

PLANT WISDOM

By Jose Ruiz Rosa

“The woodcutter’s axe begged the tree for its handle and the tree gave it.”

Rabindranath Tagore

This is a diary of my history, narrated from the perception of my plant senses, which are more heightened than those belonging to you humans, as demonstrated by scientists like plant neurobiologist Stefano Mancuso. I hope it helps you to understand our importance and, more importantly, makes you conserve that splendid balance between nature and humanity and my current home: the Dehesas.

A thousand-year holm oak.

Seed-Acorn

It was around the first century after your Christ. Everything I will recount from that time has been felt and experienced by some of my sisters and myself, all of us still rooted in the town of Siruela in Extremadura. Sounds wonderful, doesn't it?

Being the shape of an acorn or glans means I had the potential to germinate half-planted in that fertile hollow full of fallen leaves and the decomposed feelings of my ancestors, who formed that miraculous, life-giving strata called *humus*, the true earth.

The sounds of wild animals' steps and the calls of golden and imperial eagles and night owls reverberated around my open shell, bringing back memories of the millions of years we spent populating that place, bothered only sporadically by the fires we swiftly managed to recover from, sprouting fresh and shiny buds skywards, surrounded by the blackness of trunks only superficially burnt.

The area was also populated by some two-legged animals we called *fellers* and they called themselves something sounding like *Tartessos*. They murmured and hollered in a way which differed from the rest of the animals in the forest. My shape was an inspiration for them to make their metal amulets and vows for their gods, perhaps because our way of creating life is so similar to their reproductive organs. Other less fortunate acorns were toasted and ground and they produced flour to make nutritious cakes and bread. Nature is so generous and excessive that many

acorn-sisters still germinated, despite the squirrels, wild boars and *fellers*. I will later describe another of the latter's peculiar characteristics.

The Birth of a Shoot and Childhood

My senses of light sensitivity, knowledge of gravitational forces and chemical composition of the ground meant that the root tip of my shoot rose as it should to the ground surface and finally I could feel the heat of the sun's rays, the moisture of the dew, the fresh morning breeze. As these fledgling roots took shape, a kind of neuronal network allowed me to move towards the wettest and most nutritional places, and I joined other micro-organisms and fungi symbiotically to gain the other essential nutrients. Furthermore, the far-reaching roots of large surrounding oak groves provided support, wellbeing and nutritional supplements to help growth and keep our atavistic forest going.

We were an enormous family and I felt protected in the shade of the trees' branches and trunks, shielded by ancestral wisdom.

Sapling: Youth and Expansion

My trunk started to be shaped by the rodents and herbivores that trimmed additional branches. I felt great strength. The spring rains caused my upwards growth and the favourable heat-light to be continuous and enchanting: branches that sprouted effortlessly, pumped full of new revitalising sap. The wind was stronger now and the longer branches swayed even more with their unexpected mood swings. I liked to play and support the azure-winged magpies and the European bee-eaters in spring. My roots expanded relentlessly and in those times could foresee a brilliant future, up with the high crowns of my mothers and grandmothers in the May sunshine. The sounds and footsteps of the *fellers* changed and were now more organised and forceful. On one of those days I perceived a volatile and highly dangerous message from the family through my countless receivers. I'd never smelt anything like it. Sharp metals were chopping down many sister-oaks' huge vertical trunks.

The leather of their sandals made a different sound and amid the noise I could make out the sound *Legione*. These *fellers* turned out to be much more dangerous than the previous ones. My diminutive demeanour didn't catch their eye, except for one of them, who with one of my branches rubbed the same area as the wild boars

did on large trunks. It sent alarm bells ringing and I thought I'd seen my last shaft of sunlight, but it never turned out that way.

Adult Tree: Maturity

When I came to brush against the tall leaves of my mothers and grandmothers I noted grandeur. Rooted in the sturdiness of the mountain, swaying in the breeze and feeling the rain splash off my thousands of leaves.

