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Speaking the Language of Trees

Part I: A Children's Story: How I Know Cats Talk

Today we are talking about listening to nature. We all know animals can talk, like cats say meow or dogs wag their tails, but do they say anything more complicated than that? I think so, and here is why.

Growing up, we had a sweet gray cat with long fur named Pearly, because she had a patch of white under her chin like a pearl – and because she purred a lot.

She had a daughter – a little black cat who we named Persephone. My family lived in two houses.

I lived with my mother and my brothers and sisters in Oneonta NY, and my father lived on a farm in Pennsylvania. Pearly lived with us in Oneonta, and Persephone, her daughter, lived with our father.

In the summer we would all go down and live on the farm with my father, bringing Pearly with us.

Each spring Pearly and Persephone had kittens. They had seven from each—imagine having fourteen kittens at once!

Well, one spring, both cats got pregnant sort of late, so they were still pregnant when my brothers and sisters and I moved down to my father's house.

Now, Pearly was a very pampered house cat, and you see, cats like to be alone when they have kittens, so we knew, when Pearly was pregnant, to make a nice box for her in the back of a dark closet, with lots of towels for her to give birth.

However, my father didn't think animals belonged in the house. He was strict, so Persephone lived outdoors. We never knew where she had her kittens.

We hoped my father would make an exception and let Pearly stay in the house because she had never had her kittens outside, before, but he wouldn't allow it, no matter how much we begged and no matter how much she cried at back door. We felt very bad for her.

We had to do chores at my father's house, and my chore was to weed the gardens. Poor Pearly was so pregnant that summer. Her belly was HUGE. It almost dragged on the ground.

One day, she began following me all over the yard, crying. I was afraid she was going to have her babies mid-stride! I didn't think she should be walking all over the place, so I sat myself down in the cool green grass under the huge locust tree above our back porch, and waited for her to give birth.

She seemed happy about that.

Well, I waited and waited.

The wind blew, I pet Pearly, the grass rippled, and nothing happened.

I waited, and waited, and WAITED. It seemed like hours! I wondered if I was wrong.

But finally, the kittens began to arrive. I pet her as she pushed each one out, and their fur was all wet and squished flat. She'd lick them until they were dry and fluffy, and they would set to nursing. One kitten came out a little backwards, feet and tail first, so I gently tugged on its paws to help it out.

Well, all the kittens came out fine, and that was the end of that, a job well done.

A few days passed. Persephone hadn't given birth to *her* kittens, yet. She was a very shy cat, so I rarely saw her and wasn't too worried about her.

We all slept out on a wide balcony on the second floor. It was lovely to sleep outside with the stars shining in the dark sky, lulled to sleep by the rhythm of the crickets, and to wake up with the sun and dew on our noses.

One morning, very, early, Persephone began to cry at the backdoor downstairs, right under the sleeping balcony.

This was odd, because Persephone knew better than to ask to come into the house.

But somehow, by accident, someone opened the screen door. She slipped into the house, ran straight upstairs, and pushed through the door to the balcony. Then, she hopped right up on my bed and immediately began to give birth to her kittens. Right there! On my clean sheets! I was so surprised, but I was honored.

Now why in the world did she do that? She'd never done it before, and she never did it again. I think, that somehow, Pearly must have told Persephone that I was a good helper, and that she should come to me when she was ready to have her kittens.

So, that's how I know that cats can talk to each other – that they can say something beyond meow and pet me.

They both lived happily for a long, long time, and they both taught me a great deal about love.

Part II: SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF TREES

One strong memory I have from childhood is of lying on a low looping branch of an ancient apple tree on my father's farm in Pennsylvania. This branch was so wide that I could lie on it without falling off. I used to imagine that some loving entity was watching me there, in the shade, like a guardian angel, or a parent, or the tree itself.

It is easy to see why we love trees. We look like them, they feed us sweet fruit and nuts, and they provide us with fuel, shelter, shade, clothing, and clean air. They literally join sky and earth, the perfect symbol of generous, peaceful, and powerful existence.

We know that animals can talk, but how about trees? What are they telling us, how can we hear them, and how do we harness joy to combat the climate emergency?

These are the questions I want to explore today.

For me, it all starts with my father. My father was a tall, stoic man of few words. He could be strict and a little mean, suffering as he did from depression. When he did talk, it was of two things—trees and the somewhat grisly stories from his own past.

I remember one story in particular about an ancestor who suffered a fatal accident while dynamiting tree stumps to clear a field for crops. The story (and his cryptic yet graphic wording of it – which I’ll spare you) tells a lot about what the world was like in the early 1900s for a poor farming family. Brutal accidents of this kind happened all the time and became part of our family’s lore and lexicon.

So, my father wasn’t demonstrative, and he wasn’t tender, but if you wanted him to talk, all you had to do was ask him the name of a tree or a plant.

“What’s that?”

I’d ask of the mauve-crested weed that grew taller than me.

“That’s Joe-Pye Weed,” he’d say.

“And that?” I’d prompt, enjoying that moment of attention.

