

# Trees offer lessons rooted deep in scripture



## Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Trees have deep roots in ancient scriptures. Gautama became the enlightened “Buddha” while sitting under an Indian bodhi tree. The tree of life was planted in the middle of the garden of Eden. Abraham shared a meal with the Lord’s messengers under an oak tree. To teach a lesson, Jesus cursed a fig tree, then he died on a tree (was it made of wood from a fig tree?). According to the Book of Revelation, trees grow in heaven. In Chinese Taoism, trees teach us to be gentle and soft, rather than stiff and hard. There are many other examples of trees playing a prominent or supportive role in the story of faith.

Also, we shouldn’t overlook the fact that sacred scriptures are all made from trees.

Since a large part of the earth is covered with diverse varieties of trees, religions can’t make “their” trees, which are central to their own stories, the center of everyone’s story, to plant their chosen bindings of paper in the consciousness of the whole world. As a vital species for the planet, trees can teach each of us, in any culture, no matter our beliefs. Trees help us stay “grounded” to this spinning rock in space, as our essential companions.

One lesson I’ve learned from trees is how they are

similar to us in significant ways. Sunlight and oxygen are essential to our shared lives, and we go through cycles as they do.

Forests breathe, and they are like communities that shelter countless species, each depending on one another. Whether pine or fir, redwood or sequoia, oak or apple, every tree plays a part in the order of things, just like we do. Roots, branches, leaves, fruit, each serve as useful analogies for the life cycles of our lives.

I was thinking about lessons gained from trees while reading wise words from an ancient thinker: “So one should pass through this tiny fragment of time in tune with nature, and leave it gladly, as an olive might fall when ripe, blessing the earth which bore it and grateful to the tree which gave it growth.” (Marcus Aurelius, “Meditations,” Book 4:48). Like other Stoic philosophers, the Roman emperor returns, time and again, to the shortness of life. He seeks to keep an honest perspective, a balanced understanding of life and death. In the last book of his “Meditations” he writes: “What a tiny part of the boundless abyss of time has been allotted to each of us – and this is soon vanished in eternity; what a tiny part of the universal substance and the universal soul [mind]; how tiny in the whole earth the mere clod on which you creep. Reflecting on all this, think nothing important other than active pursuit where your own nature leads and passive acceptance of what universal nature brings.” (“Meditations,” 12:32).

Marcus Aurelius identifies the “tiny” aspect of our existence. A tiny amount of time, a tiny part of everything in the universe, a tiny space we each inhabit on

earth. He really puts human life in context. We are not the center or the pinnacle of anything. Our lives matter, but if we consistently keep in mind we are very tiny – small olives – we can be reminded to accept the ways of nature, even when we fall from the tree.

What would it be like if each religious tradition encouraged us to pay attention to the natural world, particularly trees? What if all the lessons we need to live meaningful, fulfilling lives are all around us, and all we need to do is listen and learn? As one who thinks this life and this world is all we get, I would say this is true – all the lessons we need are in the earth, the rivers, oceans, forests, plants, birds, animals and fellow humans. Over the centuries, our cultures decided to kill animals and write “holy words” on their skin, then cut down trees to write “sacred scriptures.” Living things, our original teachers, are destroyed, used to record invisible voices, when those living things have had their voices silenced. Strange thing to contemplate.

We could be listening more to the natural world, especially trees, and lay aside the “sacred paper” now and then. Books are good; writing is good; tradition (handed down knowledge) can be good. However, the printed word can be a distraction, averting our eyes and our minds from the “active pursuit of our nature” near at hand. Human greatness lies in our ability to reflect on ourselves and our place in the larger picture of things, recognizing how small we are, how tiny our space, how short our time.

*Chris Highland’s books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (chighland.com).*