

The Trees Might Save Us Yet

A new study suggests that restoring forests could help reverse global warming.

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NASHVILLE — My whole family was watching the HBO series “Chernobyl” when a big sugar maple tree in our front yard split in half, falling a few feet short of the corner of the house. We didn’t hear the actual crash, perhaps because the storm that took out the tree was already so loud, perhaps because the dramatized cataclysm on the television in our family room was louder still, or at least more absorbing. The branch-whipping wind outside the house functioned like a howling soundtrack for the show. We were focused on the imminent irradiation of Europe when we should have been crouched in our safe place in Tennessee, it turns out, wearing our bike helmets for good measure.

When the torrential rains finally let up, it was clear to us, even in the steamy darkness, that the mighty maple was gravely injured. About eight feet up, where the trunk had branched into two smaller trunks, half the tree had simply peeled away like a layer of string cheese in a giant toddler’s hand. That half lay

stretched out on the ground. The other half had been twisted into unrecognizability by something violent: Beowulf in the mead hall, wrenching Grendel's arm from his body.

Trees were down everywhere, blocking roads, smashing ancient dry-stack stone walls, opening houses to the full view of their neighbors. All over the city, people were mourning their lost trees. My husband and I held out hope, at first, that the still-standing half of our own tree could be saved. But two different arborists told us the injury was not survivable.

It wasn't our only old tree. It wasn't even our only old maple tree. There are many other trees in our yard — pines, ornamentals, two locust trees, a cedar, a fruit-bearing pear, a huge white oak — plus 11 other sugar maples. We were heartbroken anyway.

The maples were all planted in 1948 by our beloved backdoor neighbor, Joe Wilson, a lineman for the telephone company who came home from World War II to marry Millie and buy the very first house built in our neighborhood. Joe and Millie lived downslope from the scraped lot where our house would be built two years later, and Joe was concerned about erosion. Maple trees have shallow roots that often rise above the surface of the ground, and Joe was counting on the 18 saplings he had planted to keep our soil in our own yard and out of his storm cellar.

The maples' shallow roots have cost a few of them their lives. Joe and Millie lived out 65 years of happy marriage in the little house behind ours, but when they died, a developer bought the house and tore it down. In its place rose up the grand kind of house a telephone lineman will never again be able to buy in this ZIP code. The builder took no care to protect the glorious trees Joe and Millie left behind. And because tree roots don't respect property lines, some of the builder's heavy equipment and some of his heavy piles of brick and lumber got dumped on shallow roots that fed the trees in our yard.

This story has been unfolding all over our neighborhood for some time now, and all over the country, too. People buy houses in old neighborhoods, in part for the way the new houses are tucked among towering trees, for the shady bower in which the shiny new houses sit. When it becomes clear that the trees are sick, the worried homeowners call an arborist, who pronounces the trees beyond saving. It costs them thousands and thousands of dollars to take the old trees down and plant saplings in their place. In another 71 years, they will have shade again.

As a species, we seem to have evolved to form attachments to trees. One of the most affecting parts of Bruce Springsteen's one-man show, "Springsteen on Broadway," is the tale of a great copper beech tree the Boss had loved as a little boy and the grief he felt when he returned to his old neighborhood to find the old tree gone. In his memoir, "Born to Run," Mr. Springsteen movingly describes the place the tree occupies in his imagination: "The very air and space above it was still filled with the form, soul and lifting presence of my old friend, its leaves and branches now outlined and shot through by evening stars and sky."

When a developer bought a duplex on a corner lot in our neighborhood, we all worried about the majestic tree that stood in its front yard. The massive white oak, a lookout perch for the resident red-tailed hawk, cast its leafy shade over all the nearby yards. A second grader two doors down tied a plaintive plea to its trunk: "Please dont Cut me Down!! I am beautiful and The tree canopy needs me to be here. Thank you." The K in "thank" was turned backward in that way of new writers. That backward K nearly killed me every time I walked past.

The builder didn't cut the tree down, but he did nothing to protect it, dumping loads of lumber on its roots and parking backhoes on them. Maybe there was nothing that could have been done: Utility trenches invariably cut straight through the largest roots of any tree on the property. By this spring, the old oak was clearly dying: Some of its branches had failed to leaf out altogether; in

others, the leaves were very sparse. The new neighbors, who love the tree as much as the old neighbors love it, called in skilled arborists. The skilled arborists shook their heads.

It's a conundrum. We love our trees, and our trees protect us as we love them, breathing in the greenhouse gases that are warming the planet, cooling our city streets and reducing energy costs. Chernobyl had nothing on the climate calamity we face today, but instead of protecting our surviving forests — both the urban tree canopy and the remaining wilderness in our care — we allow the pace of deforestation to increase at a breathtaking rate. Instead of replanting forests that have been destroyed by industry, we issue new logging and mining permits in previously protected land.

A new study recently sought to quantify the benefits that could be derived from planting trees in the coming cataclysm. A Times summary of the new report noted that “the planet could support nearly 2.5 billion additional acres of forest without shrinking our cities and farms, and that those additional trees, when they mature, could store a whole lot of the extra carbon — 200 gigatons of carbon, to be precise — generated by industrial activity over the last 150 years.” Planting trees, in other words, could go a long way toward saving us from ourselves. Although ecosystem changes may complicate the planting in this new climate, we have to try.

In Richard Powers's magnificent novel “The Overstory,” which won this year's Pulitzer Prize for fiction, one character repeats a Chinese saying: “When is the best time to plant a tree? Twenty years ago.”

Then she continues: “When is the next best time? Now.”

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