

Trees in War and Peace
July 2, 2017
Deuteronomy 20:19-20

In the 14th Century BC world, without planes from which to drop cluster bombs; without a cavalry to charge with bayonets; without cannons and heavy artillery, without rifle-bearing men in trenches, warfare required basic, available materials— mostly, trees. Armies laying a siege, that is surrounding a city they wished to conquer by attacking it, depleting its stores into defeat depended on wood, nearby trees, in order to construct primitive implements. Trees from which to make a battering ram; tree trunks on which to roll the battering ram; trees from which to make ladders to conquer city walls; trees from which to construct towers from which to shoot arrows.

The 20th chapter of Deuteronomy contain God's, by way of Moses' instructions for the Israelites as they conquered the land of Canaan,

specifically here... the ethics to be maintained in the process. These last two verses give a fascinating glimpse into that ethic: “Don’t cut down trees that can be used later for food. Fruit trees. Olive trees, Fig trees. Palm trees.” I don’t believe an ecologically sensitive God had a thing for fruit trees. The instruction is self-protective for the Israelites.

It must have happened --destroying orchards around towns being overtaken. Imagine the supposed victors going “Doh” when they realized what they had done. You will want your enemies’ food-providing trees when that land becomes yours.

You are probably asking yourself, what on earth is Linda going to do with this?

Fourth of July weekend.

Wars for independence, liberty, freedom.

Trees.

I've been thinking about the value, purpose, role of trees during times of war and peace. Trees have been locations for gathering patriots and provided inspiration to victims of war. They have been both instruments of death and symbols of peace. As I share some reflections I hope you'll think of others, either as I share mine, or later as you celebrate this 4th of July weekend.

Trees as Gathering Places

In August 1765 the "Sons of Liberty" began gathering beneath a century old elm tree to protest the unpopular Stamp Act—the taxation without representation levied by the British. The elm tree, which had been planted in 1646, stood on a prominent roadway near Hanover Square from which anyone traveling into or out of the city would have to pass. The patriot rebels decorated the tree with banners, lanterns, and even an effigy of the prime minister. Eventually, a sign "Tree of Liberty" was nailed to the tree.. For the next decade patriots gathered around that tree for meetings, speeches, and celebrations and to plan demonstrations. Thomas Paine celebrated the Liberty Tree in a poem

published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, commemorating its importance to all Americans. Look it up. Here's part of it:

Unmindful of names or distinctions they came,

For freemen like brothers agree,

With one spirit endued, they one friendship pursued,

And their temple was Liberty Tree...

In the summer of 1775, British soldiers and Loyalists, then under siege in Boston, chopped it down for firewood. But the destruction of the tree only strengthened its power as a symbol. A flag flown by General George Washington included a representation of the Liberty Tree; others were flown by the patriots during those years of war.

And so, a tree which was once a central location for organizing became an enduring symbol for freedom.

Trees as witnesses of war.

If you have travelled to Civil War Battlefields—particularly Gettysburg, you may have come across the term “Witness Tree”. No

living human witnesses to the battles of the Civil War exist, but there are things living --trees which were alive and which witnessed those landmark battles. The National Park Service has estimated that there may be as many as 100-200 such trees remaining today at Gettysburg. Several years ago, five were verified by core sampling and labeled as such. Does it matter? To the historians, and the poets and sentimental among us, yes.

Any one of us can visit those 200-year-old trees and know that in their youth, had they been paying attention, they would have heard Abraham Lincoln's voice when dedicating a national cemetery at Gettysburg saying,

"We here highly resolve these dead shall not have died in vain; that the nation, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." (Gettysburg Address)

Trees as gathering places, trees as witnesses to battles, and from WWII,

Trees as sources of inspiration

From 1942 until 1944, during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, teenager Anne Frank, along with 7 others hid in a secret annex of a friend's home in Amsterdam. In that diary discovered after her death at Bergen Belsen, she writes with freedom, passion, honesty and sadness about her reality and that of the life she loved.

