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Tree Town - A Parable For Our Times

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There was a town much like any other town, except it had no trees. A disease had wiped them out so long ago that no one living today even remembered they had existed. They had grown accustomed to the barren landscape.

One day a young man went to the library looking for something to relieve his boredom and by apparent chance he came upon the book. The library had been built when the town was new and small, nothing more than a small outpost with a train station. It just so happened that the young man was walking through a dusty section of the library when the noon express train rumbled past vibrating every shelf in the library. The dust stirred and he sneezed as it tickled his nose. And there, sticking out of the bookcase ready to fall to the floor was the book. He reached out to push it back into place, thinking to himself that they should move the library away from the train station for a bit of peace and quiet.

Obviously it was a long-neglected book, which made him curious. He plucked it from the shelf and opened it. There were no pictures, and the pages were old and yellowed. It seemed to be a collection of stories about the life of a gardener. "I may as well have a look at it," he thought. "I've nothing else to do."

Later that afternoon as he sat outside his home sipping a cool drink in the shade of his porch he began leafing through the book and came across a chapter about trees. This fascinated him, since he had only heard of trees and had never seen a real tree. He knew what wood was, but it always came on the delivery train, not from trees.

As he read he became even more excited about trees and what they provided. Why they make shade and hold delicious fruit to be eaten! They offer windbreaks from the winter storms, and fuel for heat when they grew old and tired. "What a wonderful thing trees must be! Wouldn't it be great if we had some around here?"

As the days passed he grew more excited and began to talk to his friends about the book and the trees it described. Soon he found others who had heard about trees and one or two who had actually seen them from a distance. The excitement grew in the town as people wanted to have some trees. A town meeting was held and the mayor asked the young man to read about trees from the book. A vote was called and the citizens decided to build some trees. Soon the quiet town was a hive of activity. Committees were formed to design and build the trees, to import the lumber and even to gather the fruit.

Soon trees began to spring up everywhere in that small town. Well, at least what they thought were trees!

They stayed as true to the book as they could. For roots they dug holes and buried old rope because they sounded closer to roots than anything else they had. They nailed these roots into the large timbers they imported for tree trunks. They nailed 'branches' to the trunks and the ladies cut leaves out of their finest linen, painted them and glued them on the branches. They also gathered fruit and tied them onto the trees so they could pick them whenever they wanted.

Eventually the streets were lined with trees. Though they looked similar at a distance, up close you could see their differences. It seemed that different people had interpreted the section of the book on trees quite differently. The branches jutted out at different angles. The colors of the leaves were different colors and they only used the fruits they thought best.

Visitors came from far and wide to see trees for the first time in their lives and marvel at the hard work it had taken to build so many. By popular vote it was decided to change the town's name from Prairie Town to Treetown. The book that started it all was enshrined in the town hall under glass. A new industry sprang up to satisfy the growing number of visitors. The townspeople set up tours, opened gift-shops and Treetown T-shirts became all the rage in that part of the world.

But as time went by the excitement over the trees faded for many. They grew weary of building and maintaining the trees and wondered why they hung fruit on them at all, insisting that the fruit stayed fresher when stored inside. Some even began to question if these in fact were real trees. The experts - those who had memorized the chapter on trees - quickly attacked those with questions. Of course they are real. Look at all the time and money we've spent on them and how many people it drew to their town. Could so many people be so wrong?

And even when the spoiling fruit seemed to make people sick, the people themselves were blamed for not believing that the trees made the fruit better. Soon a law was passed to require that fruit could only be eaten straight from a tree and no one was allowed to store any in their homes anymore. People grew disillusioned and discouraged with the endless work that brought so little return. "We just have to work harder to make it better," became the refrain of the town fathers.

Most people fell in line afraid that they would be shunned as troublemakers and ridiculed for not putting the town's prosperity ahead of their own ideas. But there were a few who just couldn't fit in. They stopped working on the trees and stopped eating their fruit. At first people tried to convince them how wrong they were, pointing to the phenomenal growth of the tree industry in the town. "Why we even send our experts to other cities and they too are building their own trees!" This worked with some, who had grown too tired to fight the status quo and decided it was just easier to fit in.

