

Learning from the oak tree

Executive coach, supervisor and climate activist **Linda Aspey** offers a personal reflection of practising outdoors and describes how an oak tree inspired a supervisee to reconnect with her values

Recognition

Last year, when lockdown had just ended and I was acutely aware of the reality of climate change and the destruction of much of our natural world, I went on an eco-retreat in Snowdonia, North Wales. One day, my group and I went for a forest bathe, where our coach led us through the earthy-scented forest, encouraging us to tread lightly and silently on the ground: *'Walk like a fox'*, she whispered. She urged us to stop and study the leaves on the ground, appreciate their unique markings, their beauty, letting go of the immediate need to name them – just to stop and notice.

We were then invited to get into pairs, in which one person would be blindfolded, while the other would lead them to a tree of their choosing. I was first in my pair to be blindfolded. My partner turned me around a few times to disorient me and then led me gently further into the woods. We walked slowly together, with her light touch and soft commands guiding me as we crunched tentatively through the undergrowth. A couple of minutes later, she stopped and told me she had found 'my' tree. She invited me to reach out and get to know it. I held out my arms to encounter a rough mossy trunk, and as I got closer, its rich, earthy smell filled my senses. I slowly stroked the uneven bark, noticing the bits that were lumpy and bumpy, jagged and smooth. I felt compelled to throw my arms around it and hug it. What a feeling of connection and safety. Something very primitive perhaps – a tree like that would have given me shade and protection when we humans lived in nature. And the fact that these woods were hundreds of years old was humbling.

Who'd have thought I'd get to this age having never really hugged a tree?

After a while, my partner led me back to the group base, turned me around a few times to disorient me again, took off my blindfold and invited me to go and find 'my' tree. The wood was full of trees but from the size of the trunk I had hugged, I guessed that it was an oak.

Despite there being hundreds to choose from, finding my tree was surprisingly easy. It might have been a combination of my senses that led me directly back to it, such as perhaps sensing the different smells that we have forgotten how to use to find our way, to sense danger, to detect food. Perhaps it was the slope of the ground, or the direction of the wind on my face. Or a combination of these.

But I immediately recognised my tree, even before I touched it. And when I did touch it, I knew it for sure. Of course it wasn't 'mine', as nothing of nature is, but I felt a bond.

The forest and the tree stayed with me, in my mind, heart and body for days afterwards.

What did I learn from that experience? That I am connected to nature more deeply than I recognise when I am stuck in the busyness of life. And from that experience onwards, I have tried to go out walking most days. I don't always manage it, but I miss it when I don't.

Realisation

Some years ago, as a coach, I had offered one-to-one 'visioning days' for my executive clients, during which we would take a long walk together in nature, but I had stopped offering these when I moved house. However, I recall that the feedback from these was always different from the feedback I received on indoor coaching sessions. Clients tended to be more poetic – more tender, more compassionate even – towards themselves, and moved by their experience of the coaching.

So, feeling inspired when I returned from Wales last year, I started inviting my clients to meet face to face and we would go out for a walk. Many of them refused, preferring to stay with the new familiarity of Zoom. I felt quite disappointed.

However, one of my supervisees, 'K', an executive coach, with a stated introversion preference, said she would love to meet in person as she was *'craving connection'*. She would come to me from the city where she was working earlier that day, and if the weather was still fine (we were speaking in August), she'd go for a walk. I hadn't expected her to say yes!

I asked K if she had any health issues, special needs, insect allergies, etc and she said 'no', and so we agreed to give it a go. Before the date, I carried out an online search on coaching in nature safety measures and didn't find much, but I packed a bag with a little first aid kit of insect bite cream, plasters and wet wipes. I knew the fields and wooded area where I would take her, just five minutes from my home, so I went out and

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planned the route carefully, making sure there were no obvious dangers. (On reflection, I should have checked my insurance too – I didn't think about it at the time.)

A couple of weeks later, she arrived for our session, and off we went. It was 23°C, early September, just after the raging hot summer.

As we walked into the first field, we saw piles of fresh, green acorns sitting atop the blanket of newly shed oak leaves on the ground. This isn't unusual – the first autumn winds often cause some acorns to fall early, which don't germinate, but the rest should when they fall later in the month. But now there were hardly any acorns left on the trees – just a sea of little green half-cupped nuts on the ground – and the blanket of fallen leaves seemed to be quite deep, unusual for early autumn.

Concerned that the trees were diseased – as we've seen in other species like ash and Dutch elm, which has resulted in their near obliteration – K asked if we could do some online research when we returned to my office. We discovered that the oak trees had probably become stressed during the extreme summer heatwave, and shedding their leaves and acorns prematurely enabled them to both cool down and conserve core energy, and so survive.

We felt profoundly sad, and guilty, knowing that human activity is the primary cause of their plight. And while nature is highly adaptable and trees inherently know how to preserve themselves in a crisis, we wondered about this year's acorns and future generations of trees. Can the oaks adapt quickly enough? Will they be as abundant in the future? If not, it has implications for the multiple species of plants and wildlife that rely on the trees for shelter, food and shade. The consequences are many.

