Beckoned by Living Trees

Marcelle Martin

THE FIRST TREE that beckoned me silently, long ago, was a sapling on the far side of a lawn. When I investigated, I discovered it was being strangled by an orange plastic band encircling its trunk. After the sapling had been purchased from a local nursery, the label and price tag had been removed, but not the band. The trunk, now grown, was being choked by the plastic ring.

Did I merely imagine the tree’s relief when I cut it off?

More recently, on a hot August day, another tree, large and beautiful, called to me from the edge of the local park. I entered into the welcoming shade provided by the tree’s shiny leaves, high overhead and all around. As I leaned back against the trunk, I imagined its roots deep in the ground.

I’d been praying about a project and was trying to “think outside the box.” I wanted to hear what God desired. As I rested against the tree, a creative idea came, along with a surge of energy and excitement. It felt like a gift—not from the tree, exactly, but received because I had connected with the tree that way. This new possibility later grew into something wonderful.

In the months that followed, I became better acquainted with the tree, its graceful spreading canopy, its dark oval leaves edged with tiny serrations, the ridged grey-brown bark. Friends identified it as an American Elm. I noticed that the roots had thrown up a couple of old paving stones; it had outgrown once tidy park borders.

I’ve returned to that beautiful tree at different times of day, during every season. It has taken a while to notice my human prejudices. Gradually I realized that I had been thinking of myself as somehow bigger, more important than the tree, in spite of the fact that it’s immensely larger than I. The branches rise perhaps seventy feet over my head, with a span more than half that wide. Slowly, I have recognized my belief that I, a human being, am worth more than a tree. I now question this.

I discovered another blind spot when I invited my husband to come meet “my” tree. The beautiful Elm stands beside another, taller, tree. The neighbor is farther into the park and gets more sun.

“It has a friend!” my husband exclaimed, when he saw the two trees side by side.
Suddenly I recognized that I had been viewing the other tree as a rival for the sun. Terry’s comment enabled me to see that, in fact, the two are companions. Their roots are intertwined and they help shelter each other from the wind. When I looked around, I realized that the pair are also part of a whole community of trees, a community without borders, not only trees in the park but also those on nearby streets, including a towering Sycamore a block away. Among the many gifts they give, this community of trees purifies the air and provides oxygen that my neighbors and I breathe.

This summer the American Elm’s leaves were small and the crown of the tree didn’t fill out the way it did before. Did this beautiful tree, like the little sapling on the lawn, call to me because it’s in distress? I look forward to learning more from being in relationship with living trees.

From a post that originally appeared on Marcelle’s blog, A Whole Heart, <awholeheart.com>. Marcelle is a member of Swarthmore (PA) Friends Meeting.