

Between You and Me and the Trees

Janis Norton

The more time I spend in the forest, the more I think trees just might be smarter than humans. This occurred to me recently during a visit to the playground with my grandchild. I'll get back to that experience.

First, how is the forest smart? Well, let's take the red oaks. Red oaks are those tall, long-lived trees that are often the last to put on a show of vibrant fiery leaves in autumn. I was admiring a stand of red oaks last fall during a hike along a trail in the Shenandoah National Park. It was a cool and sunny day, and, unlike every other hike of my life, I had arrived for this one prepared. Prepared not just with bug spray and water bottle but with some actual knowledge of the deep and dreamy woods.

I had been reading up on trees, trying to learn more about the life and characteristics of various types of trees. Just a little bit of research had further piqued my interest in the way trees live in community. An obvious fact about the forest is that each tree starts its life sprouting wherever its seed has fallen. No picking a neighborhood here. From that fateful point forward, it becomes a matter of making the best of what the environment has to offer. Often seeds sprout very close to one another and two saplings compete for sunlight and water their whole lives. Likely they will live out their days under big trees that have established deep roots and a huge canopy above. Life in the forest can be quite crowded. Lots of elbow rubbing going on.

In the crisp autumn air, I spent some time looking at how this stand of red oaks had adapted themselves to one another. From my reading I knew that their root network was extensive and dense. Over time the roots share nutrients and water and have a sophisticated chemical signaling system through which they alert one another to threats and dangers. A neighborhood pantry and a watch system to boot.

All the while, the trees that are near together must manage being so darn close. I peered up and shaded my eyes against the bright sunlight that peeked through in spots. The branch kaleidoscope demonstrated how they do it. Branches grow towards one another, but they do not invade their neighbor's limbs. Once branches spread out close to a friend, long growth stops, and further development goes into thickening and strengthening. An ingenious benefit towards creating a strong topstory able to withstand whistling winds and blankets of snow.

“Let there be spaces in your togetherness...”

A beloved quote from Kahlil Gibran that I had known but long forgotten popped into my head as I surveyed the stand of oaks surrounded by stately pines and an understory of bushes still green and thick. I finished the hike and left the park with the tranquil feeling the forest magically brings. However, I found that Gibran would not leave me. He bedeviled me as I went about the everyday business of work, neighborhood, and family.

He was whispering in my ear as I listened to my sister talk about her difficulty with a problem in her family. From my outsider spot it seemed to have a clear solution. I opened my mouth to share advice, sure of myself as usual. But I paused. If I tell her what I think she should do, am I violating her space? But she had invited me in, hadn't she? So, what is an appropriate amount of involvement with her problem? And what exactly does it mean to have space and togetherness at the same time?

Nature has figured it out. A tree knows where self stops and the other starts, after all.

I could have used Gibran when I was raising children. Where was he then? I recalled a conversation with my then middle school daughter. She was puzzling over an invitation she had received that day at school. She was invited to try out for cheerleading.

“They said they need a flyer, Mom.”

My petite daughter was athletic and pretty much a three-season participant in school sports. Soccer was her first love. I was thrilled that she was being lightly recruited for cheerleading. Why? Because that would have never happened to me. Not in a million years. I tried out for cheerleading every year and never got one call back. One year I stumbled and embarrassed myself. That is big stuff when you're fourteen.

But now-- the possibility of vicarious success was within reach!

Or maybe not. My daughter was looking quite perplexed. She explained that she didn't really know if she wanted to do cheerleading. She would have to give up track. And track was her go to for off season soccer training.

I listened but I was sinking fast. How could a person not want to do cheerleading? Especially one who was so perfect for the sport. I could just see her, ponytail whipping as she flipped up into a perfect V, balancing on one foot while the crowd...wait a minute.

I went back to listening. Maybe Gibran was there with me. As I recall, my daughter talked her way through what she wanted to do and I swallowed my disappointment. Barely. Apparently, there was just enough space in our relationship for me to get out of the way of her growth in decision making.

Growth in decision making. The opportunities are everywhere for children. And for parents too! How many times had I insisted my young children dress according to my comfort level? Once I was pushing my son's arms into a jacket he did not want to wear, and my husband looked at him and said in amusement.

“Wear the jacket, son. Your mother is cold.”

Back to the playground. Infant granddaughter in arms as I contentedly watch the other parents and their children. A father sits down next to me. His young son is shakily making his way up a rather steep ladder. The child looks back nervously at his dad who has kindly taken the time to lean over and admire my bundled granddaughter. I watch the child carefully climb back down the ladder and approach his dad.

“Can I do the slide dad? It's awful high.”

His father got up.

“I'll stand there. You can decide.”

I smile to myself. I thought that dad was pretty smart when he recognized the charm of my granddaughter. And then he confirmed it.

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