

It Started With Trees

I arrive early on October 3 for a meeting with Liza to listen, soak up, soak in, seep into stories of The Guilford Foundation. 50 years of fostering the flow of finance & footing for some 80 funds that fuel passion, purpose, progress in myriad ways.

My task to tackle is to weave what I hear, read, see, sense - my impressions - into an expression, a reflection, a meditation on the place. &, as always, I wonder how the muse will reveal her face. As a writer & mostly a poet of late, I never know what

my fingers are going to find or where they'll find it, so I keep pens, paper, a keyboard close by in case I can capture a spark ignited by a something I hadn't foreseen... I'd already scribbled down feelings from scholarship nights, newsletters, pictures in the paper...

I sensed TGF's spirit was starting stanzas inside of me... As I wait to meet Liza, I think of my goosebumps in May when a TGF award is given in Lizzie Schwanfelder's name & for a minute I reminisce on what I miss: Lizzie's long letters, her whimsical wisdom, the Cat

Stevens song sung at her funeral: "Oh Very Young" - (& how a whippersnapper student who embodies her pizzazz might just stand taller because a Lizzie lift is in her pocket.) Or when my classmate, Julie Cyr, dedicates a scholarship in her sister Mo's name & a nurturing

nursing student accepts a gift of Mo's afterglow. I flash on a relay race of light-filled batons passed between resolute radiant runners - some of whom are no longer running with us - I hear the echoes of their ethereal footfalls. As I peek inside the tranquil office building on 44 Boston Street

I'm struck by the order I see, the atmosphere of calm. I know there is cooperation, collaboration, breath in the space even before I walk inside. Liza arrives & we tour the historic home where the colors are an exhale: light greys & creamy whites calm me & a massive tree trunk table

so substantial its excess largess was subsequently divided up & repurposed into little desks invites both conversation & concentrated consideration.

A line from The Guilford Covenant of 1639 crosses my mind “Bynde ye to one another...sit down and join ourselves together... to be helpful,

each to other in any common work.” The TGF offices were a gift from Guilford Savings now Ascend Bank - they retain a 19th century feel with a modern sensibility... signs of front-footed tech wind around the rooms & I sense a sweet spot here between specific solo endeavors & communal

causes. “I’m looking for a mind at work” rings in my ears from Hamilton. There are minds at work here. As we settle to talk about all things TGF, I learn that it all started interestingly with trees. The state of the trees on the green - damaged due to storms, age, disease. Eventually, a small grove

of folks planted Bradford Pears & cultivated a figurative forest with The Guilford Foundation planting roots in the soil of Guilford that grew into a nourishing wood for the whole town. TGF offers shade, shelter, support for so many. Liza says “when someone is at a low point, we provide comfort -

memories of their loved one can live on here.” I see candles dance to the names of the someones we loved. She continues “There is this opportunity to create a legacy in a tragic time & also, to enrich lives with diversity, with art, with uplift for the mentally ill.” My mind glitches, trips on her

last phrase - mental illness in my family’s tree having rotted the branches of a brother and others - does uplift exist for them? I breathe and bring myself back to the health of this TGF hub and hear that upwards of 85 funds and 8 million dollars of metaphorical fruit-bearing trees come

under its canopy spread across the town and region. And there are saplings too - young philanthropists - who are growing their own gifts of giving - the youth advisory group raising funds in many ways - among them - the sale of luminaria during the annual tree lighting. How fitting. Lights again

flicker in front of my eyes. I see how the young philanthropists are the next generation’s lanterns lining the green, adding to the magic of that holiday

night and, I suppose all of our nights, guiding the way for those in need of luminescence - reviewing grant requests related to GHS, recommending generous next steps. Brilliant bulb by brilliant bulb, alighting, aligning, connecting, creating community. I'm told there will be a tree in the gala space where the bare branches are bedecked by little lamps. I see them glowing with the faces of the board members, bankers, youth advisory group,

ambassadors, staff - all who embody this meaningful work of The Guilford Foundation. As I leave Liza my mind swirls - something is forming, unfolding, molding itself in me. I note how hearing about the gracious grant giving of TGF feels in my body - like I'm basking in benevolence, like I'm breathing

fresh air from a breeze carrying fairness and community care. I've been weary - wearing the woes of our world - the political cruelty, chaos, callousness of our national public discourse, which is discordant, divisive & destructive. It can ache to feel positive today.

Yet my morning brought me to a grove where kindness and compassion grow - where there are whispers of wellness and wells of support - to an illuminated forest where the best of us glitters & the rest of the mess gets blown away in the wind. That green grove (for which I am grateful) is

The Guilford Foundation.

-Written By and Presented by Julie Fitzpatrick for the 50th Anniversary of TGF - 11/13/25