

"Ol' Mother Oak"

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Ol Mother Oak

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Part 1

He looks upward and into a twilight mist. A sea breeze blows coolly about him like an angel's breath, he smiles.

Purposefully he looks around him once more and moves to cross the street without looking the other way; no traffic can harm him. Moving down the street of his choosing he picks up the aroma of an early breakfast, pancakes. He remembers. After a half mile or so he turns right onto Big Oak Lane, where he stops and then stands like the shadow of a person, yet he is purposeful in his intent. The mist has stopped and the morning's first light peeps shyly above the horizon. Time is short.

This movement of his spirit is not without purpose, a theosophical enterprise which must be done. Yet, he is hesitant to face this mythical place, fearing that it will be different than the memory of it he so dearly relishes. "I must continue", he tells himself as he accepts the possibility that he can no longer trust the mental movies of his own memories, which of late seem to skip from scene to scene, leaving parts, important parts, missing.

He begins to move once again, passing the first two houses, then stops in front of the third. It looks different than he remembers, yet it is the same. He then sees the object of his trip, it is exactly as he remembered it - an old oak tree, an old oak tree sprouting from the ground a foot upward and then bending to parallel the ground at an impossible 90 degree angle for about six feet before rising skyward again, and its leaves are brown. It is dying. He knows this, he feels it, and he hears it saying its good-byes. Gently he sits beside its misshappen form and caresses it. The spirit of the oak merges with him, and he with it.

"I've missed you, old mother."

"I've missed you too, my son", she replies.

"You look sad old mother, tell me what is wrong."

"I am not well," she responds in a whispered voice.

"I am here for you. Tell me what I can do to help," he says as he begins to rub and caress her bark with great affection.

The old mother hesitates then softly replies, "There is nothing left to do."

I don't believe that," he responds.

After another brief silence where reflection is required, she once again speaks. "I am tired of living. I am tired of this bent and haggard existence. I am lonely and sorrow has ridden over me completely."

"You must not think that way old mother."

With a slight rustling of her leaves the old mother says, "You don't understand. No one does. Look at me! I long to extend my branches skyward like an oak was born to do, but I cannot. Look at me all warped and misshappen - I only wish for death to come and relieve me of this burdensome life."

He laid his arm across the bent trunk of the ill-formed oak and loved her, feeling as he did her great sorrow. After a fashion he again spoke. "Tell me about your life old mother. It will do you good to talk about it."

A cool breeze tossed the leaves of the old oaks as if she were shaking loose old memories, then she began.
"The way of the oak is very different from your own, my son."

"When an oak is born, it is meant to grow tall and bountiful, strong and heavenward as if it were our very limbs which hold the sky in place. We are a proud and majestic race. But we are a fickle tribe as well."

He turned as if to look into the eyes of the old oak and asked, "In what way?"

"Well," continues the tree. "Oaks are respecters of space. We understand that to each is given a mission and a place in which they are to accomplish that mission. Consequently, when we grow, we do not like to grow into the space of another, in fact we won't. We oaks will not grow in such a way as to invade the space of another; we will not grow in such a manner as to touch the leaves of one there before us. Other trees will grow like the grass, one atop the other, fighting and crowding each other out like, like - men. No offense."

"None taken, go on."

"But not oaks," she continued. "We know the value of space and the purpose of that space. We respect that piece of the sky afforded us and we respect that piece of the sky given to others as well."

"What does this have to do with you and your sadness old mother?"

The spirit of the oak seemed to think for a moment, and then answered. "When I came into this life, I was born into a space far from here. My mission was to rise above the land like a giant Atlas, holding the world in place. I was to be a haven for ten thousand generations of birds and a million generations of insects. I was supposed to be tall and beautiful so that I might bring joy to those who happen to encounter me. I was to lend shade to the weary, inspiration to the artists, ideals to the poet. People would have put a swing upon my great and powerful arms and children would have laughed and played at my feet. But look at me now." Again she paused as if to gather herself.

"When I was just a sapling I used to look up into the space above me, longing as all youngsters do, to grow. It was my space. No one was to be above me, except my sister the sky. I would have been majestic. But look at me now. I am nothing more than an old bent and stunted tree who never achieved her potential. And it weighs heavy on my heart."

