

# TED Talk

Mario Houle, Friday 26, 11:00

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I am fascinated by trees.

When I was a pastoral animator in high school,  
I had a room decorated with a tree,  
I set up a room that looked like a quiet garden behind an old house.  
With my students, I made two gigantic three-dimensional trees,  
which were quite well done, even if I say so myself!  
Entering the room and sitting there  
brought the teenagers to the level of their deepest emotions,  
and the two big trees were for them  
a symbol of security and a promise of growth.  
That same summer, while shopping to furnish the office  
where I would welcome the young people,  
I fell in love with a frame... this one.  
It was such a representation of the reassuring and protective tree  
that I wanted to be for them!

"Leave to me the leaves and branches that hurt you:  
As for you, raise your head, have faith, life is waiting for you!"

This frame is always with me, in my Provincial office,  
above my lamp and rocking chairs,  
a precious place of prayer and meeting.

Trees speak to me, inspire me.

And I'm not the only one: this is also the case for God.  
It seems that the word tree is one of the most frequent in the Hebrew Bible.  
Because it is both rooted in the ground and reaching for the sky,  
a tree is the inspiration of the wise man or woman  
who cares for this world while gazing at God.

"Planted near a stream, it grows like a palm tree;  
it pushes its roots towards the current,  
it never fears drought."

Trees, for God,  
are the ideal setting for reaching out to human beings  
- Abraham and Sarah under the oak of Mambre come to mind.  
but also the place to acknowledge them, to call them, to send them:  
the sycamore tree of Zacchaeus, the fig tree of Nathanael,  
the bush that burns without being consumed, from which Moses set out  
armed with a simple walking stick...

God really loves trees,  
and trees have much to teach us about God.  
He is the one who plants them, who nurtures them and cares for them.  
He is the conscientious Vinedresser, the Pruner.

I said 'pruner', not 'trimmer'.  
Let me explain quickly.

Pruning,  
is the careful work done by professionals.

Trimming,  
is the often drastic operation  
by which people of goodwill like you and me  
- a little instinctively and a little at any time -  
remove dried out or unsightly branches  
or the new shoots on the bottom of the trunk.  
And I'm not talking about those who cut off the tops of trees  
to improve their view of the lake...

Trimming is not knowing the tree, nor the person who looks after it:  
it is reacting, adjusting in the short term, without reflection, without vision.

For his part, God is a good pruner for his beloved trees,  
and each one of them is quite unique in his eyes.

Because let's face it: tree plantations,  
all lined up in every direction,  
all the same and all trimmed in the same way,  
that's clearly a human invention, not a divine creation!  
Our God is much more of an "English garden" type,  
a slightly disorganised but friendly and convivial mishmash,  
than the "French garden" type  
where every leaf and blade of grass is tended with a nail clipper.

Pruning, therefore, consists of  
"pruning, reducing or even removing  
branches, shoots and roots  
in order to improve the structure and condition of the tree,  
always in harmony with its surroundings".

The pruner therefore begins by carefully studying  
the single branch in front of him.  
He does not do anything at random:  
his decisions are considered, his gestures are meticulous  
and his actions are aligned with the needs of the tree and of the environment,  
which always take precedence over the owner's ambitions.

For the Vinedresser aspires - even more than we do -  
at keeping us branches that bear abundant and tasty fruit.  
And for this, he carefully but firmly prunes us  
at all stages of our growth and maturity.  
But like all true professionals  
he prefers to act when we are dormant  
- you know,  
that silent, somewhat inert period  
between the falling of the dead leaves  
and the appearance of new buds...

And to sculpt us,  
he uses the classic techniques of the pruner.

For example, in the case of **sanitation pruning**:  
he gently but firmly removes  
our dead, weak or broken branches  
before they cause harm to us or to others;  
Above all, he makes sure that all the sap is devoted  
to bringing us back to good health and nourishing leaves and fruit.

Sometimes the pruner acts with a **directional aim**.  
He goes so far as to remove whole sections of the tree  
in order to protect it from the obstacles that are about to come;  
It is also, often, to allow the **rebalancing** of his weighed down tree.  
He is the one who planted it, who knows its true essence,  
and he brings his tree back to its natural mission and form,  
to an accomplishment that only he truly knows.

