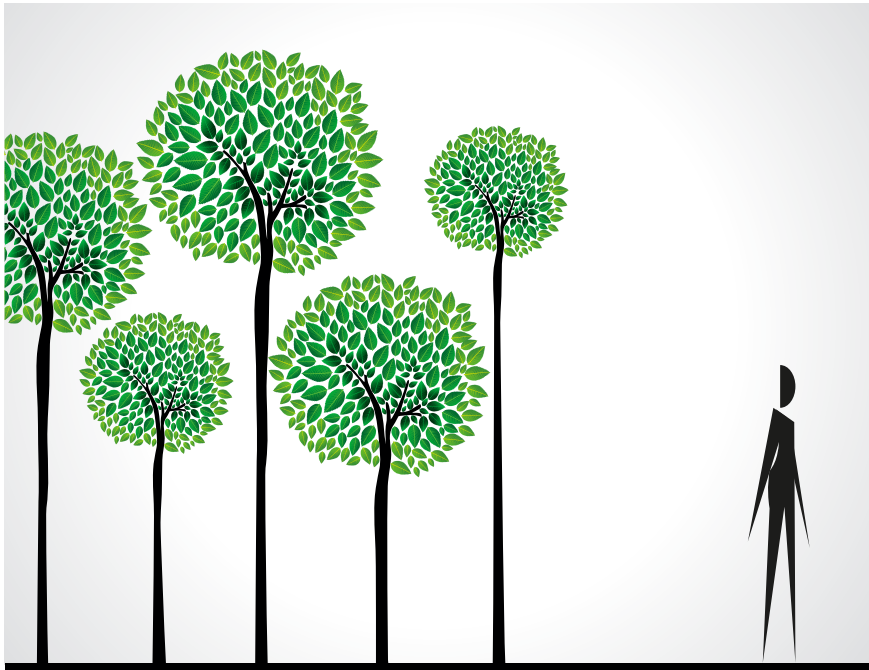


When I Am No Longer Among the Trees

by Judith King



When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness,
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."

Mary Oliver (2006)

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For over seven years I have lived among the trees. Some of the first visitors to our top floor apartment home called this 'our tree house' soon after a move here in 2006. I was not displeased for the trees were what drew me here. In an instantaneous visualization, upon my first visit, I could see myself sitting here in the morning light, disciple to their fecundity, strength and beauty - this was enough for me to end the search for a new home and sign the papers. Not a secluded rural landscape, as you might imagine, but rather a long, narrow site, boundaried at one end by a row of eucalyptus, a kind of sound barrier from the traffic flow on the M11 and on the other by a fast flowing tidal river called the Dargle, on the nearby bank of which grew a row of magnificent trees. On the outer edge of Bray town this peaceful habitat of river and mature trees was a chance cross-fertilization of history, economics and someone else's sensibilities to the trees.

Local history suggests that this estate was first owned by a French Huguenot family who had immigrated here. Planting native trees was common practice among the more wealthy of Ireland's landowners, one dating back to the first "Planters" as they were called. These early colonisers were "gifted" with the lands of the indigenous people from the 1600's onwards. 'For the House of the Planter is

known by the trees', as Austin Clarke says in his evocative poem, 'The Planter's Daughter'. In the property boom of the late 1990's, developers bought the site, leveled the old estate house and the first round of old trees and then built a tasteful development of apartments across variously styled buildings. In a competitive market the mature trees and their ambience of stability and pastoral peace were no doubt an impressive selling point.

In the early months of 2014, it was decided by the powers at be, that in order to build adequate flood defenses, all the mature trees at the riverside end of the development must be cut down. In the intervening years these trees had become like family, the ones who see you first thing in the morning, dishevelled and sleepy-eyed. Saved from our morning grumpiness, the trees seem ever able to offer a bright 'Good Morning'. Returning from a spell away it is as if they extend a twigged 'Welcome Home'. They play with the light of sunrise and spill forward dappling dances upon our living room floor as I gather myself to begin my morning round.

Many times, I have idly mused that in truth I need no mantra nor breathing visualization here to help me meditate, for if I were simply to sit and observe the trees, I would learn all the secrets of life. And in the wake of their imminent demise my musings are no longer so idle and out of my deep gratitude for these beautiful, living beings, I believe I owe it to them to attempt to record and communicate some of that they have taught me.

'Everything flows, nothing stands still'. Heraclitus

One of my little refrains in the early months of living here, when new visitors and family would come visit, was to say with glee that we now

get to watch the seasons "up close and personal". My 'Council of Tree Elders', as I began to call them, included thirteen Beech and two Scot's Pine. The deciduous Beech submit obediently to the seasonal cycle, surrendering so gracefully and beautifully to each major and minor movement of the four cycles of the year. The abundant verdant green canopies of summer are lush and generous and become the play world to all manner of creature, winged beauties like chaffinches, jays and blue tits, gymnastic squirrels and manifold four, eight and hundred-legged insects.

