

Bechtel Prize Essay

THE Tree Project

SAM SWOPE, WINNER

A Tree Is

As I walked through Central Park to the subway that September, already leaves were beginning to turn. I was excited by the project I had planned for my immigrant fifth graders. There were 36 of them, from more than 20 countries, and I'd been their writer-in-residence since they were in third grade. Of course I was also conscious this would be my last year with these kids, which meant the coming months would be a long good-bye and I'd be sad.

It was hot in their classroom, an attic space with windows by the ceiling. Any breeze blew uselessly above our heads and the students had nothing to stare out at when bored. I introduced the topic we'd be writing on throughout the year by asking, "What's a tree?"

"It's like a big tall plant," said Ella.

"A big plant, yes, but with a woody stem. Good."

I wrote "big plant with woody stem" on the blackboard, the start of a list. "What are the parts of a tree?"

Hands went up: Trunk. Leaves. Roots.

"Yes, good," I said, and added these words to the list. "What else?"

More hands: Wood. Bark. Branches. Twigs.

"Good," I said, and wrote those down. "Anything else?"

Silence.

"What's the green stuff in the leaves?"

Miguel, an Ecuadorian boy who always surprised me by the things he knew, said, "Chloro something?"

"Chlorophyll."

“Oh, yeah....”
And *chlorophyll* was written down.
“Can you name some trees from your native countries?”
“Palm,” said Lucinda, from Puerto Rico.
“Gingko,” said MeiKai, from China.
“Banyan,” said Rosie, from India.
“Good,” I said, and wrote them down. “Name other trees.”
Maple. Oak. Redwood.
“Christmas trees,” said Amarjeet.
“Yes, good,” I said, and added all of those. “What do trees give us?”
“Oxygen and stuff,” said Miguel.
“They clean the air of pollution,” said Rosie.
“Yes!”
“What else do trees give us? Cesar?”
“Wood to build.”
“Be specific! Build what?”
“Houses?”
“Yes. What else? Look around the room.”
Eyes darted everywhere and kids shouted out the words I’d write:
Chairs! Desks! Floor! Door! Pencils! Bookcase! Rulers! Flagpole! Broom!
“Keep going! What else in the world is made from wood?”
Clarinet! Ladders! Violins! Swings! Fences! Bridges! Boats!
Chopsticks!
“What about food? What kind of food do trees give us?”
Apples! Oranges! Coconuts! Cherries! Peaches! Plums!
“Blueberries!” said Jessica.
“Actually, no. Blueberries grow on bushes, I think, not trees.
What about nuts?”
Oh, yeah! Walnuts! Chestnuts! Almonds! Pistachios! Pecans!
“What other foods?”
Silence.
“Think pancakes....”
“Maple syrup! Maple syrup! Maple syrup!”
Syrup was added to the list. So was firewood—fuel for cooking,
fuel for warmth.
“What do trees need to survive? What do they eat?”
“Water.”
“Yes, mixed with minerals from the ground,” I said. “What do
leaves make, using energy from the sun?”
“Starch,” said Miguel.
“Good! Does anyone remember what that process is called?”
Silence. I can see them searching: *uh, uh, uh*.... I wrote it on the
board: *Photosynthesis*.
“Oh, yeah!”
“What else? What do trees give on a hot summer day?”

“Shade!”

“What fun things can you do with trees?”

“A base for tag!”

“Hide and seek!”

“You tie your jump rope to them.”

“Climb them!”

“Yes! Oh, yes, yes, yes! When I was young, that was my favorite thing to do. How many here have climbed a tree?”

Three hands went up, no more, which broke my heart: ten years old and never climbed a tree! Out of all the things in a poor city kid’s life, this made me saddest: how little time they spent outside. Their parents worked, they couldn’t go outside alone, and the school didn’t even have recess. Without exposure to the out of doors, I worried, what kind of grown-ups would these kids become?

I asked the class, “What about birds? How do they use trees? Nicole?”

“For nests?”

“That’s right,” and nests went on the list.

“What other animals do you see in trees?”

“Cats climb them and jump on you,” said Rafael.

“Good! And no one’s mentioned dogs. How do dogs use trees?”

That got a laugh, but it was true, so *place to pee* was added, too.

“What happens to trees in fall? Su Jung?”

“They change color.”

“What colors specifically?”

“Red, yellow, orange.”

“Purple!”

“Pink!”

“Yes! Yes! Yes! Let’s have other adjectives. Describe a tree.”

“Majestic,” said Rosie.

“Beautiful,” said Su Jung.

