

## THE PRACTICE OF THE PRESENCE OF TREES

By Barbara Bassett

Somehow I can't forget, like other people seem to, that a tree is alive. Alive, enormous, and—don't look now—*standing right outside my window*. Not that my neighbor's pin oak is a sinister presence, exactly; it just unsettles me, as do all big trees. They remind me of Magritte's bowler-hatted man: a mysterious, rigid, dark-clad figure, set against a blue sky, face obscured by an apple or a bird.

Here is something I find deeply puzzling. How can a tree have such presence—be such a huge, intricate, living, growing, absorbing-and-transpiring entity, filled with DNA similar to mine, fated to die just like me—and nevertheless have not one flicker of awareness about anything?

Of course trees are blank slates, on which we humans can project any motive, longing or fear. So here goes, here's what I long for. I want trees to have "vegetative souls," as Aristotle speculated about all plants. I want them to have "leaping greenly spirits"—lovely imagery courtesy of e.e. cummings. I want to hear their *truth*, a word with the same root as *tree* in Old English. I want "oak knowledge," the English translation of the Celtic word "Druid." If that apple should drop or the bird fly, I want to be able to look into the eyes of a sentient being—bark-rimmed and alien eyes, perhaps, but windows on a soul all the same. And I want to ask questions and get answers.

I'm not the first person in history who has yearned to talk to trees, thank God. As psychologist Ralph Metzner notes reassuringly in *The Unfolding Self*, traditional cultures around the world "abound with stories and images of communication and emotional bonding between humans and trees."

Pre-Christian and tribal societies pretty much took for granted that trees could talk, attributing this ability to the presence within trees of various species of numen: wood sprites, souls of dead relatives, guardian spirits, oracles. Sir James Frazier's monumental study of folklore, *The Golden Bough*, is essentially a catalog of such human-vegetable interactions—including one example that I dearly love. At one time on some Figi islands, men would not eat a coconut without asking its permission: "May I eat you, my chief?" (I can totally see myself doing that.)

So is the desire to talk to trees merely an artifact of our primitive past, which everyone has outgrown but me? Here's my defense in a single word: Treebeard. Not only do we moderns still love articulate trees, we also like them to be wise and good, and fiercely protective of humanoids.

In my lifelong attempt to grok trees, I've spent many hours just standing around next to them. I don't know what I'm waiting for; I don't know what to say or do; I don't know how long I should wait. The trees always outlast me.

Here are the trees in my neighborhood that I stand around most:

The Seven-Trunked Locust

The Crazy Pink Lady (mimosa)

Mother Basswood (which used to roar with bees in June—but no longer)

The Twister Oaks (two mammoth white oaks topped years ago by a tornado)

The Odd Couple (a Virginia pine and silver maple, joined at the base)

The Man-in-the-Moon Tree (a pin oak with a moon-face scar on the trunk)

In, I guess, an effort to relate, I've written a haiku for each of them. Here's one:

*Crazy Pink Lady*

*Visits us from Outer Space!*

*Mimosa in bloom—*

This is fun for me, but pretty ridiculous in terms of tree reality. This type of relating is equivalent to dressing up a poodle in a tutu. No dog-whispering going on there.

Once in a while, though, a haiku (one by an old master) may serve its true purpose, and give me a teeny, tiny, photon-sized flash of treality.

*The petals fall*

*And the river takes them.*

*Plum tree on the bank. –Buson*

*Not yet become a Buddha,*

*this ancient pine tree,*

*dreaming. – Issa*

There is one thing I know for sure about my relationship with trees, and it is good solid physics. We – trees, me, and the rest of the universe – consist almost entirely of empty space. Something like 99.999% of us is void; as Deepak Chopra says, “more than anything else, it is our raw material.”

The void in trees is, presumably, the same void in me (assuming there is only one kind of nothing). So is that where our numens might hang out together—in the Big Empty? Is that the cosmic dance hall where I could hook up with some tree spirits?

For years I've done a spiritual exercise called Centering Prayer, or “The practice of the presence of God.” In this exercise, the desired mental state is one of calm, surrendered

waiting, with an empty mind—thinking nothing, expecting nothing, imagining nothing, just sort of hanging out in nothing, in case Something shows up.

I've found that this practice transfers easily to trees.

Last winter I stood for 15 minutes, on a snowy gray evening, next to the aforementioned basswood tree in my neighborhood park. That may not seem long, but 15 minutes of stillness in freezing cold, practicing the presence of a tree, is a pretty good effort. Just as the timer on my watch was about to sound, I sensed something indescribable (which of course I'll now try to describe)—sort of a *familiarity* with the basswood, as if we had both just relaxed our guard after an awkward introduction. But the sensation was much more than that—it was also an opening, a hint of greater connection—not only with the tree, but with *another state of being*. It startled me so much that I hightailed it out of there.

