Sketches of personal experience with tree life

“We are shown that our life exists with the tree life, that our well-being depends on the well-being of the Vegetable Life …” is what I read over and over again in the “Message to the Western World” sent by the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy -from the northwest of the North American continent- to the United Nations in 1977.

Reading and re-reading this document time and time again causes a sensation of finding myself before a revealing message. Today I would like to share some of the personal experience that was generated by my becoming aware that my welfare, my health, my life itself are all related to the life of trees, to the life of forests.

The mulberry tree in the patio of my home: I relate intensely with this mulberry tree that in my eyes rises high in the patio of my home. I am so young that I do not go to school yet and so I have all that potential that children have “before they are taken” to be tamed through that so-called “formal education.” I live fascinating adventures. I talk to the mulberry tree and it answers me. Sometimes it is the tree that talks to me. It suggests ideas, it shows me marvellous maps drawn on its leaves, it advises me how to make my tree-house among its branches from boxes that I have begged from a man who comes round selling vegetables in a little cart pulled by a mule through the mud streets of the humble neighbourhood of that big city where I live.

Installed among its branches I am very close to the sparrows and hummingbirds. The butterflies are my friends. I feel that the mulberry tree and I vibrate together when I hug its trunk and I grab its branches to climb higher and from there I see a different world.

Now I am not such a child. I am moving to another house wanting to make my own nest. Before leaving I look at the mulberry tree. We don’t say anything…we just look at each other. .

It is the morning of a day following many others on the calendar. It is almost midday. I see that they are taking out the mulberry tree, cut into several pieces. I ask why they have killed it. They tell me that its roots were lifting up the mosaics of a gallery. Something breaks inside me and I feel pain, a lot of pain.

The Western Chaco: we are in 1976. State terrorism has taken over with the power to decide on the life and death of everyone in Argentina. After a quick family council, I decide not to leave the country. In a sort of “internal exile” I move to the Western Chaco with part of my family.

I started working in an institution that was developing a project with the communities of the Toba-Qom originating peoples. I travel inside the Chaco forests with young Qom members. I am amazed by the “Algarrobo” forests.

I discover that trees have a spirit. It is a slow, soft discovery. It is a colossal discovery that teaches me daily sharing with the Qom people. I understand with amazement and happiness that I am beginning to unlearn many things and apprehending others that become the most important and

transcendental things in my life.

I perceive the “value” of the “algarrobo” tree. I say the “value” and not the “price” of the “algarrobo”. This differentiation between “value” and “price” is what makes me aware of the essential values of the two cultures that live together in this scenario.

One of these, the dominating one, puts a “price” on everything, subtly obliging the members of the other culture, the dominated Qom, those who value everything, to destroy the native forests, particularly the Algarrobo forests. For this timber has been given a “good price.” A sawmill has been installed and a carpenter’s shop to make furniture. This furniture is not intended for the homes of Qom families but to be sold to the “big city” in the framework of a developmental conception and under the rational of “we are so good that we give work to these poor people.”

I feel pain over this imposition that I see and suffer and feel pain over the murdered algarrobo trees, a pain like I felt when I saw my mulberry tee cut into pieces. And thus this story is woven, my story, learning and unlearning, in a direct and very strong way, what love for plants is.

In the country of my interior silences: it is the beginning of the nineties…I am in the south of Chile on the Isla de los Ciervos. It is private property belonging to Don Giorgio who lives in Italy and once a year visits the Island. Don Giorgio does not want the Island to be contaminated. For example, the water is supplied to the dwelling by gravity. No motors are used. Don Alonso and his 17 year-old son, “Patito” are the only inhabitants.

We are very cordially received and taken along paths where enormous trees are columns holding up a continuous canopy of branches. From time to time the canopy opens and the sky presents us with its varied hues an infinity of blues, while the leaves dance with lights and shadows. Cascades of coigue trees with their strong red colouring, sparks of life, illuminate this Temple of Nature. Flowers of all colours peek out from the moss, between the branches and trunks, spilling their perfume and adorning this happy sanctuary of life in all its splendour.

We walk in silence. This silence enables us to enjoy the choral symphony of songs and murmurs of birds and rivers that slide along, fertilizing the land. The soil talks to me. The soil is alive. The elasticity of this soil, covered in a carpet of moss, ferns, leaves, and petals invites me to share its vital vibrations. My intuition tells me that I am barely beginning to understand the dialogue of the Originating Peoples with Mother Earth. Suddenly I find two enormous trees, two formidable columns that share the same roots. I am absorbed by something I had never seen before. Patito sees that I am overwhelmed. With a smile he approaches me and says “See? They both share the same root! For me, here underground, all the roots are shared…”

Here, in the country of my interior silences, in my bodies I listen again to what “Patito” told me. I relive the impact of his words. I relive my feelings of solidarity with life, my feelings of belonging, all us beings belong to each other. We are Nature. We “inter-are”, a beautiful new word that tells me that I am in the other - that I am in all living beings.

The wealth of cultural biodiversity teaches me to unlearn and to apprehend. Life has given me to get to know various Originating Peoples’ cultures. I discover that they all have something in common: they feel they belong to Nature. They all feel this belonging, all…except western culture. I become aware that I was born and bred in a culture with an anthropocentric paradigm that gives priority to “man” (the macho man) as a superior being. From these cultures I understand that the centre is in life, in every form of life, that its paradigm is bio-centric. In this paradigm centred on life is the one in

which today, I feel that I am in the world.

The child who was wise talking with his mulberry tree was taken to “school” and to many schools…however… I feel that this wise mulberry tree has had a lot to do with this child never letting the flame of rebelliousness die, they were never able to tame him and thus he came, with his pores wide open to find the wisdom of the Peoples that have always been here, that live in harmony, cooperate, with an ethic of solidarity.

Today I feel-think that I am a Forest and that my health, my whole life, is thanks to tree life.

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