“When the leaves are gone, the tree is ugly,” said Ella.

“They scare me!” said MeiKai.

“Always?” I said.

“Yeah, always at night.”

I wrote down *beautiful* and *ugly* and *scary at night*. I said, “What sounds do trees make?”

“Trees don’t make sounds,” said Jessica.

“Yes they do!” said Simon. “When comes the wind, they do like whoooooosh!”

“Excellent! What other sounds?”

Okan made a creaking noise and Gary cried out, “Crash! Timberrrrr!”

“Yes! Yes!” I said and wrote it all down quick, the list was growing fast and I was running out of room. I had to stick words sideways, cram them in the margins.

"Wait a second, let's back up! We forgot to mention bugs!"

"Ewww," said MeiKai. "I hate bugs."

"How do bugs use trees?"

"Sometimes they eat leaves," said Okan.

Simon cried out, "Termites! Termites eat the wood!"

Bugs and *ewww* and *eating leaves* and *termites*—all were added to our list.

"Who else are enemies of trees?"

That was obvious, and lots of happy kids cried, "Humans!" at which point Aaron raised his hand and slyly said, "But writers are the most worst enemies of trees 'cause they write books that murder trees!"

"Yeah!" they shouted. "Mr. Swope is a murderer! Call the cops!"

I wrote down *humans* and I wrote down *writers*, too, then added *drought* and *flood* and *fire*. By now our list was wonderfully long, and could be longer still, but we'd done well, and it was time to write.

I love the first class of the year, all of us so eager, notebooks fresh and new, still tidy, everyone determined to do well.

"We made this list so we could write a special kind of poem," I told the class. "A list poem."

I showed them, as examples, list poems written by other children, and read them a catalogue of trees from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Then I lifted back the cover from a giant tablet, and with light green marker wrote "A tree is" on the first line of the page. I said, "Each line of our poems will begin with those three words. Let's do some as a class. Who has a first line? Rosie?"

"A tree is brave."

"Good," I said, and wrote that down. "Another?"

Jessica said, "A tree is still and quiet."

Miguel said, "A tree is as full of life as the ocean."

"Okay, good," I said—but truthfully, I wasn't that impressed. I said, "Remember metaphor? Take a second now and close your eyes. Picture a tree. What do you see? What does a tree remind you of?"

Noelia got excited, shouted, "A tree is a lollipop of God!"

MeiKai said, "A tree is a big stiff statue."

Jorge said, "A tree is a pigeon hotel."

I said, "Now you're talking!" and after writing out those lines, I decided they were ready. "Okay, guys. Try writing on your own."

Everyone wrote, but when their words were handed in, just a few felt anything like poems or approached the rhythmic fever that can be a list. Most were monotones, a shopping list, but even those might have a line or two that was inspired, or anyway fun, which is all that I could reasonably expect:

Every year an oak produces between 10,000 and 50,000 acorns. It is estimated that on average only one becomes a tree.

A tree is like air, as quiet as can be.
A tree is the shadow of God.
A tree is patience, everyone's patience.
A tree is brave, it doesn't run.
A tree is a greedy old water sucker.
A tree is a waterfall upside down.
A tree is like a kid playing with the wind.
A tree is a long bony jungle gym.
A tree is a place to be in when you are sad.

There was a single poem, though, that dazzled me the way magnolia trees in blossom do. It was by Maya, a Guyanese girl of Indian descent. With thick black hair, butternut skin, and huge red glasses (like a clown's), she'd always been so eager to please that it was hard to get to know her. Although Maya was an enthusiastic writer, I'm sure she sensed her writing never really captured my attention, not the way it did that day, the day she blossomed, found her voice, and made some magic out of words:

A tree is a wedding gown in the spring
A tree is a giant Chinese fan
A tree is a great messenger of God
A tree is Mother Nature's child
 Strawberry trees!!
 Maple trees!!
A tree is a daycare center for baby birds
A tree is the giver of air
A tree is the reader of clouds.
 Apple trees!!
 Cherry trees!!
A tree is God's wig.
A tree conceals a beautiful story.
 Coconut trees!
 Palm trees!
A tree is a dog's toilet.
Scrapes the sky!
In the middle of nowhere,
surrounded by vicious animals,
A tree is an angel's choir.
 Red trees!
 Green trees!
A tree tells God about the sights on earth.
A tree is suffering in the desert.
A tree is a wise ancient teller of sense.
A tree is a tree.

