

Its Bark

Tessa McWatt

Lockdown again.

November, and it is a warm 15 degrees Celsius in London. The sun is bright. The temperature is at such odds with the seasonal slant of the sun's rays that buildings, cars, lamp posts seem to float. I have come to accept the floatiness of 2020, but now, late in the year, with death tolls rising again, I need to feel grounded. I visit my local park to converse with the trees. I'm not mad. I'm in a state of hyper-awareness, different from the shock and awe occasioned by the silence of the first lockdown, when London was filled with birdsong and the skies were empty of vapour trails. It's clear now that this is what we have been heading towards, this latest consequence of carbon-based industrial capitalism, founded on the abuse and extraction of the earth's resources, destroying habitats, weakening the immune systems of animals whose diseases now leap at and into us, as we are both accused and pleaded with. *Stand back*. My brash and baleful state requires a new kind of listening. I march towards the park in the low 4 p.m. light and the springlike temperature. I am worried about how distressed the trees must be.

Trees are alert, social and sophisticated. They are not only producers of wood, shade- and fruit-offering entities in the service of humans. Scientific evidence shows that trees of the same species are communal, and form alliances with those of other species.¹ Forest trees are cooperative and interdependent. They communicate. They have a shared 'intelligence', across mycorrhizal networks, which link them in symbiotic relationships.

The electrical pulses emitted by trees are strikingly similar to those in animal nervous systems. And it seems that the main 'conversation' in woods, groves and orchards expresses alarm and distress.

My own sense of alarm is acute. Illness is everywhere. At the small, wooded area at the back of Queen's Park, I listen. I touch the bark of the horse chestnut. I rub my hands on its furrowed, flaking skin, knowing that this tree replenishes our oxygen, balances our carbon emissions, inhales, despite what governments do; exhales perhaps too little, too late. It whispers.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN)² says that over half of Europe's endemic trees – meaning found in only one location on the planet and nowhere else – face extinction. In the horse chestnut's case, the threats are from logging, forest fires and tourism, and the leaf-miner moth. Trees like this one are homes to uncountable species. Their extinction will mean the disappearance of mosses, liverworts and hornworts, snails, slugs. Birds.

Habitat loss has been responsible for a 60 per cent loss of non-human life worldwide since 1970. In North America that includes three billion birds.³ How many fewer songs are now in the air than when I was a child? The rates of species collapse are speeding up. While we're all so focussed on the microscopic coronavirus, I am also tuning into the creature-by-creature whispers. Pandemics are inextricable from climate catastrophe and biodiversity collapse. The world counts cases, deaths, economic losses. My sights are honed on tinier activities. Spring life-cycle events, like leafing, flowering and egg laying, are coming earlier in most species. Autumn events, like leaf fall and the fruiting of fungi are happening at the wrong times. Most species that have adjusted their timings to warmer climates are likely to have done so out of distress.

I stand hunched before the horse chestnut. I listen to its bark.

Canadian scientist Suzanne Simard⁴ says all trees all over the world

form a symbiotic association with below-ground fungi. Cooperative networks. The fungi provide nutrients and water, and the plant provides the fungi with a substance equivalent to the results of photosynthesis, sending nutrients and carbon back through their networks. A below-ground pipeline connecting one root system to another. They negotiate and share.

I listen harder.

On the west coast of California, two million acres of forest have burned in 2020. Trees in the Amazon, not so far from where I was born in Guyana, are being destroyed. We've all heard it. That old ontological riddle about forests is a trick. Everyone hears every tree that falls in every forest. Trees communicate with each other and with us. Not hearing them is deliberate, fatal deafness. It is a refusal to listen.

At the same time, the Amazon has nearly 30,000 active fires, set to clear the land, encouraged and rewarded by, among others, the Brazilian president. Virgin forest is burning at the highest rates in a decade – started by humans, worsened by drought. If all the Amazon forest were to be reduced to ash, at least 10 per cent of the world's known species of plants, animals and microorganisms would be destroyed. This would mean the loss of an immeasurable number of potential medicines (25 per cent of Western modern medicines are derived from the rainforest); drought and flooding would increase around the world, catastrophically so for agriculture and food supplies. The Amazon's estimated 76 billion tonnes of carbon would be released into the atmosphere, accelerating global warming. Rainfall would lessen; the dry weather would cause more fires and air quality would plummet. About 30 million people who live in the rainforest would lose their homes.⁵ But with more CO₂ in the air, we would all struggle to breathe.

The disproportionate effects of the loss of trees and biodiversity on residents of the global south is mirrored in the disproportionate effects of the racial capitalism that governs globally. For Black people, Indigenous people

and people of colour, the consequences of the deliberate deafness of capital are vast and profound. Structural racism, the extinction of species, the climate crisis, bad air, the deafness: these are intimately entwined. Capital is put before care. Extraction eclipses equality. The illness is spreading.

Oh help, I whisper to the horse chestnut before moving on. Have I just prayed? I am not mad.

