

TREES

*“There is more to life than measuring its speed.
Let me look upward into the branches of the towering oak,
and know that it grew great and strong
because it grew slowly and well.
Slow me down, Lord, and inspire me
to send my roots deep into the soil of life’s enduring values.”*

Anonymous

“Their [tree] killers are external physical or biological factors rather than old age alone. That is, there is no evidence that harmful genetic mutations pile up over time or that trees lose their ability to produce new tissue.”

Robin Lloyd
Trees Have the Potential to Live Indefinitely¹

*“And now the axe is laid unto the root of the trees:
Every tree therefore which bringeth not good fruit is hewn down,
And cast into the fire.”*

Warning of John the Baptist to his generation
Luke 3:9

I’ve always been in love with trees.

Along scenic Back Mountain Road—the twisting road leading to my oldest daughter’s house outside Winchester, Virginia, and running parallel to the West Virginia mountains—stands a majestic, giant oak tree. The tree with its endless, upward clutching branches is a marvel of nature. Now, it towers over a field alone; a solitary thick-barked sentinel, sole survivor of successive waves of indigenous and European settlers to the area, its gnarled roots spreading outward like the arms of a huge wooden octopus.

I have taken dozens of pictures of the tree over the years.

Eventually, I intend to do an artwork series featuring the oaken giant in all four seasons.

¹ Robin Lloyd, “Trees Have the Potential to Live Indefinitely,” *Scientific American*, Dec. 2021. The oldest living tree is estimated to be 4,850 years old, a Great Basin bristlecone pine known as “Methuselah” located in the White Mountains. This makes it the oldest known living organism on Earth that reproduces sexually.

Each time I drive past the tree, I imagine the beginnings of another novel taking place under its branches—one time an Indian love story, another the story of a colonial family’s challenges and travails.

When I take time to walk around the tree’s gigantic girth, I try to visualize other famous trees about which I have read. In Tom Holland’s *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, I read the story of Donar’s Oak, near Hesse, Germany, which was the sacred tree of the Germanic tribes and hewn down by the legendary Anglo-Saxon missionary Saint Boniface. Likewise, I have read accounts of Anne Frank’s Chestnut Tree in Amsterdam (Netherlands), and the towering General Sherman Tree—some 2,500 years old—in Sequoia National Park. Then there is the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi located in Sri Lanka (planted in the 3rd century B.C.), and touted as the offspring of the sacred fig tree in India under which Siddhartha Gautama—Buddha—attained *bodhi* (enlightenment).

I especially enjoy traveling to sites where trees interact with the history of Native Americans. Close to where I was brought up, in Circleville, Ohio, once stood Logan’s Elm—which rose 65-foot-tall and had a trunk circumference of 24 feet—historical site of the most famous speech delivered by any Native American, Mingo Chief Logan.²

Several years ago, I attended an artillery orientation course at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. After classes one day, another class attendee and I drove all over the massive military installation in search of Geronimo’s grave, reputed to be located somewhere on the base. Just about dusk, we found the grave marker hidden beneath a small grove of trees. Surrounding Geronimo’s grave was a series of tombstones marking the burial sites of his chief lieutenants and wives. While we were standing there, a breeze started stirring and rustled the branches of the surrounding trees which were, in turn, decorated with scores of Indian bandannas, all hung to honor—if not sap the energy of—the great Apache chief’s warrior spirit. I marveled at the graveside scene although, I must admit, it was all a bit spooky and unnerving.

A similar rush of emotions—call me crazy if you like—sweeps over me when I stand under the great oak tree alongside Back Mountain Road. The last time I was there, for example, my mind was filled with fond memories of my days

² Also known as “Logan’s Lament”: “I appeal to any white man to say, if ever he entered Logan’s cabin hungry, and he gave him not meat; if ever he came cold and naked, and he clothed him not. During the course of the last long and bloody war, (the French and Indian War, 1754-1763), Logan remained idle in his cabin, an advocate for peace. Such was my love for the whites, that my countrymen pointed as they passed, and said Logan is the friend of the white men. I have even thought to live with you but for the injuries of one man, Col. Cresap, the last spring, in cold blood, and unprovoked, murdered all the relations of Logan, not sparing even my women and children. There runs not a drop of my blood in the veins of any living creature. This has called on me for revenge. I have sought it: I have killed many; I have fully glutted my vengeance. For my country, I rejoice at the beams of peace. But do not harbour a thought that mine is the joy of fear. Logan never felt fear. He will not turn on his heel to save his life. Who is there to mourn for Logan? Not one.”

working at the U.S. Embassy in Singapore where, on my way back to the apartment, I would regularly walk through the giant *banyan* trees and colorful plants in Singapore's world-famous Botanical Gardens.

Ah, the memories.

“Sigh.”

In a world gone completely crazy, I somehow find comfort and solace in the old oak's stability, longevity and sheer natural beauty.

