

## ESSAY

## A Grief Observed: The Spirituality and Sociality of Trees

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From the time I was little, I have heard my Dad say “The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is today.” My father has planted and tended thousands of trees in his lifetime. He waters them, prunes them, transplants them if they don’t like their current home, drains soil around them if their roots are too wet, concocts various soil recipes to improve tree health, and frets about the right weather for his trees. I’ve watched my Dad fuss over his trees, like a hen over her chicks, since I was little. As did his father before him. I have three siblings, all of whom also plant trees, and fuss over them. Much to my delight, our eldest son and the daughter he chose for us bought a home a year and a half ago, and one of the very first things he did was plant trees – wild ones transplanted from ditches. You see, us Hieberts are known for the rather quirky habit of domesticating wild trees on our yards. It would appear that being a “tree whisperer” is part of Hiebert DNA.

My first real relationship with a tree happened as a teen. We had a large, wild Manitoba maple tree in our back yard. It had a sturdy trunk, and at about 8-9 feet high it branched out in three directions. A perfect seat. It became my thinking tree. I would shimmy up the trunk and nestle myself into that tree and ponder life. I would go to it early on Saturday mornings before my parents and siblings woke. I would go to it when I came home late at night and the house was still with sleep. I would go to it in the middle of a leisurely, lazy Sunday afternoon when other family members had scattered to their various activities. When life brought more troubles than my young and inexperienced spirit could hold, I would seek out the comforting embrace of that tree. And when life brought more joy than my young and inexperienced spirit could hold, I would seek out the comforting embrace of that tree. And when life felt ordinary, I would seek out the comforting embrace of that tree. My spirit stilled as the tree held me, and taught me to feel the extra-ordinariness of the ordinary. It never failed to speak to me, somehow sharing its life-force with me. Though I certainly could not have articulated it at the time, it was my desire for new metaphors for life (Hesse 1972) and the universal human longing for home that led me to that tree.

In the first two homes my husband and I owned, the very first thing we did in each of them was plant trees. Then we bought an acreage where there was scarcely a space available to plant a tree. There were many magnificent mighty oaks kept company by resilient maple

trees and stubborn poplars. We shared that corner of creation for twenty-four years, until his death, which precipitated tectonic shifts in my soul. I still live there.

I am, at heart, a mystic, and that mysticism emerges most prominently in my interactions with the soil. For me, all the goodness of life lies in the soil. All the promise of abundance. All the risk of scarcity if it is not known, tended, and loved. My great wonder with the soil is in its resurrection capacities. Soil is earth's skin, filled with a multitude of living organisms. Living things die. They decompose. They transform. And through this process they are drawn back into soil. All that rot – all that death – all part of the living community we know as soil, which births a seedling, nourishes all manner of plant growth, producing miracles such as the astonishingly vibrant taste of a tomato in my garden, the misty sea of waving wild fruit blossoms that adorn my meadow path every spring, and the canopy of majestic oaks that shelter my home.

Each of these wonders will die, their plant matter falling to the earth, embraced by the earth, taking the miraculous transformative journey to becoming soil. These same plants and trees will have also produced seeds, and while some of those seeds will also embark on the journey toward becoming soil, some will re-birth as seedlings. Either way, as soil or seedling, they will live again. Every spring creation proclaims, "death, where is your victory?" Regeneration. Renewal. Rebirth.

Trees are among the oldest and largest living organisms on the earth, some being thousands of years old. Of all the ways in which creation tells and re-tells her resurrection story, there is none as magnificent in my experience as the life-journey of a tree. Full-grown, the canopy of an oak tree above me is surpassed by an unseen massive network of roots beneath me that is twice as large in many cases as the canopy I actually see. And in its embrace, sheltered by that canopy above, supported by a safety net of roots below, I am held inside the embrace of the eternal mother – the story of resurrection. Endless death birthing endless life birthing endless death birthing endless life. It's *breath-taking*. And *breath-giving*. Experientially, one of my life's most piercing mysteries.