Trees have always been sacred. The sacred groves of the past, and some remaining among Indigenous peoples in various parts of world, are truly human spaces. Groves harnessed prayer long before any churches were built. The Druids, whose very name is derived from the word for oak knowledge, prayed among – to – trees. Carl Jung, among others, believed that trees were direct embodiments of the meaning of life. In the woods he felt life's 'deepest, awe-inspiring workings'. Now deforestation and climate catastrophe threaten the sacred groves of Ethiopia; prayers are being vaporised by drought.

The tree as a metaphor is perhaps the most universal and certainly the most widespread of all great cultural symbols. Trees appear and reappear throughout human history to illustrate every aspect of life. For aeons, the structural complexity of a tree – its roots, trunk, bifurcating branches, and leaves — has served as symbol, visualisation and map of knowledge and ideas. How can we make out this rich linkage to metaphor, the human, the sacred, amid the frenzied din of 'productivity' and its iniquities?

For the first time in history, more than 50 per cent of the world's population lives in urban areas. This percentage is projected by the UN to grow to 68 per cent by 2050. Trees and woods, then, play a more important role than ever in our cities. Urban woodlands have an effect on our brains. One study found that people living in proximity to trees have better 'amygdala

integrity' – meaning, a brain structure better able to handle stress.⁶ Perhaps I am mad. The Amazon, the horse chestnut, the weeping willow: oh help.

How will we re-enter the world once this pandemic is over and before the next one? In this post-Covid awareness, I grapple with what might be new. The silent conversations between oaks adjusting to new temperatures, the lack of rain. The scratchy, admonishing chatter of a row of sycamores as they perform their messy shedding of leaves, seed balls, twigs and strips of bark. What can I learn from this listening? The lockdown silence can't have been for nothing. How will I re-enter society? The healing, the connection, the evidence that links nature and well-being will lead me, tree by tree, to examine my place in community in this new moment.

In Cree and Ojibwa culture, trees are 'who' and not 'what.'⁷ This is the most sane thing I've remembered all day. At the edge of the woods, towards the exit, I reach a tree that is rotting and dying. The world feels like this. But suddenly I feel a thrill. I recall other things I've learned about woods. Each tree plays its part in a social system. Young or old, it has a purpose. In forest nomenclature, this tree at the end of its life is called a snag. Despite a snag's inevitable death, its rich usefulness to wildlife is about to peak. Dead wood provides homes for insects and fungi. Those insects are a food source for birds, bats and other little animals. These creatures shelter in the tree's hollows and holes. But they in turn are food for larger mammals and birds of prey. Dead, decaying trees are integral to a wood's biodiversity.

Death has talents.

I run my hand along the rot and pinch some chipped wood. I hold it in my hand. Nothing is inconsequential. This edge we are perched on is either of extinction or revolution. Nature gives us a model, if we choose the latter. Trees are cooperative, are not pitted against their own nature or habitat.

Even in their illness they are abundant. The way out of the pandemic must involve a way out of the extraction and exploitation of resources and people for profit, pitting us against one another and nature itself. A key to a different structure lies just beneath the surface of what we know. If we attend to the invisible workings of cooperation and of care.

Listen.

Notes

- 1 Wohlbeben, P. (2017) *The Hidden Life of Trees*. London: William Collins.
- 2 International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) "European Red List of Trees," Fri, 27 Sep 2019.
- 3 World Wildlife Federation, *The Living Planet Report*, 2018; and Pennisi, E. (2019) "Three Billion North American Birds Have Vanished Since 1970, Survey Shows" in *Science*, Vol 371, Issue 6525.
- 4 Suzanne Simard in Diane Toomey (2016) "Exploring How and Why Trees 'Talk' to Each Other," *Yale Environment* 360, September 1, 2016.
- 5 World Wildlife Federation, Inside the Amazon wwf.panda.org/discover/knowledge_hub/where_we_work/amazon/about_the_amazon/ [Accessed January 2021].
- 6 Kühn, S., Düzel, S., Eibich, P. et al. (2017) 'In search of features that constitute an "enriched environment" in humans: Associations between geographical properties and brain structure.' *Sci Rep* 7, 11920.
- 7 Tomson Highway (1999). *The Kiss of The Fur Queen*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada.

Tessa McWatt

Tessa McWatt is the author of six novels and two books for young people. Her fiction has been nominated for the Governor General's Award, the City of Toronto Book Awards, and the OCM Bocas Prize. She is one of the winners of the Eccles British Library Award 2018 for her first non-fiction book, *Shame On Me: An Anatomy of Race and Belonging*, which won the 2020 Bocas Prize for Non-Fiction and was shortlisted for the Hilary Weston Prize 2020. She co-edited, with Dionne Brand and Rabindranath Maharaj, *Luminous Ink: Writers on Writing in Canada*. Her latest novel, *The Snow Line*, will be published in 2021. She is also a librettist, Professor of Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, and is on the Board of Trustees at *Wasafiri*.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

writersmosaic.org.uk

© Tessa McWatt