



The Old Tree Still Lives

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Almost every day here on Cyprus we are reminded that human history is a long and drawn out procession of living things, of people interacting with each other and with their environment ... and somehow making a 'go of it'. Going back 11,000 years and working down to the present (for around 450 generations) we see here evolved the architecture of human habitation.

Just on the edge of our village, at its eastern 'gate' so to speak, we have the oldest tree on the Island. It's a stumpy, scowly old thing with a marvelously thick bole — 1,500 years old they figure, and it looks it, a member of the pistachio family (in fancy talk: *Pistachia Atlantica*). It was a sapling somewhere around 500 A.D. It produces little berries with which Cypriots sometimes garnish their salads. Bored with (or sometimes even ignorant of) the long march of their history, perhaps this useful feature is what deterred people in our village from cutting it down for firewood long ago.

Anyway, there squats this ancient thing still very much alive just beyond our old Greek Orthodox church of St. George. You can't miss it as you drive or walk eastward out toward our neighboring village of Yerasa. And it expresses something I'm not sure there are words to express. It is a survivor and people kind of respect that, a sort of standing truth for their own endurance. It belongs to the architecture of human habitation here, a witness through the years, a very old 'word' for something that still has meaning, and people take a kind of bemused pride in the fact that they did not strike it down.

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These are ancient lands all about us, home to cultures that are arguably the oldest we know. They've sprung up, swirled about each other, interpenetrated, blended, split, collided and shaped one another over millennia, spans of time it's hard get our minds around. Here distinctively human verities had their first testing ground.

People emerged from caves and moved beyond being hunter-gatherers. They built houses. Villages evolved into towns and towns into small cities. Arable land was cleared and crops were planted; sheep, goats, pigs, cattle, camels and horses were tamed, domesticated and harnessed. Economic ambition fed into the search for both prosperity and comfort ... not bad things in and of themselves.

Folk set about making things — small things for the home (plates, cooking pots and utensils) and vessels to ply the sea-lanes for recreation, fishing and trade ... and for war. Tools became more sophisticated ... weapons too. At roughly the same time human whimsy took to decorating things, making things of beauty to delight the eye and express awe. Speech was interpreted into writing. The remarkable human ability to communicate meaning, beauty and awe gave birth to philosophy and theology. Flutes and stringed

instruments augmented human song and dance. We learned to ‘speak in tongues’. Art and war evolved together if not exactly in harness. Slavery was invented to deal with human booty. In symbols and monuments we see emerge what we’ve come to recognize as ‘civilization’. And improvisation invented ever faster ways to ‘spread the word’.

As societies elaborated they grew simple sets of rules to define decency and order. The rules that contributed to survival were expressed into laws, moral principles and political institutions. Politics commodified power. Power, in its turn, harnessed philosophy and theology (and where necessary ‘dumbed’ them down for mass consumption). The spin-doctor craft is truly ancient. There was war and conflict all spun out to look ‘legitimate’, ‘just’ and even ‘holy’. It was against this cynical brutalization of power that the prophets railed. But prophets were few, far between and regularly held in dishonor especially in their own countries and among their own peoples. Many were killed; the words of others were distorted after they died. Spin again: the last word. Prophecy is lonely, fragile and vulnerable.

In our technological age we have only elaborated on old themes. For people here in the lands of the morning there is nothing really new under the sun. Even the violence done to things of value, to the environment, and to fellow human beings isn’t new. You’ve only to look at the bald hills of Lebanon, Palestine and Cyprus to know that ancient forests were decimated over centuries. Wild life and whole ecosystems were trashed. Whole species were wiped out ... whole peoples obliterated, enslaved. One generation quite mindlessly impoverished the next and bequeathed misery. Out of the anxiety that something had gone wrong with God’s human experiment sprang the three great monotheisms, warts and all — Judaism, Christianity and Islam. They tried to provide the spiritual grounding for the experience of self-consciousness and its purpose. Still keeping a spiritual spark at their core (often heavily masked), power too frequently subverted them, and used them to justify degradation both of our environment and of human cohabitation. We now have coined a word for that: dehumanization. With the patina of sanctity, it was more: it was desecration.