Those who continued to question the townspeople's obsession with trees, however, found it difficult to stay. Some of those working on the trees would throw sticks or fruit at them in anger as they passed by.

They called them 'treeless ones' and would tell them, "If you don't like our trees you should leave our town. But then you'll never know the joy only trees can bring." Then they would look at each other and smile. "It's for their own good you know. They need the food." Finally a few moved out of town, rather than endure the continued abuse.

One day the young man who had discovered the book was walking by the resplendent, new city hall that had been built with all the money drawn to Treetown. He sat down on the plaza beneath the trees, gazing at the gilded glass case on the front of the building. Locked inside was the book that had caused so much division. He was heartbroken that what had seemed to hold such promise had caused such trouble, and he cursed the day that he'd pulled the book off of the shelf.

Soon he found a stranger sitting down beside him on the bench. "Are you okay?" the stranger asked. "You don't look well."

The young man looked up at the stranger and was captured by the caring look in his eyes. "I once was a 'treefolk' but now I am a 'treeless one'," sighed the young man. "I thought the trees would bring us great joy, but it all turned out to be more work and trouble."

"What trees?" the stranger asked.

"Look around," the young man said pointing to the trees that lined the plaza.

"Good heavens! Are those things what you're calling trees?" the man exclaimed pointing to the towers of wood pieces, painted linen and apples hanging from string.

"That's what they are. We built them using a book I found in the library and ..."

"Wait a minute," interjected the stranger. "What was the name of this book?"

"Uhhh... The Gardener and His Garden. It was an autobiography, I think... something like that anyway."

"Ah, I see. So you have never seen a real tree?" questioned the stranger as he looked around the plaza.

Puzzled the young man looked at his new friend. "Aren't these real trees? We built them as best we knew."

"That's not a tree! Just how much of the book did you read anyway?"

"Well just the section on trees actually. I glanced through the rest of it but it all seemed a bit boring, except the part about trees. We didn't have any trees at the time and they sounded so incredible."

Chuckling, the stranger stood up. "Follow me. I think I have some news for you." Intrigued by the stranger the young man got up and followed him over to the glass case. "So you never really read the

book, eh? No wonder this town is so strange."

"What do you mean, strange?"

"The book was not about gardens or trees, but about the gardener who grows them. Real trees cannot be built; they can only be grown."

"Grown?"

"Yes, you plant seeds in the ground, keep them watered and they will spring up into a tree that will really bear fruit."

"Trees grow?" the young man sighed in shock. He'd never heard of such a thing. "I thought you had to build them?"

"I know my friend, but you have never seen a real tree. They cannot be built no matter how clear the description or skilled the craftsman. You can only grow them. If you had read the whole book you would have known that. You would have gotten to know the gardener and how he does his work to make beautiful trees out of the smallest seeds. There were even some seeds glued to the back of the cover so that you could plant them and watch them grow. Didn't you see them?"

The young man had a very sick feeling in his stomach. "There were some little, round specks of some kind."

"That's them."

"I thought they were just specks of dirt and cleaned them out before we enshrined the book."

"Only those who would have taken time to read the book and get to know the gardener would have recognized them as seeds, since they were so small and look so insignificant."

"I guess I've made a real mess of things."

"Messes can be fixed," said the stranger.

"But I've thrown out the seeds and now I can't even read the parts about the Gardener."

"Sure you can," said the stranger, pulling a copy of the book out of his back pocket and handing it to the young man. "You see I know the Gardener who wrote this book."

The young man took the book in his hands and his face lit up with a smile. "You do?"

"He's my father, and I'd be happy to show you everything you need to know about him."

"That would great!" Then flipping open the book he ran his hands across the inside of the back of the cover. "They're here!"

"That they are! Now that you know what they're for, let's go plant them and watch what happens!"

"A real tree? Won't the others be surprised!"

"That they will, my friend. That they will..."

*David Hebden of Vancouver Island, BC helped write the last article in BodyLife and first wrote the tale that became Treetown.

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