

# Broaden your perspective of place through the simple practice of befriending a tree.

## Introduction

In each issue we offer a practice inspired by one of the issue's stories. The practices are intended to provide meaningful ways of connecting to the natural world, bringing what's shared in the story into your own life. Whether being immersed in place, engaging the five senses, or sitting in quiet contemplation, these practices are an invitation to explore your relationship to place and deepen your connection to the earth.

In exploring this issue's theme of Perspective, writer Chelsea Steinauer-Scudder spent time with a pin oak tree in Portland, Maine, listening, watching, and learning from the tree.



# Befriending a Tree

## by Chelsea Steinauer–Scudder

After moving to a new city, I decided to befriend a tree. What would it mean, I wondered, to spend time with a tree over a period of months, or even years? What could a tree teach me about being in a place?

I've read books about trees—books in which scientists and researchers parse trees apart, from apex to taproot, revealing what they're made of and what they do. I've admired trees along walks in the woods, or out of apartment windows. I've sat against them, climbed them, collected their leaves. But what, I thought, do I *really* know about trees? The answer to this question, it seemed, was not in a book or a scientific journal. It was not one search away on Google. I wanted to understand trees not as a broad category of ecology but as living beings. So I set out to find a tree.

I thought it might take a week of exploring new neighborhoods and parks before I found a tree that seemed right. But when I set out from my apartment on a September morning, I somehow walked straight to the pin oak in Deering Oaks Park, standing tall and elegant in the late summer sun, endless leaves waving and whispering some ancient oak language.

I approached the tree until I was standing several feet from the trunk, the canopy above vastly greater than my field of vision. I admit to being a bit unsure of what to do next. How do you introduce yourself to a tree? I put a hand out to feel the gray-brown bark.

"This is a living being," I thought, and the thought surprised me. Trees are *alive!* I knew this, of course, but had never taken the time to think about what it meant. *Here is a life.*

I circled the trunk. I looked up into the branches, wondering how a tree could keep track of so many swoops and turns, twigs and acorns. I walked a hundred yards away, trying to see the whole tree at once, remembering that the roots are invisible to my eyes beneath the mowed grass. I walked back again.

I've visited the tree for several months now. I've laid down in the grass and watched the birds alight on the highest branches and then take off into a blue sky. I've leaned against the trunk as the squirrels scurried away with acorns. I saw the leaves turn brown and wrinkle, and one morning they were gone, fallen from the branches and already collected by park management. I checked the tree after wind storms. I researched pin oaks and learned that they drop their acorns only every two years. I invited the city arborist to meet me at the tree and tell me the history of the park. I introduced the tree to my partner and then to my father and brother. Some days, I bring my camera and take photos,

some days I bring a notebook and pen, other days I bring only myself. Mostly, I try not to *do* at all, though not-doing is hard. I try to listen to the tree. I try to feel the life beneath the bark. I try to see the pin oak in the present moment, on this day, in this season.

In "Time to a Pin Oak," I write about how the tree began to shift my perspective of time. But there have been other shifts, some more subtle. Like any relationship, there is a slow, growing awareness and deepening familiarity that comes only with a long succession of shared moments. I am beginning to see the tree differently, in some way that I can't fully explain. And I'm beginning to see myself differently in relation to the tree. It's almost as though the practice of presence and attention is akin to that of the metalsmith forging a key. I don't yet know what it will unlock.

I invite you to befriend a tree. Sit against the trunk or lay beneath the leaves. Know that the tree's branches above you welcome the changing sky; the roots below you are faithful and patient anchors to this place. Simply be. See what emerges.

# Start of Practice

- BEING -

1. Go outside and find a tree that you feel drawn to: perhaps in your front yard, growing in the park down the street, or newly met on a hike through the forest. Go out with the intention of dedicating time to spend with this tree. Set aside real, valuable time.

2. Once you've found a tree that speaks to you in whatever way a tree may speak, introduce yourself. This could be a spoken introduction, or resting against the bark, or picking up a leaf from the ground and pressing it into the palm of your hand. Do what feels right to you.

