

The practical benefits of trees

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I'm looking out upon miles and miles of trees. Glad I live someplace crowded with them. That old line, "Two's company, three's a crowd," does not apply here. I still remember hearing a speaker from Nebraska say, "We've got trees. They're called telephone poles."

For living in a timber community I discovered an ironic quote in the Bible's book of Isaiah where the cypress and cedar trees taunt the king of Babylon, "Since you were laid low, no tree cutter comes up against us."

I can picture the shock in our local woods were a chainsaw to rev and a tree suddenly shout, "Stop! Put that thing down!"

We've all got tree stories, I imagine. Hopefully mostly good. But falling from a tree, or one toppling, can bring a different story. They command respect, for sure.

One of the most incredible tree-come-down stories I know happened to my nephew when he was in high school in Colorado. He volunteered a week at a summer camp for elementary school students. When he and another girl led their group on a hike through the forest Tim had the idea to spice it up by making like they were on a reconnaissance mission. He was scouting up ahead — the other teen was at the back of the line. They were creeping along the trail slowly checking things out when Tim had the sensation of movement above him. He bent his back, threw his hands over his neck, and a tree landed on him — all in a split second.

He remembers the sensation of the tree striking his back — like someone slapping him — and at the same time bolting up from the shock of it and yelling, "Run!" to the kids behind him. Filled with adrenaline he tore down the trail and the tree rolled down a small embankment. His co-counselor in the rear saw it hit him. She called, "What just happened?" They all traipsed down to the fallen tree, and when they tried to pick it up, it was heavy like that Nebraska telephone pole. They carried on with their hike. That night in the dining hall Tim told one of the camp leaders about the incident. That's when he learned about "widowmakers."

Typically widowmakers are detached or broken branches that shake loose from a tree and hit someone. This was a snag with a rotted root ball and most of its branches gone. Tim had no bruise or scratch or anything to show a tree had fallen on him. Our family believes there was unseen divine intervention on Tim's behalf.

I just learned a wonderful old word in use in the 19th century. Nemophilist. It means a person who "loves or is fond of woods or forests." Someone who visits them often. The Japanese call it "shinrin-yoku" or "forest bathing." They are convinced it relaxes, and improves one's mood.

Around here, even if we wouldn't call ourselves nemophilists or forest bathers, we know the benefits of time spent in the woods. Practical precautions, yes — but for the most part a sanctuary right out the door. These days I'm practically running to it with open arms.

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