Buddha Groove



The Tree of Life

Wide roots, thin rings, and a spring that is already made

FOURTEEN SHORT ESSAYS ON HOLDING ON AND GROWING

The creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

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A book for the long way through

The year you had to start over somewhere new. The old hurt that still feels close. The family that does not look like the one on the greeting cards. The birthday that made you wonder if it is too late. The winter you are just getting through.

If any of that is where you are, this book will not tell you to be strong. It has one thing to show you: a tree, and the surprising ways it holds on, takes a wound, grows old and lets go.

Almost none of it is what we were taught. Roots are not deep. Wounds do not heal. Old trees do not slow down. Each of those turns out to be good news for a person.

And if this is a good, green season, read it anyway. There are chapters here on family, on growing older, and on what you are carrying into next year.

What the tree of life is, in plain words

The tree of life is one of the oldest pictures people have: a tree with its roots in the ground and its branches in the sky, joining what is below to what is above.

It turns up in the stories of many peoples. A tree of life stands in the garden in Genesis. The Norse told of a world tree. The Buddha is said to have woken up sitting under a fig tree. Families draw themselves as trees. People wear one on a chain to remember where they come from and that they are still growing.

This book takes the picture back to the plant. Each of the fourteen essays starts from one true thing a real tree does, something a forester or a gardener could show you, and walks it into an ordinary life: a hard year, an old hurt, a family dinner, a birthday.

Read one a day, or all at once. Each ends with the point in plain words, and one small thing to try.



ONE

Roots Are Wide, Not Deep

Most of a tree's roots live in the top foot and a half of soil and reach far wider than the branches.

READ THIS IF

you feel like you do not belong anywhere, or the one thing that held you up is gone.

Ask almost anyone to draw a tree and they will draw the roots going down. Deep, like a mirror of the branches, reaching for the center of the earth. It is the picture on the pendant, the picture on the wall hanging, the picture in our heads. It is also not what a tree does.

Dig under a real tree and you find most of the roots in the top foot and a half of soil. Nearly half of them are in the top six inches. Instead of going down, they go out, and they go a long way out: two or three times the width of the branches above. A tree with a crown thirty feet across is often holding on to ninety feet of ground. Thin roots, thousands of them, close to the surface, spread wide.

The deep taproot that children draw is mostly a seedling's trick. It gets the young tree through its first dry summer and then, in most species, it stops mattering. The tree that stands for a hundred years is not held by one root going down. It is held by a wide, shallow net of small holds.



Where the holding happens: the top few inches.

Now think about what holds you

Set the tree down for a minute and think about what the word *rooted* has meant to you.

Most of us carry the deep-root picture, and it costs us. We think being grounded means one big thing that goes all the way down: the hometown we never left, the one career, the marriage, the faith we were raised in. And when that one thing is gone, or was never there, we feel like a tree with no root at all. The person who moved six times in ten years. The one whose family is scattered or broken. The one who changed careers at forty-five and feels like a beginner. The one who left the church. You can go years quietly believing you are not rooted, because you do not have the one deep thing.

Look at what actually holds a tree up. Not one deep thing. Hundreds of small ones, close to the surface, spread wide. The neighbor who waters your plants. The Tuesday call with your sister. The coffee place where they know your order. The friend from the old job. The walk you take at the same time every evening. None of them goes very deep. Together they hold ninety feet of ground.

Rooted was never about depth. It is about reach.



The tree holds far more ground than it shades.

Wide is strong

There is something else in the shallow net. It is the part of the tree that can change. A taproot, once it is down, is down. But the surface roots are being made and lost all the time. A tree cut off on one side will quietly grow new roots on the other. It is always re-rooting, a little, toward whatever is still there.

So if the big deep thing in your life is gone, you are not a tree with no roots. You are a tree doing what trees do: reaching sideways, a few inches at a time, into the ground that is still there. The new town. The new work. The people you have met since. It does not feel like much, and it does not go deep. That is the point. It goes wide, and wide is what stands.



Not down. Out.

IN PLAIN WORDS

You do not need one big thing holding you up. Many small things do the job, and they do it better.

A SMALL PRACTICE

Count sideways

The next time you feel unrooted, do not look for the one deep thing. Count sideways instead. Name ten small holds you have in the ground right now: a person, a place, a habit, a shop, a route. They will feel too small to count. Count them anyway. Ten small roots close to the surface is how a tree stands up in a storm.

Somewhere a tree is standing in a wind tonight, held by nothing deeper than a hand's length of soil, and it is not going anywhere.



TWO

A Tree Is Made of Air

A willow grew for five years in a pot that lost almost no soil. Nearly all of a tree is carbon it pulled from the air.

READ THIS IF

you cannot point to one big thing that made you who you are.

Almost four hundred years ago a doctor in Brussels named Jan Baptist van Helmont did something very simple and very patient. He weighed a pot of soil. He planted a small willow in it. For five years he gave it nothing but rainwater. Then he lifted the tree out and weighed everything again.

The willow had gained about a hundred and sixty pounds. The soil had lost about two ounces.

Van Helmont decided the tree must be made of water, which was a fair guess for 1640 and partly right. We know the rest now. Take a tree and dry it out, and almost all of what is left, the wood, the bark, the branches, is carbon. And the carbon did not come from the ground. It came out of the air, through the leaves, one breath at a time. A tree is not pulled up out of the soil. It is built out of the sky.



Where the wood came from.

Now think about what built you

Set the willow down for a minute and think about where you came from. Not the place. The stuff.

When we try to explain how we became who we are, we reach for the big things, the way van Helmont reached for the soil. The one teacher. The move. The year everything broke. The person who believed in us. Those are real, and they are the two ounces. They are not where the weight came from.

The weight came from things too small to notice. The thousand mornings someone made you breakfast without saying anything. The habit of reading before bed. The way your grandmother answered the phone. Ten thousand ordinary conversations. The walk to school. The hundred small kindnesses you have already forgotten and the hundred small hurts you have also forgotten. None of them weighed anything. You could not have pointed to one of them and said, that one built me. And yet here you are, a hundred and sixty pounds of it.

What built you was invisible,
and it came one breath at a time.



One leaf. One breath. Repeat for a lifetime.

The pile you cannot find

This cuts the other way too, and it is the more useful direction. If you are trying to become something now, a calmer person, a better parent, someone who can sit with hard feelings, you will keep looking for the soil. The big fix. The retreat, the book, the breakthrough conversation. And you will keep weighing the pot and finding it has barely changed.

The tree does not grow that way. It takes in a little carbon from every breath, more than it lets go, and it keeps the difference. The difference is tiny. It does it every hour of daylight for years. Then one day there is a tree.

So the ten minutes of sitting still that felt like nothing. The one time you did not send the sharp reply. The walk you took instead of the scroll. They are air. You cannot see them being kept. Keep them anyway.



Built out of the sky, and still mostly sky.

IN PLAIN WORDS

You were not made by one big event. You were made by thousands of ordinary days.

A SMALL PRACTICE

Keep the difference

A practice, and it is the easiest one in this book because you are already doing it. Once today, notice a breath. Just one. Air in, a little kept, air out. Then say to yourself, plainly: that is how a tree is made. You will not feel any different. The willow did not feel different either, on any one day of its five years.

