The Secret Life of Trees

There’s an old saying: *S/he can’t see the forest for the trees.* In the context of its application, to describe situations where people focus on the minutiae of existence to the extent that they blinker themselves to the big picture, it is a useful analogy. But what about the flipside: not being able to see the trees for the forest? Wouldn’t that be equally undesirable?

It doesn’t have to be either-or, though. With a philosopher’s eye, this perceived duality can easily be reconciled. Whether the knowing be scientific or spiritual, sociological or biological, the same premise holds: microcosm reflects macrocosm – the fundamental essence of the entire ocean present in a water droplet, the resonance of all sound evident in a single note, or the DNA of any species read in a solitary cell. Just as astrophysicists observe the intricacies of a star in order to understand the mysteries of the cosmos, so too can we contemplate the life of all trees by focussing on one ordinary specimen – ordinary, perhaps, yet extraordinary in the same moment. We need only close and considered witness to plumb the secret life of trees ...

Sharing secrets

I spent my childhood up a particular tree in our family’s front garden, engaging its heavily-leafed and solidly-built branches summer, autumn, winter, spring. And as the tree grew, I grew – higher and higher away from earth. At one point it was suggested that a treehouse should be constructed for my semi-permanent existence therein. But why? The tree and I were perfectly happy communing skin-to-skin. Why pound nails into her thick-barked flesh if it wasn’t necessary?

It was a secret life we shared. I could silently observe pedestrians going up and down the street on the footpath below oblivious to my nest above, or read and tell stories aloud when no one was about save the tree herself and an ice-blue pyjama dog I’d decided was as close an approximation as I’d ever get to *Kimba the White Lion.* Whenever anything precious or special happened, I’d head up the tree to tell of my joy. Whenever sad or in trouble for something said or done, unsaid or undone, I’d head up the tree for tea and sympathy. Only once – ever – did I fall from her embrace. The cracking of the branch, too high, too thin, pierced my consciousness like a rifle-shot in the same breath as gravity bore me down. But I never reached earth – the tree herself held out her arms. A bough I’d always thought resembled a cradle became my saviour, no more than a bruise, a scratch and a few tears my fate. I could not imagine a mother taking better care of her children than this beautiful loving tree – indeed, hers was my first ‘home’, a more-than-worthy ten-foot-square hut.

Even if I was the only human living life in her limbs, I was well aware of sharing space with myriad other creatures – a bearded dragon had as big a fright as I when we unwittingly connected one day, but birds flitted in and out undisturbed by my presence while I kept out of the way of ant-armies marching between the various plateaus of her exposed roots. Butterflies were regular visitors to the orchids on her trunk and she played host to a staghorn fern amongst other epiphytes. Harmonious co-existence – we all just seemed to get on with the business of living our lives in communal space, and from where I sat on my favourite branch, it seemed perfectly natural to be a member of the family. Indeed, my felt-sense of the tree’s presence was akin to this image of the *Madonna of Mercy* – trunk strong, arms held out, offering any and all, without discrimination, without question, protection and shelter under her cloak; a cloak which seems as inseparable from her skin as the unconditional mother-love radiating from her core. Growing tall toward heaven, wide-spreading across the earth. This is how I see trees – sharing their love with all.
A one life community

I am a foster-parent to oaks, an experience described in this essay. Their longevity is inspiring. It’s a nice feeling to directly nurture life that may still be around in five hundred years to commune with the generational progeny of my own gene pool. Equally their strength inspires. The breadth and length of a quantum of sturdy limbs angled toward the horizon never ceases to amaze. And of course, like all trees, the very fact of their existence means we also can live. In short, they make the air ‘OK to breathe,’ an expression I gifted to a character in this short fiction, and a notion I extended in The Taste of Translation to Kisha’s experience of sharing air, sharing space with a particular exemplar (p.384):

*We know her route well – not the quickest way to the centre, but the most calming. Stumbled upon once and added to her daily ritual, she walks through the rambling gardens of an 18th century villa now home to university institutes. Students mill about the entrance, a fountain plays in the gravelled courtyard. She walks past ancient beeches and under a solitary oak, its sturdy limbs an aerial perspective beyond its roots extend and thick hide. I saw its massive base and thick hide, I saw its roots extend deep into the earth to help in weathering the strongest storms, I saw its crown as a light-tower ‘beacon’ reaching toward heaven. A steward explained how the tree was in the process of evolving into a single community which could host all life within and withon it – a state of pure ‘being-with’ (Irigaray 2002, p.48). The one life of this one tree would thus be akin to an all-encompassing Madonna of Mercy cloak. He called it: ArkTree.*

As part of my tour, I was lifted to the crown where some form of big cat (like a jaguar) was playing tag inside the tree’s trunk on spiral staircases. There, it co-existed with many other species which would normally be its prey. How could this be? It seemed the tree hosted a huge liana vine which threw out millions of tiny edible polyps as food for all the animal species therein and thereon. Play and peaceful relations between all animals on the Ark was the result. Excitedly, the steward macheteed
down one of the huge flower-bulbs which contained these polyps – for all the world like soft corals to my eye. What was extraordinary was their protein content came from ants symbiotically interacting with the liana until the time came to ‘gift’ their life to their host. The notion of conscious and selfless gifting, which I explore in this essay, therefore ensured an ethical food chain. As a single community – indeed a single mind in the spirit of Gregory Bateson’s ecology of mind – all was recycled in and through the system, the ants ‘serving’ the greater good like all other species there at ArkTree.

