

A Maple's Tale

By Ray Fortune

*While walking in the woods one day
I stopped beside a maple tree
The leaves were rustling in the breeze
And this is what they said to me...*

Hello, please stop awhile and listen to my story. Yes, I'm a maple tree and I'm talking to you! Here I am standing in my allotted spot in the woods, surrounded by my children and grandchildren. From my lofty perch I can look out over the tree tops and watch the clouds sail by and the hawks and eagles soaring high above me. But it was not always like this.

My very first memory is as a small round kernel lying on the forest floor in the leaf litter. How I got there, I later learned, was by floating down from my parent tree and landing where I stand today. It was a very good spot, as the soil was moist and just the right mixture of sandy loam with lots of decayed leaves. I lay there all winter covered by snow. The snow melted as the weather warmed, providing lots of moisture, and I began to swell. The moment of awakening arrived when my shell split and I sprang forth as a green shoot. My first meal came from my seedcase, but I soon began to reach out with tiny rootlets in the damp soil that allowed me to add to my rapidly growing height, and I kept stretching as much as I could to see the sun. All at once two leaves sprang from the tip of my growing stem and I could now breathe as well as drink! A patch of sunlight shone directly on me and I began to grow faster than my siblings all around me.

All too soon my daily dose of sunshine began to diminish, and I felt myself slowing down. My leaves fell off and I felt the need to sleep. The snow came, but I awoke in the spring and once again sent out my leaves to catch the sun. And then my stem grew and I added another row of leaves. Every year the cycle repeated, and soon I was a teenager standing ten metres tall and with limbs and lots of leaves.

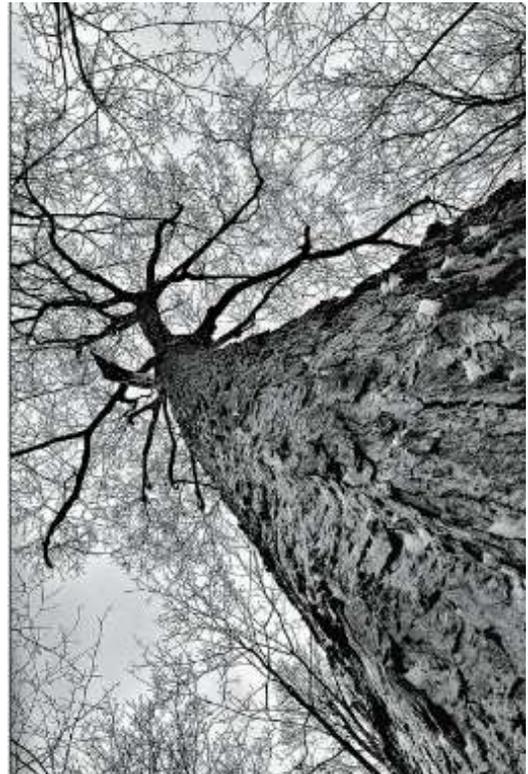
I outgrew my nearby siblings and am sorry to say that most of them fell by the wayside. Then something happened — the sunshine that I absorbed each summer could no longer reach me due to the canopy formed by the older trees above. I survived, but my growth almost stopped and I seemed doomed to live in the shade of all these big trees.

Now this was many years ago and there were no people around. But settlers came and began to cut the mature trees for lumber and firewood. I was too small and thin, so I was left undisturbed. Now I could see the sun again and I began to grow. There were still other trees around me, so my beam of sunshine was narrow. I stretched my new limbs upward every year to catch every minute of the nurturing sun. I grew tall and straight until I became the tallest tree around me, and now I could spread my limbs far and wide.

I have lost count of the number of years I have stood here, but I do remember special events that occurred. Several years red-shouldered hawks nested in my branches, and I enjoyed watching the young hawks learn to fly. I thought it must be nice to be able to fly around, but I also saw how hard they worked to find something to eat. All I had to do was spread my roots for water and my leaves for sunshine and I was fully fed.

That reminds me that sometimes caterpillars ate my leaves and I was very hungry. I had stored some starch in my trunk and roots just for this possibility and I used this food to survive. Much harder to withstand were those years with not enough rainfall or snow cover to provide all the moisture I needed. Then I partially shut down my system and I even dropped my leaves to conserve moisture. If you were able to look inside my trunk, you could see that these events are recorded in the width of my annual growth rings. Ice storms and wind storms twisted my branches, but I was strong and survived.

So here I am today — the tallest and largest maple in these woods — and people come just to see me.



The Fortune Farms giant maple tree is 33m tall, with a 110-cm diameter and 25m to the first limb. It is estimated to be about 300 years old. Photographer Neil Carleton writes: "The integration of two scales from this perspective — the magnificent girth of the trunk and the intricate detail that emerges from its silhouetted canopy branches — speaks to both the massive presence of the tree as a single forest component and its interconnectedness to a complex ecosystem that exists above, on, and beneath the forest floor."

There are trees with larger diameters on lawns and in open areas, but they are also rather short and bushy. Not majestic trees, like me, found only in dense forests.

One spring day a man appeared and — ouch! — he drilled a hole in my trunk. I couldn't stop the sap with its supply of sugar that I needed for my new set of leaves dripping out the hole. Now squirrels had always bitten some of my twigs to drink a bit of sap. But this was different. This man-made hole was wholesale robbery. He was very greedy, but I saw him collecting the sap and he seemed to value it very much. In the end I had the last laugh. Since this was in the spring, the weather was warming rapidly and all the microbes that live in my bark rushed to the hole to gorge on the sugar in the sap. There were so many they stopped the sap from flowing, and then I covered the hole with new wood. I will always have a scar, but as long as I can grow new wood no serious damage is done. This now happens every spring, and I have learned to grin and bear it.

By the way, I have some friends standing around me. Our roots intertwine and even grow together. Underground we are a continuous interconnected maze of roots. If one tree has a better supply of moisture or nutrients, then it may even share it with its neighbours!

Some people say that the trees are talking to one another. But that's not the right expression. We do communicate with one another through our roots and through the olfactory emanations from our leaves. We also whisper in the wind, and if you sit beneath my canopy and listen closely as you are today, you'll hear me communicating with you!

— *Ray Fortune and family are the owners of Fortune Farms Maple Sugar Bush – Published in the March 2019 edition of the Humm.*