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Meditations on Helping

Pamela K. Gardner¹

*While writing my dissertation there were many moments of writer's block. During one, I wrote about the scene outside my window. It became a metaphor for my thesis: that reflecting on our actions and the stories we tell ourselves can help us be better educators, counselors, and human beings. The dissertation, titled-*Living a Life Beyond Fear: A Narrative Exploration of College Career Counseling and Student Affairs Professional Preparation*, is currently being reviewed by my faculty committee.*

Outside my rattling window, the wind blows hard and the little tree quivers and bends. The gale swings in from the north and accelerates as it squeezes between the houses to reach the open expanse of Lake Champlain. It beats the little tree that stands in its way. Since I planted it, the sapling has been shaped by the insistent wind, its branches swept in a constant southerly yearning. Its red-brown bark is less smooth; the rounded crown and lead branch are split by the brutally beautiful ice storm it survived two years after it came to live in its permanent spot. I almost killed it during that storm.

In fear for its life, I spent hours trying to chip the weight of the icy embrace off of its branches and learned later that my desire to help almost cost destroyed it. More ice on one side made the lead branch split and tear the trunk. Even after we dramatically pruned the damaged branch, the split was visible in the heart of the tree. Our friend the arborist declared solemnly "only time would tell." We could only wait and see how the little tree fared. Opportunistic infection or bugs could have taken over, but it survived. Today, it bears a few shriveled leaves and some of the cherry-red fruit it bore last season. Watching in the quiet stillness of some mornings rewards me with a view of the evening grosbeaks that come and pluck at the crabapples from the limbs, and the red-breasted robins that feed from the ground below it.

I love that tree. When we saw it in the nursery, I loved its pristine perfection and indescribable color. Now, with its scars, I love the way its branches are twisted and gnarled by the punishing winds, while its trunk remains strong. Today, naked and shaken, it holds its energy in reserve, deep inside. Its roots hold it firm and complete through the drifts and gales of the Vermont winter. A few months from now, it will take our breath away with the brilliant proof of its survival. The plum-red buds will blister those bare limbs and burst into a deep-pink display of triumph. Every spring, the tree brings the neighbors and the children out, each one commenting on its breathtaking character and beauty. Heedless, it just grows and bears fruit. Every spring, in a valiant and tenacious push of energy, those roots thrust out new little trees that gardeners call sucker shoots because unchecked they can steal the nutrients from the more beautiful crown. For me, they are just another sign of the fierce determination of living things to grow.

When I see this tree, I remember that my desire to help is sometimes driven more by what I fear than what is really needed. It reminds me that the cold and cloudy times are as necessary to growth as the warm and brilliant times are. It reminds me that cutting back seems cruel but can sometimes bring revival. It reminds me that faith and trust and the willingness to let others live their lives are essential to this work we call student learning.

Pamela K. Gardner graduated from the University of South Carolina in 1980 with majors in English and Psychology. She obtained her Masters of Education degree from The University of Vermont in Student Personnel Services and Higher Education. She is currently the director of Career Services at The University of Vermont.