Somewhere a leaf is taking in a breath of air right now and keeping a little of it, and in forty years a child will climb on what it kept.



THREE

The Rings Keep the Bad Years

A dry year leaves a thin ring, never a missing one.

READ THIS IF

there are years of your life you leave out when you tell your story.

Cut a tree and the years are written on the face of it. One ring for each year, pale wood from the fast spring growth, darker wood from the slow end of summer. Everyone knows this. What fewer people know is that the rings are not all the same width, and the narrow ones are the interesting part.

A dry year makes a thin ring. The tree still grew, but barely. A good wet year makes a wide one. So a slice of trunk is not just a count of years. It is a record of which years were hard. And here is the thing scientists found: a long run of thin rings is usually not drought at all. Droughts rarely last more than two or three years. A long stretch of thin rings means the tree was crowded, shaded by neighbors, growing slowly for a decade until something opened up.

The thin rings are also how a tree's story gets read. Because every tree in a valley had the same dry summer, the pattern of thin years matches from tree to tree. Lay two slices side by side, line up the thin rings, and you can date wood that was cut a thousand years ago. It is called cross-dating, and it only works because of the bad years. Good years all look alike.



Three hard years. Still there.

Now think about your thin years

Set the slice of wood down and think about the years you would leave out if you were telling your story to someone new.

The year after the divorce when you mostly watched television. The two years at the job you took because you were scared. The stretch when you were caring for your mother and nothing else happened. The year of the illness. The year you were twenty-four and could not get out of bed, which you have never told anyone about. When we tell our lives, we skip those. We go from the wide ring to the wide ring, as if the thin ones were missing.

They are not missing. Look at the wood. The dry year is thin, and it is there, and the tree did not stop growing in it. It grew a little. That is what a thin ring is: proof that you kept going when there was nothing to grow with.

A hard year is thin.
It is not missing.



The year of the thin ring, from the outside.

Good years all look alike

And then there is the matching. The reason your thin years matter to anyone else is that other people had the same ones. The friend who went quiet the same winter you did. The stranger at the support group whose bad year lines up exactly with yours. When two people lay their stories side by side, it is never the good years that match. It is the thin ones. That is how we recognize each other. That is how we know we lived through the same weather.

So the years you leave out are the years that would have let someone find you. Not the wide rings. Everyone has those, and they all look the same. The thin ones are your pattern. They are what make your story readable.



Different trees. Same hard years. That is how they are read.

IN PLAIN WORDS

A hard year still counts. You grew a little in it, and it is part of your story.

A SMALL PRACTICE

Count the thin one

The next time you tell someone how you got here, leave one thin ring in. Not the whole story of it. One sentence. *There was a year I mostly slept. There were two years I just worked.* Say it plainly, the way the tree records it: the year was dry, and I grew a little. Then watch what happens on the other person's face. Half the time, it is their ring too.

Somewhere a tree is adding a thin ring this year, and in a hundred years it will be the one that lets someone read the whole trunk.



FOUR

The Nail Stays Where It Is

A tree grows taller only at its tips. A nail driven in at eye level is still at eye level fifty years on.

READ THIS IF

something said or done to you long ago still feels like it happened yesterday.

Here is something that surprises almost everyone the first time they hear it. If you hammer a nail into a tree at the height of your eyes, and you come back in fifty years, the nail will still be at the height of your eyes.

The tree will be much taller. It will be much thicker. The nail will be buried in bark, maybe grown over completely. But it will not have moved up an inch. That is because a tree does not grow taller the way we imagine, with the whole thing stretching upward like a child. It grows taller only at the tips. The top gets higher and the branches get longer, and the trunk, the old part, stays exactly where it was. What the trunk does is grow outward, adding a new layer of wood each year on the outside of the last one.

So the nail stays at its height, and the tree wraps it. In a few decades it is deep inside the wood, with thirty rings around it, still exactly where the hand put it.



The year the nail went in.

Now think about your nail

Put the hammer down and think about something that was driven into you early, and hard.

A sentence a parent said when you were nine that you can still repeat word for word. The teacher who told you that you were not a math person. The first person who left. The thing that happened in the house that no one talked about. We all have at least one, and the strange thing about it is that it does not feel old. It feels like it is still at eye level. Because it is.

Here is what we expect, and what we are quietly angry about when it does not happen: we expect the nail to rise with us. We think that if we grow enough, do enough work, get enough years between us and it, the hurt will come up to where we are now and we can look at it as equals. And it never does. We get taller and it stays where it was, and so we decide the growing is not working.

The growing is working. Look at the tree. The nail did not rise. The tree got fifty feet taller anyway, and along the way it did something better than lifting the nail. It grew around it.

The hurt stays at its height.
You are the one who grows.



Same height. Deeper in.

Where the nail ends up

Think about what fifty years of rings around a nail actually means. The nail is still there. It did not dissolve. But it is no longer on the surface, where the weather hits it. It is held, on every side, by wood the tree made after the nail went in. Every year of growing put another layer between the nail and the outside. The tree is not pretending the nail is gone. It is simply much bigger than the nail now.

That is what healing looks like from inside a life. The sentence your father said does not get taken back. The year does not get un-happened. But each year you live after it is another ring around it, and the rings are made of your own material: the people you chose, the work you did, the person you turned into anyway. One day you notice the nail is still exactly where it was, and it is deep, and it is held, and it does not reach the surface anymore.



Thirty rings later. Still there. Still held.

IN PLAIN WORDS

The old hurt has not grown. You have. Measure how far you have come since.

A SMALL PRACTICE

Measure from the tips

When the old thing comes up, and it feels like it is still at eye level, stop measuring from the nail. Measure from the tips. Ask: what have I grown since? Not around the hurt, just since it. The friendships, the skill, the kid, the quiet mornings. Name three rings. The nail will not move. It does not have to. You are taller than it now, and that was always the only way this was going to go.

Somewhere a tree is sixty feet tall tonight with a child's nail in it four feet off the ground, and the child is a grandmother, and the tree has never once tried to lift it.



FIVE

A Tree Does Not Heal. It Seals.

A tree cannot repair a wound. It walls it off and grows new wood over it.

READ THIS IF

you have tried for years to get over something, and it is still there.

When you cut your hand, the skin closes and, given time, the new skin is almost the same as the old. A tree cannot do that. Wood does not grow back where it was. A branch torn off in a storm, a gash from a mower, a hole where a woodpecker worked: the tree has no way to fill it.

What it does instead was worked out by a scientist named Alex Shigo, who spent decades cutting open wounded trees to see what happened inside. The tree builds walls. Around the wound, cell by cell, it lays down chemical barriers that the rot cannot cross, so whatever got in stays in a small sealed room. Then the living layer under the bark begins to grow over the opening from every side, like a slow tide, until one year the edges meet and the wound is under new wood.

Cut that tree open a century later and the wound is still there. A dark pocket, walled off, with a hundred clean rings grown around it. Shigo's way of saying it became a rule of thumb for anyone who works with trees: a tree does not heal. It seals.



The edges coming in. It takes years.