In autumn the Elders became as 'Indian princes' (Allingham, 1973) resplendent in their robes of gold, red and ochre. Each leaf was tenderly released to the gentle autumnal air or sometimes I have been blessed enough to be showered in gold rustle which seemed to have waited for me to stroll beneath; the dry crunch under my feet added that familiar October acoustic to many a morning stroll.

Winter demanded that the Elders were pared back to the vulnerability of their naked form. Caught in the low sky November light, beech bark is a translucent grey, smooth to touch unlike the russet warmth of the more textured bark of the Scot's Pine. Straining forever heavenward, Beech raise their limbs in praise and prayer. Some of the branches had a particularly feminine grace like the raised arms of a dancer in legato. When the greyness of winter intensifies in late December, and I lay on my yoga mat trying to stretch my stiff body into a next pose, the evergreen umbrella of the Scot's pine would offer me a gift of remembered green to nourish my wintered eyes.

The Elders resisted the intensity of spring's call until each leaf bud was swollen full of potentiality, protected by a little sheath of

brown ensuring it was ready for the great unfurling. The buds of the upper branches were the first to swell I discovered, as if, like us, consciousness leading to growth and change must first begin in the head and slowly move down the trunk in order to become manifest in and from the body. Like a child on an Easter egg hunt I would eagerly search out the twigs to find the ones where the first Spring leaves were unfurling. It is difficult to find words adequate enough to describe the colour of that early green. So I will not try, save to say that when tree after tree opened into this early fullness, the outdoors and indoors were aglow in a kind of virginal "viriditas", (Hildegard of Bingen's word for the 'greening power of God', the vital, invigorating life force). A delay in the start date of the flood defense works last Spring allowed me to experience this virginal greening of my world one last precious time. Obedient to the end and being their 'Beechselfes' to the very end, they generously offered us the exuberance of a new spring anyway, despite their imminent demise and then weeks later yielded with their reliable grace to the even greater cycle of life.

Perhaps never before in human history has there been such pressure to deny and attempt to circumvent the impact of the macro seasonal life-cycle of our own being – childhood into adolescence is frequently rushed and pushed; adolescence into adulthood is delayed and resisted; the beauty and vitality of human skin, hair and limbs, enjoyed by us in our late teens and twenties is still sought after by us in mid-life. We are seduced by the mirage of anti-aging serum or the disfigurement of surgical procedure. In Western cultures almost none of us are immune to this pressure. Daily I

stood in front of these Elders who seemed to say, in stark contrast:

‘Surrender to the process, embrace what is natural, allow all to unfold, each season has in its own intrinsic beauty, your laughter lines and greying crown are the necessary outer wintering so that your inner world of soul and spirit may truly silence the demands of ego and image; untethered, you can surrender down into the deep sap of the life force, the eternal spring and offer yourself to the alchemist who seeks there the transformation of your soul’.

Stillness

Some mornings the Beech and Pine stood in such complete stillness that I feared I might have interrupted the Elders in their meditation. For this stillness was not just an absence of wind but something much more intensely embodied. The nature scientists tell us that all things, even the most sedentary, are actually vibrating with a discernible resonance. When the Elders were ‘meditating’, the stillness they embodied was captivating. Entranced, I use to seek some kind of entrainment to my own vibrations. I pray I may have by now internalized something of this quality of stillness for when I witnessed it, it called me to silence, to my knees. On the morning Dart commute to the city many passengers close their eyes for the duration, but those taking advantage of the journey time to do their morning meditation are a set apart because their bodies transfigure somewhat into this kind of alert stillness.

Groundedness and flexibility

Storm winds unnerve me. I find it difficult to be at ease when their energy dominates the skies and the surrounding air. They shake

things around and rustle feathers. After they visit, you find upturned old pots and tools, yours and strays, lying around the yard. But the Elders knew this wind dance so well. They showed me how they had mastered a critical balance between grounded roots and upper body flexibility. They swayed and swirled when “*Brother Wind*” was high and unpredictable and they rustled and sashayed when he was in a more playful, gentle mood. What an important movement for all of us to practice - this easy blend of rootedness and flexibility, buffeted as we invariably are by the winds of time and happenstance.

