



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

My passionate journey from naivety to despair to hope

Vivienne Allen © 5th March 2023

I have always been drawn to trees. Until I turned 10 I spent most of my spare time climbing trees on our farm. Back then I divided all trees into two categories; good and bad; the good ones were those great for climbing such as Pohutukawa, some Lawsons, oaks and others with wide low branches. The bad ones which were not good for climbing were trees like Lombardy poplars that were too upright or didn't have low branches. Luckily our sharemilkers had 7 children for me to play with and our favourite activity was to climb trees. We even used to enjoy climbing the nectarine trees in the orchard in summer, sitting up in the branches munching nectarines on a hot day.

My Dad planted trees and cared for them wherever we lived, on our farm and when we moved in town, didn't everyone? My parents retired to a 100acre farm but unfortunately soon after they moved there, he was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer and had to put the farm on the market. I went to visit there for the last time and found him down a gully planting trees. When I asked him why, he replied; I may not be able to look up to them ever but I'll be able to look down on them.

When I was 10 we moved to Tauranga and luckily our house was right beside a beach, lined with beautiful old pohutukawas – which if you were a tree climber you'd know are perfect for climbing. I joined a little group of local children, all boys except for me, who loved to have play fights. We'd divide into two groups, one on the ground and the other up in the Pohutukawa. The ones on the ground would throw handfuls of wet sand and mud up at the others and I can't remember who would win but we'd all end up in the sea to wash off all the dirt.

I've always felt the calmest and at peace in a forest, the wonderful earthy smell after rain, the sense of being enveloped with ancient trees. Trees just spoke to me. Moving to Titirangi 25 years ago to a house surrounded by trees felt like moving to my ancestral home. Most mornings Jos and I would walk through the local bushtracks before work and on Saturdays we would often go for longer walks in the Waitakeres. On holiday you'd find us doing another Great Walk in the South Island

The well-known researcher [Dr. Suzanne Simard](#) got her PhD in Forest Sciences because she wanted to understand why forests have felt so powerful to her since she was a young girl. She also wanted to help protect them. Her groundbreaking discoveries include many of the ways trees communicate with one another through **underground fungi** networks, and how they help each other by sharing resources. Hub trees, or grandmother trees—the oldest and largest in the forest—are especially important to the ecosystem because they act as central hubs for vast below-ground networks.

[In her popular TEDx talk, Dr. Simard](#) assures us that everything in the forest is connected and communicating. She said, “Most of us have forgotten that we’re connected to each other and to nature—that we are one. ‘Nature’ is not some separate thing, but an intimate part of us.” She believes that trees perceive many things in their environment and that it’s very likely they are able to feel the presence of humans when we’re nearby.

Redwoods live 500 to 800 years on average, but many survive for 1,500 years. Giant kauris can live 2,000 years or more. That means we can touch trees today that carry the wisdom of when the earth was a very different planet.

To position this closer to Maori cosmology, we might consider the narratives of Tane-Mahuta, the deity of the forest represented by the tree who creates To Ao Marama, the world of light, by separating the sky deity Ranganui and the earth mother Papatuanuku, bringing light and life to the earth. Tane, like the figures of rain, wind, and the birds, is an emissary between earth and sky.

Very near to our house in Titirangi was an enormous ancient kauri, probably one of the largest in the Auckland area. It is thought that it wasn’t cut down by the loggers because it is a bit misshapen. Many decades ago, busloads of tourists used to come to view it but now the exact location of it is hidden and secret as the locals want to protect it. I’ve walked around it a few times before Kauri dieback arrived, and it is so large and ancient that it’s hard not to get emotional when you are in its presence. Maybe it is what Dr Simard calls a grandmother tree.

Six years ago Jos and I decided that our large house and garden in Titirangi was taking too much time and effort so moved into a townhouse in the central city. Within a few days of moving, I had a reality check. I was walking down Wellington street on my way home when I noticed that there were arborists with chainsaws roaring, about to cut down a huge Norfolk Pine on the corner of the street on the berm. I asked them to stop while I phoned the Council as it was obviously a protected tree being on the berm. The Council informed me that through a quirk in some planning change, this tree was on private land and since the National government removed tree protection from private land in 2012, there was nothing that anyone could do to stop this happening. I cried all the way home while the chainsaws roared behind me. This tree was magnificent, probably the tallest most perfect Norfolk pine in central Auckland, obviously more than 100 years old – it was a landmark. I cried for many days afterwards every time I passed by the empty space.

I waited for the uproar amongst my neighbours, the community, the city. Shouldn’t there be some sort of funeral? A mark of respect for all the good work that this tree had done; the shade it had provided the children going to and from the school next door, the landmark for finding your way around the city, all of the deadly gases that it had absorbed and its help in sucking up water in times of flooding? No, there was deadly silence.

My talk is about my journey though naivety, despair towards hope so I hope I won’t disturb you too much with a little reality in regards to our urban trees.

Moving into the city was when I lost my innocence. I thought everyone loved trees like I did. There have been too many examples to share but I will share two.

Unfortunately this first example is from my own family; We were having a family gathering at the house of my sister who lives with her daughter and granddaughter. They were proudly

showing me their new back deck which was going to be used for future family gatherings. But, they had decided that the huge Oak tree shading the deck had to go as it was dropping leaves on the deck which they had to sweep up. I pointed out how amazing the tree was and that they could trim it as Oaks can take quite a prune. The next time we visited there was the huge gap where the Oak had been. My sister then said to me, oh we're finding the deck is too hot now and we're going to plant an evergreen tree for shade and because it won't drop leaves. I replied that evergreens do drop leaves but do so all throughout the year. I despair! Had we still had tree protection in Auckland that tree would still be with us.

