NATURALLY: Eulogy to a tulip poplar

- By Sara King Special to the Gazette
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When the first European surveying party came to lay the Fairfax Stone in 1746 near what is now the town of Thomas, West Virginia, they had trouble getting through the Canaan valley. In this valley, about six miles southwest of their final destination, a large number of huge red spruce trees had fallen. The trees were as big as 6 feet in diameter — almost 19 feet in circumference — and the crevices between them were so deep that the party risked losing their horses if they tried to cross.



Friends of White's Woods members measured a tulip poplar that was 10 feet in circumference. Photo by Lynda Santos.

Almost all of the big trees in our region were cut down between 1880 and 1930, mostly as the railroads made their way into our communities. Because we've grown up seeing young trees, many Pennsylvanians believe that big trees are native only to the western, but not the eastern, United States.

What a shock it must have been to lose all of those big trees, nearly all at once. Sound and smell so radically changed as birds and animals vanished and the wind had nothing to rattle.

As our forests have begun to recover, some people have rediscovered their own connections to them: "On the mountain for an hour," said nature writer Nan Shepherd, "I am beyond desire. It is not ecstasy … I am not out of myself, but in myself."

For 30 years, almost every day, I walked by a handful of towering 100-year- old tulip poplars, some as big as 10 feet in circumference and over 130 feet tall.

Named for their large yellow flowers and part of the Magnolia family, tulip poplars can live for 300-500 years. A single 100-year-old tree can support thousands of species. It is not only part of the larger forest ecosystem, it is an ecosystem unto itself.

My comparatively young hundred-year-old neighbors lived long enough to be called “witness trees” — trees that have stood as witnesses to our history. These trees stood during the advent of radio, widely available electrical refrigeration, television, space flight, and computers. They stood by as our country fought in World War II and in countless wars since.

The hundred-year-old tulip poplars that were in the College Lodge Forest also witnessed and enriched a lot of individual human lives. One morning, I heard and saw a Great horned owl in one of these trees. On another day, in that same spot, I found myself amazingly close to a mother bear and her two cubs. But very often, like Nan Shepard, I just found myself. These trees cushioned me, softened and made sane the world around me as I walked through one loss and another: a brother and a best friend, both taken far too young. Parents. Human relationships. Beloved dogs. Sometimes I walked among these giants long enough to almost walk past self-deceit. I’ve walked all the way through grief to explode in delight at the sight of a frog or a flower, always with those giant trees standing steady, completely steady, as life moved on.

I know that I am only one of hundreds of people who grieve the loss of these big trees in our community’s near woods. When we lost these trees, we lost our sacred space, defined by Joseph Campbell as a place “where you can find yourself again and again.”

I’ve watched numerous friends and acquaintances struggle without success to hold back their tears when they talk about the logging of this natural cathedral. These giant trees had stood immutable, penetratingly honest, and wholly honorable in a world that has become, it seems, full of lies. For people who are lucky enough to know how to love living things, nothing exceeds the perfection of a tree. Our giant tulip poplars never missed a second of a perfect life.

I’ve tried to console myself: Nearly everywhere I turn I can see trees. But not really big trees that are 130 feet tall and ten feet in circumference. Not trees I’ve grown up and grown old with. Not huge, old community trees that supported a fantastic range of natural life and nurtured often brave and hopeful human life.

I’ve learned that grief in response to loss in the natural world can cut deeply. I’ve also learned that sometimes humans can be so detached from living things that they do not notice or care when they inflict unnecessary harm on this living earth.

The loss of these trees might have been avoided if their value — both to the living ecosystems of the forest and to the people who walk among them — had been widely recognized. I would hope that it would be harder to cut down a heritage tree than to haul off a few thousand board feet of timber.

It is time to celebrate our big trees. Our witness trees, our living cathedrals, the mainstays of the multiple ecosystems that create a forest need to be with us for far more than 100 years.

Friends of White's Woods has started a list of our region's big trees. Please go to friendsofwhiteswoods.org to describe and honor your favorite big trees.

Sara King is an emeritus professor of psychology at Saint Francis University and president of Friends of White's Woods. The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.

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