

We know that aspirations are very important for directing our evolutionary path, provided they are realistic and pursued with that “trifocal vision” that Assagioli talks about: one eye on the goal, one on the path and one on the next step. But let us stop for a moment on this image of the farmer who cultivates his land, of the shepherd who looks after his flock and of the fisherman who casts his line, and of Icarus who has fallen into the sea without any of them having noticed.

Let’s take it as a small meditation, according to the rules of Slow Art. Let’s enlarge it and simply observe it in silence for 5 or 10 minutes. Let it enter us, let us make room for it and observe our resonances.

74 Let’s hear what it has to tell us, what synthesis it has to offer. An emotion, an idea or a happy intuition could mature. Let it ripen, like a seed that ripens in the dark of the earth, until it is time to come to light.

THE FOREST BETWEEN THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

Translation by Damiano Pagani / Gordon Leonard Symons

We could begin our chat by imagining that we are retracing a novel, a vegetable tale which, like all tales worthy of the name, begins with:

‘Once upon a time, about 470 million years ago, there were small, inconspicuous algae; they lived in the shallow waters of lakes and ponds, where the water came and went according to the seasons. A tiny group of green algae was armed with all the genes needed to withstand the outdoors, progenitors of the plants that now occupy all land environments and form the basis for agriculture and industry.’

‘But why exactly those algae?’, you ask. Evolution is also a matter of luck and it is by chance that we end up with the right genes at the right time... and let’s leave its part to the mystery!

And what did those “pioneers” have? To protect themselves from ultraviolet radiation, it was enough to “trust” the atmosphere where oxygen and an ozone layer were present; to protect themselves from desiccation, the cells were equipped with a wall that prevented the loss of water. This wall is one of the most spectacular features of terrestrial plants: the water network, the vascular system that allows the rapid exchange of gases (water vapor and carbon dioxide) and the parts of the plant, to carry on the great invention of plants: photosynthesis. And to do this, the water had to be transported to the leaves and, without a real circulatory system, photosynthesis could not take place.

The first vascular plants appeared 427 million years ago.

Within a few million years, the plants out of the water

invented roots, the structure suitable for extracting water directly from the soil.

And the story continues...

Thus equipped, the plants were able to increase in size, overcoming gravity, taking root in the little soil. A titanic feat! Which they accomplished with the help of fungi, which already lived on land. They wrapped themselves around the thinnest roots and an exchange of matter began between the two Kingdoms of nature, creating an intricate society of life: the symbiosis between plants and fungi. Water and mineral salts are the nourishment. From stage to stage, the plants thus took root, even far from the water, gradually, by expansions and evolutions, which also concern reproduction. The male and female cells that previously simply swam towards each other in the water now had to be protected and transported through the air.

At that point the earth becomes a wetter place, the plants have transformed it, creating soils richer in organic compounds that retain more water and draw on deeper water reserves.

And to expand their Kingdom, they invent the seed, protected and “dormant” until the right conditions for budding arise. To remove the seeds from the mother plant and its shade, they rely on the wind, like the seeds of elms, maples, poplars and can reach tens of kilometres. They ask the animals for help and repay their kindness with sweetness, creating fruits, sugar-rich casings that envelop the seeds.

And so, within a few hundred million years, plants manage to conquer distant environments.

A last step, for some, was to get rid of the structure so painstakingly conquered: the trunk. Better to grow quickly, in a few months or weeks...

Then, about 130 million years ago, the first herbs were born that now live:

- In the rainforests
- In dry deserts
- On the mountains
- Near the sea

- In the sea
- In the concrete of our cities.

At this point in our story mankind arrives and the novel of life continues...

Mankind confronts the tree, the forest; in it they live the dangers, the games of shadow and light, the fears; in it they discover their own strategies and potential for survival. And they grasp, little by little, the mysterious aspect.