But now the *fellers* were larger in number, their visits more frequent. Some of my closest relatives were chopped down, perhaps on account of their straightness and the height of their trunks. In my case, some years previously a mountain goat had damaged my trunk and it had grown in a twisted fashion, making my body-wood less attractive to those insatiable two-legged *lignatores*, as they now called themselves.

Gradually, the vastness and continuity of our population began to shrink as the two-legged men colonised our land and planted grain seeds with the help of oxen and horses. Other migratory *humani* came from cold lands in winter with their sheep and goats, who smoothed and cleaned our slender trunks and grazed in the fields that grew ever larger among our sisters. Having said that, to us their manure and the control of adventitious plants were highly beneficial for even healthier growth.

Centenary Tree: Splendour

The light and dark occurred on at least 200,000 occasions and by then our dwelling had been visibly transformed. The almost infinitive *Continuum* of the forest was cut off around populated areas farmed by the *humani* animals, which, in contrast to the hares or birds, did not use the grass or branches, but stones and adobe bricks and always wood for construction, heating and making coal bunkers in which our bodies and branches were cut and reduced to black combustible stones.

Nevertheless, the splendour of centenary life was great. Accommodating thousands of small worms, insects, reptiles, birds, rodents and majestic birds such as falcons, eagles and storks made me feel like a microcosms; a mini-ecosystem fractally repeated in the forest and across the whole green planet. Now my somewhat curved demeanour, and knowing that my location was not hugely

accessible to the *humani*, granted me the kind of security I hadn't possessed in the preceding centuries...

Thousand-Year Tree: Wisdom

Living for over a thousand years can furnish you with many virtues like adaptability, resilience and empathy with other living beings, but today my most valued acquired virtue is Wisdom. Understanding that all of us beings are interconnected, that natural processes are cyclical in countless continual stages of birth, maturity and humus-related decomposition which regenerates once more. Every existing being and every object has a meaning and a causality that we as sentient beings know well. Something the *humani* in their short and turbulent lives can mostly never appreciate.

Finally, I would like to speak about the marvellous balance the meadows' garden-ecosystem represents, and of which I was a part hundreds of years ago. I call it a garden because it is the results of man's intervention, clearing the forest and delimiting the land, and an ecosystem because the origin is a holm oak or cork oak grove that has come to be used sustainably in an open coppice with a pasture that provides shelter and invaluable food for humans' domesticated livestock and a multitude of wild animals, plants and fungi.

Unsurprisingly, in the closest human population called Siruela the meadows were always communal forests and important meeting places for transhumance farmers, to the point when after 1500 years after Jesus Christ they played host to the meetings of the Honrado Concejo de la Mesta, the most important transhumance institution.

Humans slowly but surely built new metal objects and others made from strange materials, making them more efficient in exploiting our habitat. What those complex artefacts and instruments had in common was increasing noise levels, and, as the decades passed, they produced smoke similar to the smoke from fires. They used them to improve their crops and, of course, to fell more trees. But they also improved their fences and protected their livestock enclosures in our ancient forest. In the end, a balance was struck in our meadow, definitively populated by a type of boar which had been domesticated by the Siruela inhabitants since ancient times. Peace in our home became permanent and we were cared for and pruned by humans to offer more shelter and food for their animals.

The meadow bloomed again and evolved, and we lived in hitherto unseen harmony, peace and wellbeing.

Today this is all in grave danger with threats like climate change, created largely by human beings burning the oxygen we produce, recurrent fires, desertification and, above all, global plagues like the 'root rot' fungicide which is destroying thousands of acres of this delicate harmony between humans and nature.

All I ask is that, just as we have always helped you without asking for anything in return, you now discover and study us with science, wisdom and love, because the unknown and underappreciated is condemned to destruction. Remember the aphorism of the Indian poet: although you have felled and burnt us without mercy, our great generosity has also provided you with countless supplies, and the wood required.