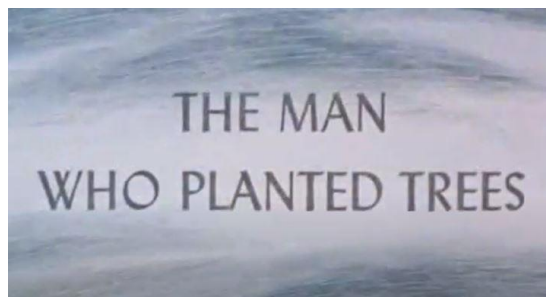


Film Review - The Man Who Planted Trees

By Rev. David Huber, Plymouth UCC, Eau Claire

"The Man Who Planted Trees" is many kinds of stories, which makes it the kind of story that is easily revisited time and again. But since this is an environmentally themed newsletter, one of the stories is the power of one person to literally change the landscape, if one thinks and acts with a long-term vision and performs daily acts of generosity.



This beautifully animated short (using colored pencil) was directed by Frédéric Back, based on the 1953 short story of the same name by Jean Giono, of a man who turns a barren part of the Alps into a thriving ecosystem by planting trees every day for decades. It won the Best Animated Short Film Academy Award in 1988. The English version is narrated by the excellent Christopher Plummer. The first time I saw it was in 1988 as part of a traveling animation festival. It spoke deeply to my growing environmental awareness as an early 20s idealist, and imprinted itself on my heart, inspiring my thinking and praxis since seeing it.

Told through the point of view of the narrator, the story begins the year before World War I as the narrator hikes up into the Alps above Provence, to a region where the trees have been cut down over the years so that the locals could make charcoal to fuel France's economy. He runs out of water near an abandoned village and soon meets a shepherd who invites him to stay in his cabin. He watches the shepherd sort out 100 acorns before going to bed. The next morning, they take out the sheep and the narrator watches the shepherd plant the acorns and learns that by that time he had planted 100,000 acorns.

The narrator then leaves and ends up a soldier in World War I, after which he had "a great desire to breathe pure air" so he goes back to the shepherd. This time he finds tens of thousands of young trees covering more than 30 square kilometers, and the shepherd has turned to beekeeping with more than a hundred hives. Animals, flowers, meadows, and even streams have returned. After witnessing the engines of death of World War I, the narrator's response to this flourishing of life is, "All this was the work of the hand and soul of one man with no mechanical help. It seemed to me that man could be as effective as God in tasks other than destruction."

The narrator returns a few more times, his final time the year after World War II. The shepherd's daily devotions had become hundreds of square kilometers of life: birds, animals, flowers, repopulated villages, and a forest that was now under the protection of the government, even though no one ever knew that it was planted by one man. The narrator finishes the movie, "When I think that one man, one body, and one spirit, was enough to turn a desert into the land of Canaan, I find after all that a man's destiny can be truly wonderful. When I consider the passionate determination, the unfailing generosity of spirit it took to achieve this act, I am filled with admiration for this old unlearned peasant who was able to complete a task worthy of God."

This short film is available as a DVD and on YouTube (which also has many videos of various people reading the book). The story is fiction, but there are some real-life visionaries doing this work. One is Jadav Payeng who has been planting thousands of trees on the island of Majuli in northeast India, which had been losing land to erosion. View this [documentary](#) of him. Another is High Wilson, who has helped turn 3700 acres of degraded land back into native forest in New Zealand. View this award-winning [documentary](#) of him.

[View the film short of The Man Who Planted Trees](#) (1987), animated short, 30 minutes long