Now think about the thing you are trying to heal

Set the tree down and think about the wound you have been working on. The one you have read the books for.

Most of us have one. The betrayal. The accident. The thing that happened when you were small. The years with the drinking. And most of us carry the same quiet goal for it: that one day it will be healed, which we take to mean gone. Filled in. New skin, almost the same as the old, so that we can touch the place and feel nothing. We go to the therapy and do the work and wait to be filled in. And when, years later, we can still feel the place, we decide the work failed.

Look at the tree. The work did not fail. The tree was never going to fill the hole, because that is not what wood does. What it did instead is the thing you have actually been doing all this time without giving yourself credit for it. It walled the thing off so it could not spread. And then it grew. A lot. Around it, over it, with its own new material, until the wound was deep inside a much larger tree.

You will not fill it in. You will wall it off, and grow.



Not gone. Closed over.

The pocket is small

Here is the part worth holding on to. When you cut open a tree that sealed a wound well, the pocket is small. Not because the wound was small. Because the walls went up early and held, and because everything the tree did afterward was real growth, not scar. The hundred rings around the pocket are ordinary wood. They are the tree's best years. They happened after.

That is what a sealed life looks like from inside. The thing that happened is still there, exactly its original size, in its small room. And it is surrounded by everything you built afterward, which turned out to be most of you. The marriage. The work. The children, or the friends who became family. The calm you did not have at twenty-five. None of that is scar tissue. It is you, grown around the thing.



The wound, a century later. Small, sealed, and surrounded.

IN PLAIN WORDS

Some hurts never go away completely. You can close them off, and keep growing around them.

A SMALL PRACTICE

Change the goal

A small practice, and it is mostly a change of words. Stop asking whether the thing is healed. Ask two tree questions instead. Is it walled off, meaning it no longer spreads into the rest of your days? And am I growing around it, meaning is there new wood this year that is mine? If the answer to both is yes, you are not failing to heal. You are sealing, which is the only thing a living tree has ever done, and it is enough to stand for three hundred years.

Somewhere a tree has a wound from a storm thirty years ago sealed inside it, and this spring it put on a ring like any other.



SIX

Hollow, and Still Standing

A tree can lose its entire center to rot and live for decades.

READ THIS IF

you lost the thing you were sure you could not live without.

Walk through any old wood and you will find them: trees you could stand inside. The whole center gone to rot, a dark room where the heart of the trunk used to be, and above it a full green crown, leafing out like nothing is wrong.

It seems impossible until you learn where a tree keeps its life. Almost all of a mature tree is dead wood. The heartwood at the center stopped living years ago; it is there for strength, the way bone is. The living part is a thin layer just under the bark, a few cells wide, plus the leaves, the buds and the root tips. That is it. The tree is alive at its edges and dead in the middle, and it has always been that way.

So when rot takes the center, the tree loses almost nothing it was using. A hollow trunk is a tube, and a tube is a good shape. It flexes in wind. Some of the oldest trees in the world are hollow, and have been for centuries.



Inside, looking up. The green is still there.

Now think about the thing at your center

Put the tree down and think about what you have lost that you were sure you could not live without.

The person who was your whole life. The job that was your name. The faith that held everything up. The house. The ability to walk, or to remember, or to do the thing you were best at. When it is gone, the feeling is exact: hollow. People even use the word. *I feel hollowed out.* And underneath the word is a belief: that the center was where the life was, and now the life is gone.

Look at where the tree keeps its life. Not in the center. At the edge, in a layer a few cells wide. The thing you lost was the heartwood. It was holding you up, and it mattered, and it was not where you were alive. You were alive at the edge, where you touch the world, in the thin layer that was still making new wood the morning after the loss. You still are.

The center was holding you up. It was never where you were alive.



Empty in the middle. Upright.

Shape clay into a bowl.
It is the empty space inside
that makes it useful.

DAODEJING, CHAPTER 11

A bell, a bowl, a room, a flute. Not one of them works if you fill it in.

The tube flexes

There is a second thing the hollow trees know, and it is less comforting and more useful. A solid trunk is stiff. A hollow one bends. Old hollow trees survive storms that bring down younger solid ones, because the wind can move them.

People who have been hollowed are often like that. Not stronger, exactly, but more able to bend. You have already lost the thing you thought you could not lose, so the next wind does not have the same grip on you. You know, in your body, that the edge is where the life is, and the edge is still there. There is a kind of steadiness that only comes after the center is gone, and the old trees have it.



A ring of life, and that is enough.

IN PLAIN WORDS

You can lose the thing at the center of your life and still be alive at the edges. Start there.

A SMALL PRACTICE

Find the edge

A small practice for a hollow season. Each day, find the edge. Name one place where you are still touching the world and something is still being made: the plant you watered, the message you answered, the meal, the walk, the one laugh. That is the living layer. It is a few cells wide and it is making new wood today. You do not have to feel whole to be alive. You have to have an edge, and you do.

Somewhere a hollow oak is leafing out this spring the way it has for four hundred years, alive all the way around the edge of a room with nothing in it.



SEVEN

The Old Tree Grows the Most

In most species the biggest, oldest trees add the most new wood every year.

READ THIS IF

you have started to feel too old to begin something new.

For a long time, people assumed trees were like us: fast growth when young, a long plateau, then a slow decline. It seemed obvious. Then in 2014 a group of scientists measured it. They looked at more than four hundred kinds of trees on six continents, over six hundred thousand individual trees, and asked a simple question: as a tree gets bigger and older, does it add new wood faster, slower, or the same?

Faster. In almost every species, the biggest and oldest trees were putting on the most new wood each year, and the rate kept rising. In some old forests, the giant trees were six percent of the trees and did a third of the growing. One big old tree could add more wood in a year than an entire middle-sized tree contained.

The reason is plain once you see it. A big tree has more leaves. More leaves, more light caught, more wood made. The tree does not grow in spite of its age. It grows because of everything the years already built.



New growth on an old branch. The usual thing.

Now think about the plateau you have been told about

Set the study down and think about the story you have been handed about the second half of a life.

You know the one. The best years are behind you. The learning is done. Whatever you were going to become, you have become, and from here it is mostly holding on. People say it kindly, and we say it to ourselves less kindly. At forty-five, starting something new feels a little foolish. At sixty, it feels like a thing you should have done earlier. At seventy, you are expected to have stopped.

Look at the measurement. It was taken on six hundred thousand trees, and it says the opposite. The old tree is not coasting. It is growing faster than it ever has, and not by fighting its age. By using it. All those years of branches are all those leaves, and all those leaves are catching light, and the light is becoming wood at a rate the young tree cannot match.

You have more leaves now than you did at twenty-five. Every person you have known, every skill, every mistake you understood afterward, every book, every hard year you came through. That is the canopy. You did not know you were building it. It catches more light than a young tree ever could.

The old tree does not grow in spite of its years. It grows because of them.



All the leaves at once. That is the advantage.

They shall still bring forth fruit in old age.

PSALM 92

The psalm is talking about people, and it compares them to trees. It was written a very long time before anyone measured an oak.

