

## Coping with Nature Loss

For months I followed a story on Facebook that I've heard in many different versions from people across the city over the past five years. It's the story of a friend who spent weeks frantically trying to find out if her boulevard tree had Dutch elm disease and if it was being scheduled for removal.

In the end, the dreaded red dot foretelling the diagnosis did appear on her elm, and in July of this year it was finally cut down.

What struck me, apart from the grief associated with the tree's demise was the anxiety, guilt and powerlessness my friend felt in the face of that potential loss. Was there something she could have done to save the tree? Should she have scraped together the money, on a freelancer's income, to have it pruned or inoculated against the disease? Was she somehow responsible for the tree's death?

My friend isn't alone in those feelings. As interim chair of Trees Please I've heard dozens of similar stories. And there's a word that describes the feelings people experience when confronted with this kind of loss. It's called solastalgia, a term first coined by Australian philosopher, Glenn Albrecht, to describe the emotional impact strip mining had on the people of New South Wales.

Essentially, solastalgia is the sense of anxiety and grief people feel when the natural world - even the smallest element of nature like a single tree - associated with their home environment is damaged or destroyed. Some describe it as a kind of environmental homesickness, a longing for what once was and is now lost.

It often begins with a sense of panic or anger – the kind of panic one woman expressed when she wrote a letter to Trees Please about a recently announced development project that threatened to destroy a small but precious copse of neighbourhood trees. It's also articulated in the anger expressed by another individual, who wrote about a road repair project on a major artery in his neighbourhood that destroyed the trees that had once lined the street with no plan to replace them.

What usually follows the initial panic and anger is grief. Grief for the loss of life, not only the life of a single tree or copse or a boulevard lined with giant elms, but for the protection they offered and the life they supported – the birds and insects, the mosses and fungi – an entire mini-ecosystem dependent on the habitat they provide.

That grief is often associated with feelings of guilt and powerlessness – the powerlessness you feel when confronted by destructive forces you can neither stop nor control. The guilt you feel when you imagine that there was something you might have done to prevent the loss.

But the painful truth is this - there is often little you can do as an individual to prevent nature from being ground under the heel of urban development. There is, however, a lot you can do if you form an alliance with like-minded people to pressure governments to protect, preserve and expand the islands of nature that have managed to survive in the urban environment.

And that includes pressuring governments to pony up the money needed to prune and inoculate trees against pests and disease.

In fact, there are groups in this city that have had great success in taking on city hall to protect nature. Organizations like Save Our Seine, which fought and won the battle to rehabilitate and provide public access to the Seine River and its natural greenway and protect it from development. Or OURS, which led the charge to save city owned golf courses from development and preserved as green spaces.

The group I work with, Trees Please Winnipeg, continues to monitor city wide tree loss and the health of our urban forest and lobbies city government to view trees as essential infrastructure and provide its Urban Forestry Department with the sustainable budget it needs to protect, maintain and expand our public canopy.

And there are more than a dozen other smaller community and neighbourhood groups that are actively engaged in protecting nature and promoting climate resiliency, with projects ranging from tree planting and community gardens to wetland rehabilitation and naturalization efforts.

So if you, like many of us, find yourself suffering from an acute case of solastalgia there is something you can do. You can find comfort and mutual support in joining with other people in the fight to preserve and expand the natural world within our city limits.

It may not eliminate the grief, but it certainly alleviates the loneliness and powerlessness so many of us feel when confronted with the loss of nature in the place we call home.