But suppose tree communication is not so much about mentally entering the Void, as about physically re-entering Nature. Maybe all I really need is to be an animal again: loping through the woods, lifting my nose to the thousand-scent breeze like the mammal I am. Knowing each tree through my senses and body, the way a fox knows earth and bone, den and mate and pups.

I stand next to the Seven-Trunked Locust, wanting to get closer. This is a black locust, not a honey locust, so it doesn't have those demonic spines. But all around and underneath it is a forest of poison ivy, with thick, muscular vines and leaves as big as my hand; and in that green tangle I know there are ticks, chiggers, and no doubt some truly impressive spiders.

To really go back there, into the wild place where trees might speak, would mean passing through that ring of fire--embracing the extreme discomfort, even the mindless atrocities, of nature at her indifferent worst. Who am I kidding?

So instead, I write a haiku.

*I listen beneath  
The locust with seven trunks.  
Oh! That's the message!*

Even though I can't get close enough to hear.

In his book *The Mysterious Flame*, philosopher Colin McGinn proposes an almost unbearable idea: that the human mind may be “cognitively closed” to certain knowledge about reality. He believes that there are some things we can never know, in the same way that a dog will never understand HTML. As long as dogs are dogs, that information is forever inaccessible to them; no canine Einstein will ever crack the code.

McGinn's focus is the mind/body problem, but I'm afraid his idea might apply to the human/tree problem as well. We may never, at this evolutionary level, even begin to understand the subtle communications of trees. And yet...I think of the polymath-mystic-botanist George Washington Carver, who frequently talked to his experimental plants ("Sweet Potato, Sweet Potato, who are you?") and attributed much of his success to their guidance. And of the remarkable gardens at Findhorn Community in Scotland, where communication with plant "devas" is a management practice. Maybe we aren't as cognitively closed as we seem.

There is one topic about which the trees are making themselves perfectly clear, and we are just not paying attention. Where I live, a bizarre "hot snap" last winter caused twigs to green, then freeze and die, blackening trees all over town. The redbuds blossomed in an odd brief burst this spring, and the bees were gone from the basswood in June. Now, in late September, too-green walnuts and locust pods hang on the trees, still soaked from the impossible deluge of rain all summer. There are no acorns this fall, anywhere in my neighborhood.

The local weather forecasters keep cheerily reporting another temperature swing or precipitation total "for the books,"—then another, and another, until freakish weather has become the norm, and we forget that *this should not be happening*. That this strange weather is starting to kill the trees. I'm really afraid that, if I ever should contact an actual tree numen, the first thing I'll have to say is *Sorry*. I'm so, so sorry about the green holocaust. We didn't know what we were doing.

Last year, in an effort to carbon-offset myself, I donated a swamp white oak sapling to the city park a few blocks from my home.

We didn't get along at first. It was planted during a dry spell in the fall, and it looked awful: raggedy brown leaves, scraped-up bark, and—worst of all – a scrawny trunk curved like a bow, which made the crown look as if a stiff nor'easter were blowing.

How could I love this tree? I found myself hoping it would die, so I could get it replaced with something more decorative – you know, like nature intended—and then feeling guilty for my heartlessness. Once again, approaching a tree as if it were human, as if it might care what I thought of it.

And since it didn't care, my negative vibes did not prevent my little swamp oak from growing green and lush and straight this year, fed by torrential rains during the wettest summer on record. So now—oh, fickle humanoid!—I'm proud of it, and visit it often.

But beneath this tendency to personify trees, my yearning for oak knowledge is real. Just now, I looked up "sapling" in the dictionary, to find its word origins. I read that the root of sapling is the Indo-European *sap*, to perceive, from which came the Latin *sapere*, to

taste or know, and finally the modern word *sapient*, full of knowledge, wise. The suffix *-ling* means “little” (as in duckling, yearling). So my sapling, etymologically, is a “little wise one.” This, unexpectedly, has made me cry.

The late ecologist and writer Roger Deakin disapproved of the tendency to dote on individual trees. He would have had no truck at all with me, who not only cries over trees, but can't put an avocado pit in the trash because it has a tree in it (“May I throw you out, my chief?”). But I contend that my earnest quest to know the truth of individual trees has changed me profoundly. Because of it, I'm more observant of nature, more concerned about the environment, more enchanted with the incredible beauty of life—and although I may be just one person, I count.

Even the magical, mystical Jesus of the Nag Hammadi documents, in the Gospel of Joseph, remarks on the value of seeking the truth in every tree. “Split a piece of wood,” he says— “I am there.”

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