



Shelter for My Soul among the Trees

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Trees have the power to change your perspective, even in the chaos of a pandemic, social unrest, political storms, and wildfires. This eye-hunger I have for trees has saved my sanity. I believe the same can happen for others.

Growing up in Kansas, I remember the elm trees in our backyard to be enormous, towering over me and my sister as we skipped through the water dancing from the sprinklers. The trees were homes to birds and cicadas whose mingled music nearly deafened us in the afternoon. I'd stop running around with my sister long enough to gaze up at the trees, watching the branches wave and bend in the Kansas wind.

I used to create cities in the sand in our driveway at the dead-end of our dirt road. I sensed the elm tree above watching over me, its branches bowing low as the wind blew. The sound of the leaves rustling took me to another world. A lazy plane soared high up in the sky, its engine sound nearly lulling me to sleep as I put the finishing touches to a mini-castle in my city.

Next door lived my aunt and uncle and cousin. A huge cottonwood tree dominated their backyard. In summertime, we all joked about the snow coming down as the cottony seeds from the tree broke free and blew into our own yard and into our hair.

Push ahead fifteen years: I'm living in Denver, Colorado, one of the most tree-filled places this side of the Mississippi. Yet I hardly noticed them. Existential angst crowded my head and heart so that I could not see.

Skip ahead five years later to San Diego where I made the city my home port for these past three and a half decades. In my history classes at San Diego State University, I learned of a lady named Kate Sessions, dubbed "The Mother of Balboa Park" for all the trees she planted in Balboa Park, formerly called City Park. The extent of her plantings is enormous, ranging from Pacific Beach to Mission Hills where she had a flower shop and nursery.

In the History of San Diego class, I focused on Kate Sessions as my special project. I went to the basement of the San Diego History Museum and read old newspaper articles along with some old letters and even pages from a diary. She had first been a school teacher but did not enjoy the work and decided to follow her true passion of discovering new plants and growing them from seedlings.

Through all my studies of San Diego history, I was falling in love with the city more every year. Still, the call of Kansas, my homeland, was very strong. In 2002, I was close to pulling up stakes and moving back to my hometown where I could buy a little

house with a big backyard and front yard with a garage for \$50K. Instead, here in San Diego, I fell in love and married. My husband and I agreed I'd go back to my hometown once a year to visit.

Then two and a half years ago, my mother passed away. I did not return home to Kansas again—for it no longer felt like my homeland without her—until just three weeks ago. Two hundred days into this pandemic which looked as though it wouldn't go away for a long time, and the ensuing civil unrest surrounding the election, I realized this world would never be the same again. I needed to get back to my hometown to see family, most especially my aunt, who had just turned 84 years old.

On the way to Kansas, my husband and I spent three days in Denver, soaking up the beauty of the trees turning autumn colors. They were jaw-dropping gorgeous against the azure October sky. When we got to Kansas and spent time exploring and photographing with my nephew and nieces, having lunches and dinners with my aging aunt, the sparseness of trees on the land struck me as never before. Along the creeks and rivers, yes, there were trees, but they seemed short, stunted, compared to what I'd just seen in the Denver area and what I treasure in San Diego, everything from lacy-leafed jacaranda trees to the giant grandfatherly California Live Oaks.

When my husband and I returned to San Diego, I was staring at the trees around the city with new eyes. One thing that a pandemic gives you is lots of time to look around, which I have been doing, all over San Diego. I find myself gazing up the long trunks of trees; my imagination reigns in the tree tops where the birds live. The trees give me shade and shelter, fruit and flowers, oxygen and new vistas.

I've been sheltering in place among trees these last seven months, especially in Balboa Park. I can get lost in the grove of magnolia trees, or dream up medieval tales among the twisted junipers. The older I get, the more I appreciate the very basics of life. There is hardly anything more basic in its beauty than a tree. And we have the legacy of plant pioneer Kate Sessions to thank.

During this pandemic and chaotic year of change and uncertainty, I have led others to look up and see the beauty around them. This, I hope, is my own legacy. I have the Mother of Balboa Park to thank for that. From her, I learned, too, that among the trees, I find shelter for my soul.

