



## **The Humility of Trees**

*brother Michael*

**R**ABBI ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL IN THE PREFACE OF his book, *Man's Quest for God*, wrote, "prayer is a forgotten language." What an arresting thought! So many questions flood the mind when faced with such a provocation. What is language? What have we forgotten? What is communication and communion in our data filled, internetted world?

Language is so much more than words. An example of this is the phrase, "body language." This conveys, often to our dismay, that our body communicates more than our words. What is communication? How can prayer be a forgotten language? Certainly we have no lack of words. Perhaps the language of trees can help us to explore this question.

Is it not amazing that a pumpkin seed is larger than the seed of a maple tree? An acorn sits nicely in the palm of our hand. Like an infant, there is so much potential in small bundles of life, and even as we grow in our

earlier years, so does a tree transform the humus of the earth. Together with sunlight and water a living being is formed which is able to shelter the birds of the air.

It may be noted that a tree has memory. The annual growth rings record the overall conditions of each year. Cold or drought means small growth. Warmth and rain make for enhanced growth. What is most noticeable is the amount of sunlight available. A crowded tree grows slowly, while a white pine in the middle of a field can grow over two feet in a year. I know of two particular white pines, in our north field, that we didn't cut back for a few years. I can remember thinking, "Wait one more year, they are not hurting anyone." Now they are over thirty feet tall!

I always feel a deep need for a moment of prayerful gratitude when a tree is harvested. We fall a tree so that younger or healthier ones can continue to grow. The tree which is limbed and brought home for firewood or milling is on a journey. We are all on a journey. We are all created beings, even the rocks on the forest floor. Each of us is in a process of transformation.

Our capacity to fall a tree with a chainsaw in a matter of minutes is a sign, not only of our power as humans, but also of the responsibility that we are summoned to by the earth and the One who formed the earth. To abuse our power leads to the devastation of the earth, while to exercise our responsibilities allows the forest to remain healthy. As stewards, we enter into a dialog with nature that enhances our lives. Mutuality is a key word in describing this relationship.

We now begin to see the tree in a whole new way. Knotted, diseased and crooked wood is split open, dried, and provides warmth for us in winter. What a generous gift! Straight, solid, and large diameter, trunk wood can be used for milling. The milling of wood is the start of a whole new conversation. A solid, eight foot long trunk has ages of history imbedded in its grain. While cherry wood pits very easily, hard maple has two distinct colors within it, and ash is amazingly consistent in its lines of memory. We mill the wood horizontally and open new horizons of possibility.

We cut the eight foot long sections into slabs, which are one to four inches thick, and lay them in a sheltered place for a year so that they may air dry. The ends are sealed with paint to avoid checking. The key word now is patience. Much wood is "kiln dried" in which the water of the wood is taken out by putting the slabs into a huge oven. By air drying, the wood's natural color is preserved, and somehow the length of time and the process seems more respectful. The majesty and movement of the tree swaying in the wind has given way to the solidity and quiet of aging wood.

The journey continues in the woodshop. It is here that the conversation becomes more intimate. From the vastness of a single tree, a small piece of wood may now be formed into a cross, a cup, a bowl, a dove.



*Brother Michael and brother Augustine milling wood.*

The outer bark has been shed, and working with the inner grain now becomes the focus. There is not a single word for these moments, but there is a key question: How can the grain, knots and textures most enhance the final form? Sometimes an "imperfection" in the right position can be breathtakingly stunning, especially when the hand sanding of the piece brings out the subtleties of its inherent movement, its embodied memory.

All this happens within a context of yielding. The tree has been taken from its soil of birth, been split open, molded into a new form—silently. The process clearly speaks of humility. The humility of humus, of earth, of accepting our playful interaction is a wonder filled mystery in which we are able to explore our own humanity, and the humility to which we are called.

When we clear cut a forest, or waste our resources mindlessly, then this dialog is lost in the roar of greed and consumerism. We are challenged by the forest to do no harm, to become humble. We do not believe we should simply let the forest be, and do no forestry. Rather, we become a people whose hearts can be uprooted from prejudice, whose hearts can break open in compassion, whose lives can be molded anew into the image of Christ, the humble servant.

Now you know why some of us value working in the woodshop so much! It is an exploration in the language of prayer, not a language of the forgotten, but a language of communion with the abundant life which envelops us. ■