



A majestic sentinel of the woods



A stand of Sitka spruce in Clatsop County



The web of life: Ivy vines wrap around an old-growth tree.



A massive cedar stump

CLOSE TO HOME: THE SECRET LIFE OF TREES

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FOR COAST WEEKEND

Tree huggers: Here is the new manifesto.

Trees do possess instincts, emotions and protective mannerisms. They even communicate, though at levels that fall below the range of human hearing.

Who sayeth this? Among others, author and scientist, Peter Wohlleben, the dedicated forester who wrote the acclaimed “The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate.”

In an earlier column, I confessed to hugging a cedar tree that stands in a path leading to one of my coveted mushroom patches — an ent-like sentinel if ever there was one. I now confess to pressing my back into this amazing tree and lingering in its presence, often napping, and making small talk with my friend. Of course, the cedar never answers, at least not in human vernacular. Does it communicate? I believe so, though I am at some loss to explain just how.

Wohlleben examines the relationship among trees, the transfer from mother tree to younger saplings of sugar, water and minerals. They exhibit a confluence of “relationships, alliances and kinship networks.” Those are the words of Richard Grant, a writer for the Smithsonian, who prepared the article on Wohlleben.

In other words, trees are in tune with each other and possibly us, as well as other creatures from the natural world.

Any serious mushroom hunter is aware of the symbiotic relationship between fungi and diverse tree and root systems.

Mushrooms like “chicken of the woods” suck at the marrow of those massive cedar stumps, leftovers of the golden logging age. Porcini gather in pockets of moss under live Sitka spruce and flourish. Chanterelles prefer second-growth fir forests. Each mushroom seems to choose a specific environment. Fungi absorb minerals and water from the roots of the mature trees. In turn, they feed nutrition back into these forest mother ships. They nourish each other through a lacework called mycelia.

Kinship with trees

And may it be said that these sentinels nourish us, you and me. Inspiration comes in many shapes. Many of us — choosing to live in the Pacific Northwest, in this Columbia-Pacific cocoon of breathtaking ocean and river visages and blossoms of natural beauty — find within the woods an undefinable spirituality. That relationship is sometimes called pantheism and predicates a meaningful relationship in the magnificence of wilderness havens.

Recently, driving through the Avenue of the Giants — that winding Northern California road that puts on a display of magnificent redwoods — I was refreshed and inspired. At times, I was struck with the impression that those ancient trees were looking at me, studying these strange earth creatures who cut and tear at forest and copse without any sense of the rights and nobility of this living environ.

Understand, I grew up with and around hardworking loggers and woodsmen who, aside from their dutiful commitment to large timber corporations, felt a definite affinity to this same environment that inspires us, day after day. But they had a job to do, and hungry bodies to feed at home. And the

times were different in the early to mid 20th century. There simply weren’t a lot of job opportunities. Men were men, and the virgin forest represented opportunity and profit. Old-growth timber came down in droves until very little remains today.

Nobody would have considered that trees feel danger or emotions or protective instincts for their younger kind, or that they can form clan-like relationships with each other. Or that younger trees might have some strange reverence for the old giants, the ancient ones, their ancestors. And having said that, I have put myself out on a limb, so to speak.

Wohlleben and others, such as Suzanne Simard at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, make compelling — not definitive — arguments of a hidden reality among trees communicating with their kin, with insects and four-legged animals. And perhaps, with us. And perhaps not, for communication comes in as many colors as the feathered cloak of a male peacock and remains hard to identify.

Many of the Native Peoples felt this sense of kinship with trees. They used them for totems, longhouses and canoes. They crafted masks and clothing and fishhooks and nets. Cedar trees were woven into their culture. They respected their tree cousins. They consulted with the forest around them, before felling a single tree.

Many of the early Euro-Americans defined such affinities as a form of lunacy. Not only did these pioneers and governments steal Native lands, but had the audacity to hire many of the Natives along the coast of British Columbia to cut down their own forests. After otter and salmon populations had been devastated, there were few economic opportunities

for these proud indigenous people. And if a toppled tree didn’t kill you, the wages were good.

Treebeard would approve

We humans see things in our own perspective. “A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest,” Simon and Garfunkel said. Certainly, that applies to most of us.

What we can’t hear or see or smell flies beyond the perception of our experiences. What might an author or woodsman feel when confronted with one of the remaining old-growth forests, walking undisturbed through filtered sunlight (or in the rain) among the giant Sequoias in California, or witnessing a tree that spires over 300 feet into the clear blue sky?

Have you ever wondered how a sapling that receives but 3 percent of the available light from the sun survives? According to this new science, they are nurtured by the mother trees, fed water and sugars through networks of nearly invisible root endings into even smaller tree veins and arteries. And much is transferred through a host of fungi. This remains a give-and-take relationship.

As Wohlleben closes on this mystery, he projects a form of consciousness exhibited by a tree-like community with keen instincts. Still, at times, he equivocates: “I don’t think trees have a conscious life, but we don’t know. We must at least talk about the rights of trees. We must manage our forests sustainably and respectfully, and allow some trees to grow old with dignity, and to die a natural death.”

Treebeard from Tolkien’s Middle Earth would approve. 