"Truly, that is a sad story old mother. Tell me what happened. Explain how you came to be here in this tree crowded yard, and bent that way."

"It is such a painful story," said the oak with a shudder, with a hesitation.

"I was small, about as tall as you, and no more than a sapling. Then one day some men came and removed me from my place, from my companions, from my family, from all that I should have been. It was horrible! The worst day of my life."

"The men did not understand the truth of the matter. They thought that they were doing a good thing by removing me, a harmless thing. But by not understanding the truth about oaks and our fickle ways, they brought me here. But the other oaks were already here, in their space. Their bowers were above me completely. Do you understand?" Her companion nodded that he did and she continued.

"As I began to grow there was no space above me. With great trepidation I tried to remain small, but a tree is as it is, and so I grew and grew - but not upwards and into the space of another, I cannot do that, so I grew sideways, bent and crooked in this unnatural fashion, and now look at me. I am worn and feeble and useless and I wish only to be left alone so that I might die."

"Old one. I know that you were forcibly removed from your place and put into another place, a place of confinement where you are unable to fulfill your maximum potential. I know that you miss those whose spirits gave you life. I know that your ability to be an oak of great stature has been taken from you. But know this: You still have the ability to be of importance in this world. You have brought a measure of honor and dignity to this little yard. You have remained a positive force, a spirit of love and peace. And you are loved here." The companion then rose from his seat upon the ground beside the oak's trunk and sat atop the bent old tree like a park bench.

Silence.

"I used to sit here on this exact spot and watch my children play. Little kids needed trees to climb as well as big kids do. And you are perfect for their little hands and feet. They would climb on you and play for hours, and when they fell from you they would be unharmed and laughing all the while. Maybe your body was not amenable to a swing, but it's perfect for other smaller things."

"Many were the hours that I myself rested against your bent frame and contemplated life. The best years of my life were spent here with you and my family. And though you may not see it, let me say this, it is because of your bad experiences in losing your other possibilities, which caused you to be here, where you had such a profound impact upon others, like me. And though others of your kind might see you as a misshappen freak, a failure, I see you as purely majestic. For you have made the most from your bad circumstances and have become a giant in the service of others. And it would be a shame if you did not share what you are with those yet to come. It would be a shame if you did not show others that it is the bent trunks of life which ultimately define our character."

The companion began to speak to the tree of love, compassion, destiny, fulfillment, and God. He told the oak funny stories of his children, and they laughed together. He reminded the oak of the times his wife had lovingly trimmed the grass from around her trunk, and they laughed when he remembered the time she had planted flowers around the tree's base, only to have them utterly destroyed by the kids the very same day. Together they remembered. Together they enjoyed their shared memories.

"You are loved, my friend. This is why you cannot let yourself die. You are not worthless. And though you are bent you still have a purpose. And though few sparrows find respite in your limbs, and though few insects move about you; though you cannot be that which you so wholeheartedly desire to be, you can still be of value."

The old oak contemplated her companion's words, then with a spiritual sigh said, "I have heard your words my son - but have you?"

The companion was suddenly whisked away by a fierce tugging at his back. With a snap he is back inside his body where he springs into a sitting position, fully awake.

The prisoner looks around himself at his dank, dark cell, the filth, the cockroaches scurrying here and there, unafraid. Rotten food, old clothes worn by others before him, no life worth living.

The prisoner thinks of his family. He thinks about how he could no longer be with them. He thinks about not being able to provide for them. He thinks about being a burden and on and on, till sorrow overcomes him completely. And he hates his life.

The prisoner hears the hollering of someone a few cells down. The whimpering of another in the distance. The constant banging of another across the way, pounding out a rhythm upon the steel walls, oblivious to how others might feel about it. Noise, noise, noise: prisoners make noise because no one has taught them how to make silence. And he hates his life.

The prisoner pulls from within his sparse mattress a plastic bag of sixty sleeping pills. He had methodically traded some of his food for them over the past few months. He was not absolutely sure, but he thought that sixty would do the job. He hates his life.

The prisoner moves to the front of his steel cell door and peers out through the peep hole to ascertain if any cops were walking the run who might accidentally see him in the act -- there were none. He proceeded to the steel sink where he fills a small Styrofoam cup with water. He hesitates and tears form in his eyes. He commands them to leave. He hates his life.