What the decline really was

If the old tree grows fastest, why did everyone believe in the decline? Because they were looking at the wrong thing. Whole forests do slow down as they age, but that is because trees die and are not replaced, not because any living tree slowed. The individuals that survive keep accelerating. We mistook the thinning of the crowd for the slowing of the tree.

People do the same thing. We look at our generation thinning and read it as our own decline. It is not the same measurement. The question is not how many of your friends are still growing. It is whether you are, and the tree's answer is that the ones still standing are doing the most growing of their lives.



More leaves, more light, more growing. At any age.

IN PLAIN WORDS

You are not too old. What you know now helps you grow faster, not slower.

A SMALL PRACTICE

Count the leaves

A small practice for the day you feel too old to start. Count leaves, not years. Name five things you know now that you did not know at thirty: about people, about yourself, about what matters. Those are leaves. Then ask what the new thing you want to try would do with that much light. The young tree has to start from almost nothing. You are starting from a canopy.

Somewhere an oak that was old when your grandmother was born is putting on its biggest ring ever this year, and it is not done.



EIGHT

The Leaf Is Let Go, Not Lost

Before a leaf falls, the tree seals the place where it was attached.

READ THIS IF

people keep telling you to let it go, and you cannot.

We say the leaves fall. It sounds like something that happens to the tree: the cold comes, the leaves die, they drop. That is not what happens. The tree lets them go, on purpose, and it does the hard part first.

In late summer, as the days shorten, the tree begins to take back what it can from each leaf. The green fades because the tree is pulling the valuable parts down into the branches for winter. Then, at the base of the leaf stem, where it meets the twig, the tree builds two thin layers of special cells. The outer one is a seal: corky, waterproof, a tiny scab laid down while the leaf is still attached. The inner one is the letting-go layer, where the cell walls are quietly dissolved until the leaf is held by almost nothing. A breath of wind does the rest.

Look at a bare twig in winter and you can see the result: small smooth marks where each leaf was, every one of them already closed. The tree does not drop a leaf and then tend the wound. It tends the place first, and then lets go.



The seal goes in first. Then the letting go.

Now think about what you are trying to let go of

Set the twig down and think about the thing people keep telling you to let go of.

The friendship that ended badly. The version of the plan you had for your life. The resentment you have carried so long it has a shape. The house you sold. The person who died, and the daily ache of them. People mean well when they say *let it go*. But it lands like an order to drop something, right now, and then deal with the wound after. And so we hold on, because dropping it feels like it would tear.

Look at the order the tree does it in. First it takes back what was valuable: the lesson, the good years, the parts of the person that are now part of you. Those come down into the branches and are kept. Then it seals the place. Only then, when the join is already closed and the leaf is held by almost nothing, does it let the wind take it. There is no tearing. There is no open wound. The leaf was let go the way you set something down, not the way you lose it.

Letting go is not dropping.
It is sealing the place, and
then opening your hand.



Not lost. Let go, one at a time, each place closed.

A time to get, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away.

ECCLESIASTES 3:6

Both halves are in the same line. The keeping comes first.

What the tree keeps

It matters that the leaf is not wasted. Before the tree lets it go, it takes back the nitrogen and the sugars and stores them for spring. The yellow you see in October is what is left after the tree has kept the good part. And the leaf itself falls to the ground at the tree's feet and becomes next year's soil. The tree will grow in it.

That is the difference between letting go and losing. When you lose something, it is gone. When you let it go the way a tree does, you have kept what was valuable, closed the place where it was attached, and let the rest fall where it will feed you. The friendship taught you something you still use. The years in the house made the person who left it. The person you grieve is in your branches now, kept.



Where the leaves were. Every one closed before it left.

IN PLAIN WORDS

Letting go is not dropping something. Keep what it gave you, close the place, and then open your hand.

A SMALL PRACTICE

Seal first

The next time you decide to let something go, do it in the tree's order. First, take back what was valuable: say out loud one thing it gave you that you are keeping. Second, seal the place: decide what you will no longer do about it. The call you will not make, the argument you will not reopen. Only then, third, let go, which by that point is barely anything. You will find the wind does it for you.

Somewhere a maple is building a thousand small seals tonight, one at the base of every leaf, so that when the wind comes next month there will be nothing to tear.



NINE

Small in the Shade, Waiting for the Gap

A seedling can live for years in deep shade, barely growing, until an opening appears. Then it rises fast.

READ THIS IF

you have spent years in someone else's shadow.

Under the big trees in an old forest, there is a layer most people walk past: the little ones. Knee-high, waist-high, thin as a finger. They look like this year's seedlings. Many of them are not. Cut one and count the rings and you may find a tree twenty or thirty years old that has grown a few feet in all that time.

Foresters call them advance regeneration, which is a dull name for a patient thing. These are trees that sprouted in deep shade and could not get enough light to grow, so they did the only thing they could: they stayed alive. Barely growing. Putting what little they had into roots. Waiting. And then one day a big tree comes down, a gap opens in the canopy, light pours onto the forest floor, and the small tree that has been sitting there for decades is released. It shoots up. It wins the gap, because it had a head start no seed could match: a root system thirty years deep and a body already standing in the right place.

The foresters' word for it is exactly that. Release.



Some of these are decades old.

Now think about your years in the shade

Set the forest down and think about a stretch of your life when you were small under someone bigger.

The years at home caring for a parent while everyone else's life moved. The job where the boss took the credit and you did the work. The marriage where there was only room for one person to be the big tree. The decade of raising children when your own name barely came up. Or the long quiet apprenticeship, in whatever your work is, when you knew you were ready and no gap opened. Years, maybe. Years when you grew an inch, and it felt like you were failing at growing.

Look at what the small tree was actually doing. Not failing. Rooting. All that time with no light to spare for height, it was putting what it had into the ground, into the part no one would see until the gap opened. When the light came, the tree that had waited thirty years did not start from nothing. It started from thirty years of roots.

The years in the shade were not lost. They were going into the ground.



The gap. It comes without warning.

They also serve who only stand and wait.

JOHN MILTON

He wrote it after he went blind, afraid that his useful years were over. His longest work was still ahead of him.

When the gap opens

There is a hard truth in this too, and it is worth saying plainly. The small tree does not make the gap. It cannot. A tree has to fall, or a storm has to come, and that is not in its power. What is in its power is to be alive, rooted and standing in the right place when it does. Foresters have found that the saplings that win are not the newest or the most eager. They are the ones that were already there, with roots, when the light arrived.

So if you are in the shade now, the work is not to force the gap. It is to stay alive and keep rooting. Keep the skill sharp that no one is asking you to use. Keep the friendships. Keep the practice. The day the gap opens, and it does open, the one who rises is the one who spent the dark years putting down roots and did not leave.



Released. Thirty years of roots, and then this.

IN PLAIN WORDS

The years nobody noticed you were not wasted. You were getting ready.

A SMALL PRACTICE

Root in the dark

A small practice for a shaded season. Once a week, do one thing for the roots and nothing for the height. Learn one more piece of the craft. Call one person who will matter in the next chapter. Write down one thing you would do first if the gap opened tomorrow. No one will see it. That is what roots look like. The tree that is released is always the one that used the dark.

