



How the Trees Stopped Talking

Estonia and Finland

Many years ago, when human beings were still capable of imagining, a man left his cabin and went to the forest in order to collect firewood. He came across a very straight birch tree and decided that this tree would do. He placed his leather bag on the ground and picked up his axe. But, just as he was about to throw the edge of his axe against the white trunk, he heard the tree pleading:

‘Please don’t chop me down! Let me live! I’m still young and haven’t had a chance to enjoy life. In addition, I can be very useful, because, with my skin, you can make baskets and with my twigs brooms.’

The man was very surprised for he had never heard a tree speaking. So he took pity on the birch tree and continued on his way until he came across an oak. Once again, he put his leather bag on the ground and grabbed his axe, but when he was about to make the painful chop, he again heard a voice.

‘Don’t kill me!’, said the oak tree. ‘I still have a lot of life ahead of me, because I can live for thousands of years and, please, remember that my acorns feed the animals of the forest, from which you feed later.’

The man lowered the axe and reflected on what the oak tree had said. ‘Yes, he’s right’, he thought to himself. So he went on his way in the hope of finding a tree that did not speak, until he found an ash tree with beautifully-shaped leaves, which also spoke to him.

‘I want to live! Don’t kill me, please! Think that, as you get older, you’ll need my leaves because I can relieve rheumatism and gout.’

The man went ahead and came across a maple, who also complained to him:

‘Let me live! Don’t you see that my sap is not only healthy for you, but that many creatures of the forest feed on it? What’ll become of them if you kill me?’

And so things continued that morning, with the aspen tree begging for mercy because the rustle of its leaves could relax him when he felt tense. The fir, spruce and other pine trees begged him not to chop them down because, then, how could birds protect themselves from the cold in winter? ‘Can’t you see that, when spring comes, you’d miss their song in the morning?’ they added to which the rowan tree said:

‘My fruits are still green, and what will the birds eat in winter if you chop me down?’

However, the final reason was given to him by the juniper, who began to cry, pleading not for him, but for all the creatures of the forest, since this is the tree that brings happiness to all.

‘The juice of my fruits is capable of curing up to ninety-nine diseases in all beings’, he explained. ‘If you kill me, you’ll do great damage to all the beings you live with, feed on, obtain shelter from and also damage the useful objects we provide for your survival.’

Finally, the man put his leather bag on the ground for the umpteenth time, put his axe to one side of the bag and sat on a rock thinking. What was he going to do now? He had no heart to end the life of any of those trees. However, he needed firewood, with which to make a fire for heating and cooking. His family needed that fire!

Then he came up with an idea:

‘Trees shed their dead branches, and some of them are really big. With these branches we can warm ourselves and we can cook our food. It doesn’t really make sense for me to kill any tree at all.’

Just at that moment, a little man with a long grey beard emerged from the trees. He was wearing a birch bark shirt and a spruce bark coat and on his head he had a bonnet decorated with acorns.

‘You’ve made a wise decision’, said the little man, as if he had heard the thoughts of the man with the leather bag. I’m the spirit of the forests, and I thank you for having avoided killing my children.

‘As a token of gratitude’, he continued, ‘I’m going to give you something’.

And the little man handed him a finely carved wand of yew wood.

‘Every time you need something’, said the little man, ‘show your wand and ask for it, and all beings will be happy to help you in exchange for your kindness to the trees.’

‘If you need honey, take out your wand and show it to the bees, and the bees will bring you honey.’

‘If you want blackberries, take out your wand and show it to the birds, and the birds will take you to the blackberries.’

‘If you need to till your fields, show it to the moles, and they’ll do the job for you.’

‘If you need to build a barn, show it to the ants, explain what you need and they’ll build it.’

‘The trees will give you their sap and their healing juices, and the spiders will weave your clothes with silk, linen or wool, according to your wishes. But be careful with one thing’, the little man warned him, suddenly becoming very serious: ‘never ask for something unnatural or impossible, because then misfortune will fall on you’.

And without waiting for the man to thank him, the little man opened his eyes wide, put the index finger of his right hand on the tip of his nose and disappeared.

After recovering from the surprise of the appearance of the spirit of the forests, the man wasted no time wondering what he could do with the yew wand. The first thing he did was ask a deer to help him carry the dry woody branches that he was picking up on his way back home.

