

T. P. Murphy

Maple 1: The Tree of Knowledge

*I was of three minds
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.
-Wallace Stevens*

I pounded on the sugar maple tree with my fist. I had been paging through my journals--tabbed with sticky notes marking entries that recorded my responses to that sugar maple tree--and making notes on a yellow legal pad, drawing boxes around ideas and connecting elements up and down the list with lines and arrows. I was so convinced that in all this there was something important that I could almost feel it in the nerves at the ends of my fingers, but it stopped at my fingertips and would not flash through the pen onto the page. Then it was as if Thoreau's lines from his "Ktaadn" essay welled up: "Think of our life in nature,--daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,--rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact!" I threw down my pen, pushed away from the desk, stood, and rushed out the front door onto the porch, down the steps, and out across the driveway until I stood in front of the tree.

It is the first of the thirteen sugar maples lining the road that snakes by our house on its way up Blair Hill. Of the thirteen, the first sugar maple is the only one whose branches and leaves do not mix with a neighboring tree's. In summer, it is like the picture labeled "tree" in one of the cardboard books we would read to our children when they were very young. Its trunk is more than a yard in diameter and on a sunny midday its crown casts an almost circular shadow about 60 feet wide. It is the answer to the question "What is the Platonic ideal of a sugar maple?" if you want an answer unencumbered by the ambiguity of the tree being shaped by the forest canopy. Just as Oscar Wilde complained that a gorgeous sunset looked like a bad imitation of a Turner painting, any attempt to describe this tree's majestic presence in summer, its glorious blaze of foliage in fall, visible a mile away, or the architecture of its dark branches against the snow—all those attempts sound like clichés because this tree engages archetypes that move people when the object is present and leave them inarticulate about the experience when the object is gone.

So I pounded on it with my fist, again and again, using the soft part along the bottom of my hand like someone beating on a door rather than knocking on it. I was not politely seeking admission. As I pounded on the gray bark of the trunk, however, all that gave was the heel of my hand.

Sometimes, the bark of old sugar maples reaches out in blades running perpendicular to the ground as if the bas relief pattern is trying to push further into the third dimension. At some points, thickened bark detaches and the bottom of the blade begins to curl. I put my shoulder to the tree and pushed. I did not expect the tree to move, but I pushed because that was what I could do, my right shoulder against the tree, my left leg extended and my left foot slowly sliding along the ground as my shoulder slid down the trunk. During one push my careless shoulder placement knocked off a small blade of bark. I have it here as I write; it is about four inches long and perhaps an inch at its widest point. Much of its surface is covered with lichens. I had not wanted to break it off because such a piece is meaningless; it says nothing about the power of the tree’s beauty—the sinuous strength of its gray trunk, the rounded symmetry of its crown. That small piece cannot hint at the tree’s presence in the landscape.

When I was ten years old and we lived in a new house on East 175th Street in Cleveland, Ohio, I was untroubled by trees. When we first saw the boxy little house they were building for us—the first my parents would own—the yard was nothing but yellow clay and scrap lumber. Under the sparse grass, the backyard would crack in the dry heat of summer. There were no trees. But as they always did and still do in developments, in the patch of grass between the curb and the sidewalk, somebody planted a tree, most likely a silver maple. I remember that we called that place the “tree lawn.” Every house had such a tree in front of it, maybe an inch in diameter, wired to an angle-iron post for support. Those trees did not impose themselves upon the place, did not shape the world around them.

I have some black and white photographs of the spindly little tree in front of our house, pictures I took with my red plastic camera in the late 1950’s. One is of my brother Tim when he was about eight or nine, all legs and arms and smile and a few years away from the beginning of the growth spurt that would make him six feet, four inches tall. The tree, about twenty feet behind him, begins at his right wrist and ends at the top of his head. Allowing for the effects of perspective, the tree is probably then about the same height he would become. In another picture, my sister Terry, who would have been six or seven, smiles and squints into the camera, the bangs of her page-boy haircut ruffled. She is standing directly in front of the tree so it seems to be growing out of the top of her head. Apparently when I took the pictures I was unconscious of the tree, which was reduced to insignificant background. Although I remember our lawn as being ill kempt, in the picture it looks like a carpet, and the street’s pavement and the sidewalks look new. The tree casts a shadow like a small oil stain on the sidewalk.