Somewhere on a forest floor a knee-high tree is twenty-eight years old tonight, rooted and ready, and the big tree above it is beginning to lean.



TEN

Good Neighbors Leave a Gap

In some forests the crowns of neighboring trees never touch.

READ THIS IF

someone you love feels too close, or not close enough.

Lie on your back in certain forests and look straight up, and you will see something odd. The crowns of the trees do not touch. Each one stops just short of its neighbor, and between them run thin, winding channels of sky, like rivers on a map. The leaves on one side reach toward the leaves on the other and stop, a hand's width apart, all the way around.

It has a name, crown shyness, and it has been seen in pines, in larches, in eucalyptus, in mangroves. What nobody has settled is why. One idea is that the branch tips rub each other raw in the wind and stop growing where they get hurt. Another is that the growing tips can sense the light bouncing off a neighbor's leaves and quietly stop before they get there. Both are probably partly true, and in some forests neither explains it. The scientists are honest about this: the trees leave the gap, and we are still not sure how they know to.

What is sure is what the gap does. Light gets through to the forest floor. Air moves. Disease has a harder time crossing from one crown to the next. The trees grow close, for decades, and never quite touch, and the forest is healthier for it.



Close for a hundred years. Never touching.

Now think about the people closest to you

Set the canopy down and think about the person you are closest to, and the last time it felt like too much.

The mother who calls every day and is hurt by the days you do not pick up. The partner who wants to know what you are thinking, right now, every time. The friend who takes your silence as a verdict. Or you, on the other side: the one who cannot stand a closed door, who reads a gap as a goodbye. Most of us were taught that love means no gap. That close means touching. That if there is sky showing between you and someone you love, something has gone wrong.

Look up at the trees. They are as close as two living things can be. Their roots are tangled under the ground. Their crowns have grown side by side for a century. And at the very edge, where leaf meets leaf, they leave a hand's width of sky. Not because they are drifting apart. Because the gap is how both of them keep getting light.

Close is not the same as touching.
The gap is where the light gets in.



The channels of sky are not distance. They are air.

Let there be spaces
in your togetherness.

KAHLIL GIBRAN, THE PROPHET

A few lines later he gets to the trees: the oak and the cypress, he says, do not grow in each other's shadow.

Nobody knows why, and they do it anyway

I keep coming back to the part the scientists cannot explain. The trees do not have a reason they could give you. They are not keeping score or protecting themselves. Something in the growing tip simply knows: this close, and no closer, and the forest is better for it.

You probably know it too, and have been talking yourself out of it. The evening you need alone, the week you do not want to discuss the thing, the room in the house that is yours: you have been treating them as failures of love, and apologizing for them. They are the gap. They are not the opposite of being close. They are what makes being close survivable for a hundred years.



A *hand's width. Enough.*

IN PLAIN WORDS

You can love someone and still need room. A little space lets both of you breathe.

A SMALL PRACTICE

Leave one gap

This week, leave one gap on purpose, and do not apologize for it. An hour, an evening, a question you do not answer yet. Say it plainly if you need to: *I am close, and I need a little sky.* Then watch what the gap does. Usually the light gets through to both of you, and the thing you were afraid would be a goodbye turns out to be air.

Somewhere two pines that have stood side by side for ninety years are leaning toward each other in a wind tonight, and stopping, and leaning, and stopping.



ELEVEN

The Graft Takes at the Wound

A branch from one tree can be joined to another. It grows on the new root and still bears its own fruit.

READ THIS IF

your family includes people you were not born to.

Nearly every apple you have ever eaten came from a tree that was made, not grown. Plant an apple seed and you get a stranger: a tree whose fruit is nothing like the apple it came from. So for thousands of years, people have done something odd instead. They take a twig from the tree whose fruit they want, cut it at an angle, cut the stem of a young rootstock tree to match, and bind the two cuts together.

For a few weeks, nothing. Then, under the binding, a soft tissue grows across the cut from both sides. The living layers under the bark find each other and join. Sap from the root starts moving into the twig. The twig leafs out. And from then on it is one tree: the root of one, the branch of the other, and the branch keeps its own fruit. A grafted branch of a sweet apple on a sour tree bears sweet apples for the rest of its life. Some orchard trees carry five or six kinds of fruit on one trunk, each branch still exactly itself.

The joining only works one way. Both sides have to be cut. The living layer is under the bark, and the only way to bring two of them together is to open both.



Two cuts, bound together, and then the waiting.

Now think about the family you were not born into

Set the orchard down and think about the people you are joined to who did not come from your root.

The stepchildren who arrived at eleven and nine, already themselves. The husband's mother who became, somehow, your mother. The friend who has sat at every Thanksgiving for twenty years and is simply family now. The child you adopted, or were. The partner whose whole history you were not there for. We do not have good words for these joins. We say *blended*, as if two families could be stirred into one smooth thing, and then we feel like failures when the edges stay visible.

Look at the graft. It is not a blend. The branch does not become the root. The sweet apple stays sweet; the rootstock stays what it was. What happens is narrower and more honest: at one place, where both were cut, the living layers meet and join, and from then on the same sap moves through both. One tree. Two kinds of fruit. The edges never disappear. They are not supposed to.

•

Joined at the cut. Fed by
one root. Still yourself.



One trunk. Two blossoms. Both true.

Thy people shall be my people.

THE BOOK OF RUTH

Ruth said it to her mother-in-law, not to a husband. It is one of the oldest stories there is about a family made by joining.

The cut is the point

Here is the part that is hardest to hear and most worth hearing. The graft takes at the wound. Not next to it. At it. There is no way to join a branch to a root without cutting both open, and the join is made of the tissue that grows across the cut from both sides. The place where the two trees are weakest, for a season, is the place where they become one tree.

Every joined family knows the cut. The divorce that made the room for the new one. The death. The move. The loss that put you and these people in the same house. We spend years wishing the cut had not happened, and in the meantime the living layers are quietly finding each other across it. Ten years on, the join is the strongest wood in the tree. Orchard trees break in storms, and they almost never break at the graft.



From one tree. No one asked them to match.

IN PLAIN WORDS

A family can be joined, not only born. No one has to change who they are to belong.

A SMALL PRACTICE

Stop stirring

A small practice for a joined family. Stop trying to blend. Instead, name the join. Say to the person who did not come from your root: *you are on my tree now, and you do not have to be my kind of fruit.* Then feed the join: one thing you do together that neither of you did before, so the sap has somewhere to move. The edges will stay. The tree will hold.

Somewhere in an orchard tonight a branch that was cut and bound in March is drawing its first sap from a root it did not grow, and by August it will bear.



TWELVE

Your Family Tree Is Upside Down

The oldest drawings of family trees put the ancestor at the root.

READ THIS IF

you have mixed feelings about the people you come from.

The first family trees were drawn the right way up. A thousand years ago, in churches across Europe, painters drew a man named Jesse lying asleep on the ground, and from his body a tree rose, with his descendants in its branches, generation above generation, up to the top. The ancestor was the root. The children grew out of him. It is called the Tree of Jesse, and it is where the whole idea of drawing a family as a tree comes from.

