

Addendum to “of Trees and Men”

The Useless Tree

- Chuang Tsu

The Useless Tree¹

In one of those long conversations that we sometimes have, a dear friend once told me, “*you are a useless tree and that because of that, you have no problems in the world.*”

I was puzzled, then he explained that it came from an ancient Taoist story of *The Useless Tree*, by Chuang Tzu, and that I should be honored to be called a useless tree. I had never heard the tale before, so he shared the whole thing with me. It's not long, but it's very beautiful, and my friend is right.

There is an ancient Taoist story about a tree.

A useless tree.

The Useless Tree.

There was an old and crooked oak tree by the village shrine, every branch twisted and gnarled. The tree was large enough to shade several thousand oxen and was a hundred spans around. It towered above the hilltops with its lowest branches eighty feet from the ground. More than ten of its branches were big enough to be made into boats. There were crowds of people around it, a marketplace.

Passing the old tree, Hui Tzu, a carpenter's apprentice said to Shih, the master carpenter, who without even turning his head, walked on without stopping:

“What a useless tree that is. Its trunk and branches were so crooked, so distorted and full of knots. The wood is so beautiful, but it cannot be cut up, no straight plank can be made from it. The tree serves no purpose at all.”

¹ <https://ando.life/journal/the-useless-tree>

There it stands beside the road. No carpenter will even look at it. Even you don't look at it master."

Shih the master carpenter replied:

"The tree on the mountain height is its own enemy... The cinnamon tree is edible: so it is cut down! The lacquer tree is profitable: they maim it. Cherry, apple, pear, orange, lemon, pomelo, and other fruit trees. As soon as the fruit is ripe, the trees are stripped and abused.

Their large branches are split, and the smaller ones torn off. Their life is bitter because of their usefulness. That is why they do not live out their natural lives but are cut off in their prime. They attract the attentions of the common world. This is so for all things.

That tree is useless. A boat made from it would sink, a coffin would soon rot, a tool would split, a door would ooze sap, and a beam would have termites. It's worthless timber and is of no use. That is why it has reached such a ripe old age.

Every man knows how useful it is to be useful. No one seems to know how useful it is to be useless.

This tree has been trying for a long time to be useless. It was almost destroyed several times. Finally it useless, and this is very useful.

So for this big tree, no use? It is planted in the wasteland, in emptiness. People walk idly around it, rest under its shadow. No axe or bill prepares its end. No one will ever cut it down.

Useless? You should worry!"

The uselessness of this tree is the very thing that protected it.

Good for nothing, nobody wanted it.

So it remained, useless, uncut, growing older, becoming ancient, fulfilling its own true nature, to be a useless tree.

"No one seems to know how useful it is to be useless."

What is it to be useless?

It is to be empty, free of striving to become something, to be anything special, without goal or attainment.

To be useless is simply to relax, rest at ease, and allow our true nature to express itself in a simple, easy way.

There is nothing to do, nothing to be, and nothing to attain.

I'm nothing special.

You're nothing special.

Everything we can perceive is impermanent, in the flow of life, constantly changing.

If we free ourselves of goals and attainments, to truly let go of any wish to be a certain way, or to possess certain things or attributes, leaving everything alone, then we are truly Free.

Without limit.

Unbound and unbounded.

This is true rest.

To be completely and utterly useless.

Like the tree.

Life takes care of everything else.

If I am a useless tree, I am very happy to be so.

Long may I remain useless, long may oxen in need of shade sit beneath my gnarled and twisted bows.

It is enough.²

Shih the carpenter was on his way to the state of Chi. When he got to Chu Yuan, he saw an oak tree by the village shrine. The tree was large enough to shade several thousand oxen and was a hundred spans around. It towered above the hilltops with its lowest branches eighty feet from the ground. More than ten of its branches were big enough to be made into boats. There were crowds of people as in a marketplace. The master carpenter did not even turn his head but walked on without stopping.

His apprentice took a long look then ran after Shih the carpenter and said, "Since I took up

² *The Useless Tree* is an extract from '[Unsui: a spiritual journey](#)' the story of a life's wandering, perhaps to be released one day...

my ax and followed you, master, I have never seen timber as beautiful as this. But you do not even bother to look at it and walk on without stopping. Why is this?"

Shih the carpenter replied, "Stop! Say no more! That tree is useless. A boat made from it would sink, a coffin would soon rot, a tool would split, a door would ooze sap, and a beam would have termites. It is worthless timber and is of no use. That is why it has reached such a ripe old age."

After Shih the carpenter had returned home, the sacred oak appeared to him in a dream, saying, "What are you comparing me with? Are you comparing me with useful trees? There are cherry, apple, pear, orange, citron, pomelo, and other fruit trees. As soon as the fruit is ripe, the trees are stripped and abused. Their large branches are split, and the smaller ones torn off. Their life is bitter because of their usefulness.

That is why they do not live out their natural lives but are cut off in their prime. They attract the attentions of the common world. This is so for all things.

