

About a week or more ago I was looking absent mindedly outside the window at the small willow tree which I planted a few years ago. Willow trees have always fascinated me; maybe because they are delicate, maybe because they sway so beautifully in the wind. I have always associated these beautiful trees with lightness and grief. Actually, one of their names in Greek is 'κλαίουσα', which means 'the one who weeps'. I think willows originated in China, where they are a symbol of rebirth or/and immortality, but they probably symbolize different things in different parts of the world. I read somewhere that the raindrops that fall to the ground from their drooping branches resemble tears and that is how weeping willow got its name. The young willow tree outside my window generated more thoughts about environmental destruction, deforestation and lost habitats, lungs and oxygen and breathing. And then I remembered the countless images of trees that have appeared in my visual journal pages, some of which have found their way into this website, and the multiple and everchanging meanings they have held for me as I gradually stripped layers of experience or as I created metaphors or containers for interpretations, material and ideas. Trees became a metaphor of my exploration of deeper familial dynamics or they reflected my struggle to contact my mother and my trips down rabbit holes that relatives and others had sent me, at others times tree images depicted my sense of rootlessness and search for roots and beginnings. They became symbols of immobility and stuckness, but also strength, tenacity, perseverance and endurance. Trees are also memories. A tree in the old school playground, a deer in a wood in England, a camping holiday among poplar trees, the eucalyptus tree in my parents' house back yard, walks in olive groves in Greece during the summer, trees I have planted and the sick old almond tree I tried to save, the ever multiplying naturally occurring fig trees I have had cut down in my garden, the citrus tree a neighbour chopped down, the beautiful lemon and orange tree orchards I see through the car window as we drive across the countryside on the mainland, Christmas trees with fairy lights and shiny trinkets and old memorabilia. Endless snapshots of trees that provide a connecting thread. My musings over trees ended as I soon as the view of the willow tree was replaced by something else as I left my desk.

And then last Sunday I listened to a podcast, as I mentioned in the previous post, where Jonathan Foust recalled an instance during his childhood when he had felt as if he had become one with a tree on the farm he had grown up on. This made me realise that I too had several childhood memories of trees. One memory involved a huge old tree in the school yard with a large hollow where one could sit in. So, I have this memory of my sitting in the hollow during lunch time eating a sandwich. Over the years I have wondered whether the tree was actually in the school yard and whether this memory might be a combination of two or more fragments of separate memories, which I had stored as part of a similar group of material; my eating a sandwich at school, my being in the hollow of some tree elsewhere, and who knows what else. Sometimes memories are grouped and are represented by one single symbolic image like the cover of a book or the sleeve of

an old record. I also have another memory of me hanging from a tree, not being able to climb down, being stuck and afraid. By the time the adults had come to my rescue my face was stained with tears, like a dry snail trail, and the rough bark I had come in contact with had not only left scratches and marks on my hands, knees and other areas of my body, but had also left a sense of permeability, as if the rough surface had splintered my porous being and the soreness had spread through my body. In addition to this material, another more recent tree and woods related memory surfaced. This was about a video I had watched ages ago, where the musician and activist, Peter Gabriel, shared his personal motivation for standing up for human rights with the watchdog group WITNESS. He talks about his love for trees and then describes an instance when his classmates attacked him out of the blue and abused him in the beautiful wooded area around his school - an experience that left him not only violated, but powerless, as well. He also talks about how he got involved in the human rights' world and how the more people around the world he met that had been tortured or had suffered some form of violence, the more he realised that often their stories were denied or forgotten because there was no recorded evidence. That is how the idea of providing people with cameras to facilitate their story telling came about, and at the time the interview took place WITNESS had given out cameras to over 60 countries. So, I searched the internet to see if I could find the video and if I had recalled the story correctly and sure enough it was there. You may watch this video at: [https://www.ted.com/talks/peter\\_gabriel\\_fights\\_injustice\\_with\\_video](https://www.ted.com/talks/peter_gabriel_fights_injustice_with_video).

