

Cultivating Intimacy with Trees

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It is at this time of year that I often have the wonderful experience of seeing trees with fresh eyes. A minute ago it was just that maple tree on the corner but now it's the maple tree "burning" with life. It is not that the tree changes; rather, I change the way I see it. In effect, I see it more fully.

Most of us are quick to note the ways in which we, humans, are different from trees: We can walk and they can't; we have a brain and they don't; we can talk and they can't, and so forth. But if you stop to think about it, we actually share a great deal in common with trees. Consider some of the likenesses:

- **Elemental composition.** There is no part of gross human anatomy that looks anything like a plant leaf and, yet, when we compare the ratios of nitrogen, carbon, phosphorus, etc. in leaves to these ratios in the human body, the two are remarkably similar. So it is that the greens on our plate offer us something quite close to what our bodies need.
- **Biochemistry.** Tree tissues, like our tissues, are composed of carbohydrates, fats and proteins. Plants use the same amino acid building blocks to construct proteins that we use. They employ very similar, sometimes identical, biochemical pathways for the synthesis and breakdown of compounds in their cells. And like humans, their cells contain a nucleus with DNA packaged in chromosomes. Also, just like us, they have an array of hormones that act as messengers, turning cellular processes on and off.
- **Sex.** It is not just humans and other animals that have sex; trees have sex too. Flowers are the genitalia of trees and plants in general. The minuscule pollen grain is analogous to the entire male reproductive tract. When pollen arrives to a flower (transported on the wind or carried by an insect pollinator), it extends a thin tube down into the flower's ovary. Then sperm descends this tube and fertilizes one of the "eggs" in the flower's ovary.
- **Population expansion.** Successful mating in humans and trees alike leads to the production of offspring (seeds in the case of trees). Although trees are stationary during their adult lives, their seeds can be carried considerable distances by the wind or water or animals. So it is that trees, like humans, are able to colonize new territories.
- **Defenses.** Trees, like humans, have defenses to protect themselves. Indeed, without some sort of defense system, most plants would be eaten to death. A solution is to produce special chemicals to deter herbivores. Some of these plant compounds are familiar to us as drugs (caffeine, nicotine), poisons (cyanide) or insecticides (rotenone). Many of them simply taste bad; some interfere with digestion; others cause reproductive abnormalities, paralysis, or blindness. All send the message: "Stay away!"

As we come to recognize the many commonalities between ourselves and trees, we can slowly build the scaffolding for a relationship with trees. Suddenly a tree is much more than an isolated brown and green object sticking out of the ground. The air that moves in and out of the tree, the water coursing through its vessels, the sunlight penetrating its leaf chloroplasts, the insects fertilizing its flowers, and the fungi shunting nutrients to its roots are all integral parts of the tree. The tree is not separate but part of a larger whole.

Furthermore, as we gain familiarity with trees, the notion that we, humans, are somehow a "higher" or superior form of life becomes less and less tenable. Certainly, if we define "higher" in terms of cognitive abilities, there is no contest; we outshine trees by a mile. But trees outshine us in some respects—most significantly, by their capacity to animate the world by making complex carbohydrates from water, air and solar

photons. No capacity of ours comes anywhere close to this in terms of its significance for the unfolding of life on Planet Earth.

During these glorious days of spring it is not surprising that both child and adult alike are drawn to trees and feel an inclination to lean against them, touch them and even hug them. In this, we might take solace in the words of English professor, Scott Russell Sanders:

I confess that I do hug trees in my backyard and any place else where I happen to meet impressive ones. I hum beside creeks, hoot back at owls, lick rocks, smell flowers, rub my hands over the grain in wood. I'm well aware that such behavior makes me seem weird in the eyes of people who've become disconnected from the earth. But in the long evolutionary perspective, they're the anomaly. Our bodies were made for this glorious planet, tuned to its every sound and shape.

Cultivating intimacy with trees calls for openness and imagination. Rather than seeing that maple tree on the corner through the veil of fixed thoughts and opinions, we might endeavor to see it with an uncluttered mind and fresh eyes—what Buddhists call “beginners mind.” Then—who knows!—there may even come a day when we come to experience our very bodies as integral parts of the living body of Earth.