

An Arbor Day Tribute to the Sacred Trees of Our Lives

By Rachel Oppedahl

The Stanislaus River ribbons through the lower meadow at Kennedy Meadows in the high Sierra, and at its edge stands a magnificent incense cedar tree. In my mind's eye, that tree has seen the lives of four generations of my family pass through, like the river that has flowed past it for ages. The cedar has come to symbolize our love of the place, for the stunning high-mountain beauty we long to see every year. So much so, that many of us have said we want our ashes spread around it when we leave this earth. Sadly, we gathered around it last year to do just that, as we honored my beloved niece's wishes.

Certain trees have held a special place in the hearts of humans all over the world and through the ages, for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the reverence was inspired by the fact that many trees are life-giving, providing food and shelter. But beyond their practical uses and beauty, some trees have been seen not only as powerful symbols of life and death, but also, as having spiritual or supernatural powers.

In many cultures and religions, there is some version of the symbolic "Tree of Life." With its roots reaching deep into the earth and its branches reaching skyward, it often symbolized the connections between the heavens, earth and the underworld. In Jewish mythology there is a tree of life or "tree of souls" in the Garden of Eden, which blossoms and creates new souls. In Christianity there is also a tree of life, but it is overshadowed by its neighbor in the Garden of Eden, the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Trees have also symbolized fertility to many cultures. An example is the maypole dance, which evolved from ancient ribbon dances around a living tree as part of spring rites to ensure fertility. While scholars believe this ritual originated with the pagan May Day festival known as "Beltane" in the UK and Ireland, and "Walpurgis" in Germanic European countries, there were similar ribbon dances in pre-Columbian Latin America.

Throughout history, people have looked to certain trees for healing, protection and even granting wishes, because they believe benevolent spirits live in them. The notion of "wishing trees" can be seen worldwide to this day, as hopefuls hang rags, wreaths, ribbons and other offerings on tree branches. In *Voyage of the Beagle*, Darwin recounts seeing one tree in South America festooned with rags, meat, cigars and more.

Examples of specific sacred trees and species of trees abound. There is an ancient fig tree, called the "Bohdi" tree, which lives in front of a temple in India. The Buddhists there revere it because it is said that the Buddha attained enlightenment while meditating under it. In the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, the departed find eternal peace in a landscape inhabited by sycamore trees. The Celts practiced rituals in what they considered sacred oak groves. Some scholars believe the word "druid"—those mysterious high priests of the area—was formed from a combination of ancient Irish and Welsh words for oak ("daur" and "derw"), and the Indo-European root "wid,"

meaning “to know,” referring to a people who lived in oak forests. Central California Native Americans, from the coastal Ohlone to the foothills Miwok, understandably cherished oaks because they provided the acorns that made up a large portion of their diet. In Malcolm Margolin’s *The Ohlone Way*, he describes the joyous dancing and celebrations at night in the acorn groves at harvest time: “The people chanted and danced—not merely for a distant god or goddess—but rather for the oak trees themselves...”

Our intimate connections to trees are ancient. Today, especially in the “developed” world, few people believe in the powers ascribed to trees in ancient times. And yet, in honor of Arbor Day (April 26), it makes sense to stop and consider how trees are, or should be, sacred to us: they give us food, shelter, homes for the birds and bees we love, a sense of awe, childhood memories, a gathering place for celebration and remembrance, and in a very real sense, the air we breathe.

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