When Maya finished writing, she was breathless, flushed, and looked as if she just might swoon. She'd always rushed when writing, though, which meant her stories were sloppy and incomplete. I'd forever tell her "Slow down! Don't hurry so!" but it did no good. She had no choice, writing was a passionate business for her, and if she didn't race, she'd never get it out. For the past two years, her favorite genre had been horror, and her stories were haunted by ghosts and evil spirits and children who came to bloody, grisly, "curséd" ends. I flamed her passion all I could, and when I asked her once why she loved horror so, she said, "It's just fun to have a chill go down your spine," and that made sense to me. Horror *is* sensual, making the heart pound and the skin crawl, but Maya also understood that horror was a game. The quality I most admired in her writing was its humor, for Maya loved a laugh as well as a shiver, and her bubbly giggle was a delight to hear, burbling up from her tummy.

"This is a beautiful poem," I told her.

"Really? You liked it?" she said, wanting to hear me say it again.

"I liked it a lot."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Swope," she said, sweetly grateful.

I made a fuss about Maya's poem, typed it up and gave each kid a copy. I also showed it to her teachers, who were all impressed and told her so: "Wow, Maya!" Of course her parents both were proud; her father said the poem made him think of Wordsworth. So Maya, told she'd written something special, sent her poem off to contests, won a prize or two, and got it published, saw her name in print.

If Maya does become a writer, most likely she will say this poem was a cornerstone of her career, and it will make her feel nostalgia for the days when words came easy in a joyous rush. If she doesn't, maybe years from now perhaps she'll come across her poem in a dusty box and say, "Oh, I remember this!" then think, "Not bad!" and wonder if she'd missed her calling.

Nature Writing

That year we spent 14 full days in Central Park, where we studied, drew, photographed, and wrote about trees in poetry and prose. On our first trip, I gathered the kids round and said, "Today we're going to do a new kind of writing. It's called *nature writing*. All you have to do is find a comfortable spot, look around, and write what you see and hear. Put your imaginations away. Let me repeat that: put your imaginations away."

I'd never tried this before and wasn't sure how it would go. At the very least the exercise would force them to look at the world, but I hoped it would also introduce them to the pleasures of descriptive writing, which they hadn't yet discovered because at their young age, the main concern is plot, plot, plot.

“How many pages?” asked Samantha.

“Don’t worry about that. Just write.”

Some got working straight away. Maya plopped stomach down in the leaves, her knees bent and her feet in the air. MeiKai and Ella sat primly on a bench. Cesar found a rock. Lucinda and Paula, I was thrilled to see, climbed onto a tree, which gave others the same idea, and soon there were eight kids writing in trees, making me smile and smile. Then I saw Simon and Gary, whirling in circles in a little cyclone of leaves.

“Simon! Gary! Stop horsing around and write!”

Finally, everyone was settled, pencils in hand. Most looked around, then wrote; others got lost in their words.

Today the sun wind come. I thought it might rain, but it didn’t rain. The weather is very cold. Before we ate lunch Mr. Swope showed us how trees suck up water. Then we went to the bathroom. After that we went to eat lunch. After we ate lunch we have to write. It’s called nature writing. I see birds are flying. Trees are moving. Wind is blowing. Leaves are falling. Kids are in trees. Mr. Swope is stepping on leaves. The boys are playing with leaves. Mr. Swope is yelling. It is quiet.

—Samantha

The clouds move fast beyond the sun by the raging wind casting its spell on the leaves. I’m surrounded by millions of leaves, broken bits of bark and dirt. Birds tweet their beautiful chant through the wind. The fresh air of nature seizes beyond my calmest dreams. Ants walk the dirt and soil in their walk of amazement.

—Matthew

Starting to change yellow. They have spots. They have veins. They’re drying. They smell. They also have holes, some have white colors on them. They’re compound leaves. Have branches. The difference is that some are smooth and others bumpy. Some are sticky. Leaves jagged and smooth. Some have sticking up veins, some veins are inside of the leaf. Some smooth and some rough leaves are breaking. They’re curved. Some have wood. Bigger and smaller veins. Different color. Different shapes. More yellow. Have thorns. One wooden stem.

—Mateo

While they were writing, a park ranger came along, and politely told us climbing trees was not allowed in Central Park. She was awfully sorry, but the kids would have to get down.

Max in Control

Every year an oak produces between 10,000 and 50,000 acorns. It is estimated that on average only one becomes a tree, but none have a prayer unless they get out from under the shadow of their parent. To that end, trees have evolved solutions so clever and whimsical a child might have imagined them. Some seeds get gobbled up, then pooped; some are squirreled away, then forgotten; some hitch a ride on fur, then work loose; some whirligig in the wind, then drop; some drift out to sea, then wash up on a distant shore.