That tree needed to be propped up because it was only a sapling. If I had pounded on it, even then as a child, it would have shuddered. I could have put my hands all the way around it and shaken it, its flimsy tip whipping back and forth. All those newly planted trees in all those segments of tree lawn survived only if the adults protected them from us children, who were their equals and constantly testing the limits of our place.

For a year before we moved to East 175th Street, we had rented half an old three-story duplex on Sycamore Street, lined on both sides with big trees. Those trees were implicit in the place; they hovered above, often out of sight and consciousness, but always there. At ground level they took up little space, though implicit underground too, they dislocated sidewalk slabs and disrupted the surfaces of lawns. The trunks and cable-like roots held the

tree down, kept the clouds of leaves from floating away so we could play in their cooling shade in the hot summer. Though the street was named “Sycamore” the trees were mostly maples. I still remember the gift of helicopters—the winged samaras, the seed pods that fell from the sky, gyrating to the ground.

Big trees seem to speak out of our mysterious past, our collective unconscious. We are descended from beings who lived in the trees. Perhaps our wonderful hands formed because generations of ancestors became more and more successful at grasping the tree branches thick enough to hold them suspended in the air. Desmond Morris describes how after some of the primates became heavier, “Instead of scampering and leaping, they switched to brachiating—swinging hand over hand along the underside of the branches.” When the ice age came and the trees died back, those apes that stayed with the trees stayed apes; those that took to the ground and set off from the forest became us.

But still we are drawn to the trees. One of the first things I did after we moved into the Blair Hill house was to fabricate a swing from ropes and a board and hang it from the most horizontal branch on the first sugar maple. I thought I was doing it for the children. We had never had a tree big enough to hang a swing on, that could support the rhythm of the swing--the bounce and release and pull back, but I believe I have used it as much as they did. There is a thrill in being swung like a censor by that tree’s strong out-stretched limb, becoming a kind of celebration and inhabiting, for an instant out of every few, the same airy place as the crown of the tree. In late fall when the skeleton of the tree with its intricate geometry stands out against the blue-gray sky, something inside me imagines myself high up there, not needing the protection of boards and rope, swinging confidently from branch to branch by hand.

I remember the horizontal ladder as about 20 feet long. Basic training in the U.S. Army, 1971, the heart of the Vietnam War: before each meal each platoon in the company would line up in front of one of the four ladders that separated the area where we fell in from the door to the mess hall. To get to the meal, we would be required to go hand-over-hand from one end of the ladder to the other, amid a din of drill sergeants shouting imprecations.

I just could not do it. I was losing weight and building muscle, but I was just not strong enough to make it through all those rungs. I would jump up and grab the cold gray metal bar with both hands. I would reach out my right hand for the next one; after I grasped it I would let go with my left hand and reach for the bar beyond the one my right hand was wrapped around. Sometimes I would make it; sometimes I would not. At most I would get 4 or 5 feet and then one hand or the other could no longer hold me up and I would fall. That meant going to the end of the line and doing it again. Eventually, long after the others had gone into the mess hall, the drill sergeant would relent. Sore and humiliated, I would go in to eat.

What I needed to learn, and eventually did, was that the key to brachiating is swinging, it is letting go of one hand before the other one has caught, it is letting go first, it is flying through the tree tops not holding on securely. Once you start the swing, your weight does not just pull you down; it pulls you forward and the swing moves you upward and you gain height so that you fall to the next bar. It is elegant and beautiful. The great apes discovered this and lost their tails. I have adapted to being on the ground, but you can

imagine my joy when I learned how to swing along that ladder. It was as if I recovered something of myself, the something that wants to be part of the crowns of the trees.

But a regularly spaced, rectangular horizontal ladder is merely a reductionist abstraction of the branches of a tree, a straight line, a logical progression. Swinging through the trees, however, is thought beyond logic; it is to be like the ideas flying through the brain firing neurons. The memory of swinging through the trees is itself a memory moving through the neurons and synapses of the maple tree’s branches, spread against the sky over my head like a brain inside a transparent globe, like the visible mind of god.

Seeing the divine in trees also echoes from almost before memory. Some of my Celtic ancestors must have followed the Druids and worshipped trees before Christian missionaries came and converted the pagan Druid’s tree to the tree of life in the Garden of Eden, to the tree of the cross—a god climbing back up into a tree and becoming one with it. In the 10th century Anglo-Saxon poem “The Dream of the Rood,” the cross speaks. “The best of trees” identifies with the god crucified on it: “They pierced me with dark nails: the wounds are seen on me, open gashes of hatred. Nor did I dare harm any of them. They mocked us both together. I was all wet with blood, drenched from the side of that Man after he had sent forth his spirit.” Christianity just changed the symbols; it did not take them away.

