

Reason and Respect

Volume 3
Issue 1 *Winter 2007*

Article 11

2-8-2008

Jean Giono. The man who planted trees, 20th anniversary edition. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2005.

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Recommended Citation

O'Connell, Roxanne (2007) "Jean Giono. The man who planted trees, 20th anniversary edition. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2005.," *Reason and Respect*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 11.
Available at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/rr/vol3/iss1/11>

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Review:

Jean Giono. *The Man Who Planted Trees, 20th Anniversary Edition*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2005.

Also in DVD:

The Man Who Planted Trees (1987) animated short film, directed by Frédéric Back, written by Jean Giono. 30 minutes.

Some years ago I attended a workshop on finding purpose and passion in one's work. I was, at that time, working in a large high tech company and the entire industry was in a state of turmoil with repeated layoffs, "right-sizing," and reorganizations. This made staying focused and enthusiastic about one's work very difficult. The workshop ran half days over the period of two weeks and I forget much of what we did there—except for one thing. We watched a film. Not some rah-rah corporate training video, not some problem-solving case-study. We sat together in the semi-darkened room, twenty occupational war-weary souls trying to find our moral compass, our life's meaning, and we found ourselves transported to the hills of Provence and the story of Elezéard Bouffier.

Bouffier, as the anonymous narrator in the film comes to discover, is a shepherd, a solitary man living in the arid, deserted hills, who goes out each morning and plants one hundred acorns. His method is systematic, guided by nature, and quietly purposeful. Over the following decades, he changes a few things—he stops herding sheep because they damage the young trees, and begins to keep bees. He plants different varieties of trees, beeches and birches, each according to the elevation and resources of the land. Little by little, the hills and valleys of the area undergo a great transformation. Water and birds come back to the dry dusty land and happy families begin to move back into the area. The author of this story, Jean Giono, writes as an epigraph:

In order for the character of a human being to reveal truly exceptional qualities, we must have the good fortune to observe its action over a long period of years. If this action is devoid of all selfishness, if the idea that directs it is one of unqualified generosity, if it is absolutely certain that it has not sought recompense anywhere, and if moreover it has left visible marks on the world, then we are unquestionably dealing with an unforgettable character.

Giono is talking to us about the power of generosity and patience as the essence of true service.

The story was written in 1953 and was first published in *Vogue* magazine in 1954 as "The Man Who Planted Hope and Grew Happiness." Giono had lived through two world wars, the first as a soldier barely out of his teens. By 1930, Giono had become a successful writer and was able to devote himself full-time to writing short stories, novels and poetry, all with great dedication to his personal beliefs. He was passionate about nature, rebellious against war and destructive capitalism. Once blacklisted, and even imprisoned, for his pacifist commitment, he is now regarded as one of the great 20th century French writers. This story is one of his most well known, having been translated into several languages and made into an Oscar-winning short animated film. But it was not always so.

In the afterword of the 20th anniversary edition, Norma Goodrich, Professor Emeritus of French and Comparative Literature at the Claremont Colleges, tells us that:

Giono ran into difficulties with the American editors who in 1953 asked him to write a few pages about an unforgettable character. Apparently the publishers required a story about an actual unforgettable character, while

Giono chose to write some pages about that character which to him would be most unforgettable. When what he wrote met with the objection that no “Bouffier” had died in the shelter at Banon, a tiny mountain hamlet, Giono donated his pages to all and sundry. . . . Giono later wrote an American admirer of the tale that his purpose in creating Bouffier “was to make people love the tree, or more precisely, to make them love planting trees.”

Giono believed that there was a connection between his gift of the story to all and the effect that it has had in the world. He claims, “It is one of my stories of which I am the proudest. It does not bring me in one single penny and that is why it has accomplished what it was written for.”

And what is that effect? Why do readers insist that the story of Bouffier is, in its essence, more fact than fiction? Consider this:

- A man named Abdul Karim, from the Kasargod district of Kerala, over the period of 19 years, created a forest using the same methods as those described in Giono’s story. Where once there was sun-scorched arid waste there is now lush green forest and fresh clean water (<http://forests.org/archive/asia/indfor.htm>).
- Since 1988, an organization called “Trees for the Future” has helped thousands of families plant over 35 million trees in over 6,000 villages in Asia, Africa and the Americas (<http://www.treesftf.org>).
- 2004 Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Wangari Maathai, founded the Greenbelt Movement, which has planted more than 30 million trees, restoring the Kenyan environment in fulfillment of its mission to “mobilize communities for self-determination, justice, equity, poverty reduction and environmental conservation, using trees as the entry point” (<http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/>).

I once lent my copy of Giono’s book to a colleague to read over the weekend—indeed, it would take far less time than that, just a few hours, really. He returned it on Monday and with a wry cynical smile said, “Nice fairy tale.” Given the real transformations happening in the world today because one person here, and another there, quietly, persistently, and patiently go about planting tree after tree, day after day, year after year, I would have to say my colleague missed the point. Real, true, lasting service to ourselves, and to the earth that sustains us, is not a BIG thing. It is a hundred thousand small, generous, patient things that make all the difference. As the narrator of this wonderful story concludes:

When I reflect that one man, armed only with his own physical and moral resources, was able to cause this land of Canaan to spring from the wasteland, I am convinced that in spite of everything, humanity is admirable. But when I compute the unfailing greatness of spirit and the tenacity of benevolence that it must have taken to achieve this result, I am taken with an immense respect for that old and unlearned peasant who was able to complete a work worthy of God.

It doesn’t matter if you choose to read the book or see the film. Ideally, you should do both, and more than once. As I write this the polar bear is being put on the endangered species list because his habitat is melting away; over 130 rainforest-dwelling species go extinct every single day; 24% of the world’s coral reefs, essential habitats and a source of structural storm protection, are at risk of collapse. The notion that any one of us has the power to help save the world we live on seems laughable, outrageous. And yet there is hope, there is Elezéard Bouffier, a man who simply planted trees.

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