

The “Useless” Tree

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Readings

from the *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 11

translated by Ursula K. Le Guin

Thirty spokes
meet in the hub.
Where the wheel isn't
is where it's useful.

Hollowed out,
clay makes a pot.
Where the pot's not
is where it's useful.

Cut doors and windows
to make a room.
Where the room isn't,
there's room for you.

So the profit in what is
is in the use of what isn't.

from *The Hidden Life of Trees*, by Peter Wohlleben

When trees grow together, nutrients and water can be optimally divided among them all so that each tree can grow into the best tree it can be. If you “help” individual trees by getting rid of their supposed competition, the remaining trees are bereft. They send messages out to their neighbors in vain, because nothing remains but stumps. Every tree now muddles along on its own, giving rise to great differences in productivity. Some individuals photosynthesize like mad until sugar positively bubbles along their trunk. As a result, they are fit and grow better, but they aren't particularly long-lived. This is because a tree can only be as strong as the forest that surrounds it. And there are now a lot of losers in the forest. Weaker members, who would once have been supported by the stronger ones, suddenly fall behind. Whether the reason for their decline is their location and lack of nutrients, a passing malaise, or genetic makeup, they now fall prey to insects and fungi.

But isn't that how evolution works? you ask. The survival of the fittest? Trees would just shake their heads – or rather their crowns. Their well-being depends on their community, and when the supposedly feeble trees disappear, the others lose as well.

Sermon

Here is a story that has been lodged in the back of my mind for decades. It originates with the Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu – who lived and philosophized, often through stories, some 2400 years ago or so, the next generation after Lao Tzu and the *Tao Te Ching*: (from *Chuang Tzu: Inner Chapters*, translation of Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English)

Shih the carpenter was on his way to the state of Chi. When he got to Chu Yuan, he saw an oak tree by the village shrine. The tree was large enough to shade several thousand oxen and was a hundred spans around. It towered above the hilltops with its lowest branches eighty feet from the ground. More than ten of its branches were big enough to be made into boats. There were crowds of people, as in a marketplace. The master carpenter did not even turn his head but walked on without stopping.

His apprentice took a long look, then ran after Shih the carpenter and said, “Since I took up my ax and followed you, master, I have never seen timber as beautiful as this. But you do not even bother to look at it and walk on without stopping. Why is this?”

Shih the carpenter replied, “Stop! Say no more! That tree is useless. A boat made from it would sink, a coffin would soon rot, a tool would split, a door would ooze sap, and a beam would have termites. It is worthless timber and is of no use. That is why it has reached such a ripe old age.”

After Shih the carpenter had returned home, the sacred oak appeared to him in a dream, saying, “What are you comparing me with? Are you comparing me with useful trees? There are cherry, apple, pear, orange, citron, pomelo, and other fruit trees. As soon as the fruit is ripe, the trees are stripped and abused. Their large branches are split, and the smaller ones torn off. Their life is bitter because of their usefulness. That is why they do not live out their natural lives but are cut off in their prime. They attract the attentions of the common world. This is so for all things. As for me, I have been trying for a long time to be useless. I was almost destroyed several times. Finally I am useless, and this is very useful to me. If I had been useful, could I have ever grown so large?”

What’s going on here? Perhaps quite simple. How the “world” ordinarily defines “useful” barely scratches the surface of what truly matters. If nothing else, you see, Chuang Tzu is getting us to reconsider this category of “usefulness”.

Even when, to begin with, it comes quite literally to trees.

For thought the tree in the story may not have been useful in terms of timber and building materials or fruit. How about... shade for the oxen or the weary traveler... beauty for tired eyes... a shrine. And like all trees, as we know today whether or not Chuang Tzu knew, breathing out oxygen so that the oxen and us and all other creatures on the animal side of the ledger of life can breathe in.

Useful indeed, not for some secondary human purpose of becoming a boat or a door or a house, but just by being a tree, by doing what a tree does naturally.

There's more too, more, literally, than meets the eye. As I've been learning recently through the book from which I read earlier, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, much of which is about how trees are useful to each other and to all sorts of other flora and fauna, useful in all sorts of ways other than as timber or fruit for us humans, each tree useful just by being a tree and doing what a tree does naturally – mostly invisibly to us humans (as long as we are thinking of trees in terms of how they might be directly useful for our relatively narrow purposes). A few examples:

Giraffes on the African savannah love the leaves of acacia trees. But they can only munch on a few at a time, because in response the tree immediately begins secreting a substance toxic to the giraffes. The giraffes move on, but not to neighboring trees. They go some ways off, because the munched upon tree has also immediately been releasing a warning gas signaling to neighboring trees that danger is at hand. (p. 7)

And this: As we heard suggested in the second reading, like the links of a chain, it turns out that each tree is only as strong as the forest around it. (p. 17) This has to do with the general health of the local ecosystem, with the trees' ability to share nutrients, as well with each tree being more likely to survive storms, since growing in close proximity means that the trees can lean on one another.

All of which means that even the apparently weaker trees have an important role to play.

As for the age of trees? It turns out that while very old trees become less marketable ("useless") as lumber, they have become more valuable as part of healthy mature forest ecosystems, which means, among other things, more valuable in relation to combating climate change – good for us well as for the trees. (p. 97)

Well, I could go on about this hidden (to the common eye) world of trees, all the ways in which they communicate with each other through their root systems and through miles and miles of fungus connections, all the ways in which their health is essential to the health of birds, insects, microorganisms, the soil, and so much more.