His life, and that of his family, radically changed from that day on. He asked the birds to repair the roof of their cabin and cover it with moss, to plug leaks and insulate the house from humidity. He entrusted the moles and ants to till and sow the family field with cereals, so as to have bread all year long. At the same time the reindeer fertilized it and stirred it with their feet between harvest and sowing. He asked the ducks to collect the feathers which they had shed in order to make his wife a mattress fit for a queen, and the beavers were commissioned to make a small dam in the nearby river for his children to bathe in summer.

He also summoned the ravens so that, when approaching the sea, they would ask their brothers and sisters, the gulls, to look for a large piece of amber on the beaches. And, when they brought it to him, he invoked the squirrels to carve it with their teeth into the facets of a jewel, which he then hung around his wife's neck on their anniversary.

And the man, who once went out to chop down a tree and came back with a yew wand, lived happily until the end of his days, always bearing in mind the warning given to him by the spirit of the forests. He bequeathed the yew wand to his children, who lived equally happily, with all their needs met until the end of their days.

However, when it reached the third generation, the yew wand fell into the hands of a fool, who ignoring what his parents had transmitted to him, began to ask for absurd and unnecessary things, which only satisfied his curiosity, his vanity and his greed.

Finally, one day, this fool wanted to put the power of the wand to the test and see if he could ask for even more fabulous things, like ordering the Sun to shine in those cold northern lands, as it did in the warmer regions of the south. Of course this was against nature, since it had not taken into account all the other beings that lived and thrived in the cold northern regions. With such a decision, he would condemn them to extinction, just because he wanted to enjoy a tropical climate.

Of course, it was impossible to fulfil his desire, as he did nothing but seek his own personal good, ignoring the common good of all the beings who had helped his family for three generations. And so the yew wand vanished from his hands, and it later made the foolish man disappear. He was never seen or heard from again.

When they saw what happened, the trees were deeply saddened, because they did not wish evil to any being. So they held a tree council to think about what they should do from then on and decided that, to avoid similar situation, it would be better never to speak to any human being again.

‘Humans are still young, and they have to grow up’, said the oldest of them, who was a yew tree. ‘It would be better not to address them again, unless they demonstrate enough maturity to think of the whole community of life before of themselves.’

And this is how the trees stopped talking to human beings and how, since then, when the trees talk to each other in the forests above our heads, we seem to hear a mysterious whisper of voices. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2020).

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Comments

This is a story that transmits a good number of ecocentric ideas and values. But it also has a special impact on the development of systemic thinking, insofar as it makes us see the systemic interconnections and interdependencies that occur in nature, without which human life would be impossible.

A more concise and suitable adaptation of this story for a children’s audience can be found in Margaret Read MacDonald's (2012) version, the reference of which can be found below.

Sources

Livo, N. & Livo, G. (1999). How the Trees Lost Their Power of Speech. In *The Enchanted Wood and Other Tales from Finland*, (pp. 150-153). Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, Inc.

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Maas, S. & Hoffman, P. (1978). *The Sea Wedding and Other Stories from Estonia*. Minneapolis, MN: Dillon Press.

MacDonald, M. R. (2012). Mikku and the Trees. *Spirit of Trees: Educational resources website*. Retrieved from <http://spiritoftrees.org/mikku-and-the-trees>

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 7c: Promote the development, adoption, and equitable transfer of environmentally sound technologies.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: Earth, our home.- The resilience of the community of life and the well-being of humanity depend upon preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters, and clean air.

Preamble: The global situation.- The dominant patterns of production and consumption are causing environmental devastation, the depletion of resources, and a massive extinction of species.

Preamble: The challenges ahead.- The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life.

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities.

Principle 1a: Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

Principle 2a: Accept that with the right to own, manage, and use natural resources comes the duty to prevent environmental harm and to protect the rights of people.

Principle 6a: Take action to avoid the possibility of serious or irreversible environmental harm even when scientific knowledge is incomplete or inconclusive.

Principle 6c: Ensure that decision making addresses the cumulative, long-term, indirect, long distance, and global consequences of human activities.

Principle 7b: Act with restraint and efficiency when using energy, and rely increasingly on renewable energy sources such as solar and wind.

Principle 10d: Require multinational corporations and international financial organizations to act transparently in the public good, and hold them accountable for the consequences of their activities.