I could see our session had left K in a deeply thoughtful state.

We agreed to meet again six weeks later. When she arrived, we returned to walk together in the woods. K was quiet and contemplative, but as we got into an easeful rhythm, side by side, she shared that she was really struggling to secure new business. She was, she said tearfully, at the point of giving up her coaching practice and going back to her old job in finance.

But that had ultimately depleted her so much that she'd been depressed and ill. Retraining as a coach had been a new start for K. But she was finding it tough. She was feeling desperate and wondering if she would ever be able to make a living as a coach. Maybe she had made a big mistake.

I listened without interruption as we walked. Then, K suddenly stopped in front of an oak tree. I saw her shoulders visibly lift.



'For many people around the world, a state of scarcity is their norm, and that includes people living just a few miles from me. I will be OK. I've just got into a state of polarised thinking,' she said. 'I need to think like an oak tree. It doesn't mean all is lost.'

I listened, silently encouraging her to continue.

K said she'd hardly thought about the oak trees since our last session. She'd gone back into 'busy' mode, and not made time for reflection. She hadn't really been listening to the oaks' message. She'd 'turned away' from how sad she felt about the trees, because it was too painful to think about. Yet that had stopped her from feeling resourceful.

And walking here again now, back in the natural world, she recalled something she'd heard or read about oaks having several strategies to draw upon – collaborating and communicating with other trees through the network of roots, mycorrhizal fungi and bacteria, sharing nutrients, warning them of danger, or producing pungent enzymes on their leaves to deter invading insects from eating them.

'They're really resourceful', she said. 'And they aren't alone. They're all part of a system.'

K went on to reflect that in the single-minded pursuit of 'building up her city practice' she'd become isolated and separate from many of the other systems around her. Now, she'd finally listened to her craving for connection.

She'd grown up in a community where she had relationships with nature and other people, but as an adult had got sucked into city life. Her parents had had an oak tree in their garden, and she remembered inviting her close friends over to set up picnics on bright-coloured blankets, underneath the tree.

And now she realised she had all these things in her local community – right on her doorstep.

'I need to learn from the oak tree', she said again.

She kept looking at the tree, repeating this and nodding to herself as she did so. I've never seen her so deeply thoughtful.

K spent the rest of the walk thinking and talking about how she could find and build new networks with small local businesses and community groups. She thought she might earn less than from her city work, but the benefits of giving something back and feeling part of her community could far outweigh that. Being an introvert didn't have to mean isolation.

Throughout all of this, I listened. No questions were needed. Her connection with the oak tree seemed to have catalysed her thinking.

As coaches, we know that metaphors play an important role in enabling our clients to access and express their thoughts and feelings. K could have chosen any metaphor. But she chose the oak tree. It's associated with wisdom, protection, strength, resilience and longevity. One could hardly say the same about a car, or a washing machine, or anything man made.

Perhaps it's because the oak tree is a living being. Anyone who has read Robin Wall Kimmerer's book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*,¹ will know that there are few nouns in the Potawatomi language because most things in nature are not 'things'; they are in a state of being. A tree is not a tree. It is 'being a tree'.

Reconnection

So, from these two oak tree stories, what learnings can we draw?

- Being connected to nature, to trees, is a profoundly moving experience, if we open ourselves up to it;
- It invites us to consider our values and what's really important, without anyone needing to prompt us with questions;
- In shedding things that don't serve us in the long term, we are being resourceful and adaptable, not giving up;
- Trees allow us to access deeper feelings and attach our own meanings, do our own sense making, removing constraints to our imagination and giving us new perspectives;
- They offer us a shared experience of being alongside another being;
- Our stories are held in trees, trees are held in our stories;
- The oak has particular meanings for peoples and cultures all over the world. We need to tune in to these as coaches;
- We need to take care of nature, of the Earth that we share with the oak trees, and all other living beings;
- Coaches have an important part to play in the healing of the world. The work starts with us.

I am fortunate that I live in the countryside and have access to beautiful outdoor spaces. Not everyone does. But I do encourage you to find places for yourself and your coaching clients – many towns and cities have canals and rivers, playing parks, even your local hospital might have greenery in the grounds – places where you can feel, deeply feel. That will resource you for the work that lies ahead as we all come to terms with climate change and loss of biodiversity; we need to allow ourselves to connect.

'The refusal to feel takes a heavy toll. Not only is there an impoverishment of our emotional and sensory life, flowers are dimmer and less fragrant, our loves less ecstatic, but this psychic numbing also impedes our capacity to process and respond to information. The energy expended in pushing down despair is diverted from more creative uses, depleting the resilience and imagination needed for fresh visions and strategies.'

— Joanna Macy²

I leave you with some questions. What might you be avoiding feeling that is holding you back when it comes to climate change? What learnings can you or your clients take from the oak tree to help you to become resilient and imaginative in light of the tasks ahead of us? ■

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