

## **Business Frontiers:**

### **Social Responsibility, Sustainable Development and Economic Justice**

*By Wayne Visser (ICFAI Books, 2005)*



~ 29 TREE OF LIFE ~

### **Roots, Shoots and Fruits**

We live in an unfathomable universe. All around us are mysteries that we cannot pretend to understand. Life is a tangle of complexities, the synergies of which we can only feebly guess at. To survive this uncertainty, to prevent us from going insane with confusion, we automatically try to simplify "life, the universe and everything".

One way is through adopting beliefs – patterns of thought that tell us how things work and what we need to do to fit in. Another way is by using metaphors to fill the voids where unknown exists. Metaphors assume that life continuously reflects, refracts and duplicates itself – like a mirror, a prism or a hologram.

The most powerful source of metaphors is Nature. We constantly refer to our observations about Earth's natural processes to explain our own personal, social and mystical experiences – birth, growth, cooperation, conflict, death, seasons, cycles, equilibrium. And of Nature's metaphors, few can be so meaningful and enduring than the Tree.

In this article, I have interspersed fragments of a poem that I wrote with my own reflections on "The Tree of Life". As you take this journey of imagination with me, I hope that you will discover your own personal garden of inspiration.

*Original seed,  
In the womb of Mother Earth,  
Germinated by a desire for meaning,  
Nurtured by the water of evolution.*

What an amazing thing – the seed! It seems impossible that the acorn conceals a latent mighty oak. And yet, we know that it is true. So, for me, seeds are symbols of untapped potential, of beginnings, of creation, and of faith (remember the mustard seed?). It reminds me to believe in my dreams, even when the end result is nowhere in sight, or seems inconceivable to my rational mind.

There is also something incredibly profound about the seed needing to be buried in the dark, damp earth in order to germinate. I think of the creative void, of embracing my shadow self, of the power of the unconscious, and of going within to find a new lease on life. I realise the importance of starting small and of nurturing all fragile creations – ideas, optimism, caring, the earth.

And then there's the powerful force of evolution, seemingly at work everywhere – in nature, in society, in my relationships, in my spiritual development. Every experience that I have, the trials and tribulations, the joys and jublations, all contain lessons that I can either ignore, or learn from in order to develop into someone better, someone more whole.

*Founding roots,  
In the fiery lava of unconsciousness,  
Anchored by the principles of life,  
Thirsty for the mineral elements of sustenance.*

Ah yes, roots! Roots are what connect me to my source, my cultural identity, my sense of values. Without roots, I would be tossed about on the stormy seas in this chaotic, turbulent and contradictory world. Or I would be blown over, uprooted, every time the gales of tragedy, pessimism or change gust across my personal horizon.

I am reminded that my true strength is within. My roots are anchored in an unseen world, below the surface of materiality, reaching down towards an undistinguishable, eternal place. But this place of centeredness, of psychological stability, needs to be fed, to be sustained, or else I will grow weak and my potential will wither.

My being is thirsty for regular doses of quiet contemplation – be it through meditation, walking in nature, or writing poetry. Sometimes, when they penetrate deeply, my roots dip into the overwhelming bliss of collective consciousness. I like to affirm that, in everything I do, I should try to be a "radical" – someone who reaches to the root of things.

*Tender tendrils,  
In the dark humus of creativity,  
Stretched towards the warmth of light,  
Called forth by the sky of destiny.*

I believe that we are all destined to have a personal destiny. We are all reaching for that something beyond our grasp, for our unique contribution, our personal bliss, our gift to

humanity and ourselves. But this path is seldom obvious. We need to take small steps, in the direction that feels right, which warms us and liberates us and transforms us into creators.

The parts of our being that are stretching out towards this purpose are sensitive spirals of new growth. They are easily damaged by cynicism and fear. They are easily distracted from their natural tendencies, manipulated by pre-existing expectations, taught to conform, to play it safe, to cling to the trellis of tradition.

