

A Tribute to My Dad - "My Dad Was His Forests"

Written with love by Christine Dennis

Those who knew my Dad knew that he had a passion for trees. Once I asked Dad just how many trees do you think you have planted in your life time? "Oh", he started, pausing for a moment, quietly mumbling to himself, listing the various plantations and farms. He was doing the math. "10's of thousands of trees", he replied.

And why should and how could anyone be surprised by that?! It was with the strength of the oak, the sweetness of the maple, the generosity of the walnut, the protection of the cedar, the jabs of the hawthorn, the rootedness of the willow, the stubbornness of the ironwood, the enthusiasm of the tuliptree, the boundarylessness of the locust, and the vulnerability of the ash that Dad had lived his life. He was his forests. And in the forest there is diversity. There are tall, strong, straight veneer trees, nourishing fruit and nut producing trees, trees with sharp spines, as well as trees that are a little rebellious, their form altering from the norm, doing their own thing, in their own way, and in their own time. Such diversity defines a forest.



When you have a dad that is larger than life, like the crown of a walnut unimpeded and untamed by a forest, there was not always enough room for you to live right next door to him. So it was not without its challenges. But Dad and I always shared a love of the trees and forest. A love that sprouted early when my sisters and I were children. A love that he nurtured and watered. When working or walking in the forests with him, not only did we have to try and keep up with his walking pace, we had to keep up with his passion. "Quick," he would say, "without looking up at the leaves, what kind of tree is this one?" A testing that continued. Even this summer on the side-by-side delivering firewood to the cabins, and especially if he sensed he was being rushed, we would take detours and we would creep along the trails looking at and talking about the trees. And often Dad would slow even more, eventually coming to a full stop. Looking around carefully before pointing to a tree, "What's that tree?" A test I rarely failed. "And how many board feet?" A test I never passed.



Like the heartwood of a tree, Dad was the central, supporting pillar, and heart of our family and Otter River Farms. And it is with the same certainty that the trees come into leaf every spring, that I know he loved me.

Some of my dearest memories are of the two of us planting trees together. And as we did so, we were also planting something a kin to seeds. Because with his words, his energy, his attention and intention, that went into each tree planted, like the bark of the sycamore, he was sort of leaving pieces of him self behind. Little pieces and seeds that would be there long after his death. Seeds of comfort that spring forth in a moment of need when we remember that a piece of him is still there in that tree. Pieces left and seeds sown throughout his land and home in everything that he has done. Pieces of Dad everywhere, Dad is still here.





Almost every day this summer, walking down the laneway and back between our homes, I pass through a row of geriatric sugar maples on one side and middle aged hickories on the other. Trees of two different generations not dissimilar to Dad and I. Both our grounds around our homes are arboretums. And for his birthday this year, I gave Dad two more species to add to his arboretum. He died on the day that we had planned to plant them together.

The whispering pines had been foretelling change.

An old growth tree, our family’s grandfather tree, has toppled. And was there a sound in the forest? Indeed there was. And it is still rippling out across the land. Dad is deeply embedded in his land as he had both love and concern for it and the forests. All the sentient beings who visit and live with the land - the bipeds, the four-legged, the winged, the rooted, and the river feel the absence of him driving by and his feet walking upon it. As much as Dad had been touched by the land, the land has been touched by him. The land & forests mourn along with us.

Now, like an old hollowed out beech tree, at the core a gaping hole, is how we find ourselves as a family and at Otter River Farms. But like that tree, we will continue to stand and produce new seedlings. Though a little more vulnerable without our core, it is with the wisdom collected from the years of growing along side Dad that we will carry his legacy forward.



Just as the crowns of the trees live high above in the sky, reaching for and pulled up by the heavens, where earth and ether mingle, Dad is now riding free and wild upon the winds. Like a breeze through the tree tops, he moves through and with the land. All who have been touched by Dad can know and perceive his presence. It is without words that he speaks ever so softly. He is at home and here to stay.

And so together, Dad and I will continue to plant trees.



Douglas Arthur Dennis - aka D.A.D.
September 6th, 1942 - September 11, 2022

Over the span of 80 years, Dad was born, raised, lived, died and buried in The Municipality of Bayham, which is nestled in the Carolinian Forest Region in Ontario, Canada.

Dad and I just 1 week before he crossed over.