Recently, I became aware of a neighbour who was petitioning the Council to have a tall Cottonwood cut down outside his house on the berm. I can see this tree through the window in my office because it pokes up above all the other trees. This neighbour had just bought the house and within a few weeks had gathered signatures from his neighbours to have this tree cut down as the fluff that it produced every autumn annoys them. I do understand how this could be annoying but so too are the hidden fumes from the motorway close to our houses, which is way more deadly, but I don't see any petitions to close that down. I was sent a copy of his letter to the council which made me cringe, please realise that this man used to head one of Auckland's largest law firms so he probably has been in his elite bubble all his life. In his letter he told the council that he would pay for the removal and replacement of the tree and that the Council could then 'give the wood to the poor'. Wow, how entitled is that? I wrote to the Council in support of the tree, and luckily the Council refused to cut it down but did give it a well-needed prune so that it won't be so annoying. I'm hoping that this neighbour doesn't now resort to poisoning it.

After many of these types of episodes in my neighbourhood I decided to try and help and joined the [Tree Council](#), an organisation which tries to protect urban trees in Auckland, and also lobbies government to have tree protection reinstated – even though they have failed at both – not for want of trying. I joined their small board of passionate tree lovers and tried to do my bit. I liked the people on their board, because although all are tree lovers they are also pragmatists and realise that some trees do have to be felled if they are dangerous, in the wrong place or sometimes to allow buildings. They are usually not the people you see with placards but they are behind the scenes lobbying and appearing at environment courts.

However, after a couple of years trying to help I realised that I'm just too emotional about trees and it was taking a toll on me watching the decimation of our urban trees in Auckland and nobody caring enough to stop it.

What I have noticed is that people will say to me, of course I love trees but not this one beside me – actually they are deluding themselves that they actually care when they really don't.

I changed my focus on to my very close surroundings and joined the little committee in charge of the small park that surrounds 30 houses including ours. I've helped to protect four old trees from being cut down often by owners who up and leave a year or so later, meaning the tree that annoyed them that they wanted cut down, doesn't annoy the new owner. This is what I call short-termism; in the political sense and also in the minds of we NZers. We are thinking of today and what annoys us today, not of future generations who might benefit.

On our berm outside our house was a very scruffy old cherry tree, the sort of tree that is tempting to cut down. It was choked with grass around its trunk and looked very sick. The

last remaining original neighbour of 90 years old told me that he planted the cherry trees in 1975 after he moved into his house. I cleared away the grass, added compost and fertiliser and planted the berm with some flowers. Now the tree has twice the number of leaves and is thriving and people walking past often comment on how they enjoy the flowers. I'm not the first in the street to plant the berm but soon the majority of our neighbours have planted their berms and the street is looking great. Across the road from our house is a small pocket park that probably didn't get built on because it has an enormous Norfolk Pine on it. Two neighbours beside the park started creating gardens in the park and asked if I'd like to join them. I don't do much except help to pay and spread the yearly mulch. Another neighbour provided a large table for the park where we now have our street parties in summer.

We have quite a few beautiful Jacaranda trees in our neighbourhood, you may recognise them by their lovely purple flowers in spring and their dainty foliage. One day on one of my walks I noticed that a young one was leaning over and was in danger of falling over because its ties had broken. I registered this on the Council website and they fixed it within a few weeks. Maybe they wouldn't be able to respond so quickly at the moment but their online system is very easy to navigate nowadays. Another time I was walking around Grey Lynn and noticed a berm with three beautiful cherry trees in flower, just stunning but I was concerned that around their trunks someone had built up about a metre of grass clippings which actually can kill a tree. I left a friendly note in their letterbox suggesting that they remove the grass clippings away from their lovely trees to allow them to thrive and was pleasantly surprised when I next walked past they'd done it.

If you live in the city and would like to experience a spiritual tree experience but don't have the time or ability to go walking in the Waitakeres, all you need to do is to visit [Smith's Bush](#) which is located behind Onewa Domain off Northcote Road where there is plenty of parking. The loop path is flat and has an elevated boardwalk for easy walking, great for those with mobility issues or families with pushchairs. It's not too long, has plenty of seating to rest and enjoy the birds and the forest.

Jos and I occasionally watch a NZ program about the SPCA officers who follow-up calls from the public who are concerned about animals that are being mistreated. The officers go out and visit the animals to check on their welfare and if they are sick or being abused can legally remove the animals or insist that the owners improve their care. The first SPCA originated in the UK in 1824 when a group of 22 people met in a coffeehouse to launch a society to prevent cruelty to animals. One fascinating fact about this meeting was that it included the MP William Wilberforce who campaigned to end slavery and now turned his attention to the plight of animals. At that time, compassion for animals was regarded as strange. Most people thought that animals were commodities used to supply food, transport or sport for people. In its early years the Society's major campaign was to win the hearts and minds of the general public, and to change people's indifference to animal cruelty.

I'm hoping that the recent rain and cyclone devastation will be the impetus for a culture change regarding our environment but especially our trees. I would like to see an SPCE Society for the Protection and Care of the Environment, with officers that immediately go to the rescue with legislation behind them. Imagine that.

Meditation / Conversation starter

What tree is your favourite and why?

Is it a tree that you or your family planted, or sat under or climbed?

Talk about this tree and how you feel about it.