You may also like to listen to one of his songs about the civil rights activist, *Steven Biko*, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijb9auSQRso> or sung by Joan Baez at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJiRpKn7iEU>

Trees often remind me of people. Some are firmly rooted and some have eroded or not as deep roots. Like people they withstand the elements, they sway this way and that, they bend and kneel and then they stand upright again and they bloom and give fruits. They grow, sometimes against all odds, in depleted soil and arid land and may even make it through a fire. They too, like people, withstand and endure, evolve and change, shed the old and age. And sometimes they break, are cut down, burnt down, transformed or mutated, twisted out of shape, given a different form or name. They branch out and communicate with other trees and their roots touch and mingle underground sharing the moisture and the nourishment the earth provides. Trees communicate and are connected to other trees through a network of soil fungi that allows the sharing of information and nutrients. Scientists have found that when they are attacked by insects, they can flood their leaves with noxious chemicals to repel unwanted visitors, but what is more fascinating is that they will warn other trees by releasing chemicals into the wind and possibly through their network of roots. Trees like humans do not stand independent and alone in forests and they even favour their offspring. The ecologist Suzanne Simard says "Now, we know we all favor our own children, and I wondered, could Douglas fir recognize its own kin.... So we set about an experiment, and we grew mother trees with kin and stranger's seedlings. And it turns out they do recognize their kin. Mother trees colonize their kin with bigger mycorrhizal networks. They send them more carbon below ground. They even

reduce their own root competition to make elbow room for their kids. When mother trees are injured or dying, they also send messages of wisdom on to the next generation of seedlings. So we've used isotope tracing to trace carbon moving from an injured mother tree down her trunk into the mycorrhizal network and into her neighboring seedlings, not only carbon but also defense signals. And these two compounds have increased the resistance of those seedlings to future stresses. So trees talk'

[https://www.ted.com/talks/suzanne\\_simard\\_how\\_trees\\_talk\\_to\\_each\\_other?language=el](https://www.ted.com/talks/suzanne_simard_how_trees_talk_to_each_other?language=el)

In his book *The Hidden Life of Trees: What they feel, How they Communicate – Discoveries from a Secret World*, forester and writer, Peter Wohlleben, draws on scientific discoveries to describe how trees are like our human families: tree parents communicate with their children, support them as they grow, share nutrients with the ones that are sick or weak, and warn each other of impending dangers. The following is a short extract from his book: '*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 be only 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?' *Their well-being depends on their community, and when the supposedly feeble trees disappear, the others lose as well.* When that happens, the forest is no longer a single closed unit. Hot sun and swirling winds can now penetrate to the forest floor and disrupt the moist, cool climate. Even strong trees get sick a lot over the course of their lives. When this happens, they depend on their weaker neighbors for support. If they are no longer there, then all it takes is what would once have been a harmless insect attack to seal the fate even of giants'.

Trees have been the subject of poems, paintings, books, stories and myths, perhaps because they are majestic, intrinsically connected, beautiful and generous, ferociously enduring and withstanding the elements year in year out. One such book, *The Trees*, by Μαργαρίτα Λυμπεράκη, was given to me by Nick, an old friend from the eighties. He had stayed with us a couple of times during the nineties after a painful divorce. On the first page the author writes: '*Since when she was little she had felt sorry for the trees, she had felt tenderness and mercy for them. She remembered that still a child she had asked her mother: "Mana,*

*why do trees not walk?" And she had responded: "They have roots, my child." Then she would go and hug their trunks and whisper words of consolation. And they used to bend and moan' (The Trees, 1995, Margarita Lyberakis)*

Finally, I will end this post on trees with the caption I read under a photo of a majestic tree from Dan Siegel's trip to the rainforest of North America on his website. Below the photo the caption writes: *'it is deeply inspiring to remember the principles of the indigenous tribes of Vancouver Island – 'everything is one, interconnected' and 'respect'.*