Tree worship

In natural religions the forest, as a source of life, held a sacred role, a symbol of vital balance and, in many cultures, a symbol of the myth of the creation of the world.

Tree as a symbol of power and strength; adaptation; verticality and defying gravity; tension and contact between heaven and earth; animal shelter; source of nourishment, refreshment and warmth and much more.

It already appears hatched in the horn carvings of Stone Age men and in cave paintings. From the 4th millennium BC in the Middle East the cult of the tree spreads: Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, Phoenicia and Palestine. In the *Book of Isaiah, 41.13* we read:

‘I will plant the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle and the oil tree in the wilderness; I will put the pine, fir and box all together in barren places’.

In Ancient Greece the cult played an essential role and in classical mythology the gods were often connected to a tree: Jupiter to the oak, Apollo to the laurel, Venus to myrtle and so on. There were also many metamorphoses from a human being into an arboreal being.

In Rome there are various testimonies documenting the presence of sacred woods and Pliny says that the city was famous for its forests.

Thus in ancient India in the sacred Books of the Vedas, in the Buddhist tradition, in the ancient pre-Columbian cultures.

But it is in Northern Europe, where thick and immense evergreen forests grow that, according to Tacitus, the cult of trees is confirmed starting from the 2nd millennium BC. with the Celts and a millennium later with the Teutons. Tacitus writes in his *De Germania, 9*:

'The woods were the sacred places [...] and their deities were not imprisoned within four walls, nor represented in any of the sacred human guises. To do both, according to them, meant offending the majesty of superior beings'. The presence of trees was therefore strong in the social and spiritual life of the "peoples of the forest". Their priests, the druids, from the Sanskrit "dru" - he who possesses the knowledge of the tree - a person who has the wisdom of the wood. But the Sanskrit term also means door. The druid, therefore, possessed the knowledge of trees that became doors to access the spirit world.

But here the first Christian Missionaries pushed into Northern Europe and had to face up to, from the 4th century AD. that cult, considered pagan. Many trees were cut down, sacred trees, representing the World Tree, which maintained the cosmic order and guaranteed men's survival. Thus writes St. Augustine in his *De civitate Dei*:

'The pagans are not to be exterminated, are to be converted; sacred trees are not to be cut down, they are to be consecrated'.

And in fact many pagan places became Christian places of worship and the sacred tree began to be assimilated to the Tree of Life.

The tree as a metaphor for human existence

When today's man looks at a tree, that is to say a vegetal species defined as a plant, with roots, trunk, crown, at the most he distinguishes deciduous and perennial leaf trees. Rarely knows how to recognize the species. His gaze is distracted. The man of the past placed a symbolic gaze and established a relationship between what he saw and himself, between physical reality and the superior reality that transcended it.

There were many studies over the centuries and exploration in different fields. Many hours dedicated to observation and knowledge and, among the many illustrious scholars, how can we forget the genius of Leonardo Da Vinci who, at the beginning of the 16th century, began his advanced studies of botany, a still purely descriptive science and considered ancillary to the medicinal arts. Not even in the great universities of

the time, Pisa and Padua, was it taught or studied.

Leonardo took his scientific work far beyond that of his contemporaries; represented plants accurately; he sought to understand their forces and processes; his visual approach and systemic thinking led him to have a transversal and profound understanding of life, in terms of metabolic processes and their patterns of organization. His is a science of proportions, a representation and description of aspects of nature, rather than quantity. From his notebooks:

'Nature is so delightful and abundant in variation that among trees of the same nature one would not find a plant that closely resembled the other, and not that the plants, but the branches, or leaves, or fruits of those, will not be found one that precisely resembles another'.

And he understood, intuitively, that life forms in different species show similarities of patterns. Observing the flow of water in the Milanese canals, he understood venous and arterial flow and designed the circulatory system and from it he borrowed the study of the ascending and descending sap in plants, as well as phyllotaxis, the arrangement of the leaves on the branches and the growth of the branches themselves.

