

Their Beloved Forests

A flash memoir

Folks are often skeptical when I tell them I'm naturally an introverted person.

My childhood voice was shy as the whisper of leaves. People were always saying, "Speak up, Sandra. I can't hear you." Now, some six decades later, I've had a long writing and teaching career that required me to speak up and be heard. I've learned to accommodate my shyness, but haven't completely overcome it.

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When I was born, Chicago was the world's eighth largest city. Today it has dropped to 187th, eclipsed by the megalopolises of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Many of our city's neighborhoods were once freestanding townships. Urban sprawl became a bloated beast that consumed surrounding towns and suburbs. Unsatiated, it crept into rural and wilderness spaces, belching out malls and housing developments in its wake.

For many urban dwellers, city parks are now what passes for our forests.

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I spent my first two years of schooling at a Catholic school on Chicago's southside. All of the students and congregants were Black. All the nuns and priests were White, many of them Irish missionaries. St. Columbanus, after all was 6th century Irish saint.

In warm weather we'd abandon the crowded, stuffy cafeteria that doubled as an auditorium. The nuns would troop us to a park across the street and let us picnic there. I avoided most of the children playing roughly and shouting raucously. Yet I was never alone.

I sat with my back against my favorite tree, munching sandwiches and sipping chocolate milk, quietly surveying the scene around me. The birds and butterflies darted about, the grass exuded its fresh green scent, clouds of dandelion fluff drifted like airborne cotton. Maybe this is when I began developing the habits of deep observation that would one day serve me as a writer.

There was something ineffably soothing in sitting pressed against that sturdy tree trunk. The rustle of leaves overhead seemed to whisper: “There, there, my child.”

In African American vernacular expression, that tree “had my back.”

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People usually associate tree-hugging with American hippies and environmental activists. Yet the original tree-huggers were from the Chipko Movement, a group of village women in the 1970s Uttar Pradesh region of the Indian Himalayas. In Hindi, “chipko” means “hugging.”

These women knew that trees were essential to their survival. When government-sanctioned logging companies came to clear-cut their beloved forests, Gandhian activist, Chandi Prasad Bhatt led them in nonviolent protest. The women linked hands and circled trees slated to be felled. Some of the village men criticized their actions. Others would come to join them.

The women stood in solidarity, backs against tree trunks, facing down loggers with pointed rifles. These trees had nourished their generations with fruit, sheltered them in shade, purified their water, and anchored the thin mountain soil against erosion and flooding. And now the women had *their* backs. Eventually they forced the loggers to retreat.

From 1972-1979, more than 150 villages joined the Chipko Movement. Their efforts led to the planting of over a million trees, along with a 15-year ban on commercial logging in the Uttarakhand Himalayas and other regions.

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Most people don't realize that some trees have gender. The females flower are the ones to produce fruit and seeds, while male flowers produce pollen.

Some years ago I decided to pay a return visit to the tree of my youth, who I now think of as female. I wanted to see how tall she had grown, how full her leafy crown had become. I wanted to lean my back against her trunk, to learn what species she belonged to.

To my dismay, the tree was gone. No trace of her presence remained, not even a stump or depression. It was like she had never existed. When someone we loved dies, we naturally want to know what happened.

Had she been struck by lightning or felled in a windstorm? Did she suffer a lingering illness, like Dutch Elm disease? Might she have died a natural death? We think of trees as long-lived species, though some have life spans shorter than ours—crepe myrtle, black willow, most fruit trees.

An African belief system suggests that so long as an honored ancestor is remembered, that one will never die. Other cultures share this ethos.

Whatever the reason for this tree's demise, she is still remembered. You have met her in these reminiscences, so now she lives in your memories, too.