

How Do You Know Me? By a Tree

Inspired by a magnificent European weeping birch on the grounds of
MIT Endicott House, August 2006

By Molly L. Stranahan

Do you know me as a European weeping beech,
or by my species name *fagus sylvatica pendula*?
Do you know me by the address where I live,
Or the name of the family that owns the land on which I stand?
Or by the name of the man who had me imported from Europe
and planted here a long, long time ago?
Or do you know me by the company I keep — the grass, the granite hillside,
the mountain silver bells and the oaks?
Or by those who care for me,
who protect and nurture me and keep me living here,
far from my native soil and climate.

Do you know me by my age, or my size?
I am more than a hundred and twenty years old,
and eighty feet high.
My trunk is 12 feet around.
And the spread of my branches creates a great green room 55 feet across.
Do these things tell you who I am?

Or do you know me by what I do?
I provide shade, and shelter for living beings,
My roots hold water in the ground.
Birds and insects build their homes in my branches.
I use sunshine to turn carbon dioxide and water into food for me
and oxygen for you.
I provide beauty and majesty in the garden.

Or do you know me because you see me?
Because you have investigated my deep green leaves
trailing to the ground?
Do you know me because you have studied my soft gray bark
and my scars, with a burl that looks like an elephant's knee,
My tangled branches that sweep to the ground, and, if you look up,
create a lacework of green and gray against the blue sky?

Do you know me by my wounds, the places I am broken,
or by my strength to persevere despite my injuries?

Do you know me because you stopped to listen, and heard my voice?
Do you know me because you have felt the embrace of my shade,
 Sat under my canopy and felt the calm creep into your heart?
Do you know me from touching my skin, from holding me in your arms?
 From rubbing my papery leaves between your fingers?
Do you feel the rhythm of my circulation?
Do you see my aura?

Do you wonder what I have seen?
 Who has sat here with me,
 Who carved my skin to leave a sign of their presence?
 What storms I have weathered,
 What generations of birds have built their nests in my branches.
Have you wondered what can be seen from the top of my crown?

Do you know me because you have imagined what it must be like to be me?
 How can you know me, when we are so different?
 You breath oxygen, I breath carbon dioxide.
 You move around, I am rooted to one place,
 You speak words, and think I have no consciousness.
 My heart is wood, but that does not mean I do not feel.
How do you know me?

The Story of How This Poem Came to Be

This poem was inspired by a magnificent European weeping birch tree on the grounds of MIT Endicott House in Dedham, Massachusetts. It was planted in the 1880s at the behest of Frederick Law Olmsted on a thousand acres of land owned by General William Weld. The property included a self-sufficient agricultural estate and the Weld family's "country house." There this beautiful tree has grown for over 120 years, for the last fifty years in the care of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology after being left to the university in the estate of Mr. H. Wendell Endicott.

At the time this story was written, the tree stood approximately eighty feet high, with a trunk circumference of 12' (meaning a diameter of approximately four feet, since the formula for circumference equals πr^2). Measured at ground level, the canopy of the tree spreads 55 feet with branches that trail to the ground creating a natural green cathedral.

I first saw the tree on July 10, 2006 when visiting Endicott House in preparation for presenting a program for The Summer Institute which focused on identity and how we allow others to see us. A couple of mornings later, I awoke with the words flowing out of me. The original version was read under the tree on August 4. In the time between those visits, a violent storm had broken a gigantic branch out of the tree, leaving a large opening in one side. The branch was still hanging by a tendon, and the leaves were dying on August 4.

That was the day that I noticed the keyhole in the tree - this amazing window that resulted from the tree starting to split into two trunks, and then growing back together as one mighty trunk. A different path taken.

On August 30, while on retreat at Miraval Resort (and transformation center), the idea of turning this paean into a book with photographs of this amazing tree occurred to me. I realized it would be fun to collaborate with my stepdaughter as she is a gifted photographer (and lives near Dedham). Perhaps instead it will evolve into an on-line visual experience, but in the meantime, here is the poem.

According to the National Arbor Day Foundation (www.arborday.org), over the course of fifty years, a single tree can generate \$31,250 of oxygen, provide \$62,000 worth of air pollution control, recycle \$37,500 worth of water and control \$31,500 worth of soil erosion.