

## **The American Elm and Higher Things**

The Coach understood from experience the eternal and how the substance of this temporal world fades away. Indeed, when he arrived in the area, some 20,000 proud and stately figures living throughout the city had recently fallen. The way they stood at attention near one another highlighted a martial bearing but exposed them to a rapid contagion destined to swiftly undermine a verdant reign. A splendid era ended as their once hulking but then diminished frames were, one by one, cut down and carted off, little evidence of a glorious past remaining beyond images in old photographs. Mediocre urban replacements planted thereafter could never cast the same royal canopy over comely streets and boulevards the earlier majesty afforded for shade. Only lone sentinels stationed on the outskirts, here or there, distant from the conflict with foreign invaders laying siege to the kingdom, managed to escape the scourge.

One such survivor, a proud American Elm, untouched by the plague to which so many of its generation succumbed, stood guard over the Great Meadow in the Park, a perennial witness there to events natural and human. It remained so for ages after most of its comrades were laid to rest - a solitary figure posted at attention for life - stoic and bare-limbed in the frozen white of January; patiently moistened by the soft spring rains; a grand, leafy fortress shimmering in the gentle summer breeze. So distinctive was the tree's imperial silhouette in the meadow, slight color shift visible in its leaves on a balmy fall afternoon, that The Coach chose to set the starting line of a three-mile cross-country race exactly 440 yards to the south of its formidable trunk. He could be found beneath an azure sky carefully measuring that span across the grassy lea. The first quarter-mile of the course thus established, he used it for decades to gauge the comparative enthusiasm and sincerity of those running north through the meadow once the race began, all be it, with a less-than-silent regard for those most fleet of foot. The Coach was, after all, a coach.

But enthusiasm and sincerity, like other precious and immortal features of the human spirit, were the attributes most sought and nurtured in his charges, not merely in passage through the shadow of the American Elm, but wherever they might run in life.

Each year, in the fickle climate of the Genesee Valley in early autumn, at The Coach's invitation, thousands arrived at the Great Meadow to demonstrate and develop those perpetual attributes for all to witness. Perceptive eyes observe the eternal components present in the movements of those coursing through the Park, others simply admire the streaming spectacle. Near the American Elm, upon an elevated platform, his voice amplified above the crowd by a loudspeaker, The Coach directs the attention of onlookers to a dramatic, colorful festival of team uniforms continually parading for hours through the dell. As if entire scholastic populations were emptied onto a broad blanket of green, boys and girls, young men and young women stride *en mass* past the American Elm with every degree of athletic talent displayed, from those possessing sublime ability down to the earnest, determined plodder. Yet the unfolding carnival atmosphere of the day, annually orchestrated so joyously by The Coach, is always underscored by a solemn gift, Magi-like, offered to each participant: a path to becoming in fact what their Creator first designed them to be – a complete person. Grace. Humility. Charity. Courage. Faith. Diligence. Loyalty. Commitment. Compassion. Trust. Determination. A belief that one can do better. An undying, unconditional love. While justly applauding the earthly accomplishment of every champion so elevated by performance on the proving grounds he painstakingly devised around the American Elm, The Coach remained unerringly devoted to encouraging self-discovery of the higher things within each heart he encountered - an enduring, timeless blessing bestowed. Wonderful.

- Leo Finucane