It's utterly impossible for me to build my life on a foundation of chaos, suffering and death. I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too, I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more"

- July 15, 1944

Looking up at the sky was not a freedom taken for granted. It was only between the curtains of a small attic window, the only window in the secret quarters which was not blacked out, that she could see into the world, through the branches of a white horse chestnut tree. She wrote about that tree three times:

23 February 1944

Nearly every morning I go to the attic to blow the stuffy air out of my lungs. From my favorite spot on the floor I look up at the blue sky and the bare chestnut tree on whose branches little raindrops shine, spearing like silver, and at the seagulls and other birds as they glide on the wind.

18 April 1944

April is glorious, not too hot and not too cold, with occasional light showers. Our chestnut tree is in leaf, and here and there you can already see a few small blossoms.

13 May 1944

Our chestnut tree is in full bloom. It's covered with leaves and is even more beautiful than last year.

With Anne's fame that chestnut tree outside her attic window also took on a certain fame and was preserved and protected, but in 2010 it succumbed during a vicious storm after being weakened by a fungal disease. But supporters had earlier gathered its chestnuts, germinated them, and nurtured saplings. Those saplings have been distributed across the world to organizations promoting reconciliation and peace. Eleven such trees exist in the United States, the most recent planted at 9/11 Memorial Plaza in New York City where the tree portrays a symbolism of hope and growth and renewal."

Trees have inspired; but trees have also served as instruments of death in this nation.

Particularly in the southern states, but in the north as well, trees were coopted as instruments for lynching. A black man or woman or a

white sympathizer; an angry mob looking for a scapegoat, a high-enough tree, a rope. From 1882-1968, 4743 lynchings were documented in the United States; 73% were black. Of the 27% which were white, many were lynched because they had assisted their black neighbors. James Cone in his recent book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* writes,

“It was a family affair, a ritual celebration of white supremacy.

Postcards were made from the photographs taken of black victims with white lynchers and onlookers smiling as they struck a pose for the camera and sold for ten to 25 cents to members of the crowd who sent them to relatives and friends.

Enough said. Those trees, if they could talk, would be weeping and wailing.

Trees as Victims of War

Today, in the Middle East, olive trees have become the **victims** of war—the protracted conflicts between Palestinian and Israeli peoples. The nongovernmental agency, Oxfam International reports that since

the war of 1967 over 800,000 olive trees on Palestinian land-- land which has belonged to families for centuries-- have been uprooted during land confiscation for Israeli settlements. Palestinian farmers are harassed, hindered by road blocks and partitioning walls from reaching their land during the weeks of olive harvest. Some of those whose fruit orchards have been uprooted by bulldozers are Palestinian Christians. Yes, trees are victims of hatred, conflict and war—even in the Middle East. And that passage from Deuteronomy seems archaic and obscure. During times of war don't cut down fruit trees—you may need them for food? And they are today needed for food, for olive oil production, for income for Palestinian farmers. We sell their olive oil, the second Sunday of every month.

Finally, Trees as symbols of peace.

The annual Cherry Tree Festival in Washington D.C. is not only a stunningly beautiful national pastime, it is a symbol of peace. In 1905, Teddy Roosevelt intervened in negotiating an end to the Russian-

Japanese wars. The mayor of Tokyo, as a sign of appreciation, sent a thank-you gift of 2000 flowering Japanese cherry trees. Unfortunately they were found on arrival to be infested with insects and worms and thus destroyed, but two years later, in 1912, another shipment of 3000 arrived, this time free of disease, and were planted near the Potomac River and Tidal Basin in D.C. Three years later, the United States reciprocated by sending Japan dogwood saplings as a sign of deepening ties.

However, in 1941 three days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese, four of those trees were chopped down by an unknown vandal. For the next 4 years, the trees were not referred to as “Japanese” but rather as “Oriental” cherry trees.

Yes, even our relationship and love of trees have been roped into our battles and prejudices and hatred. If those pink ruffled trees showcasing our capital every spring could talk to us, advise us about war and peace, equality and democracy and I wonder what they’d say? Maybe we need to listen.