“Those are stinging nettles, good to eat. Right next to that patch is jewelweed. If you get stung by a nettle, you can rub some of the stalk on yourself, and it soothes the burning. Nature is often like that,” he’d explain, “With the poison and its antidote growing side-by-side.”

The poison and its antidote grow side by side.

Yes, if I wanted my father’s love, I had to go looking for it in the wild places.

For his part, he put all his love in a lifelong devotion to trees.

Before I was born, my parents accepted a three-year teaching contract in Istanbul. My father bought the old family farm from my grandfather. The 200-year old stone house built

by our ancestors and sat on 52 wooded acres. It had no indoor plumbing or electricity. This was the 1960s.

While my parents were gone, my grandfather had the land timbered. So, when my parents returned, the property was stripped nearly bald. My father was heart-broken, but he quietly set about replanting all those lost trees. He spent the rest of his life neglecting the house and us kids, and reforesting the land.

My childhood was filled with tree planting, jostling around in the back of a powder blue, bull-nosed pick-up truck filled with barrels of water sloshing all over the place as we rumbled over stubbly fields to water the saplings.

As time went on, I found that I'd inherited a dose of depression from my father, but also a love of trees. And there it was again, the poison and its antidote growing side by side.

When things got difficult I turned to trees, like they were my surrogate parents. By listening and looking, I learned three important lessons.

The first was, take what you need, be what you are, and that is exactly what the earth needs. I learned this one day, when I agonizing about being "selfish." I was looking at a huge maple tree, how it sank its roots deep into the ground and took all the water, minerals, and food it needed, no more, no less. It spread its arms wide to catch the sun, and in doing that, it grew huge and strong, and gave plenty of shade and fresh, clean air. More importantly, it wasn't trying to do good, it was just being what it was. "Consider the lilies, of the field," Jesus said, "they toil not, neither do they spin, ...yet even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

The more I looked at trees, the more they comforted me. When I worried that I should be more like some brilliant or hard-working classmate, I would look at trees and think, we don't expect a pine tree to have leaves like a maple. And we don't say that maples

are better than pines. They are both beautiful, both useful, both needed. So that was the second thing I learned from trees.

Finally, they taught me the beauty of the fallen and the scarred. I'd look at a tree damaged by lightning, its fallen half lying on the ground beside it. Not only was the tree still beautiful, it was arguably more beautiful, because of the strange shape caused by its missing limb. Also, the fallen log itself had become a garden of moss, lichen and fungi, enjoyed by all kinds of animals and insects. When my father died at the age of 93, my family held his memorial service on the farm. We sat in a circle beneath trees that had once been scrawny, crooked saplings. Now, they reached 50 feet into the sky, caught the summer breeze in their broad leafy crowns, and cooled and comforted us with the fruits of his and their lifelong labor.

You could say that these stories illustrate a kind of tree language. Or you might argue that this is just human-centric interpretation. But there is a lot of scientific evidence that trees talk in their own right, visually, chemically, and electrically – and that these “languages” have a direct impact on us as well as other plants and animals.

Suzanne Simard, the ecologist most quoted in Peter Wohlleben's book *The Hidden Life of Trees*, discovered that trees grow better close together, contrary to what your landscaper may tell you.

And, via long threads of fungi, they connect to each other much farther than their own roots. Trees have a symbiotic relationship with fungi. And while most trees help those within their own species, some have a symbiotic relationship to other species of trees, such as the birch and the fir.

Trees also communicate via electrical impulses. But these travel only 1/3 of an inch a second – or put another way – one inch every three seconds... So, if I'm a tree, and you're a

tree—and we are, say, ten feet apart, I might say, “Hey, need some carbon,” and that message will take six minutes to reach you.

Interesting side note: Tolkein wrote about talking trees – called Ents--in *The Lord of the Rings*. In the middle of the apocalypse, after the hobbits ask the trees for help, Treebeard talks to his fellow Ents, and after 30 minutes of grunting and trunk stomping, the hobbits breathlessly ask, “What did they say?”

Treebeard tells them, “They said, good morning.”

Another example of tree communication in real life is the acacia tree. In mere minutes of a giraffe chewing on a leaf, the tree will not only pull toxic substances into its leaves to make it bitter, but it will send out ethylene gas which signals the other acacia trees to do the same.

Simard also discovered that the roots of grains make faint crackling noises at 220 hertz – and that when this sound was played for other seedlings, the roots turned toward that sound.

So, trees definitely talk, but they don’t have neurons; they aren’t conscious in the same way we are. As my daughter said, when I asked her if she had named her plants, “No, that would be wrong,” and she thoughtfully stroked a leaf. “They have names already,” Their names are in their leaves.”

It’s important to understand trees on their own terms, to try to leave our human-centric consciousness for a time and enter theirs, if at all possible.

I think Dorianne Laux gets at their consciousness

in this excerpt from her poem, “The Life of Trees:”

...I want to sleep
and dream the life of trees, beings
from the muted world who care
nothing for Money, Politics, Power,

Will or Right, who want little from the night
 but a few dead stars going dim, a white owl
 lifting from their limbs, who want only
 to sink their roots into the wet ground...