Then, somewhere around the eighteenth century, the drawing flipped. The genealogy charts in family Bibles put the oldest names at the top and the living at the bottom. We have drawn them that way ever since. Roots in the sky. The newest leaf at the bottom of the page.

The Bhagavad Gita, two thousand years before any of this, describes a sacred fig *with its roots above and its branches below*, and says that whoever understands that tree understands something true. Scholars have argued for centuries about what it means. But look at any family tree on any living room wall and you are looking at it.



Jesse's tree. The ancestor at the root, where he belongs.

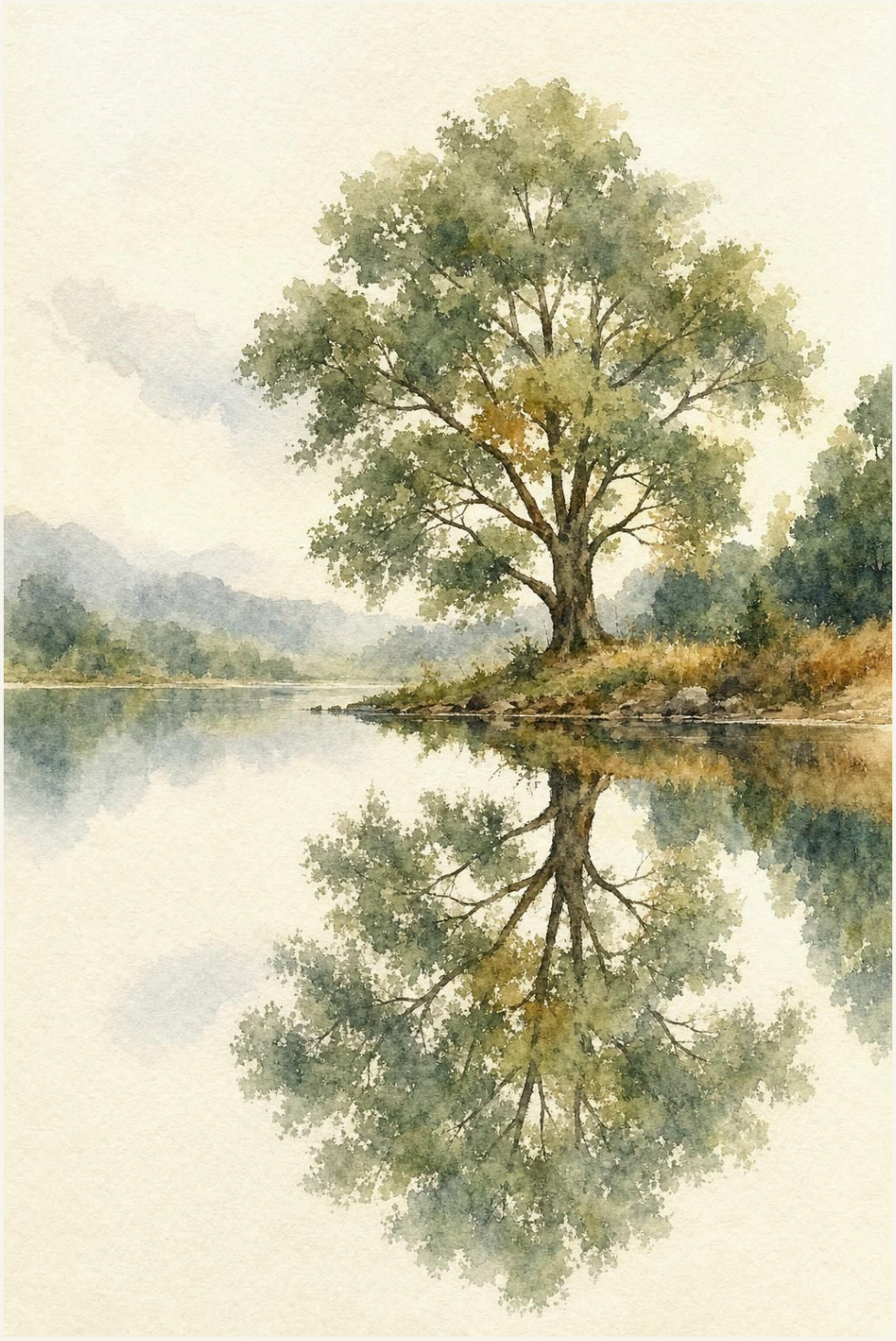
Now think about who is above you

Set the chart down and think about the people whose names sit above yours on it.

Your mother, and the mother she had. The grandfather who crossed an ocean with one suitcase, or stayed and farmed the same field, or drank, or built the business, or disappeared. The great-grandmother you know only as a name and a recipe. Most of us carry a tangle of feelings about these people. Gratitude, grief, anger, a wish that some of them had been different. And underneath it, a quiet question we rarely say: how much of me is them?

Look at the upside-down tree. Those names above you are not above you the way a boss is above you. They are above you the way a root is. You did not choose them, any more than a branch chooses its root. And everything that came up into you, the stubbornness, the laugh, the fear of being poor, the way you hold a cup, the long patience, came up through them, the way sap comes up. You are the branch that reached. That is the honest picture. It is not a hierarchy. It is a plumbing diagram.

The people above you are not your judges. They are your root.



Which one is the real tree? Both.

What a branch can do about its root

Here is the freeing part of the picture, once it settles. A branch does not get to choose its root. But a branch is not only its root. It is also what it did with the light it reached. The sap that comes up is raw. What the branch makes of it, leaf, blossom, fruit, is the branch's own work.

So the fear of being poor came up through you, and you turned it into care. The stubbornness came up, and you turned it into staying. Some of what came up you have chosen not to pass on, and that is also a thing a branch can do: it can decide what it bears. You are the first person in your line to be standing exactly where you are, in exactly this light. Nobody above you reached here. That is what a branch is for.



Every leaf is a person who reached.

IN PLAIN WORDS

You cannot change the people you come from. You can decide what you make of what they gave you.

A SMALL PRACTICE

Turn the chart over

Take one thing you got from someone above you, good or hard, and say both halves of the sentence: *this came up through my mother*, and *this is what I am making of it*. The first half is the root. The second half is the branch. You cannot change the first. The second is the only thing a living branch has ever been for.

Somewhere tonight a woman is hanging a family chart on a wall with the oldest names at the top, which is upside down, and exactly right.



THIRTEEN

One Root, Many Trunks

A whole aspen forest in Utah is a single tree: tens of thousands of trunks on one root.

READ THIS IF

there is a brother, a sister or a cousin you no longer speak to.

In the mountains of Utah there is a forest that is one tree. Walk through it and you see tens of thousands of white aspen trunks, each with its own leaves turning gold in the fall, spread across more than a hundred acres. Every one of them is the same tree. Under the ground, one root system runs through the whole hillside, and each trunk is a shoot it sent up. The tree has a name, Pando, which is Latin for *I spread*. Scientists have tested the leaves and the bark from one end to the other. Same tree.

No one is sure how old it is. The honest answer is thousands of years, and some say far more. Individual trunks live eighty or a hundred years and die, and the root sends up new ones, and the tree goes on. It has been doing this since long before anyone wrote anything down.