Moreover, God did not wait for our permission to regularly carry out a solid **training pruning** of the frisky, juvenile trees that we have been. Caught up in the gales and preoccupied with spreading our branches, we didn't always realise it at the time. But today, as fragile, century-old trees, we are feeling the effects of **fructification pruning** and the often severe removal of our old branches which alone are capable of provoking the appearance of new shoots.

But our God, the pruner, the Good Vinedresser, knows only too well that, if these clean, sharp cuts hurt more, they also heal more easily. For these stubs, these fragments of branches that are left hanging and frayed, delay the healing process. And the wound that refuses to heal lets in the germs of an infection which hurts much more than the courageous cut would have done.

Indeed, sometimes you have to be very brave when pruning.

When an ageing hedge spreads out and loses its vigour - and this is something that happens every 15 or 20 years - those who really love this piece of greenery have only one solution: cut it down to ground level to regenerate it. It is only by welcoming this poverty, this apparent nakedness that the hedge will come back to life for a new cycle.

Our Vinedresser is a loving but demanding Master. He expects us to remain bearers of Life... somewhat impatiently at times:  
*"How, for three years now  
I've been waiting for fruit from this fig tree and I haven't found any?  
Why let it occupy the earth for nothing?"*

Fortunately, we know that, he calms down and keeps on beating around it. Because he believes in his plantation, probably more than the plantation itself. He does not judge us by the strength of our trunks or the extent of our branches, but by the deep mystery of our fruitfulness:  
*"A good tree cannot produce bad fruit,  
nor a sick tree produce good fruit.  
You can tell a tree by its fruit. »*

And, above all, God does know,  
where the sap comes from that allows old apple trees  
to continue bearing astonishing new fruit:

"He who remains united to me, and to whom I am united, remains fruitful.  
If you remain united to me, ask for what you want  
and you will obtain it."

And at what seems the end of its slow growth,  
the pruner surprises his faithful old tree again,  
this time with a gentle thinning,  
a technique known as **open centre pruning**.  
With very small or very large blows of the pruning shears,  
he gradually hollows out the heart of his tree like an inner vase,  
removing not only dead branches and foliage,  
but also some perfectly healthy branches  
that are detrimental to its essential structure.

And the tree, which had surrendered itself, has the shocking experience  
that flow in a new way, to the very depths of its vulnerability,  
the fresh breath and the healing light from above.  
The pruner has turned his tree upside down, so to speak,  
allowing those who take shelter in it to see upwards in turn,  
to feel the beneficial sensation of an inner space  
which has totally and freely let in Clarity.  
The tree has become a witness to hope.

God truly loves trees,  
and trees have much to teach us about God.  
They also have much to teach us about ourselves;  
about us yesterday, about us today, and about us tomorrow, why not?

One day - a long time ago - I turned 50.  
Surprisingly, I was really looking forward to this milestone.  
I knew what I wanted to do with my 50 years: dig my roots.  
I was hungry for competence, for depth, for solidity.  
I felt like I had invested everything up to that point in the foliage  
and so little in the roots.  
I even came close to getting a tattoo of a tree, here on my arm,  
and I kind of regret not having done so at the time.

**This same year, for Christmas, my eight big nieces  
gave me an amount of money to spend as I wished, for my 50 years.  
So I decided to buy a painting of a tree:  
a real tree, impressive, powerful, solid, majestic, in short,  
the one I wanted to become ...  
or the one I thought God was calling me to be.**

**But it was this engraving that seduced me,  
without my really understanding why.  
It has never left me and now hangs right above my computer.  
It has moved me ever since I first realised with emotion  
that God's dream for me is not the tree I imagined.**

**That my trunk will remain frail, most likely,  
and my branches too sensitive to the wind, and my foliage too bushy.**

**But also, that my roots are already growing  
and that they will probably continue to grow,  
but that they are invisible, and above all,  
that they are a gift, my gift to the land where I am planted.**

**Yes, I know that now: I will never be a majestic tree,  
and I will probably never be a lush and verdant tree again.**

**But I am filled with a great peace and a great hope,  
for I know that the light that filters through my stripped branches  
makes me mysteriously, more than ever ... luminous.**

**Thank you for listening.**