The world was full of meaning for medieval Christianity. Mythical St. Patrick used the shamrock to illustrate the three persons in one god of the trinity not because it was a grand visual aid, a fortuitous accident, but because that shamrock was as real a manifestation of the trinitarian god as a fever is a symptom of a disease. The world was as intentional as a poem with a Divine Author carefully planting symbols and images that point to important truths, and people explored that world to discover those truths. The tree for the monk was as much a manifestation of the divine as it was for the druid—faith like a mustard seed.

But the ancient druid and the medieval monk did not grow up in 20th century American suburbs, regretting a childhood not of forests but of separate saplings trussed up in small, regular, grass rectangles, bordered by concrete on all sides, of domesticated trees, stripped of their divinity and made to depend on humans as if the trees were decorations: gods as landscaping. Even our majestic sugar maple was planted by humans. But it has outlived them, and by longevity, by size, and by the lucky chance of its being planted in the country, it has regained its dignity. I hope for its wisdom, that it has memories locked in its network of roots and branches, in the crevices of its bark, memories that I can somehow release.

But despite my efforts, despite my expectation and hope, when I stand before that sugar maple, quietly attentive, I am not certain I am in the presence of a power any higher than the power present when the first bean plant breaks through the garden soil. I fear that despite the sugar maple’s shape and age and its crust of lichens, that the tree is not memory, that it is merely a rack to hang my imagination on, that the tree gives back to me only what I bring to it. It is actually silent, shut up tight against my pounding fist, surrounded by the wasteland, its king long dead. And even if the problem is that I am deaf to the tree’s message, that does not change the silence and it means that the connection or lack of connection with the higher meaning is in my head not in the tree. I want a miracle; I want the force that through the green fuse drives the flower to flame out like shining from shook foil. I

want a palpable, mystical experience as solid and real as the rough bark I can feel with the fleshy heel of my hand.

Of course I know that even if I found my miracle, I would not believe it. I could only believe a miracle if its miraculousness was an illusion. I imagine someone from the 19th century, someone who hauls wood to the kitchen to cook the food, witnessing the operation of a microwave oven. “We put the muffin on this plate, place the plate inside the oven and close the door. Now we press this button once.” The oven begins to whirl, the light goes on, and 7 seconds later the oven beeps. Out comes a hot muffin. There is nothing miraculous about that; it’s just science. Forty years ago in grade school, I was taught that heat was molecules in motion. Someone figured out how to jiggle the molecules. The pre-molecular 19th century people would not have that hook to hang their understanding on, and for them the experience would float in mid air unexplainably.

Perhaps understanding what the trees have to say will not require a leap of faith. The branching patterns of trees are capable of immense complexity, and given the richness of communication we have come to associate with computers, it is easy to forget they are simply arrangements of zeros and ones. What kind of information is stored over my head, in this sugar maple’s branches? Words come from roots and grow through time as languages branch through generations and move across landscapes. And in those languages, we generate sentences that grow in branching structures from our minds so that linguists use trees, “phrase marker trees,” to describe them, each succeeding clause or phrase elaborated from some parent branch until the diagram traces a two dimensional tree. Our language and the trees resonate. Perhaps someday people will learn to read the trees, to crack their code, and then they may reveal their secrets so that my great grandchildren may be astonished that I could not interpret the branches of this tree, could not read its mind. For now it uses a language too foreign for me to understand, one spoken in an imaginary landscape.

But thinking there is a language of the tree is probably a flight of fancy, a language no more real than a child’s made-up one. What I actually see are bud and bark and branch and leaf and samara and silhouette—a sugar maple. But that literalness ignores the invisible tree underground, branching to the fineness of the most delicate human hair. I never see the roots; I can only imagine them buried in the earth, white and ghostlike. The tree whose rough bark I can touch is not the complete tree, the real tree. Imagination completes the tree, makes it whole.

This sugar maple and I will live together for a while. Standing by it that day, after I had finished my pounding and pushing, I realized I cannot force my understanding of the tree. Sometimes I will see it as nothing but itself, and sometimes I will see it as a way into a world outside me or inside me or beyond me as I must swing from one perspective to the other, learning to let go of one idea, even before I grasp the next.