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Nalini M. Nadkarni: The trees of the city can be our heroes

The holiday tradition of bringing greenery into our homes reminds us of brighter times ahead.



By Nalini M. Nadkarni | Special to The Tribune / Dec. 18, 2020, 5:00 p.m.

Humans need heroes — entities that inspire us to overcome the challenges we face. A hero protects and provides inspiration for others.

As a child, I learned about human heroes in my history books — those who distinguish themselves in wars. Today, our heroes occupy the front lines in battles against COVID-19.

But I also look to trees as my heroic figures.

Can trees — so sedentary, so silent — be heroes? The word “tree” is derived from the Sanskrit word “deru,” which means to be firm or solid or protective — the root word for “endurance.” It is related to the Old English word, “troth,” which means “truth,” which also typifies heroism.

Trees have provided me with protection. I was the middle child in an energetic brood of five siblings, with accompanying pets, projects, homework, chores and expectations. My father, a Hindu from India, and my mother, an Orthodox Jew of Russian parentage from Brooklyn, New York, created a home that at times had to strain to contain the diversity of customs and values it held within the family.

Early on, I found a safe place where my own self could emerge, in the eight sturdy sugar maples that grew in our front yard. When my small limbs climbed into their strong limbs, I knew I would be undisturbed by parents or siblings until the dinner bell. Aloft, I occupied my own world of peace and safety. Those trees — my quiet heroes — gave

me faith that I would be able to find a refuge when I needed it as I grew into my grown-up self.

The endurance of trees has inspired me since childhood. One tree in particular is an unlikely looking hero, a misshapen linden tree that I encountered in the tiny park near my piano teacher's house during my childhood summers. After my class, I would sit on a bench in the muggy summer heat of Washington, D.C., and eat my sandwich beneath this lone and scraggly tree, grateful for the shade it cast. I could almost hear the graceful arpeggios of its branches against the severe lines of the urban surroundings.

Any urban tree — meagerly fed by shallow soils, buffeted by car exhaust, peed on by dogs, roots captive under cement — is a model of heroic endurance and bounty for humans. Urban forestry studies document that trees have significant cooling effects on urban structures and provide critical exchanges of oxygen for carbon dioxide. Their silent presence reduces stress in time-pressed city dwellers within the concrete confines of their cityscape.

In the upcoming holiday season, during the tumult of the pandemic and the shortest days of our year, we need inspiration to remind us that brighter times lie ahead. In the eighth century, the Druids started the tradition of bringing greenery into our living rooms, and we continue that ritual today in the form of a Christmas tree or Hanukkah bush, reminding us that brighter times lie ahead.

Heroes need not be restricted to humans who live far away in space and time, framed by the rifled arches of a 21-gun salute or the headlines of our newspapers. I need only look out to wind-swept spruce in the Wasatch, the veteran maple of a tiny city park, or to the sycamore tree in my own front yard.



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