I trace my love for trees to my dad.

For several years in a row, during a college semester break, dad and I would jump into his beat-up white pick-up truck and launch out on an adventure. We never planned any of these trips in advance. We would let the toss of a coin make the first several decisions of the trip and then determine our direction: one time toward the St. Louis Arch, another toward George Washington's Fort Necessity, once to New Orleans, once to Texas, and another to Florida. (See my missive entitled “Tossin' the Coin”)

At any rate, we would drive for hours without a word passing between us. Dad has never been very chatty. He is a very introspective person—to this day. But there was one constant during each of these long drives. At some point during the trip, dad would look wistfully out the window and say: “I wonder what this country looked like when the Indians lived here?”

Through my dad's side of the family, we have Cherokee blood coursing through our veins. Indeed, my great grandmother on dad's side was a Cherokee princess—or so goes the Akers' lore—and my granddad and his brothers had enough Indian blood to qualify for the Oklahoma land rush (of course, the youngest brother got flimflammed on the train heading out West and lost all the money in a poker game—another Akers' lore).

I guess my point is that dad shares an Indian-like intuitive love of nature, and with it a love of trees.

His dad, Grandpa Wiley, was the same way. They both passed a love for nature in general, and trees in particular, to me.

For that reason, I love stories about trees.

When I was a kid, I enjoyed climbing trees. What boy didn't (of course, that was before iPhones, and iPads—a time when boys actually played outside). I can still remember shimmying out on a huge maple tree limb, that stretched out over Route 73 just inside Springboro, Ohio's town limits—in front of Roger Dunn's house—and, hidden by the red-yellow autumn leaves, pelting cars passing underneath with corn during the Halloween season.

As I write this, I am looking out the front window at my sister-in-law's house (in Hi Hat, Kentucky). There used to be an apple tree in the front yard. I told a story about that same tree—which was cut down this past year—when I spoke at Hazel's (Imogene's mother) funeral in October 2009. (Oh my, has it been that long ago?). In the months before her passing, Hazel was enduring intense back pain because a fast-spreading disease was disintegrating her skeletal bones. At any rate, Donna (Ima's youngest sister) took her to one of many medical appointments. As they returned home, and turned down the driveway, Hazel saw a neighborhood boy "stealing" apples from her tree. "Stop the car," she shouted to Donna, simultaneously bolting out of the car—oblivious to the pain—and sprinting toward the boy as fast as her spindly legs would carry her. Waving her walking cane in the air, she threatening to beat the boy to a pulp and then chased him out of the yard. She proceeded to use the cane to knock every apple out of the low-hanging branches to the ground, so nobody could have any of the apples.

Never underestimate the power of the human will.

When I taught Philosophy 300 at Alice Lloyd College, I would play the same cassette tape (remember that technology) to a new class of students every semester. The tape—the "Love Tape"—was by Leo Buscaglia.³ I almost wore that tape out over the years. Interestingly enough, one of my favorite Buscaglia stories from the tape concerns a tree. As I recall, a frazzled elementary teacher dragged herself into his class one day for Leo's favorite part of the school day, art class. She passed out to each student a pad of paper, brushes and water color paints.

"Paint me a picture of a tree," she said, before collapsing with exhaustion into a chair behind the desk.

Johnny was also in the class. He was all boy, boundless energy contained in a small frame, red-headed, freckled and sporting a missing tooth in front. *A tree, alright!* Johnny thought to himself, *I've climbed trees, fallen out of trees, ate trees ...I know trees.*

The trees in his life were full of life!

So, Johnny grabbed the brushes with gusto, splashed vibrant colors of every description on the paper pad, tore off the sheet of paper and proudly strolled up to the teacher's desk. "Miss Johnson," he said proudly, "here is my tree.

"My God," Miss Johnson gasped, "brain damage! What is that?"

³ As I mentioned in a previous missive entitled "The Love Tape," Felice Leonardo Buscaglia (1924-1998)—also known as "Dr. Love"—was a motivational speaker, author and professor in the Department of Special Education at the University of Southern California. At USC, Buscaglia's class on Love was so popular that incoming freshmen would enroll in the class to reserve a class spot by the end of their senior year.

She then proceeded to the blackboard, took a piece of chalk and drew a large popsicle-looking image, quickly scribbling in a bit of green color and red blotches where her make-believe apples should be.

“Now, this is a tree!” she proclaimed loudly to the class.

Johnny was disappointed. There was a lot he didn’t know, but he knew that what she drew on the board was not a tree as he had experienced one.

You see, the teacher wasn’t interested in what a tree meant to the students; she wanted them to replicate and imitate *her* version of a tree.

The bottom line: in our country today, from the classroom to the media, we have too many people telling us we should march to *their* vision of what a “tree” should look like.

I urge each of you to resist the siren’s call.

Dare to create your own tree.

And take time to enjoy the unique beauty of a God-created tree the next time you drive by one ...