

THE OLD LOCUST

In December, the arborists came to our backyard to prune our locust tree, some of whose larger branches had died and were breaking off from the trunk. Deadwooding is what they bluntly call this work: a no-nonsense reminder to us non-arborists that, their majestic beauty notwithstanding, even trees at times need amputations, to protect them and the rest of us. The workers expertly tossed their ropes and grappling hooks in the air, climbed and pulled themselves upward into the tree, and with their lightweight, portable saws, expertly cut off the diseased and dead branches in a matter of minutes.

Walking around the tree later in the day, the ground frozen and the air winter crisp, I marveled at the cleanness of the cut where each branch had once protruded. Yet, scanning the straight spined tree trunk, I noticed four deep depressions in the bark, perhaps from heavy boot prints or other climbing equipment. Their respective angles conspired with my overactive imagination, and within seconds of seeing them, I could swear I was looking at the furrowed brow and deep frown of a face whose wearer well knew pain and suffering.

Psychologists call the phenomenon of seeing a face in things as diverse as shrouds, clouds and even toast, facial pareidolia. This is well-established science, given our knowledge of the human brain's evolved capacities to detect facial

features, including in our everyday surroundings. Scientific consensus has also evolved around the idea that the global community of trees communicates on many complex chemical levels about their life cycles and when danger approaches. In many respects, trees are sufficiently sentient beings from a scientific viewpoint. Yet I would be foolish to assume that some dents in a tree trunk mean that it has a real face and the capacity for genuine human emotion. Trees are what trees are and we are what we are.

Why then, each time since, that I have I stood outside gazing at my old locust, I have been rendered speechless with a kind of shame, as if the tree were taking me to task? I cannot shake this eerie feeling that the locust is a person, looking at me with a kind of enraged judgment: “How dare you invade my space, brutally lopping off pieces of my body without consulting me!” I have cut down two ancient front-yard willows in the last decade, and I have been saved from deathly boredom during COVID by the shady company of old growth forests on my many hikes. I owe the trees a lot, and so I feel the old locust silently berating me for my colossal insensitivity, the necessity of removing its limbs notwithstanding.

Perhaps this should come as no surprise. If in the biblical Garden of Eden, the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil bore fruit that made humans so intelligent, why would we assume that we and the trees possess no capacity for speaking to each other? Our symbiotic exchanges of oxygen and carbon dioxide have enmeshed us in a mutual strategy for staying alive, for likely millions of years if not many more. In that most basic sense, we and the trees have always communicated with each other. Yet as our potentially limitless capacity for *knowledge* has blossomed us humans into an almost cyborg-like enmeshment with technology, our other capacity for hearing the *wisdom* in nature has withered. Trees may have evolved to be our suppliers of the very air we breathe and with which we speak, but we are listening to them less and less. The tools we created to control the world are becoming our taskmasters, making us their slaves who are deaf to anything but their command.

Jewish tradition teaches that in every generation, beginning at Passover, a person must imagine himself as having personally left the slavery of ancient Egypt. On its face, the statement is not logical. We who were born into freedom have little or no understanding of what it means to be liberated, so how could we even hope to see ourselves this way? This of course is the point of the teaching:

acting in solidarity with the downtrodden and the oppressed in the present age begins with the excruciating work of cultivating an empathy that is ageless.

So now, early in March, so close to Passover, the holiday that connects the rebirth of spring with the rebirth of freedom, I stand outside once again gazing at my old locust. I see her face imprinted with that same grimace, angry and mournful, on her trunk, and I try to listen to what she whispers to me, to us, and the trans-species empathy she desperately seeks for me, for us, to cultivate.

She whispers to me, to us, that human liberation cannot last long if the rest of the planet is in thrall to the dictatorship of our environmental excesses.

She whispers to me, to us, that the psalmist's dream of the trees joyously crying is being transformed into the scientist's nightmare of the trees silently dying.

She whispers to me, to us, that as the world trends warmer, the seas rise higher, the ice caps melt faster, the storms blow harder, the fires burn hotter, and the great forests become thinner, even the heartiest living things will become weaker.

Soon, this locust will break free from winter's dormancy and come alive with buds of green. Each leaf she produces this season will, in the words of the poet Stephen Dobyns, flutter like a million frightened hands. Each one will wave a whisper at me in verdant indictment:

“What will you do in this season of liberation to free us all from the environmental tyranny that threatens us?

How will you fight to prevent our time from becoming what Rachel Carson called a silent spring?”