The shape is dynamic, never static; the spiral that best describes growth and the coexistence of stability and change, a fundamental characteristic of all living beings. And now we come to us, making a small moment of synthesis.

What have plants taught us so far?

- The pioneering spirit
- Knowing how to trust and protect yourself
- From the roots to the crown, every single cell is networked and is useful where it should be
- Staticity alternating with flexibility, continuity in the trunk and variety in the foliage, expansion in depth and expansion in verticality
- Stretch downwards (geotropism), strain upwards (phototropism)
- Proportion in branches and arrangement of leaves
- Relies on the wind for the seed, on insects, on man

- Gives and receives, recirculates in the circle of life
- Kindness and sweetness give fruits
- It strips itself of the trunk and becomes a blade of grass
- In any form: dynamism – resistance – adaptation – renewal

The Psychosynthetic Tree

How can we produce good chlorophyll photosynthesis in us? This will be the topic of tomorrow's seminar. It remains for tonight to look at what analogies we find with the morphology of the tree and man.

Tree roots: draw water and mineral salts from the ground, ascending sap nourishes the trunk, branches, leaves, which draw elements from the air and light which, through the process of chlorophyll synthesis, form the descending sap which, through aerial roots of the branches nourishes the trunk and the underground roots.

Man's roots: this is how it is for man; his psychic roots sink into the lower unconscious from which the physical-instinctual aspects of the personality draw strength, to which the deepest and most ancestral structures of our being are linked. They depend on our DNA, prenatal and neonatal experiences, socio-cultural and family influence; they constitute our humus, the ground for our growth.

Trunk: its shape, knottiness, the state of the bark reminds us of the wounds and events of our existential journey. It can be assimilated to the conscious aspect of our personality, fed by the energies of the lower unconscious and at the same time of the higher unconscious. As the ascending and descending lymph determines the life of the tree, so the exchange of psychic energies determines our life and our psychic health.

Branches and leaves: for man too, physical health and psychic development depend on the integration of instinctual energies with spiritual ones, needs with values. The leaves allow us to expose our earthliness to light and to sublimate the instinctual, emotional and mental energies.

But as the tree dies if it is separated from its roots and its crown, so happens to man if he does not cyclically re-examine his autobiography, the serene re-reading of his

past, opening himself up to learning to love himself, in the shadow parts and in the bright parts. Learning to live like the tree that only thinks of being itself and giving itself for what it is. *'If we placed ourselves on the side of the leaves we would experience The freshness of spring // The splendor of summer // The nostalgia of autumn // The annulment of winter'*. (Anna Maria Finotti)

To be, looking to our limits, to be there, to strive, to balance our opposites and to grow, step by step, by synthesis. And of this the tree is a powerful symbol: in it the masculine, the paternal way of supporting the trunk, finds harmony with the feminine, the foliage, the nourishment. The masculine and feminine are already present in the Latin classification: the noun is inflected in the masculine, the adjective in the feminine (*pinus pinea*)

In the manner of the tree,
as the Chinese sage Lao Tse said:

'The accomplished man is the one who knows he is masculine but remains feminine'.

The tree never stops growing and it does so by integrating its opposites (stability-flexibility, hardness-softness, depth-verticality and so on) around its own centre, aligning itself in the search for light. The centre is a fulcrum of dynamic intensity, the place of greatest concentration of energy, it is there that the process of self-realization takes place in us. It is by being in the centre that we learn to manage forces so as not to be managed by them. The centre is the holiest and safest place of our truth.

And so, when the centre of consciousness, through an inner "awakening", moves from the level of the Ego to that of the Self, to nourish our life with celestial fruits, conversion takes place. The "upside down" tree touches the world of causes high up in the sky, the manifestation of which we catch below on the earth. Silence becomes its dimension and our life opens up to wider horizons. Trees of a forest that lives on cooperation and mutual aid, unity in diversity, unanimity.