

The Mourning Tree

By Kate Bowditch

My companion and I entered the closely wooded path and the sun disappeared. I was being given a personal tour of the area, where he had lived for several years., This place was high on his list. The path led us to a very special place, and he walked ahead of me in anticipation. I walked more slowly, taking in the presence of the trees in these woods. Most were young, crowding each other like children. The older ones were more aloof, standing back deep within the ferns and salal bushes that carpeted the woodland floor.

I felt the relative quiet of this place slip away behind me as I entered an even more profound quiet that, like fog, envelopes all who will walk in equal silence. No one else was there. Slowly, gently, the voices of the forest distinguished themselves from this silence. The voices have no sound, but their presence can be felt, perhaps “heard” by those of us who are attuned to them. I reached out to a slim young tree and patted her as I felt/heard her shy attention. Moving on, I found myself nodding to the old ones as I passed under their canopies.

My companion and I explored the rocks and crags around and below us. We looked up to find an eagle watching us somberly from the top of a dead tree in the distance.

Drawn by that dead tree, we determined to attempt to get closer to the eagle to take some pictures. This would take some time, not because of the distance, but because of the incredible beauty of the place. Every view is a “photo-op,” with the earth, space, and trees all around us. And oh, these trees!

The trees here have grown up under the stern master of the hot winds of summer and the crushing snows of winter. They twist and turn, trying to avoid the ripping winds. Their bare roots cling to the stony earth. Their tops die and die, yet they are fiercely green in patches, defying these harsh elements. Birds make nests in the dry, compact twigs, and feed from the abundant cones of the living sides. Young, straight trees grow next to some of them, like children hiding in their grandmothers’ aprons. There are also



broken stumps, telling tales of the old ones who finally gave up, exposing the little ones to take their turns alone.

My companion and I meandered our way towards the big dead snag. The eagle dropped from its perch and, with a leisurely flap of its wings, slid from view. My companion got quite far ahead of me, which is a wonderful thing for those who understand each other. Each of us pursued our walk, noticing things unique to each, gathering bits and pieces of the experience, and looking forward to weaving them together later. I would hear his gentle call, and he my whistle, as we occasionally touched base.

I slowly passed a tree and stopped. She stood alone in a small shelter of overgrown stones. Her thick trunk curved gently upward, and I saw holes in her bark, most likely from woodpeckers. She stood with her branches closed around her like a hood. The outward side of them was dead; the inner side healthy and green. I wondered why this tree, here, among so many others, had truly gotten my attention. Slowly, softly, I felt her sorrow. It flowed from her and filled me as I stood looking at her. A deep, tender sadness surrounded the two of us in that place. Sorrow? The day was beautiful, sunny and cool. This spot was better than most for growing, yet sadness wrapped around us both. I felt that she had been waiting for someone, or something, to notice her. I entered her patch of grass, avoiding the many little branches around her base that she had shed like tears.

Proper tree etiquette requests that one backs into a tree to communicate (our faces confuse them), so I did this. Sorrow defined itself, becoming the particular sorrow of loss. I allowed this sense of loss to fill me as I tried to define it. In her stone shelter she was separated from all the other trees. Was she lonely? I had picked up a stick from a tree further back, so I offered her this stick as a way for her to connect to the other trees. She took it in that gentle way one accepts a well-meaning gift that misses the mark.

I left her little sheltered place and was very soon confronted by the huge dead tree of the eagle. Its base was enormous; all the bark was gone, and its many grey and weathered branches jutted out in every direction. This tree was male in its presence, straight and strong. The snagged top stood above all others along the shoreline. It had lived a long, long time. What had finally caused it to die? Why had it given up after so many years in the game?

Then I understood something. The tree behind me had loved him. He had not particularly noticed her over the years, yet her love for him was strong and pure. She grieved his loss deeply and helplessly.

Because this great tree was dead, that could not be changed. I thanked his tree spirit, however, and asked for a branch to take as a gift for the Mourning Tree. Immediately, I bumped into a branch of his that fell from its hold into my hands. Taking it back to the Mourning Tree, I broke the branch into four pieces. I placed each piece on the ground around her base, as a remembrance of him for her. This time I felt the gift was exactly right.

The air around me lightened and the sorrow lifted. Sorrow was replaced by a deep sense of peace. She was content, no longer connecting to me.

This is Tree Magic. This is Tree Magic.