From the road, it looks like a forest. From underneath, it is one living thing holding hands with itself across a hundred acres.



What the hillside looks like from below.

Now think about the people who look separate

Set the grove down and think about your brother, or your sister, or the cousin you have not spoken to in three years.

From the road, you are separate trees. Different houses, different towns, different politics, maybe. You have your leaves and they have theirs. You can go a decade seeing only the trunks: the one who always had it easier, the one who left, the one who stayed and resents it, the one who got the attention. Trunks are what you see at a family dinner. Trunks are what you argue with.

Look under the grove. The same root sent all of you up. The same kitchen, the same long car rides, the same mother's voice, the same thing that happened the summer you were eleven. You have the same bark, if you look closely: the way you all laugh with your mouths closed, the shared flinch at a raised voice. It does not matter that the trunks have grown in different directions. The root does not know about the directions. It only knows it is one.

From the road, a forest.
From underneath, one tree.



Two trunks. One root. Neither chose it.

Ye are the fruits of one tree,
and the leaves of one branch.

BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

He meant everyone. It is easier to start with the people at your own table.

What one root means

Being one tree is not the same as being close. The trunks in Pando do not touch. Many of them are hundreds of feet apart and will never share a drop of rain. What they share is underneath, and it does something the trunks cannot do for themselves: when one trunk is cut, or burned, or dies of age, the root sends up another. The forest survives fire, drought and a century of cattle because no single trunk is the tree.

That is what family does, when it is working, and sometimes even when it is not. The brother you do not call is still the one who would drive through the night if the call were about your child. The root does not need the trunks to get along. It needs them to be there, on the same hillside, so that when one of them is cut, something comes up.



One shadow under all of them. That is the root.

IN PLAIN WORDS

You and your family look separate. Underneath, you share more than any of you chose.

A SMALL PRACTICE

Go underneath

A small practice, especially for the sibling you have been seeing only as a trunk. Once, this week, go underneath. Name one thing you share that neither of you chose: a memory, a gesture, a fear, a way of making tea. Say it to them if you can. If you cannot, say it to yourself. It will not fix the trunks. It will remind you that the trunks were never the tree.

Somewhere in Utah tonight a hundred acres of trunks are standing in the cold, each one alone in the dark, and under them all, one root.



FOURTEEN

Next Spring Is Made in Summer

The buds that open in spring were formed the summer before, with the leaves already folded inside.

READ THIS IF

you cannot think of one thing you are looking forward to.

Here is a thing to do on the next winter walk. Find a bare twig on any tree and look at the tips. Small brown buds, tight, hard, a little waxy. They look like nothing, like the tree is simply closed for the season. Cut one open with a thumbnail and look inside.

Folded in there, packed tighter than anything you have ever packed, are next spring's leaves. Already made. Tiny, green, complete, waiting. In some trees, the flowers are in there too. The tree built them last summer, in the long days, when it had light to spare, and then wrapped them in scales, drew the water out of them so they would not freeze, and set them on every twig before it let a single leaf fall.

So when the tree stands bare in January, it is not empty. It is carrying its whole spring on the outside of its branches, finished, in the cold, where anyone who looked closely could see it.



Inside a winter bud. Next spring, already made.

Now think about your own winter

Set the twig down and think about the season you are in, if it is a bare one.

Maybe it is the stretch after the loss, when every day is the same grey and you cannot picture a different one. The months after the diagnosis. The year you are just getting through. The time when people ask what you are looking forward to, and you honestly cannot think of a thing. Bare branches. And underneath the bareness, the belief that goes with it: that whatever comes next will have to be built from nothing, later, by a version of you with more strength than this one.

Look at the twig. The tree does not build spring in spring. It built it in the summer before, when it had light, and now it is simply carrying it through. The next good season of your life is not something you will have to make from scratch when the strength comes back. It was made already, in the good light you had before: the people you kept, the skills you built, the parts of you that the hard season has not touched. They are on the branch right now. Folded tight, drawn down, waiting. You are not empty. You are carrying.

Your next spring was made before the winter. You are carrying it through.



Not empty. Every twig is holding something.

If Winter comes,
can Spring be far behind?

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY, ODE TO THE WEST WIND

The tree's answer is closer than that. Spring is already on the twig.

The work of winter

It changes what the hard season is for, once you see it. The tree in winter is not failing to grow. It is doing a specific job: keeping the buds alive. Drawing the water down so they do not freeze. Holding on through the wind. Not opening early on one warm week in February, which would kill them. That is all. It is a job that looks like nothing from the road and is the whole difference between a spring and no spring.

So if all you are doing this season is keeping the buds alive, keeping the friendships, taking the medicine, not making the big decision on the one warm week, going to bed and getting up, that is not nothing. That is the work of winter. The tree is doing exactly the same.



Nothing new was made. It was unfolded.

IN PLAIN WORDS

The good things ahead are already in you. In a hard season, your only job is to keep them alive.

A SMALL PRACTICE

Find one bud

The last practice in this book, and the smallest. In a bare season, find one bud. Not a plan. A thing that already exists, that the good light made, that you are carrying through: a person, a skill, a place, a part of you. Name it. Then do winter's one job for it this week: keep it alive. Do not open it early. Do not make it grow. Just carry it. Spring is not something you will build. It is something you will unfold.

Somewhere a maple is standing in snow tonight with ten thousand finished leaves folded on its twigs, carrying them, not opening a single one, and April is already inside it.

The tree, from the ground up

1

The roots

Shallow and wide. Most of them live in the top foot and a half of soil and reach well past the branches. In some forests, many trunks share one root.

In a life: many small holds, not one deep one. And more shared than it looks.

2

The trunk

One ring for every year, thin in the dry years and wide in the wet. A tree grows taller only at its tips, so a mark on the trunk stays at the height it was made.

In a life: the hard years are kept, and the old hurt does not rise with you.

3

The living edge

Only a thin layer under the bark is alive. That is why a tree can seal a wound inside itself, and why it can lose its whole center and stay standing.

In a life: you can be hollow in the middle and alive at the edges.

4

The crown

The older and bigger the tree, the more leaves it holds and the more wood it adds each year. In some forests the crowns of neighbors stop just short of touching.

In a life: growing does not stop with age, and close does not mean crowded.

5

The leaf

Each one takes in a little air and keeps part of it. Nearly all of a tree's weight came that way. Before a leaf falls, the tree takes back what it can and seals the place.

In a life: you were built a day at a time, and letting go has an order.

6

The bud

Made the summer before, with next year's leaves already folded inside, and carried through the winter.

In a life: what comes next is already in you.

7

The seedling

It can wait for years in the shade of a bigger tree, hardly growing above ground, rooting below. When a gap opens, it rises fast.

In a life: the quiet years were not lost.

8

The graft

A branch cut from one tree and bound to another grows on the new root and still bears its own fruit.

In a life: a family can be joined, and nobody has to match.

People and the tree

A tree in a garden.

The book of Genesis puts a tree of life in the middle of Eden.

A tree to sit under.

The Buddha is said to have reached his awakening sitting beneath a fig tree, the Bodhi tree. Its heart-shaped leaf is still worn today.