All visitors were offered a polyp to taste – the implication being that humanity could become a member of this ‘one life community’ if we shared the same source of nutrition. Like individual fruits, one polyp was enough for an entire meal. Many visitors complained of the taste – how sour it was, inedible, revolting; even reporting to researchers that the ants stung as they were ingested, rendering their throats numb. All around people spat them out – into containers, their hands, onto the ground. Chaos. Meanwhile, I continued munching with no adverse reactions. The polyps were wet mushy tasteless, but completely edible.

All in all, an extraordinary journey. Still, it caused me to wonder: If this is the sort of research being conducted on the inner planes of existence, how long till the material space is ready to embrace such an holistic vision of reality? With ecological ravishment and destruction continuing unabated in many regions of the world, what potential for a one life community of consciousness to ever be manifested in matter? Nevertheless, the inner researchers work, and I live in hope, filling peace-sinks for dear Gaia with each in-breath, each out-breath – sharing air, sharing space, sharing my love for our beautiful home with all trees and beyond.

A tree beyond

There is a tree beyond all other trees. Fed by the waters of life, the waters of dream and sacred creation. It is a tree of knowing and wisdom, a becoming landscape more wondrous and infinite than my tiny human imagination can hold. This is the realm of Big Mind, all that Big Mind has ever known, created, lived and died – all past, all future, all now …

Yes, my visit to ArkTree was extraordinary. But my understanding of tree consciousness grew exponentially during a journey into the sheer heart of the chalice they appear to hold on Gaia’s behalf. The words streamed above are the record of this event’s impact. And once again, a single tree was responsible for sharing its majestic story.

The place named itself The Tree of Infinite Knowing – high wide country, yet without the sense of dramatic ‘wild’ I feel in the cragged peaks and slashed valleys of the Alps. Rather, these were undulating glacier-smoothed hills, wave upon wave of alpine meadow unfolding to unseen horizons. A landscape verily without end, I felt the profound serenity held in the sentience of the earth here over a longer-than-time. I understood it to be an ancient ‘repository’ of wisdom, but there were no trees. Had I therefore misunderstood the words-as-formed?

The Tree began to tell its tale. Once it had truly existed, an individual of awe-inspiring proportions with great spreading branches. In the centre of the vast landscape in which I now stood it too had once stood but long since had ‘died’ or, more accurately, changed form – metamorphosing, melting into the subtle bones of the earth to infuse the land with (perennial) tree-knowing carried ever since their species’ birth into the world. It was as if, over the incredible length of time that had passed between The Tree’s material existence and my visit (which I could not even begin to comprehend), it had continued to fruit the soil with its wisdom. Hence the entire space, everything which formed part of the landscape as far as my eye could see, was The Tree of Infinite Knowing. Thus could the whole repository of ancient earth wisdoms be shared, on and on – deeper, wider in a chalice of infinite dimensions, ever-growing – the longer time passed from its ‘passing’ into a future not yet manifest.

In parts The Tree resembled a high moor, the grass spongy and squelchy underfoot as if the watertable very close to the surface. At one point I looked down a crack in the ground, like a small crevasse, and saw rocks beneath wet and glistening as if watered by an underground spring. Immediately a tug of
understanding arose to complement what I had seen – here the Acqua Termale, the sacred source I describe in this essay, reaches the surface. At The Tree of Infinite Knowing, the waters of life meet the earthen wisdom of life. Further, I understood that The Tree’s ‘knowing’ is dynamic, a living energy always accessible once we intuit its existence. No tablets of stone or unchanging doctrines at The Tree, but a living breathing chalice in constant communion with the sacred source. And one ever-ready to share its wisdom when our intent is pure and loving.

How fortunate I was to also meet The Tree’s guardian! A time arrived during my explorations when the resonant hum, my signature accompaniment to Otherworld encounters, suddenly rose in pitch to become a tinkling bell ‘announcing’ another presence in the space. A figure appeared from behind a boulder and took something I value into the dark ‘beyond’. I felt a surge of vibrational energy and the words formed: Green Man. Given all the images in circulation of this being, it was quite a surprise that he constellated in my imaginal world as a kind of contemporary wood sprite – tall young adult male, curly blonde hair and a cheeky grin, baggy trousers and hippy-style green shirt daubed with swirls of yellow. Oh, and no shoes. Yet although he had ‘stolen’ something of mine, I intuit this to be a game and, exhilarated to be touched by his vibration, felt no apprehension entering the dark and rugby-tackling him to retrieve said ‘treasure’. Instantly, he disappeared and I understood Green Man’s task in this context is to collect ‘knowing’ to add to The Tree’s wisdom chalice. However we both know I am far from wise! Also, anything I carry into the Malakut needs to return with me to the material world, relevant as it is to my work, here, now, in this space. The game was simply the cue as to how The Tree’s ‘secret life’ is husbanded.