3. Try not to refer to the tree as "it."

4. Take a moment to quiet yourself. Let go of what is not here, in this moment. Here you are and here is the tree. Let that be enough for now.

5. Sit or stand beneath the tree. Spend a couple of minutes simply observing the tree: notice colors, patterns in the bark, shapes of leaves, the smells around you.

6. Now move away from observation and try to see the tree with fresh eyes. Let go of your ideas or expectations about what this tree is or should be. Allow it to enter into your imagination and surprise you. Where does this tree take you? What do you remember, feel, or think about? Consider the tree in the wider setting, the ecosystem.

7. After spending a few minutes with the tree, you may find that your mind begins to form questions for the tree. Some of them will seem silly and obvious; others won't have words to go with them; others will be unanswerable. It doesn't matter—go ahead and ask.

Questions such as: What is it like to be you? Are you cold? Can you feel those squirrels scurrying up and down? What are your roots doing? How do you experience time? How do you understand where you are? What does it feel like to be here?

8. You may already know—or choose to find out—the species of the tree, the age, the history . . . or you may not and prefer to simply be with the tree.

9. Make a point of returning to the tree three or four times over the course of a week or a month, or whenever you can. Spend a minimum of 30 minutes with the tree, simply being present. Notice what shifts in you—what you begin to see that you didn't see before—as you get acquainted with this tree.

After returning to the tree again and again, you will begin to notice things you didn't notice before. The tree will be more and more familiar to you, and you may begin to feel the seeds of a friendship forming. What does it mean to care for and befriend a tree? This is another question that need not have any definitive answers. You may, however, want to reflect on your experience and explore it through writing, photography, drawing, or another medium you feel drawn to.

Here are some suggestions and simple exercises:

**Write.** Bring pen and paper with you when you visit the tree. Write down simple observations using your senses. How does sunlight look shining through the leaves? How does the bark smell? How do the branches move in the wind? Spend a few minutes writing down your sensory experience of the tree. Do not worry about complete sentences or correct grammar or whether or not it's "good." Just write what comes to you. Take about 10 minutes to write your observations.

Set your pen and paper aside for a few minutes. Perhaps even wait until you get home

or until the next time you visit the tree to take a look at your writing again.

When you return to read your written observations, you may find a word or a phrase in what you wrote that surprises or intrigues you. You may find that you want to write even more about the texture of an acorn or pine cone. Choose whatever it is in your writing that you feel most drawn to. From there, try writing a poem, a short story, or a more detailed description of your encounter with the tree.

**Photograph.** Bring a camera with you when you visit the tree. Whatever it is you choose to photograph—the same thing every time or something new—try to make a point of returning at different times of the day, or different days of the week, or different seasons of the year. There may be something you notice every time you come to the tree: a particular branch or knot in the trunk. Perhaps you find yourself repeatedly looking into the branches or stepping back to see the tree from a distance. You could photograph the bark, or the leaves, the birds that find their way into the branches, or the way the light shifts the tree's shadow on the

ground. Try to photograph the tree as you see it—in detail or in profile, up close or far away. Pay attention to how photographing the tree over several visits may help you to see things that you hadn't seen before.

When you've taken your photos, you could try arranging them in chronological order, like a timelapse of this brief period in the life of the tree. What do you see?

What do the photographs capture that you hadn't noticed before? What do the photographs fail to capture?

**Draw.** Bring a sketchbook or scrap paper and a pen or pencil, paints or markers, to the tree. You may want to sketch a leaf or a twig, or paint the entire tree, or draw what the tree makes you think of. Don't worry about your drawing being accurate or realistic. This is a chance to see how the tree might arrive from your mind and imagination onto a piece of paper.

**Share.** Having observed your tree over a period of hours or days or even weeks, take time to start a conversation with someone in your community about the tree. This could be a city arborist, who may be able to tell you more specific information about the tree. It could be a friend or a family member, whom you meet for a less formal discussion over coffee. Tell them what this experience has been like for you, what questions you have.