

Treptych

Three tree-oriented pieces of flash nonfiction

Scott Slovic

'Good trees make good neighbors'

'You'd be surprised,' Darin Bue of Los Verdes Arborists told me a few years ago, in between barks of his chainsaw, 'how an arborist practically needs a degree in counseling to handle the negotiations between neighbors over how to deal with trees on property lines.' In our case, the negotiation concerned three small pine trees whose branches drooped across a neighbor's driveway, threatening several SUVs with dropping sap. 'Take the trees, Darin,' I told him. 'If you ask me, I'd choose sappy trees over gas guzzlers anyway. But I'm gonna pick my battles.'

It turned out that Rick and Drenee, our neighbors in Reno, rewarded our neighborly removal of the offending pine trees by planting a barrier of arbor vitae between our yard and theirs a few months after the pine trees were taken down and ground into woodchips where we were covering up the front lawns to create a low-water garden. Rick and Drenee had told us, 'If you take down the old pines and protect our cars, we'll go in with you to select some new trees that won't drop sap.' We came home from work one day to find a crew of Mexican workers planting a barrier wall of twenty arbor vitae between the SUVs and our newly xeriscaped yard. I cringed to see the arboreal equivalent of lapdogs taking root where the pines had been—water-sucking, decorative, seemingly branchless cones of pale green. Trees but not trees.

Turning our backs symbolically on Rick and Drenee, Susie and I directed our attention to the opposite side of our yard, where we planted half a dozen drought-tolerant fruit trees amid the wood chips that covered our former lawn. Our landscape architect Tom Stille, a xeriscape specialist, had told us, 'Why waste precious water on plants that don't produce edibles? Careful planting can provide beauty, shade, and food without the cost and ecological damage of other kinds of trees.'

A few years later, picking pluots and peaches, cherries and apples, I reminded myself of Robert Frost's line 'Good fences make good neighbors,' adapting it to my own circumstances. Dismayed by the new barricade of arbor vitae, we had consoled ourselves with a mini-orchard, choosing to focus on arboreal companions and not to worry about our human neighbors, whose idea of xeriscape was a larger driveway. Recalling my former home in Nevada and the occasional tensions with the family next door, I think to myself, 'Good trees make good neighbors.'

'Treeplanting'

You never know when a seed or an entire tree might take root—sometimes even an idea. Eight years ago, when invited to Kuala Lumpur to spend a few weeks evaluating a university department, I arranged to visit a family of environmental activists who lived on the beach overlooking the Straits of Malacca, the busy shipping zone that separates Malaysia and Indonesia. The highlight of the weekend was a celebration to honor an endangered lagoon and the nearby jungle, which had recently been deforested in preparation for yet another oil palm plantation.

'We'd like you to say a few words about environmental literature,' said Shahida and Mohammed, my hosts. A few words, a few words. How many times have I tried to summon words—just a few words—for particular occasions? 'Please define ecocriticism in twenty-five words or less,' requested the U.S. Consul General in Naha, Okinawa. 'What is this work you do?' asked the queen as we shook hands at the Swedish Embassy in DC.

I have little recollection of what I said at the treeplanting in Malaysia—something, I'm sure, about the role of literature and art in focusing our sense of the value of nature, providing both inspiration and moral compass. The memory is somewhat surreal—I had just arrived a day earlier from America and was in the thick of jetlag. I'm not sure the families in the audience paid much attention to what I voiced from the podium.

But before walking on stage I sat at a plastic table with the Malaysian assistant minister for the environment and told him, 'Sir, our poetry, our stories—these words help us to know who we are and what our relationship to the planet is and should be.' 'Could you be talking about Wordsworth?' he responded. 'I studied literature at university before I turned to law. I think I see what you're saying.'

Together we walked up the steps to the microphone—our words in English and Malay hung for a few minutes in the humid, sunny air. Then we walked to the small cove, a blue and green tropical pool, followed by the crowd. Then we dug a small hole in the sand, the politician and the writer trading scoops. Then I handed him a small native palm tree, and the local minister planted the idea.

'Tree-smeller!'

Environmentalist though I am, I've never really taken to the term 'tree-hugger.' I have nothing against the idea of wrapping my arms around a wooden trunk—around what Scott Russell Sanders has called 'Earth's body.' If we can't embrace the vast planet itself, then why not hug some small part of it—a tree, a boulder, a human companion? No, I have no qualms with hugging *per se*. Susie says I'm a good hugger—the best she knows. It's a good thing when one's partner says so.

But the trees I love are so girthy and old that a mere hug doesn't quite do justice to the emotion meant in the gesture of a hug—that is, unless a group of friends bands together to encircle a spiring fir or a puzzle-barked ponderosa or a pineapple-scented Jeffrey pine. I've participated in such rituals, have even joined hands with Susie and a former student to give a coastal redwood an appreciative squeeze.

I always come away from a close encounter with a tree thinking not about the feel of the hug but about the scent of green plant life. Emerson joked somewhat disparagingly in his eulogy for Henry David Thoreau that he'd sooner have hugged an oak tree than poor Henry. I believe he meant Henry was a somewhat stiff and standoffish guy. Maybe so. But I like to think that Thoreau himself might have hugged a few trees in his day—and better yet that he buried his nose in bark and drew the calming goodness of tree into himself, bringing himself closer to the planet and bringing the soil and stone and wind and rain, through smell, into his body.

So I suppose, upon reflection, that I have no bone to pick with the term 'tree-hugger.' I am a tree-hugger, but I'd like to make the point that I am also a tree-smeller, and if I had to stake my reputation on one activity or the other, I'd opt for smelling over hugging. If I ever cross the line in my teaching or writing, in my small efforts to rouse the rabble in opposition to Monsanto or Coca-Cola, I hope someone somewhere, perhaps holed up in a corporate office, will think to grumble, 'That damn tree-smeller!'