



In the Shade of a Tree

One of the most beautiful aspects of life in a village is living close with nature, especially in many third world countries, where many villages do not have access to most of today's technology such as cars, tractors, air conditioners, electricity and TV. That is the kind of village and time I grew up in. I shivered in the winter and sweat in the summer. I was scared of the darkness and closed my ears from the thunderstorms. I walked in mud, I slept on the floor, I journeyed with the moon and the stars were my friends. I drank from wells and swam in the stream. I sang with the birds, milked cows, slaughtered sheep, caught fish and climbed mountains. Hundreds of time in the summer I escaped from the sun's heat by running to the shade of a tree. If I received a little wind, that was my A.C. (air conditioner).

For the summer a tree was our cabin and tent, where we took a nap or ate dinner. It became our town hall for meetings, and our gazebo for playing. This made me love trees from my earliest childhood.

In my culture the tree is the symbol of life. It is true that water is the source of our life but there is no doubt that the tree is the beauty of it. I remember when I used to get tired from working on our farm or even after play and we would run and lay down under a tree to cool off, and rest, and slow our breathing. At that time I did not know anything about oxygen and carbon dioxide and what we breath, but under a tree we felt comfortable and we breathed easier.

The tree was the backbone of our life. We used the wood as fuel to cook and warm our homes. We made doors, windows and beds of it. It provided the roof for our houses and we got fruit from it. When I went to high school and learned that trees give us oxygen and take in carbon dioxide, this gave me a new appreciation for trees. When I got to college I learned about how trees clear our air of pollution, and I loved them even more. When I came to the United States, I learned about global warming and how it is threatening our planet and our future. I heard that trees were the best weapon to fight global warming, and I loved them more than ever.

I used to love poems about trees. In Kurdish there are many beautiful poems about trees. To some poets, a green tree becomes a symbol of new life. Patriotic poets compare freedom with trees - as trees cannot live and bear fruit without water, so freedom cannot grow and bear independence without our struggle and blood. Bekas, a well known Kurdish poet, wrote about the "Tree of Freedom" which starts:

The freedom tree grows not by water but by blood
Without it never will the freedom tree give fruit;
Nor independence without sacrifice.
No fear of death will stop our plea for rights
For rights are given only when we take ourselves.

Another poet, Mufti Penjweni, wrote a poem as his will, asking that when he died he would be buried in Saywan's Hill Cemetery, because it was shaded by huge trees. He said:

When I die please bury me in Saywan's Hill
So that the leaves of lovely towering trees
Will be my cabin and my tent

Piramerd, made trees an example of how to bow down to people to give them fruit before they shake the fruit out of the tree. Piramerd in his poem said that real generosity is to give before people ask, and to do it as the tree does it, by lowering its branches to give fruit, and to keep on giving even when people beat the high branches for the last fruit.

Shekh Hasan said something similar to this when he said that people should be like trees. "People throw stones at trees, but trees throw fruit back at them." This is the best advice I ever read about dealing with people, even those fools who bother us. Some scholars say that the best answer for fools and bad people is to ignore them, but Shekh Hasan said rather to do good to them instead. We must be like trees to beautify this planet, clean the air, shade the people to give them rest, and be fruitful to let people eat and enjoy themselves in our shade.

I was blessed even after I left my country and went to Syria to finish my college because I worked as a gardener to take care of many trees and eat from many different fruits. I was happy serving the trees. I used to give them water and take care of them. They were like my friends. I talked to them. I sang for them and wrote poems about them. They made me feel good. They let me have rest in their shade. They gave me fruit. They beautified my farm. They cleaned the air. For me the trees invited all kinds of birds to come and sing for us.

Then after I came to America and lost my freedom I was locked down in my cell in the CMU. I cannot find the shade of any tree. I cannot climb on any of them which always makes me sad. How can the Son of Mountains, a Farmer and a Gardener, live in a tiny cell without hearing the birds singing or resting in the shade?

Then came global warming. I read about it and heard even more, which made me believe that it is one of the biggest and most serious threats to our future. This made me miss trees even more. I was relieved when I heard that my sister Lynne Jackson, one of my biggest supporters and helpers, was doing a great job of defending and saving trees. I learned that she is a volunteer for thirty years working with a group of people to save the Pine Bush in Albany. They have monthly news bulletins and they won some law suits against the City. She asked me to write a word for them for their party on the occasion of the signing of my book.

Today the scientists have proved that global warming is threatening our planet, which is a danger for our lives and future. They agree the one of the easiest ways to combat this threat is to plant trees. So I want you to know that saving trees (and the Pine Bush) means saving our planet, and saving our planet means saving human life and future. Please save as much as you can. I wish I could be with you physically but I assure you I am with you in my mind, heart, and prayers.... and I want you all (dear readers) to do whatever you can to help in this direction.

- If you turn your cigarette off it will help.
- If you stop your car some times, and walk or ride a bike, it will help.
- If you plant a tree, or flowers, or grasses, it will help.
- If you speak out against war, it will help
- If you write to your congressional representative or mayor, it will help
- If you give what ever you can afford to combat global warming, it will help.
- At least do not participate in making more pollution. We will be responsible for any harm that may come from it. It would be as though we were participating in ending people's lives on our planet.

I remember a story from my early childhood which I heard from my dad. A young man one day saw a very old man planting a date palm, which takes a long time to start producing fruit. So the young man asked the old man what he was doing.

"Planting a date palm" said the old man

"Do you believe you will live long enough to eat from it", the young man said?

"No", said the old man. "I don't think so".

"So why are you planting this", said the young man?

"Do you see all these fruit trees around me", said the old man. "I used them all my life, but I did not plant any of them. My dad and grand dad did all the planting and I ate from them. Now I want to plant this so my children and grand children can eat from it."

We should really think about our children and grand children and what we want them to have. In Iraq and many other places, war will curse the next three coming generations. They will have to pay back all of the loans and rebuild everything that was destroyed although it was our duty to build something for them. Once, a man named Saad, one of the Prophet Mohammed's companions, said he had a lot of property and money and only one daughter to inherit from him. Saad asked the Prophet if he wanted him to give away two thirds of his property to charity and leave one third behind for his daughter.

The Prophet said "No".

"What about half", said Saad?

The Prophet said, "No"

"What about giving one third to charity", said Saad?

The Prophet agreed and said that if a third is too much then Saad would be better to leave his child too rich than so poor that she would have to beg. He said that if someone was waiting for the Hereafter, and he had a seed in his hand, let him plant the seed before it was his time to enter the Hereafter.

If even one minute before our death we can plant the seed of something good, the Prophet advises us to do so. He used to encourage people to plant trees by telling them that if they planted trees, and birds or animals or humans ate from it and benefited from it, then the people would receive a reward in the Hereafter as long as others continued to benefit from what was left behind. It is for our children to benefit and it is for ourselves as a reward. Please plant and build as much as you can. At least one tree! And I hope someone while reading this will know that I cannot plant in prison and will plant something on my behalf. Let us be like trees – shade people, and give them good clean air, and fruit even to those who are stoning us.

by Yassin Aref, May 14, 2008