The prisoner returns to his bunk, cup in hand, where he sits once again with his sixty crime partners next to him. "I'll take them three at a time until they're all gone" he thinks to himself, then picks three from the pile and with a little water sends them to work. He hates his life.

The prisoner picks up three more pills, but suddenly realizes he is not alone. It is the old mother oak; her spirit is standing before him. "What are you doing, my child?" She asks.

Shamefully he uses his hand to cover the remaining pills. "Who are you?"

Remember!" says the spirit, and in a flash his mind recovers and he remembers their time together.

Softly he asks "Why are you here, old mother?"

"Because you are dying and I heard you calling me, we are one you know."

Silence.

The prisoner looks at his hands one after the other, but says nothing. He is ashamed for the old mother to know his thoughts.

"You think your life is meaningless because you are here. You think that destiny has been unfair to you. You think that your life has become small and bent. You are full of sorrow because you cannot fulfill that which you deemed your potential. But you are wrong. You are loved and you yourself are a loving spirit. Remember all that you said to me while at my side." He did.

The prisoner contemplated the night's events while the old mother's spirit lovingly stood by, and then knowingly he looked at the oak spirit and asked. "You weren't dying at all, were you?"

"No," replied the old oak spirit. After a moment the two smiled and then she was gone.

The prisoner sat statuesque for a period of time, oblivious to all other thoughts, except those which had transpired between him and the oak.

Part 2

After a while he rose from his bunk and moved to the cell's steel toilet where he carefully drops the remaining pills into the water and flushes them into oblivion. He returns to his bunk and lays upon it where the three pills already within overcomes him, and he sleeps.

Somewhere in that middle distance the prisoner finds the light and asks it what it was that he could do to be of service. "Think and write," replies the light. "Think and write. That is what you can do. Think and write about that which this prison experience has taught you. Find yourself and then you will know your mission. Think and write about your thoughts so that others can know about struggle, and then they will appreciate what they have. In order for freedom to have meaning, someone must be confined. Without sorrow there can be no understanding of happiness. So write about the sorrow of being confined, so that others can see the happiness of freedom."

"Think and write so that those who love you will know your heart and your mind. Think and write."

Silence. Contemplation. Acceptance.

"I will."

The spirit in the light began to flicker and to fade into blankness. "Tell the oak that I lover her," he said to the dimming light. Finally the light was gone like a mist in the wind, and once again he was alone.

He awakened and opened his eyes and looked about him with new found purpose. He sat up abruptly where his eyes fell upon a butterfly of brilliant color sitting atop the steel table welded to the wall of his small isolated prison cell deep within the belly of the local County Jail where he was being held.

A butterfly here, impossible he thought. Yet there it was, sitting atop the table. Then he noticed that it was in actuality sitting atop a stub pencil moving its wings back and forth in perfect tune with his own breath. He moves his hand towards the butterfly; just a touch, but it disappears leaving only the pencil illuminated as it did so. He picks up the pencil with one hand and then one of the ten sheets of paper allowed him with the other and struck what words his mind could create, but sadly there were only two.

Later that day after he could think of nothing further to write except those two solitary words, he once again fell into a deep, restful sleep, but it was dreamless in nature. When he opened his eyes he wondered how long he had been asleep, he wondered if it were day or night. But he could not tell as there were no clocks, no windows, and no dimming of the lights to indicate either way, this was solitary confinement, the hole, and here things like daytime and nighttime were irrelevant.. Here time was time nothing more.

Atop his bunk he once again contemplated what to write about. But, having no experience at it he became fearful of failure. Then he remembered and leapt from his bed where he stood looking down at the paper with the two words he had written upon it. The words were "I am," they were not in his handwriting. With a crooked grin he picked up his jail-house issued stub pencil and began to write... he wrote a story about a crafty old oak tree spirit who saved a prisoner's life and set him on a course of expression he still follows to this day.

Alternative Ending

And you were perfect for their little hands and feet. They would climb on you and play, and when they fell from your limbs they would be unharmed and laughing all the while. Maybe your body was not amenable to a swing, but it's perfect for other smaller things.