And yet, we are born to dream, to look towards the infinite and wonder. We gaze up at the sky and our yearning teaches us to fly. We are mesmerised by the moon and our curiosity sends us there in rocket ships. We wish upon a star and will travel across time and space to see that wish come true. Our destiny is to reach for the radiant sun of divinity.

*Budding leaves,  
In the gentle rays of first knowledge,  
Turned to face the fire of passion,  
Tracking forever the sun of inspiration.*

Is there anything more rewarding than seeing a tree budding? The tiny green leaves are so new, so pure, so perfect. I think of a baby, uttering her first word or piecing together his first sentence, a miraculous language sprouting before my eyes. I feel myself reawakening, as things that were familiar and ordinary, suddenly explode into new and exciting worlds through the eyes of a child.

I treasure the passion of youthful idealism, charged with energy and belief. I can still feel the glowing embers of my early religious devotion, the sparks of excitement when I discovered esoteric knowledge, the luminescent flares of conflict as old and new beliefs clashed, then the all-consuming flames that became my soul quest.

But new life is not just about age and experience. I remind myself that I can “turn over a new leaf” at any time. Spring is not a once-off event. Whenever I am conscious of the light, of what inspires me and makes me feel reborn, whenever I am prepared to change my behaviour, I send out new shoots to soak up rejuvenating rays – I am constantly greening my life.

*Sturdy stem,  
In the changing winds of time,  
Joining our Mother Earth and Father Sky,  
Holder of the sap of wisdom.*

Have you ever hugged a tree? Sometimes, the events in my life have me swept up in a whirlwind of exhausting activity, or the ground beneath my feet keeps giving way with change after change, or my mind races and my emotions go on a roller-coaster ride. That's

when I feel like extending my arms around a giant, sturdy tree trunk. I sigh just to think of it!

Often, I need to stop and consider: What is it that will prevent me from being buffeted by every blast of wind, or stormy crisis, that happens to blow across my daily sky? I think the answer lies somewhere in having a secure sense of identity and self-worth. A positive attitude also goes a long way to dealing with life's little niggles. My inner being is my sturdy stem.

I also need to learn to know how to respond to different situations. When to stand firm, and when to give a little? What will bend and what will break? There is no magic formula, I know. Appropriate action flows from wisdom. And wisdom is often about building bridges, seeing connections and operating at the cusps. Wisdom is the silent sap that feeds my inner being.

*Spreading branches,  
In the varied seasons of the soul,  
Extended in the fellowship of love,  
Umbrella for the shadow of opposites.*

"For everything, there is a season." How often don't we see the seasons reflected in our lives? The dark winter of pain and bitterness, of rest and creative ferment. The fresh spring of regeneration and new growth, of romance and hope. The bright summer of achievement and success, of joy and optimism. The fading autumn of ageing and slowing, of colour and transformation.

With our branches, we reach out to the world. We form relationships. We are a nesting place for lovers, a playground for children, a shady respite for the weary, a waving welcome to strangers, a whispering comfort for the troubled, a network for the dispersed, a gift of fruit to the hungry, a bouquet of flowers for the happy or the sad.

And what of the tree's shadow? Shadows are fascinating. They are like many things in my life that seem more real than they are. They remind me that when I can't find the light, it's because something (or someone, probably me) is blocking it. And the things that I don't like in others, or the world, might be a projection of my own repressed shadow. I must befriend the monsters in my closet.

*Succulent fruits,  
In the bountiful harvest of achievement,  
Fermenting new ideas under the moonlight,  
Spawning the seeds of the future.*

How wonderful it is to reap the reward of my efforts, to explode with the "Yes!" of achievement, to savour the sweet taste of success. I should not feel guilty when the

harvest is rich, for we live in an abundant universe. The tree does not wither and die out of shame for producing succulent fruits. We do not do anyone any favours by being less than our highest potential.

