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Stumbling through a darkened wood with a large basket of mushrooms, I have felt that strange vortex of uncertainty, a basket of small fears. Would I be spending the night in this forest? Would rain and stiff wind find me exposed? Would my wife fret?

In a strange way, most of this apprehension is not so bad. Why? Consider this: In a time and place in the 21st century, it is rare to find an opportunity to be truly alone with Mother Nature. After all, as the sun rises early in the morning, the route out of the thicket generally emerges. (And perhaps a friendly Ent — Tolkien's tree walkers — might make himself available as a guide.)

Old friends

Approaching the mushroom patch, I sense my old friend, a 160-foot cedar with bark like weather-beaten skin and a tussle and tangle of limbs that smells like an old-growth forest should.

Smells of evergreen, and a bit like cinnamon — I come to this place the same way Buddhists seek



A cedar canoe carved by the Chinook people resting above high tide

a shrine. The way Muslims covet Mecca, or Christians a chapel or mighty cathedral like Notre Dame. If all that stained glass speaks to you — if the rich ethereal experience of feeling close to a god motivates — then why can't one feel emotional when confronted by a great cedar tree as old as the great stone churches of France?

So, I sit a minute with this tree pressed into my back, into the soft fibrous bark of

the living, breathing cedar.

Yes, we have had a conversation, and more than once. Yes, a communal hug at times, though I can't get my arms around the massive trunk. And no, it doesn't talk back, at least in English — though, for the life of me, I feel a sensitive presence from the large, imposing figure. Having said all of this — having identified my nature-boy self with a tree — I feel compelled to defend myself against the slings and arrows of more conservative rational beings.

Scientifically, the tree is a living creature, made up of molecules not so different than yours or mine. The

tree draws carbon dioxide from the air and spills out oxygen, a life sustainer for humans. Deforestation in the Amazon rainforest and other heavily logged areas like our own backyard have begun to jeopardize our human existence.

As I write this article, three major storms are threatening enormous sections of the U.S. Five hundred-year storms, they say — all in ten days. Trees are not only our friends, they offer protection.


And, to my mind, they are beautiful. Why else would the painters and writers and artisans of the world be so drawn to them?

homes and totems. Fantastical masks enriched Native ceremonies. Their lodges housed hundreds of human beings. The length and breadth of some of those plank houses often exceeded 100 feet. Inside, cedar fires warmed their bodies. And, if you wished to travel, cedar canoes up to 60 feet or better crossed the heaving seas with the sleek performance of otters.

I knew a logger who cut mountains of trees, yet respected and loved those old-growth forests. He wrote poetry to them. Drew their bodies on paper and explored their souls. He didn't talk much about those feelings. He was one tough son-of-a-gun with a street fighter mentality to defend.

A cultural icon

Of course, the cedar was the talisman of our West Coast tribes, the Haida, Chinook and numerous Native cultures. The soft pliable grain was split, carved and woven into essential life forms, into blankets, hats, fishing gear,

But I wonder how many others house a particular fondness for these ancient beings, these living candelabras of leaf and limb. Lest we forget, as John Muir said, "The clearest way into the universe is through a forest." 

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Light pierces the canopy



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