"Many were the hours that I myself rested against your twisted frame and contemplated life. In fact the best years of my life were spent here with my family. And though you cannot see it, let me say this. It is because of your unfortunate ill luck, in losing your other inherent possibilities, which caused you to be here where you had such a profound impact upon others like me. And though others of your kind might see you as a misshapen freak, a failure, I see you as purely majestic. For you have made the most from your bad circumstances, and you have become a giant in the service of others. And, it would be a shame if you did not share your life with those yet to come.

A shame if you did not teach others that it is the bent trunks of life, which ultimately define our character."

The shadow companion began to speak to the tree of love, compassion, destiny, fulfillment, and of God. He told the old oak funny stories about his children, and together they laughed. He reminded the oak of the hours his wife had spent trimming the grass from around her trunk and they laughed when he remembered the time that she had planted flowers around the old oak's base, only to have them utterly destroyed by the kids that very same day. Together they remembered. Together they enjoyed wonderful memories of times shared.

"You are loved, my friend. This is why you cannot let yourself die. You are not worthless. And though you are bent you still have a purpose. And though few sparrows find respite in your limbs, and though few insects move about you, though you cannot be that which you so wholeheartedly desire to be, you can still be of value."

The old oak contemplated her companion's words. Then with an abrupt laugh the man wiped his brow of sweat, put on a pair of leather work gloves, and slapped his hands together with a grin of impending accomplishment. Picking up his new Stihl chainsaw, he checked the gas and oil levels, and wiped the handle of accumulated sawdust. It was an excellent chainsaw, he thought: powerful, fast, and reasonably light, with a large 30-inch saw bar, and it definitely had enough horsepower to cut the largest trees he had ever needed to fell.

The man pulled the handle on the starter cord, and was quickly rewarded with a loud but surprisingly melodic roar that men in his profession came to love and respect: he equated it with sawdust first, felled trees second, and eventually money in the bank, and cold beers at the local bar on the evenings and weekends. Money, prestige, and respect, which is what he got out of his job.

The man applied the chainsaw to Old Mother, at first bark flew, and then light-yellow chips of wood that smelled good and fresh, even though they were slightly strained by cutting oil, flew through the air and developed a characteristic odor of burning gasoline and two-stroke oil. Deep the blade cut, cutting wood many decades old. Quickly the pile of sawdust built up, and Old Mother lost a quarter, then one half, and then three quarters of her ancient base. "Stop! Old Mother cried! "When you said I still had value, I didn't know that you meant as lumber!" but it was too late. The old oak was felled, sawed into boards, and sold at the local lumberyard for flooring, furniture, and other uses.

The shadow-companion is suddenly whisked away by a fierce tugging at his back. With a snap, he is back inside his body where he springs into a sitting position, fully awake.

The prisoner looks around himself at his dank, dark cell. The filth, the cockroaches scurrying here and there unafraid. Rotten food, old clothes worn by others before him, no shoes for his feet except those for showering. No television, no radio, no dignity.

The prisoner thinks of his family. He thinks about how he could no longer hold them, nor be with them. He thinks about not being able to provide for their well-being. He thinks about the burden he has become, and on and on till sorrow overcomes him completely. And he hates his life.

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Shamefully he tries to use his hand to cover the remaining pills. "Who are you?"

"Remember!" Says the spirit, and in a flash his mind recovers and he remembers their time together.

No. The prisoner said to himself: this isn't the County Jail. That was three years ago. Between then and now there was a trial, an appeal various other legal maneuvers, but only failure, more and more failure. The prisoner realizes that he is in cell 7 on Death Row, and his date with destiny, by way of the state's electric chair, is just hours away.

"I'll have to write quick!" he said, and began scribbling on his blank paper, paper made by felling trees and converting them to pulp, squeezing the water out and pressing the damp, sticky material between rollers. More cellulose sin. When he had finished writing he looked down at the two words he had written, "Oh Shit" was what they said.

As the prisoner was led to the execution chamber, he noticed an old oak chair in the center of the room with its various electrical connections added. The wood seemed familiar, like somehow he knew it, like it was waiting for him since it was cut; as he was strapped into the oak wood chair the prisoner hears a quiet laugh, and then, the voice of the Old Mother spoke once more: "Gotcha at last, you woodcutting bastard!"

ZZZZZZZZZZZAAAAAAAAPPAPPPPPPPPPP!!!!!!

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