Gondwana Dreaming

Returned from a tree beyond to solid earth, into the heart of the felt world herself, I find secret lives being played out under my very nose, in the very corner of the world where I first saw light of day. Antarctic beeches they are called – nothofagus moorei – a relict of the Gondwana supercontinent from which Australia was the last to break off some 65 million years ago. And as we shifted north (at the stunning rate of 5-7cm per year), waving a fond farewell to the past as we oh-so-slowly eclipsed the horizon, we took with us trees which flourished under the milder climatic conditions in Antarctica at the time. But even our leisurely northern traverse wasn’t leisurely enough for nothofagus to adapt to new parameters such as heat and sparse rainfall, and it remains only in small pockets of cool temperate fire-free rainforest at high altitude along the eastern seaboard. That said, the species certainly adapted sufficiently to ensure we can witness its beauty at all rather than having to rely on rare fossil pollen records from Antarctica to tell its extraordinary story. For nothofagus learnt to reproduce asexually – stubbornly coppicing new trees from the roots of the old when no longer able to produce viable seed in increasingly difficult conditions. As a result, these gentle giants are generally seen in family groups, or ‘fairy rings’ arising from a single clonal individual, and in the area where I hail from, their northernmost community, some specimens have been dated to 12,000 years.

Some time ago, our family paid a visit to a stand of Antarctic beech. Trekking the Gondwana World Heritage area over several days, we detoured off the main track to Tullawallal, ‘place of many trees’ in the local Yugambeh language. As everywhere else on our vast continent, the land was sung into existence by Dreaming stories, this region – Woomoongoora, Queen of the Mountains – as sacred to her kinship group as all others. But I had seen no texts describing if this particular part of the plateau had been used ceremonially. So I decided to try and feel my way into her landscape in order to read any Dreaming stories held therein.
Tullawallal’s track spiralled slowly, up and around the hill, and I moved with it – slowly, mindfully, witness to a songline unspooling before my feet. Sharing space and breath, the path and I journeyed back in time. Thickly-forested, the last rays of afternoon sun had difficulty penetrating the canopy at such an angle and even though a bright blue-skyed day, to my mind I saw all-enveloping mist swirling in and about the trunks of the trees, muffling birdcalls and my tramping boots. November-fog had descended to ease my passage to the past.

As I approached the summit, I saw them. The elders. Rising up out of the mist, out of the midst of a grove of ancient trees, each with a twinkle in his eye and a smile on his lips in welcome. Sitting crosslegged in a fairy ring, within a fairy ring ...

A strange feeling. I so small. Below. Beneath. For a few seconds I wondered how to approach this space – I had lost the path in my surprise, both literally and figuratively. Eventually I found an appropriate place for the last brief ascent and arriving, discovered my elders had turned to stone. Vast slabs of moss- and lichen-bespeckled igneous rock now formed a fairy ring of shared presence with their nothofagus kin.

Our family rested atop Tullawallal a fair while in collective silence and awe, feeling-tree. Serenity filled the cocoon brought into being by elders and trees together, a place of shared beingness we were invited to share, a place of secret world work, of sacredness sung into existence aeons past, of sacredness continuing as long as their one Gondwana Dreaming voice held true. A place of ebb and flow between spirit and matter, between Otherworld and this, my consciousness likewise ebbed and flowed between the spaces – one moment delivering a muesli bar to my son, in the next feeling a burble of joy beneath my feet at the elders’ witness of a simple act of 21st century mothering; likewise when I produced a camera and began snapping away, I could sense their keen curiosity – what could this one-eyed box actually ‘see’?

Thus it continued and so could I have lingered longer in witness of a most extraordinary communion – that of ancient trees and ancient humanity sharing one breath, one space, one life. It is the lesson of ArkTree, it is the wisdom held by The Tree of Infinite Knowing, and it is ancient ancient ancient. What would it need for this peace-sink to overflow the Gaiasphere and flood the universe with its joy? At the very least it would need modern humanity to rediscover these time-immemorial ways of ‘being-with’ the land, like the sages of old whose ‘dwelling places’ become their ‘own body and mind’ (Daido Loori 2008), becoming landscape pure.

Before I reluctantly left Tullawallal, I placed a hand against an elder tree’s clonal trunk, my other rested on a stone elder in service to Woonoongoora, and offered a prayer of thanks for their presence, for holding this place open and present to all. Emerging from the cocoon of prayer, feeling as light as their air, as their breath generously shared, I suddenly found that we were all bathed in Sun’s darkly glowing presence, low in a dust-filled Western sky. Yes. From Sun’s life – trees’ life – our life. All one. All shared. All prayers of thanks offered to a sacred community of life. And none of it secret.