...If trees could speak,
 they wouldn't, only hum some low
 green note, roll their pinecones
 down the empty streets and blame it,
 with a shrug, on the cold wind.

During the day they sleep inside
 their furry bark, clouds shredding
 like ancient lace above their crowns.
 Sun. Rain. Snow. Wind. They fear
 nothing...
 In the storms... They fling
 their branches, forked sacrifice
 to the beaten earth. They do not pray.
 If they make a sound it's eaten
 by the wind. And though the stars
 return they do not offer thanks, only
 ooze a sticky sap from their roundish
 concentric wounds, clap the water
 from their needles, straighten their spines
 and breathe, and breathe again.

Now that have seen how trees talk to us through their presence in our lives, and how they communicate, scientifically, let's look at how what we can learn about our relationship to them from language and myth.

The word "true" comes from the word tree...to be as steadfast and faithful as a tree.

In Scandinavian myth, people were made from trees. Man, or Ask, was made from the Ash tree, and Embla, the woman, from Elm. Yggdrasil is the great ash tree at the center of the universe, with Asgard, the home of the gods, in its branches and Nifl Heim and Muspel Heim (the realms of ice and the fire) in its roots. Its dew nourishes the world. Three fates protect Yggdrasil, Urd, Verdani and Skuld, past, present and future. They carve runes at the base of the tree, and through these runes, the tree shapes the fate of the world.

Odin, the all-father, wanted to learn to read the sacred runes. But only those who proved themselves worthy could have that power, so he hung himself from the Yggdrasil for nine days, piercing his side with a spear. The ordeal produced a vision.

He stared down into the pool of memory and saw that the fallen twigs of Yggdrasil spelled words. With a clap of joy, Odin ended his ordeal, and shouted: *“Then I was fertilized and became wise;*

Then I was fertilized and became wise.

Originally, I was going to frame this sermon as a plea-- that we should listen to what the trees are telling us with their ever-increasing pollen count, and their huge crops of acorns, that it is no coincidence that our ash and elm trees are dying.

I was going to tell you how important it is for us to face the very real prospect of human extinction, and to prioritize climate activism above all else, that we should tweak our already ethical practices and most importantly, call our representatives, at all levels of government, to urge them to enact the wide-reaching emergency legislation we need. Because climate change IS an Emergency. WE ALL KNOW IT. And now we know that when people really believe the emergency the government can call for and lead huge change.

The kinds of societal disruption this pandemic has wrought is only a sampling of what is to come if we do not seriously change our ways. Climate change is a FAR greater threat to us than this pandemic, and it requires as great a change – and we CAN DO it.

However, this thought at this moment is exhausting. How do we make room in this current emergency for the work to come?

I went to the woods to see what the trees might say. I did some yoga in a circle of fir and hickory, grown so tall they were more like 30- foot pillars topped by a fringe.

At first it seemed they said nothing (Trees are like that, you know).

But after a long while of stretching and breathing, of lying face up and staring into at the light of the setting sun caught in the swaying treetops, I let go of language and time.

Whether they spoke or whether my mind attuned itself to what they are, and whether there is a difference between those two things, I cannot say.

What came to me was, “Be slow. Do one thing at a time. Do it with all that you are.”

What came was, “Let go of human ego. Ego is lovely for entertainment, but the work you do in the world would be so much easier if you would just let go of your individual consciousness, your expectations and comparisons, and if you took up your place amongst us in the statehood of trees.

What came was, “Spend more time with us, and all will work out as it should. Death will come as no surprise, and everlasting life will be like a garden on a fallen log. We are you, and human language is the flower of nature. Use it to speak for us.”

Maybe the story of Odin’s sacrifice tells us that the knowledge we need to save ourselves comes through close communion with nature. Indeed, studies show that just 15 minutes a day of “forest bathing” can improve your immune system, your mood, and your blood pressure. It may be a result of aerosols the trees release, or it may be that roving “soft fascination” of a walk in the woods, leading us away from our troubles.

So yes, let’s all look at the ways we can do a *little bit more* for the trees, the planet, the climate. But also, let’s seek joy, balance, and comfort as we do so.

Now, as we are so hungry for contact and communion, it’s a good time to go outside, lie down under a tree, learn the shapes of the leaves, the names we give them, the different postures of the different species, and then let all that go.

Yeah, so go ahead, hug a tree (know it’s not fashionable right now)— but put your cheek right up against it. I don’t know if you will hear anything, and I don’t know if it will hear you, but one thing I do know is, you will feel how steadfast that tree is, how true.

Let that be your guide.

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Speak up! My grandmother can't hear what you're _____. She is a little deaf. speaking. Who is _ ?Â speak. My parents don't always _____ the same language. said. She _ "goodbye" to him and went away.Â They are often dishonest. speak. He probably knows five languages. Does he _ Chinese? You might also like tell say speak talk. 43 terms. Andrii_AG.