Reverence for the Sacred

In paying this tribute of gratitude to the Tree Elders in whose shadow I’ve dwelt these last few years, I cannot but consider the consistently strong presence of trees in sacred texts across every religious tradition. From the great cedars of Lebanon in the Judaic Scriptures to the fig tree under which Siddhartha became enlightened, trees have been the means or the location of many a sacred encounter. Moses came upon the burning bush and took off his shoes for it was holy ground; Zaccheus hid in the sycamore but responded to Jesus’ invitation to come down and be host for the evening; the Greek priests of Dedonis lay on the earth and listened to the whispers of the oak trees. Groves of oak trees were also considered sacred in the Celtic tradition and were the place of Druidic ritual. The ultimate paradox, perhaps, of the Christian tradition, is how the cross of wood, upon which Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, became the tree of life. I note this connection between the trees and this revered tradition of sacred encounter because of the contemporary call to ‘the awesome

awakening to the divine evoked by our experience of the natural world’ of which the great ecologist and cultural historian Tom Berry speaks (Berry, 2006). ‘The natural world is both the primary source of religious understanding’ he adds, ‘and is the primary religious community’. He draws our attention to ‘the remarkable economics of the Earth, whereby the vast numbers of living species provide habitat and nourishment for each other in an ever-renewing cycle of seasonal transformations’ (Berry, 2006). Sitting quietly at home over those years I heard the layers of sweet music – the tweeting twitter of the small birds, the more raucous caw-caw of the crow, the muffled squawk of the ducks in the river as she flows gurgling ceaselessly and rapidly towards the Irish Sea. Now and again I would see the great heron take flight with that breath-taking wingspan, soaring upriver and at other times I would see him seated proudly and gracefully on the river’s edge or in one of its low streambed pools, searching for prey or just contemplating. I recognize that my home viewing point is in itself a representation of the destructive patterns we humans have been imposing on such natural habitats. These residential buildings have been built, no doubt, with too much concrete too close to the river’s edge. Now the plan is to replace the natural riverbank with a concrete wall to protect the concrete buildings. The Management Company of the complex sold the plan by repeating the assurance of the hundred-year guarantee that comes with anything concrete! Japanese Architect Kengo Kuma (Kennington Steer, 2014) begs to differ when he says:

The essence of ‘weak architecture’ is to ensure harmony between a building and its environment. Nature may

appear calm and tranquil, but actually it is much more powerful than anything we are capable of making ... Architecture cannot resist the strength of nature so it needs to find ways of coexisting with it.

After the first meeting at which the plans for these new flood defenses were unveiled, I returned to my apartment and sat in my living room and looked out at the Elders. It was dusk. 'Will anyone plead our cause?' They seemed to whisper. Did I betray the Elders by not doggedly fighting for their survival? I asked myself. I painfully admit that in the end I surrendered quietly to the intensity of the belittling of my first feeble attempts at defending the trees. I spoke about how difficult I would find it to be party to a decision to kill living beings much older than I, with yet several decades remaining in their natural life cycle. When I detach from my actual participation in the Earth community, and assume the superior role as one of the "governors of nature" (Berry, 2006), I too see the logic – "the first round of 'hard architecture' (to use Kuma's phrasing from above), home now to hundreds of residents, including us, is already in place and now we have to create river banks with equivalently hard architecture for protection".

One Last Lesson

When the countdown began towards the then inevitable chainsaw days, I heard no condemnation from the Elders. 'Neither do we condemn you' they seemed to say to me. Rather, in the echoes of their pounding fall to earth I knew they would teach me one more lesson. In the end we must all face our mortality, live up to our death. Can I mirror the generous fecundity of the Elders? Can I hear their final whispers of wisdom?

'Give shelter to the smaller, more vulnerable ones; surrender to the cycles of nature; have faith - 'this too will pass, all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well'; be patient and endure; yield your fruit *and* seed in due season; stay grounded but be willing to dance; accept your role in the great Earth community; give gratitude daily for being a part of it all'.

I walked among the Elders one last time in the days before the felling and touched each one tenderly and laid my full body weight against one great trunk, what might be called a begging for forgiveness. A kind of grief entered our relationship. Current and old losses in my own life story rippled out like the rings of the 'soon-to-be-exposed' internal tree trunks. Most painful perhaps is the incremental grieving in relation to my Mother, who is being quietly shelled by the slow-burn destructiveness of Alzheimer's disease, herself a great old tree of 82. And in writing these reflections I have remembered that my childhood garden was boundaried by a similar row of trees, which were felled to widen the road when I was about four or five years old.

In a more innocent time young couples, who used the natural world to find places in which to spend some private time together, used to etch heart-shapes on the bark of trees, pierced by Cupid's arrow and with their own initials carved at either end. And as I bade farewell to the Elders, I prayed that their teachings might be etched upon my heart. I call to mind the words of Cecil Day Lewis, (quoted by one of my students recently), in his poem, 'Walking Away - For Sean' (Day Lewis, 1962)

'I have had worse partings but none that so gnaws at my mind still'.

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