And yet, I am conscious that it is not purely through the farmer's toil that the orchard thrives. There are a million unseen factors at work, many of which cannot be rigidly controlled. The key to a bountiful harvest is how the farmer responds to Nature's moody ways – the weather, the insects, the soil. The farmer must learn to dance with Nature, rather than fight its elements.

Success that breeds self-indulgence, arrogance and complacency is a one-season wonder. To bear fruit over the course of my life, I must avoid the temptation to eat all the fruit, or attempt to preserve it forever, but rather allow the ferment of creativity to take place. I must search into the heart of each achievement and discover the kernel of inspiration that will reseed itself for the next season, for the next generation.

*Exquisite flowers,  
In the colourful spectrum of the rainbow spirit,  
Reflected in the stars of illumination,  
Unfolding the petals of enlightenment.*

Isn't it amazing that flowers are appropriate for all occasions – births, deaths, unions, partings, triumphs and disappointments? This is the essence of holistic expression, to respond to life's nuances appropriately. To think clearly, to feel deeply, to act decisively, to speak out confidently, to be comfortable with silence – depending on what each situation calls.

Flowers inspire me to remember the importance of colour in my world. Colour is the antidote for boring monotony, the synergy of exciting diversity, the magic of unexpected combinations. Colour is daring to be different, or blending in like camouflage. I must never forget that my perception of the world depends on the coloured lenses through which I am looking.

The highest achievement of all is illumination, the blossoming of enlightenment, the sweet fragrance of spiritual maturity. Each of us is in the process of flowering, of realising our own divinity. As we do, I imagine that angels and devas might be spreading our light around, much like the bees and butterflies facilitate cross-pollination in Nature.

*Sacred symbol,  
In the harmonious voices of diverse traditions,  
Dxui to the Bushmen, Simakade to the Zulus,  
Kabala of the Jews, Eden of the Christians.*

I really resonate with Carl Jung's concept of collective archetypes and Joseph Campbell's notion of universal myths. There seem to be some symbols, representing patterns of life experience, which transcend the barriers of time and culture. These common images are a testimony to our underlying unity, our hidden connection to each other, our source in something greater.

The Tree of Life is common to many of the world's religious traditions. One Zulu legend tells of how *Simakade* was provided as a mate for *Ninhavanhu-Ma*, the Earth Mother, and from his roots and branches all manner of life sprang. The Bushmen recall their original Creator Spirit, *Dxui*, who, in the beginning, took on various manifestations of life – flower, tree, man, lizard, bird.

In Judaism, the *Kabala* is the mystical school of religious understanding, exploring the esoteric dimensions of the scriptures and of spiritual living. In Christianity, the Tree of Life stood at the centre of the Garden of Eden, a metaphor for the state of paradise that exists when we are in harmony with God, the Source of all creation.

*Oh, Tree of Life,  
In the cosmic worlds of seen and unseen reality,  
Forever the inspired muse of creation,  
Connect us to the forest of the Living Whole.*

The Tree acts like a noble, majestic teacher in my life, or a totem. Whenever I am in need of guidance, I find wisdom among the many lessons of the Tree. And it's not just about chasing after warm, fuzzy feelings, or losing myself in "airy-fairy" philosophising. No, it is not a passive relationship I have with the Tree. The Tree calls me to action on various levels.

When I see the catastrophic deforestation around the world, I become an environmental activist protesting the rape of the planet. When I see impoverished communities living on treeless wastelands, I become a campaigner for social upliftment. When the market values dead trees more than living forests, I am a reformist calling for transformation of our economic system.

When I see a thirsty rural child share his scarce water resource with a young sapling, my faith in humankind is restored. When I stand in the presence of Giant Redwoods that are thousands of years old, I become a listening child sitting on the lap of a wise elder. When I close my eyes and become the Tree, I am truly alive; I am at one with Life.

May the Tree of Life be an inspiration in your life also.

**Source:**

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