A tree for a family.

About a thousand years ago, painters in Europe drew the ancestor Jesse asleep on the ground with a tree rising from him and his descendants in its branches. Drawing a family as a tree starts there.

A tree in a pot.

Almost four hundred years ago the doctor Jan Baptist van Helmont grew a willow for five years in a weighed pot of soil. The tree gained a great deal of weight. The soil lost almost none.

A tree that is a forest.

In Utah, a stand of aspen covering more than a hundred acres has been shown to be a single tree, with tens of thousands of trunks on one root.

In 2014 a study of more than four hundred kinds of trees found that, in most of them, the largest and oldest trees add the most wood each year.

What a tree is not

Not held up by deep roots

The picture on the pendant shows roots going down as far as the branches go up. Real roots go out. A tree stands on many shallow holds, spread wide.

Not healed of its wounds

A tree cannot repair damaged wood. It walls the wound off and grows new wood over it. The mark stays inside for good, and the tree goes on growing.

Not standing alone

What looks like a separate tree may share a root with its neighbors, or carry a branch that began on another tree. Even the gap between two crowns is something they keep together.

TO KEEP

Fourteen small practices

1 ## Count sideways

When you feel unrooted, do not look for the one deep thing. Name ten small holds you have right now: a person, a place, a habit, a route.

2 ## Notice one breath

Once today, notice a breath. Air in, a little kept, air out. That is how a tree is made, and how you were.

3 ## Leave one thin year in

The next time you tell someone how you got here, keep one hard year in the story. One plain sentence is enough.

4 ## Measure from the tips

When the old hurt feels close, ask what you have grown since it. Name three things.

5 ## Change the question

Stop asking whether it is healed. Ask whether it still spreads into your days, and whether you are growing around it.

6

Find the edge

In a hollow season, name one place each day where you are still touching the world: a plant watered, a message answered, one laugh.

7

Count leaves, not years

Name five things you know now that you did not know at thirty. Then ask what the new thing you want to try could do with all that.

8

Seal first

Before you let something go, say one thing it gave you that you are keeping. Decide what you will no longer do about it. Then open your hand.

9

Root in the dark

Once a week, do one thing nobody will see: learn one more piece of the craft, or call one person who will matter later.

10

Leave one gap

This week, leave one gap on purpose and do not apologize for it. *I am close, and I need a little sky.*

11 ## Name the join

Say to the person who did not come from your root: you are on my tree now, and you do not have to be my kind of fruit.

12 ## Say both halves

Take one thing that came down to you, good or hard, and finish the sentence: *this came through my mother, and this is what I am making of it.*

13 ## Go underneath

Name one thing you and a brother, sister or cousin share that neither of you chose. Say it to them if you can.

14 ## Find one bud

In a bare season, name one good thing you are already carrying: a person, a skill, a place. This week, just keep it alive.

Roots, wide and near the surface.
A thin ring for the hard year.
A leaf let go with the place sealed,
and next spring already on the twig.

The pieces in these pages

Each essay mentions one tree of life piece from Buddha Groove. They are gathered here, with the lines that introduced them.

Tree of Life Gemstone Bracelet, Smoky Quartz and Prehnite

Buddha Groove strings a tree of life on a bracelet of smoky quartz and prehnite, stones people have long kept for grounding. I like that it goes around the wrist, not down. A ring of small holds.

Organic Cotton Tree of Life Celestial Tee

Buddha Groove prints a tree of life against a night sky on a soft organic cotton tee, branches full of stars. It is the right picture. The tree belongs to the sky more than to the ground.

Tree of Life Indian Rosewood Bookends

Buddha Groove carves a tree of life into a pair of rosewood bookends, and the grain shows through the carving. Rosewood grows slowly. Every line in it was a year.

Sterling Silver Tree of Life Earrings

Buddha Groove makes a small tree of life as a pair of sterling silver earrings, and I think of them as worn at the height of the nail, on purpose. Not hidden. Held.

Sterling Silver Tree of Life Charm Bracelet

Buddha Groove makes a tree of life as a sterling silver charm on a bracelet, a small whole tree you can close your hand around. I think of it as the tree the way Shigo would cut it: a small sealed room, and everything else alive.

Tree of Life Bell Chime and Wall Hanging

Buddha Groove hangs a tree of life above a small bell chime. A bell works because it is hollow. Fill it in and it would not ring.

Artistic Series Tree of Life Sterling Pendant

Buddha Groove's Artistic Series tree of life pendant is a big, full-crowned tree in heavy sterling, branches crowded with leaves. It is the old tree, not the sapling. The one that catches the most light.

Textured Bodhi Leaf Pendant with Labradorite

Buddha Groove makes a single Bodhi leaf in sterling silver, the heart-shaped leaf of the tree the Buddha sat beneath, with a small stone where the stem was. A leaf that was let go, and kept.

Buddha Pendant with Layered Bodhi Tree

Buddha Groove layers an open-cut Bodhi tree over a seated figure on a sterling silver pendant. He sat under a tree, in the shade, for a long time, before anything happened. That is the whole story.

Hand Carved Wood Tree of Life Trivet

Buddha Groove carves a tree of life into a small wooden trivet, a thing whose entire job is to hold a space between a hot pot and the table. I like that the tree is the one keeping the gap.

Yin Yang Gemstone Bonsai Tree

Buddha Groove makes a small bonsai of black and white stones, two colors on one trunk, grown from one root. That is a grafted family. Nobody tried to make the stones match.

Family Tree of Life Wall Art

Buddha Groove paints a family tree of life on a wood panel, with birds of different colors in its branches. Hang it on the wall and it is the right way up: the trunk at the bottom, the birds where the branches reach. That is you and yours. Hang the chart beside it upside down and you have the whole story.

Lotus, Yin Yang, Tree of Life, Om Pendant

Buddha Groove puts four symbols on one sterling silver pendant: the lotus, the yin yang, the tree of life and the om, side by side on one disc. Four trunks, one piece of silver. I think of it as the family pendant.

Citrine Gemstone Bonsai Tree

Buddha Groove makes a small bonsai of citrine stones, the color of the first warm light, on a bare wire trunk. A tree with its spring already on the branch. Keep it somewhere you will see it in January.

A NOTE ON THE FACTS

Every essay here begins from something a tree actually does. The wide, shallow roots. Van Helmont's willow. The thin ring of a dry year, and the way those rings let one tree be matched to another. The nail that stays at its height. The way a tree walls off a wound, worked out by the forester Alex Shigo. The 2014 study of growth in old trees. The seal a tree builds before a leaf falls. Crown shyness, which no one has fully explained. The aspen grove in Utah. The winter bud with its leaves already folded inside.

The line from the Daodejing was rendered for this book. The other quotations are from Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Milton, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Kahlil Gibran, Bahá'u'lláh and the King James Bible.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

These essays first appeared on the Balance blog at Buddha Groove, where they are gathered on one page with the pieces they mention: buddhagroove.com/pages/tree-of-life. Companion series on the lotus, the yin yang and the mandala live beside it.

The illustrations were created for this series in the manner of watercolor.

Share this book freely with anyone who is finding their way through a long year. Please do not sell it.

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