

ADDRESS TO CONVENERS AT THE GIVING OF THE
CITY OF AUSTIN TREE-OF-THE-YEAR AWARD, 2007
NOVEMBER 17, 2007 at the
WILL HAMPTON BRANCH LIBRARY, CONVICT HILL ROAD,
Austin, Texas.

by

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(Intro, thanks, welcome...)

I received a letter last week from Sharon Black-Greene. She wrote:

“Dear Professor Benedikt: My supervisor told me that you were the person who came up with the idea for the Austin “Tree of the Year” award. Since I will be putting together a book display for the November 17th “Tree of the Year” dedication at the Will Hampton at Oak Hill Branch Library, I wanted to contact you. I would like to include any information you would like to share about your idea for the award and any resources that you feel would express your desire to promote the growth of trees in Central Texas. Thanks for your great idea and any suggestions on how to connect library patrons with your message.”

Here’s how I replied, a bit amplified for this occasion because I thought about it some more after I sent my reply to Sharon.

Dear Sharon,

Most people around the world, and around the US, think of Texas as a barren place of scrub and plains (forgetting about East Texas completely!), and are surprised to find Austin so green, so covered in wonderful trees that, from Mount Bonnell, you can hardly see a house and downtown rises like an apparition from out of an ocean of green. Austin without its trees would not be Austin, and we are here today to celebrate that, to publicize that, and to encourage people to take care of this heritage—this blessing of a place at a bend of the Colorado River.

I took the idea of a tree of the year award first to Michael Embesi, city arborist, who thought it a great idea, then to the City Council, where it was warmly received, especially by Councilmember Lee Leffingwell. From

there it went to the Urban Forestry Board, and thence to a task force committee, with Emily King and Nevick Donnelly (a committee of growing and changing in membership), and thence to find a home eventually at Austin Energy...

I won't bore you further with these institutional details. I am here today to talk about *trees*.

Truth is, though, I did not come up with the notion of a city-wide tree-of-the-year award because of what I just said. Not at first. It was a single tree that did it to me: it was simply passing by an old and well-cared-for live oak tree on my daily walk through my neighborhood and finding that I had "personal feelings" for it. No one sees me do so, but I nod in recognition when I pass, and feel a little teary-eyed.

As an architect by nature (it seems), as well as by training, I especially love the way certain trees *make space* even as they actually *take space*. They make space, alone, like this old oak does under it. They make space together with other trees, and with buildings. In fact, nothing is so good at making space than a tree and a building "working together": not so far from each other as to see the whole tree from inside, but not so close either that you're just looking at a trunk (or higher up, straight into the thick of leaves), but just right, just right.

And how wonderful it is when a tree throws its shadow against a wall, and the shadows of the leaves next to the wall are sharp, and the shadows of the leaves far from the wall are blurry, and how, if you look at the shadow on the wall, you can decode the blurriness information and see not a flat shadow, but somehow the whole tree in 3-D because it's in and out of "focus." And did you know, if you look more closely at the shadows made by trees, especially of maples, because their leaves are made of concave curves, you see hundreds of perfect little circles of light which are actually images of the sun, as from a thousand pinhole cameras, because leaves next to each other actually make little lenses. (And did you know that during a partial eclipse of the sun you see crescents, not circles on the ground?)

At a deeper level I love how *three-dimensional* trees are, changing from every angle of view, with branches going in every direction: up, down, away from you, towards you, left, and right. I understand the very idea of "direction," and so of *freedom*, when I look at a good tree.

I also like how trees cut boundaries into the air between sunlight and shade—boundaries that slide over us as we move under them.

I like how trees turn little rain drops into bigger ones, how they drip still when the sun comes back out.

I like how children, for real, and adults, in imagination, can climb high into a tree's limbs and look up, and down, and in, and around, and across...feeling both excited and comfortable, privileged and at home at once.

I like that trees are bigger than me. And (sometimes) much older.

Of course, I appreciate all the other things trees do, like provide shade for us (and some other animals), as well as food and habitat for hundreds of other creatures, from microbes to raccoons. I appreciate how their roots hold the earth together, probing the darkness below. And, yes, I appreciate that trees provide *wood* too, which we make things with, like furniture, and that wood *burns* in campfires and fireplaces and once-practical stoves to make an ancient light, cook, and keep us warm.

But then there's the wind in trees: how you can feel the wind just by seeing trees move, and shadows move. The wind sounds different in different trees, too—pines hiss and sigh, cottonwoods rattle and clatter, oaks let out a quiet roar, creaking as they bend. And it's great how you can hear (and yes, see) a wave of wind passing through a tree from one side to another. You know, leaves have a certain *frequency* of oscillation, back and forth, when the wind blows, depending on the species, and so do the twigs they're on have a slower frequency, and the branch they're on a slower one yet, and then the whole tree a very slow one. When the wind blows, all their frequencies combine—like ripples on waves, like tones and overtones of music—to make a complex and unique chord, or dance, which you can see by following a single troupe of leaves shimmying, wobbling, and swerving (roughly together) through space.

At the symbolic level, I like how trees can stand *alone*—some of them very alone, out in a field—or stand *together*, in groups, like quiet friends, or better, like gatherings of different families and "races," each specializing, rivaling, and gently cooperating with each other. I like how even wonderful trees, large and healthy, do not jump out in front of you, like billboards, like ads, but wait patiently for you to *find* them and appreciate them. Some blossom showily, true, but not for long, and most do not blossom showily at all. Some die and come back, marking the seasons; some "never" die and mark eternity with a small e.

I like how hurt trees work around the damage, make other plans, as it were, and find sunshine where they can. I like that trees do OK by themselves, mostly, but also benefit greatly by our care.

I like how in places that are covered in trees, like Central Texas, it "takes eyes" to see trees at all, let alone see them in their individuality.

Are all trees *great*? No. Some really are better than others, either by luck or human care. And I think it's OK to recognize that too, quite generally.

We are here to today to recognize this fine old escarpment oak, the 'Learning Tree' at Oak Hill, which has made a more people happy for longer than you or I ever will.

Thank you.

Addendum (not in the speech, for considerations of time):

O tree, O home of our ancestors, O fountain of metaphors (you know what I mean, programmers, librarians, and engineers, you makers of charts and plumbers of nature and design), the ancient Norse said that everything we see and hear and taste and smell is but the outermost layer of the leaves of the giant world tree *Yggdrassil* that stands at the center of the universe, that *is* the universe. And maybe they knew whereof they spoke. For all of phenomenal reality is surely tied together at deeper, less-visible levels, just as leaves are tied to leaves by twigs, as twigs are to twigs by branches, and as branches to branches by bigger branches yet at further remove from the surface, and which are older and closer to the trunk that unites all branches—a trunk whose roots flair out again like a tree upside down, extending into dark and rocky realms, feeling their way. Look up. Do you see that fluttering leaf catching the sun? Do you see that bird in the sky, that spider clinging to a windy web? All this, and you, and me, and even the distant sun, are sustained by the same trunk. All of us are tiny leaves on the outermost surface of *Yggdrassil*.

Yggdrassil is a family tree still growing: what is not your brother is your cousin in some degree.

And then there is *color*: not so much the color *of* trees as the color *in* trees, color high and deep among the boughs, greened light from green leaves giving green to light itself, a perfectly transparent fog of green. The same is true *in* bushes and *in* the bells of flowers: a gathering of color and space more intense than any paint can match.

And why are leaves green in the first place? Because they have sucked all the red and blue frequencies out of sunlight, and left the green for us.