Distressing it is that over the millennia we’ve learned precious little or nothing at all about how to cherish and preserve what we all hold in common — the gift and verity of life. “Life is cheap,” that old adage, continues to receive all too frequent affirmation. And yet whenever I pass the old faux-pistachio tree at our eastern ‘gate’, I need to think about endurance, and, indeed, the sanctity of life.

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Some time ago my old friend, Naim Ateek, founded ‘Sabeel’, a Palestinian Christian-led movement that now has a worldwide support network (www.sabeel.org). It expresses a sort of ‘liberation theology’ that is uniquely Palestinian. From the day he launched Sabeel, Naim proclaimed the durability of the Palestinian people while challenging the Johnny-come-lately Israelis to live in peace. His gospel of non-violence has established his credibility and also made him a gadfly both for Palestinian hotheads and for Israeli hawks. And gradually he and his partners are making headway. You see, they take the long view, and exhibit the graces of persistence, compassion and endurance.

In his lead editorial for this summer's issue of *Cornerstone*, Sabeel's quarterly, Naim castigated those who celebrated Israel's 60th anniversary for totally ignoring those who mourn the disaster those 60 years have inflicted. "[W]e violate our own God-given humanity and the humanity of our fellow brothers and sisters," he warned, when we degrade and humiliate others as lower and lesser humans. "We must shed ... our tribal theology and culture and discover the true potential of our own humanity." And here's the nub: "To celebrate one's independence on the ashes of another people becomes blasphemy and a sacrilege [against God] ... and a profanity against our fellow human beings. ... So long as the Palestinians cannot share in the celebration, it is a shame for Israel to celebrate. ... Oppressed people will ultimately gain their freedom. Sooner or later, Israel will have to grant liberation to the Palestinians. *It is wiser if the Israelis initiate it themselves rather than being compelled to concede it.*" [emphasis added]

Nelson Mandela has just celebrated his 90th birthday. There's been a mountain of comment on his career and achievements. Colleagues and contemporaries have been interviewed *ad nauseam*. But one woman, I believe his defense lawyer, hit the nail on the head. Mandela, she said, stood over against the Apartheid regime's F. W. DeClerk, and both men made radical choices. Mandela, she observed, chose to negotiate before he had won, and DeClerk chose to negotiate before he had lost. And, for South Africa, that has made all the difference. (God willing, Mandela's and DeClerk's successors and heirs won't blow their legacy!)

And, understanding Naim Ateek, for years now that's all he's been calling for. Historically speaking the Israelis are fragile (and primarily to be held at fault) but they're in power; the Palestinians (warts and all) will not vanish into the dust storms of Middle East conflict and they cannot be quelled. Still, among both are those willing to beat Uzis into ploughshares, Qassâm rockets into pruning hooks. It is time for radical choices to be made. Ancient truths must refocus our attention upon what makes human beings truly human; we must establish (again?) and expand the zone of viable and sustainable human habitation. Justice must flow down; truth's coinage re-minted at full value.

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There stands the old tree, and I've got to have hope that it is better to preserve a thing of value than to cut it down. People *can* talk to each other. There need not be either loser or winner. It is not a debate; it is a dialogue. Human self-consciousness and its purpose *affirms* life. It does not crush the spirit, that ancient element of beauty, awe, virtue and responsibility that ennobles the human soul. That is what the architecture of human habitation points to from its very first essays here in the Middle East. As the old preacher said, after the time for breaking things down comes the time for building up; after the time for weeping comes the time to laugh; after the time for mourning comes the time to dance. He knew a thing or two, did the preacher. We'd do well to remind ourselves of them.

He would have laughed, for instance, to know that the old tree still lives.

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.