Our Connection to Trees

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I've had trees on my mind lately, mostly because I've been shopping for one to replace a fallen tree in my front yard. I don't often plant a new tree, so I spent a while searching through catalogs, flipping through gardening magazines, and seeking out tree-knowledgeable friends. Finally, this morning I went to the nursery to choose a white dogwood. The landscape designer showed me the row of little saplings, balled and burlapped. I walked past each one, rubbing my chin, wondering why this decision seemed so tricky. Suddenly it felt like picking out a child to raise.

I'm not the only person who considers trees part of the family. One of my town's local columnists wrote an essay memorializing the apple tree that grew in his boyhood backyard. A thirty-foot yellow apple, it was a food source, playground, and shade tree for all the neighborhood kids. Unfortunately high winds knocked it down during a thunderstorm one night. The writer still mourns its passing—*sixty years ago*.

If you live with a tree long enough, you feel a connection with it. Why? Maybe because we know that trees do us good. They provide tangible resources like paper and building material. They become landmarks, touchstones, and symbols for us, rooting themselves in our imaginations. The trees on our planet need more than our affection, though. They need our protection.

Trees have an important job: like all plants, they absorb carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas. To put things in perspective, it's been estimated that human beings are responsible for emitting about 32 billion tons of carbon dioxide each year from sources such as power plants, automobiles, and agriculture. About 15 billion tons remains in the atmosphere—the rest is absorbed by "sinks" in the ocean and the land. The Amazon rainforest is one of the world's most important sinks, earning the title "the lungs of the world" because of the role it plays in regulating atmospheric gases and slowing climate change. Rainforests absorb 4.8 billion tons of carbon dioxide every year, yet 50 million acres of rainforest disappear annually thanks to increased agriculture, mining, logging, and harvesting for firewood.

Forests routinely disappear on this side of the ocean, too, as they succumb to development. What can we do to preserve our trees? Communities should take steps to protect natural areas, educating people about the benefits of forests and lobbying for local governments to replace trees that have been removed. An abundance of trees can make a whole neighborhood healthier by cleaning the air, filtering storm water runoff with their roots, adding to soil fertility, and providing shelter for native wildlife.

Individuals can protect trees by simply using less paper. I've been trying to make these habits second nature:

- Not printing a document unless I have to, and if I have to, using the back side of a used sheet if possible.
- Using scrap paper for notes to myself, or keeping my notes on my smartphone. Grocery lists fit nicely on the backs of old envelopes.
- Reusing file folders and notebooks until they wear out.
- Limiting my subscriptions to printed magazines or borrowing them from the library.
- Using cloth napkins and real dishes during meals instead of paper towels, napkins, cups, or plates. (Disclaimer: I do keep paper towels around to deal with pet messes!)
- Taking my own tote bags along to the grocery store.
- Wrapping up presents in the Sunday cartoon section—kids love it.
- Buying only recycled paper products if possible and avoiding buying items with excessive packaging.
- Recycling all the paper I can, of course!

One last thing we can do is plant trees every time we have the opportunity. Churches could plant trees to honor longtime members or clergy. A growing family could plant a tree to honor a new baby—they could grow up together. Try giving one as a present, even if it's for yourself. Small trees aren't expensive, and talk about the gift that keeps on giving! I look forward to enjoy my little dogwood for many years to come. ■

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