

Forests — Friends and Neighbors

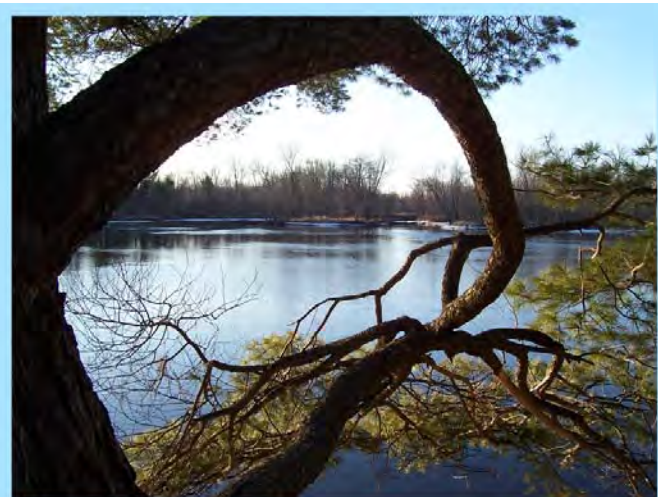
Trees have long been a source of reflection and wonder for me. This tremendous plant coming from a small seed and growing to tower over all around it, the accomplishment of its roots supportive and faithful through the seasons (and often great traumas) cause me to pause and gaze with awe and admiration. I am drawn to the love and imaginative power of God’s creative hand.

Yet, I was drawn to a new sense of relationship with the trees and forests as I read the following from *Deep Incarnation: Prepare To Be Astonished* by Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J.

Then it becomes clear that plenitude of life for all, not just for one species (homo sapiens) but for all, including poor human beings and all living creatures, is God’s original and ultimate intent. The christic paradigm makes clear that the earth and all its creatures are also encompassed by divine love. In this perspective, Jesus’ great commandment to love your neighbor as yourself gets extended to include all members of the community of life. Repeating the question of the lawyer who challenged Jesus, Brian Patrick asks, “Who is my neighbor?” His answer: “The Samaritan? The outcast? The enemy? Yes, yes, of course. But it is also the whale, the bird, and the rain forest. Our neighbor is the entire community of life. We must love it all as our very self.”

The tree, the forest, a neighbor to be loved? Jesus meaning more than my human companions on this earth to be loved as my very self? This is indeed a new relationship to ponder.

As I mused on this neighbor relationship, I remembered how, indeed, trees have been friends and neighbors in my experience and the experience of family members. In her journal of memories, my



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mother recalled how a grove of pine trees in their friendly whisperings were a source of companionship and a place of refuge in times of stress and need for consolation. She became renewed as she walked among them and prayed her [Rosary](#).

One of my sisters found a large pine tree that was my sister’s source of comfort when she needed to get away from it all. This sister shared the tree with brothers and sisters who found it a special place for picnics and family fun.

My own get a way spot was across the fields to the small forest near our home. Yes, indeed, the trees and forests are a rich heritage of friendship to me — which has received a new awakening in their role as neighbor to be loved.

A recent news story about an attack on trees saddened me and touched this relationship of love and respect. A man had poisoned landmark live oaks on the campus of Auburn University. Who knows what prompted such an act. Yet, the response of the university officials was to do all that was possible to save these grand oaks. This truly is a story of violence against love and respect, as well as a story of the trees as friend and neighbor to be loved and protected.

In this [2011 International Year of Forests](#), we are challenged to ponder our relationship with our trees and forests; not only as necessary for our own well being and the well being of our earth, but to know them as neighbors and friends to be loved as “our very self.”