As for me, I have been trying for a long time to be useless. I was almost destroyed several times. Finally I am useless, and this is very useful to me."

While the carpenter was asleep, the spirit of the tree came and spoke to him.

"What did you mean when you spoke to your apprentice about me?" said the spirit of the tree. "Of course I am not like the fine-grained wood that you carpenters like best. You carpenters especially like the wood from fruit trees and nut trees — cherry, pear-wood, and walnut.

"But think what happens! As soon as the fruits or nuts of these trees have ripened, you humans treat the trees badly, stripping them of their fruits or nuts. You break their branches, twist and break their twigs. And then you humans cut down the trees in their prime so you can turn them into boards and make them into furniture.

"Those trees destroy themselves by bearing fruits and nuts, and producing beautiful wood," said the spirit of the tree. "I, on the other hand, do not care if I am beautiful. I only care about being useless.

"Years ago, before I learned how to be useless, I was in constant danger of being cut down. Think! If I had been useful, your great-grandfather, who was also a carpenter, would have cut me down. But because I learned how to be useless, I have grown to a great size and attained a great age.

"Do not criticize me, and I shan't criticize you," the spirit of the tree said. "After all, a good-for-nothing fellow like yourself, who will die much sooner than I will — do you have any right to talk about a good-for-nothing tree?"

The next morning, the carpenter told his dream to his apprentice.

The apprentice asked, “But if the goal of the tree is to be useless, how did it become sacred tree living in the Temple to the Earth God?”

“Hush!” said the master carpenter. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. And I should never have criticized the tree. The tree is a different kind of being than you and I, and we must judge it by different standards. That’s why it took refuge in the Temple — to escape the abuse of people who didn’t appreciate it.

“A spiritual person should follow the tree’s example, and learn how to be useless.”³

³ <https://www.danielharper.org/yauu/2017/06/the-useless-tree/> Chuang-tzu 1.16, based on translations by Lin Yutang, Burton Watson, and James Legge.

CELEBRATING
50
YEARS
50th Anniversary



The
Giving
Tree

by
Shel
Silverstein

What, for example, does Silverstein mean with his injection of the flat, repetitive “happy”? He wasn’t one for happiness. In fact, the book’s illustrations seem to undermine this very conceit. “And the tree was happy,” we are told, but all we see is a sorry stump and a hunched old man staring forlornly into the distance. *Is she happy?* We have to ask. *Is he?* Or maybe the book isn’t about love or happiness at all, but a lament about the passing of time, an unsentimental view of physical decay, a withering away. Maybe it’s enough to take Silverstein’s own reading of it. “It’s about a boy and a tree,” he once said. “It has a pretty sad ending.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/giving-tree-50-sadder-remembered>

Sacred groves in Ancient World



The most famous sacred groves in mainland Greece was the oak grove at Dodona. Outside the walls of Athens, the site of the Platonic Academy was a sacred grove of olive trees, still recalled in the phrase "the groves of Academe"

Was this the famous Pardes? Four who entered the sacred grove? Of Epicurus?

During classical antiquity, according to various accounts, priestesses and priests in the sacred grove interpreted the rustling of the oak (or beech) leaves to determine the correct actions to be taken. According to a new interpretation, the oracular sound originated from bronze objects hanging from oak branches and sounded with the wind blowing, similar to a wind chime.

Ashera Grove for Idolatry: II Kings 23:7

ז וַיִּתֵּץ אֶת-בְּתֵי הַקְּדוּשִׁים, אֲשֶׁר בְּבַיִת
יְהוָה: אֲשֶׁר הַנְּשִׂים, אֲרָגוֹת שָׂם בְּתָמִים--
לְאֲשֶׁרָה.

7 And he broke down the houses of the sodomites, that
were in the house of the LORD, where the women wove
coverings for the Asherah.

Regarding sacred groves see also: The only extant source for this ritual is a passage in the *Natural History* by Roman historian Pliny the Elder, written in the 1st century AD. Speaking of mistletoe, he writes:

“ We should not omit to mention the great admiration that the Gauls have for it as well. The druids – that is what they call their magicians – hold nothing more sacred than the mistletoe and a tree on which it is growing, provided it is a hard-timbered oak [*robur*]^{[4][5]}.... Mistletoe is rare and when found it is gathered with great ceremony, and particularly on the sixth day of the moon.... Hailing the moon in a native word that means 'healing all things,' they prepare a ritual sacrifice and banquet beneath a tree and bring up two white bulls, whose horns are bound for the first time on this occasion. A priest arrayed in white vestments climbs the tree and, with a golden sickle, cuts down the mistletoe, which is caught in a white cloak. Then finally they kill the victims, praying to a god to render his gift propitious to those on whom he has bestowed it. They believe that mistletoe given in drink will impart fertility to any animal that is barren and that it is an antidote to all poisons. ”

While Pliny does not indicate the source on which he based this account, French archaeologist Jean-Louis Brunaux (fr) has argued for Posidonius of Rhodes, a polymath who flourished in the 1st century BC.⁴

⁴ Wikipedia