To teach this lesson in adaptation, one day we hunted seeds in the Ramble, one of Central Park's two forests. I told the kids, "As you hunt, don't go beyond that sidewalk over there, or that bench over there, or those huge rocks over there. And don't talk. Or goof around. I want you to be alone in nature."

The effect I was reaching for was a long lazy day in which kids slowly get acquainted with nature the way kids in the country do, the way I had, by just hanging out in it. A bit wishful, wanting them to be alone in nature with 36 other kids as well as the dog walkers, the nannies with strollers and the occasional cop car that snaked its way along the forest pathway. Nevertheless, something good was happening that day. The kids were quietly walking around, taking notes in their journals, and collecting seeds.

Miguel, however, was agitated. It was troubling. He stomped about and thwacked trees with his stick—wham! wham!

"You gotta calm down, Miguel. Take a deep breath. Listen to the quiet."

"I want to find a forest with like foxes and wolves."

"Yeah, that would be exciting. Bears would be good, too."

"Central Park wouldn't have, like, bears."

"No. But it does have hawks."

He shot me a look of disbelief.

"No, it's true. They roost on the side of a fancy building on Fifth Avenue. You sometimes see them soaring."

We looked at the sky, but it was empty, and Miguel thumped off. Every so often, I'd see him stop and rake the heavens with his eyes.

The children had adopted trees in their neighborhood, and throughout the year they observed their changes. Miguel's tree was in the schoolyard, where there were several large trees; yet he'd chosen the smallest, a laurel maybe eight feet tall with a sling-shot shape. It had lost a major branch some time ago, but it was a tough little thing. Miguel shinnied up it as far as he could go, just a few feet, and it sagged

under his weight but didn't break. He told me, "I adopted this tree because I remember my dad used to put me up there, and then I'll fall down: *abbbbbbb!*"

I couldn't decide whether that was a happy memory or merely the happiest one he had. Miguel's mother, recently summoned to school because Miguel was getting into fights, said there had been trouble at home. She said, "The other night my husband told me, 'I'm moving out,' and so Miguel started packing his clothes too and said he was going with his father. That he didn't need a mother, he needed a man. So I told him, 'All right, go. But don't come crying to me when he locks you up and doesn't let you play.' Because that's what my husband makes them do if I am not there. He makes them stay in the bedroom. They can't come out with him in the living room and play."

Miguel had named his tree Max in Control. "I call him Max because all the stuffed animals that I have, I named them Max. I don't know why. And I named him 'in Control' because like there's so much stuff happening inside of him every season and every day. It's like a curse split the trunk in half and it means the control you have to take to absorb all the water and protect himself from damage."

On the day we hunted seeds in Central Park, Miguel came running up to me and said in a loud whisper, "I saw it, Mr. Swope! I saw the hawk!" I looked up, but he told me it was gone. "I'm so glad you saw it," I said, but wondered if he really had.

Suddenly Maya shrieked in joyful horror, having come across the body of a dead and mutilated squirrel. Everyone gathered round and joined in the hysteria, screaming and jumping up and down. I had to force myself to look. The poor squirrel was a bloody mess, missing half an eye and its jaw torn off, but Maya was in seventh heaven. She leaned over to study the carcass more closely, and was so fascinated that I thought perhaps she really would become a surgeon, as she'd told me once, so she could feel horror firsthand and "look at people's disgusting insides."

The squirrel made Miguel happy, too, but for a different reason. He was sure his hawk had killed it. "This is just the place where I saw him come down!" he told me. "I heard the squirrel cry out!"

When the time came for nature writing, Miguel wanted to write a poem instead. He told me, "I used to think poems were like girly things, like lullabies or something, but then I started putting a lot of effort in it. It's like you put 25 cents in those machines and you don't know what you're going to get. That's what happens to me. I put a coin in my brain and get a poem out."

Flash!
Got a picture.
I got the hawk flying with its prey!
Run, run to develop.
"Come back in an hour."
Run, run to get my picture.
Pay my money without care,
thinking that I'll get my share.
When I open the little sack
I find the hawk with the hare.
Hey, no fair!
The hawk stopped!
The photo is no movie,
the photo is now the past, with no more life.
So run, run, run
back to Central Park
to find the hawk.
No hawk now!
This time I'll be ready,
not with the camera,
but with my eyes.
Nature is the only true movie.

Photograph courtesy of Sam Swope.