Recently, I've learned quite a number of things about trees (Wohlleben 2016)<sup>1</sup> which add to their deep spiritual truths for me. Trees, as it turns out, are social beings. Trees of the same species growing in the same area are connected to each other through their root systems. They can exchange nutrients with each other. Alone, a tree cannot establish a consistent local climate – weather and wind prevent it from doing so – but together, trees (a forest) can create an ecosystem that moderates heat and cold, stores water, and generates humidity. Together, supporting each other, a stand of trees can reach a very old age. Trees are very considerate of each other. If you lie down in a forest and look up at the canopy, you will notice that the average tree grows its branches out until it encounters the branch tips of a neighbouring tree of

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<sup>1</sup> This entire paragraph is drawn from the rich knowledge of German forester, Peter Wohlleben.

the same height. Trees don't want to take anything away from each other. Yet their roots, underground, are so tightly connected that sometimes they even die together. Interestingly, trees in planted forests do not behave this way because their roots are irreparably damaged when they are planted. They are like street kids – loners who suffer from isolation (though even in natural forests there is the occasional hermit tree who wants nothing to do with the others). Trees “talk” with each other. When African acacia trees are being eaten by giraffes, they give off a warning gas that alerts their similar species neighbourhood that trouble is coming. The forewarned trees (via the scent carried on the wind) then pump toxins into their leaves, and hence the giraffes don't eat them. Trees can also release pheromones which attract beneficial predators. Trees can also send electrical impulses to each other underground via fungal threads that grow into the soft root hair of trees. These fungi operate as a bit of a broadcaster, disseminating tree news (among many other functions). This fungi forest internet system networks entire forests, exchanging news about insects, drought, and other dangers – it's the “wood wide web” (Wohlleben 2016:11). In an era of faltering welfare states, individualism, and fractious religious communities, we would do well to take more than a few lessons from trees and the social security systems that natural forests rely on.

I didn't know any of these marvelous and mysterious scientific facts about trees when, as a teen, I sat in the maple tree in the back yard. But I know now that what I was sensing, smelling, and feeling – a “something” that I could not yet name – was very, very real. I was feeling the call of the tree to stay awhile, as I felt the light flow from its branches (Oliver 2006). It was not merely the imaginings of a rather odd child of nature. I still can't fully “name” the mystery and power of the truth-telling of a tree, despite all these enlightening facts. Some mystery remains. And I'm good with that.

Forests have a great deal to teach us about what it means to live in authentic community with each other. Warning each other of danger, channeling extra resources to those who are struggling, giving each other the space we need to grow and explore, while at the same time intertwining into each other's lives in such a way that to uproot one life is in some way to uproot them all.

In the forest (community) where we planted our marriage and children, and which nourished and nurtured both, my husband was one of the sturdy oak trees with a large canopy. The glaring gap left by the absence of that canopy has resulted in many of us feeling vulnerable to the elements. But that very forest/community also has expansive roots which, in the midst of all the searing pain of loss, showed themselves to be deeply intertwined, with many an impulse felt beneath the surface that held my children and me, and my family. A forest that was itself reeling from the loss of that sturdy oak tree that had offered so much security, shade, and resources, and was now holding each other through underground networks often unseen, but deeply felt.

My personal spirituality is most meaningfully explored and expressed by a tree. By the dirt under my fingernails and the dirt creases in the bottoms of my feet that I can never quite seem to wash out from spring through fall. Markers of my worship – time spent in my garden. Time spent under trees. Communing. Ultimately, time thus spent is, for me, time spent inside the resurrection story. The acreage I live on has some of the most mighty oak trees that Manitoba soil grows. And when life has brought me to my knees with anguish or pain – none as soul threatening as the tectonic shifts of losing my life partner – I have wept under those oak trees. Grieved. Wailed. Lamented. They have received my tears and utterances quietly, unassumingly, nobly, without chastisement or pity. And when those tears are momentarily spent, I rise yet again in the wake of his loss and I stand under those trees (as I have so many times previously over the years of keeping company with them). It is the very story of rebirth that the tree lives and breathes that reminds me that I have reason to hope. That death, ultimately, always becomes some form of life again. In the cold of winter under the weight of death it carries that truth quietly with only creaks and groans deep inside its trunk. Stand still in a group of trees sometime in deep winter and you'll hear them. It whispers rebirth in the cool breezes of spring rushing through the first leaf formations, it sings it in the warm summer breezes dancing through the mature leaves, and it shouts it outrageously in the cool autumn winds rustling through an array of colours. Death cannot defeat the tree. Life is the call it always answers. Even if only through the acorns or seed pods it has quietly deposited into the soil. I will encounter my beloved again.

I have no empirical proof of this. I have only the analogy that trees and soil suggest to us all – what we *can* see in the created world around us. But choosing to believe in life (the truth the tree teaches us) seems infinitely better than choosing a journey absent of hope to ultimately pronounce the benediction on the life I live. And so I chose to live inside this visceral truth-telling hope. It sustains me – even as I hear creation's sober fall-time lament of the death that feeds life, I also routinely bend my ear to creation's exultant spring-time declaration of life.

If you want to feel – not merely hear or watch, but *feel* – the Creator's ageless grand meta-narrative of rebirth, told in all times and all places to all peoples, spend some time in the embrace of a tree.

## References

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