So – is a particular tree useless because it can't provide timber or fruit for humans?

Hardly.

But clearly useful in all these less visible ways, useful to one another, useful to life, which means useful to us too if only (but essentially) indirectly.

Including as shrines, formally or informally – or to use another word, as exemplars, modeling for us how we might choose to *be* in this world of insistent *doing*. In 1876, long after his own most so-called "productive" years as a poet, Walt Whitman (as recounted in Maria Popova's "brainpickings" web site) was inspired by "a fine yellow poplar" – a huge tree – to write:

How strong, vital, enduring! how dumbly eloquent! What suggestions of imperturbability and *being*, as against the human trait of mere *seeming*. Then the qualities, almost emotional, palpably artistic, heroic, of a tree; so innocent and harmless, yet so savage. It *is*, yet says nothing.

Well, if we can talk about the hidden life of trees, what about the hidden life of humans, what about the ways in which our usual categories of “useful” and “useless” can entirely miss the mark for us, indeed can damage our sense of self worth, our souls?

More than once over the years, for example, I’ve had members of this congregation, in particular older members, something like the old tree in the story... declare to me, bemoan to me, that they feel useless. And indeed, as the world measures usefulness in many ways they had become useless!

But that’s the world’s fault, not the fault of our elders.

For in every case, looking beyond the diminishment of physical vigor and strength, looking past forgetfulness or more than forgetfulness, deeper and in some ways more significant usefulness was discernible – not only the often obvious usefulness of their earlier lives which could be recalled and honored, but their continued usefulness in less visible or obvious ways.

I could share several examples, but I’ll mention just one that some of you may also recall.

During what turned out to be the last few years of her life, one of our elders, Mary Niles, well into her 90s, tried to withdraw multiple times as a Deacon, noting how little she was able to contribute any longer given her various ills and general weakness. So the other Deacons and I had to reassure her – multiple times – that it had become her presence, and all that her presence represented to us, that remained important, not marginally so, but centrally so: reminding us of the virtues she had manifested throughout her more active life: loyalty to the institution of the church and to democracy, commitment to ideals of fairness and justice, kindness and compassion.

All manifest still, now simply by her continued presence. Like the old oak in the story, or like Whitman’s poplar.

Look, the “world” through the lens of the news media, of advertising, of social media, names the useful mostly in terms of the powerful and influential – whether in politics, business, entertainment, non-profits, and so on. This can depress the rest of us, who may not have this sort of visibility and can’t point to a list of grand, easily measurable, achievements.

So it may be worth remembering a moment in Jesus’s ministry. He was talking to followers who were clearly not among the influential of their day, not the bigwigs, not the powerful. And what does he tell this collection of ordinary folks, even rabble as the world may have viewed them?

“You,” he said, “you are the salt of the earth!”

Not an accidental image, that. Salt as preservative, salt as a purifier... simply by virtue of its character.

“You” – and listen carefully, because he is speaking to us as well: “you are the salt of the earth.”

Not less useful than the rich and powerful, as the rich and powerful might measure things, but maybe more useful, perhaps useful in deeper, more morally substantial ways, simply by virtue of character and example.

Well, I believe the message of the so-called useless tree, the message in the story of Mary Niles and other elders, along with the teaching of Jesus, have enduring meaning for our personal lives, whatever our age or outward roles, meaning for our spiritual lives, for our work lives, for our lives among family and friends... and for our lives as citizens.

For I'm well aware that I'm sharing all this at a particular historical moment, a particular time and place – January 21, 2018 in these United States of America.

So in this regard I want to note this: It does no one any good whatsoever to allow ourselves to be unduly depressed by the state of the world or of our nation and our nation's politics and leadership. Does no good to have our daily mood determined by the most recent news cycle or tweets from... wherever. For we must be finding deeper wellsprings from which to live, deeper wellsprings – like the hidden and intertwined roots of oak and poplar – from which to cultivate and shape our character and our values.

Then, in the spirit of ancient teachings of just about every tradition, we cast our bread upon the waters, we act as we feel we must act, do what we can do with who we are, where we are – with no attachment to the results, just focusing on the task at hand.

Sometimes it's just about showing up: The women's marches one year ago? Or yesterday? Dismissed by some as empty gestures. But the number of women now running for office at every level of government is unprecedented.

Climate justice marches and demonstrations? Empty gestures? Well, in spite of contrary national policy, at state, local, and grassroots levels more is happening than ever to move us in healthier, more ecologically sound, directions.

It is not all good news, that's for sure, but it never has been all good news. Even so, whatever the mix of good and troubling, there is undeniably energy in the air, energy around immigrant rights, around racial justice, climate, sexual harassment and abuse, and more.

And, as Annie Dillard once wrote: "There were no formerly heroic times, and there was no formerly pure generation. There is no one here but us chickens, and so it has always been." In other words, just us to do what we can do, to be who we can be.

Finally, then, today and always may we remember at least these two things:

First, that we are each of us stronger and healthier when we remind ourselves of the sort of person we want to *be*, in fact already are, instead of too often measuring the worth of our lives by what we have done, or measuring our lives in contrast to what others have done; and, second, like the trees in the forest, that in the midst of whatever our personal or political lives have brought to us, we are stronger together than apart.

So may it long be.