

For the Love of Trees

by Diana J. Ensign

"And the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations."
Revelations 22:2

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In Jean Giono's story *The Man Who Planted Trees* we meet a solitary shepherd who plants trees in a barren landscape. The man believes the land is dying for want of trees and sets about the task of remedying the situation. By the end of the story and a span of 40 years, the acres of trees have transformed the desolate ruins into a forest teeming with wildlife, rushing brooks, willows, streams, rushes and nearby meadows. The man's solitary work resulted from careful selection of acorns, mindful planting, regular peaceful toil and serenity of spirit. As noted by the narrator, "For a human character to reveal truly exceptional qualities, one must have the good fortune to be able to observe its performance over many years."

The 20th anniversary edition of this fable includes a foreword by Wangari Maathai, the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate whose Green Belt Movement planted millions of trees throughout Kenya. Maathai witnessed the loss of indigenous wisdom and loss of trees through the forces of colonialism and globalization. With the tree plantings, she says, "I saw human communities restored along with nature. This is not a mystical phenomenon: it is a fact of human existence. Human beings cannot thrive in a place where the natural environment has been degraded." The book (published by Chelsea Green, in Vermont) is printed on 100 percent recycled paper.

I love trees. Yet Giono's story reminds me not so much of the immense joy I find in nature but of my own role in its survival. If we want to see forests, pick apples, pears and peaches from fruits trees, swim in clean rivers and lakes, and frolic in plush meadows with our grandchildren, then we must do the work. We must learn how to tend the land with reverence and respect. We must learn what is needed to allow natural habitats to flourish. We must teach our children and each other what steps lead to good environmental stewardship. We can ask what herbs promote healing, what trees thrive near water and what natural systems solve urban issues (such as tree and urban watershed plans rather than a concrete storm drain). We can learn how trees lessen the impact of natural disasters, reduce air pollution and decrease global warming gasses. We can plant trees.

The book's afterword is by Andy Lipkis, founder and president of TreePeople. As Lipkis notes, "Scientists report that nearly every natural ecosystem across the planet is showing signs of human-caused stress, and many are being wiped out entirely by urbanization and pollution." Like Giono's shepherd, Maathai, Lipkis, and many other individuals and organizations are doing the work needed for ecological restoration. Resources exist to guide those efforts and avoid pitfalls experienced in prior efforts. *The Simple Act of Planting a Tree: A Citizen Forester's Guide to Healing Your Neighborhood, Your City, and Your World*, is one such guidebook available from TreePeople. Lipkis' afterword contains additional contact information and links for U.S. and international organizations that act as resources. (TreeLink, www.treelink.org, provides a complete list of conservation and tree planting organizations).

Like most people who love nature, I am trying to learn how my actions contribute to (or harm) the planet's wellbeing. I am willing to do the small acts required each day to achieve a larger act of great love. For me, that means rediscovering lost knowledge and reclaiming my part in the solution. As Giono observes in an interview contained in the afterword, "People have suffered so long

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inside the walls that they have forgotten to be free. . . . Human beings were not created to live forever in subways and tenements for their feet long to stride through tall grass or slide through running water. . . . [T]here are also times in life when a person has to