

# Seed of Hope

## Jane Goodall

It was to the forest that I went after my second husband, Derek, lost his painful fight with cancer in 1981. I knew that I would be calmed and find a way to cope with grief, for it is in the forest that I sense most strongly a spiritual power greater than myself. A power in which I, and the forest, and the creatures who make their home there, “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). The sorrows

*My Love for the Natural World*

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and problems of life take their proper place in the grand scheme of things. Indeed, with reality suspended by the timelessness of the forest world, I gradually came to terms with my loss and discovered that “peace that passes all understanding” (Isaiah 26:3). And I knew my task was to go on fighting to save the places and animals that Derek and I had both loved.

As I travel around the world, people are always telling me that I have an aura of peace—even when I am surrounded by chaos, by people jostling for signatures, or wanting to ask questions, or worrying about logistics. “How can you seem so peaceful?” they ask. The answer, I think, is that the peace of the forest has become part of my being. Indeed, if I close my eyes, I can sometimes transform the noise of loud talking or traffic in the street into the shouting of baboons or chimpanzees, the roaring of the wind through the branches or of the waves crashing onto the shore. That I have this power is a gift that I have taken from the forest for which I am deeply, endlessly grateful, for it helps me to survive the hectic pace of my endless lecture tours.

## Spiritual Value of Forests

Let us never forget that forests are beautiful in their own right. They have, for me, a spiritual value that makes them the most enchanted places on earth.

I want to share something that was one of my inspirational stories for my book *Reason for Hope*. It happened when I was walking along a trail through a glorious old-growth forest on the slopes of Mount Hood in Oregon. Suddenly, from the trail, I saw an amazing tree. It had been in a forest fire—about a hundred years ago, apparently—and only some forty feet of the trunk remained. I walked over to it and found it was completely hollow. I entered through an opening, almost like a small door into a chapel, pointed at the top.

The remaining outer shell of the tree, straight and tapering as the spire of a church, directed my eyes up and up, through the surrounding green of the forest, to the sky high above. I stood there, awed and humbled, and sent up a prayer for the survival of the remaining forests of the world.

I was with Chitcus, my Native American “spirit brother,” and a small group of Roots & Shoots children. I wanted to share my experience, and as the tree only held six people at a time, we held several ceremonies during which I stood inside the tree with four children at a time. We faced one another, holding hands, and gazed upward to pray for the forests while Chitcus knelt in the middle and chanted an Indian blessing and made smoke from the sacred Kish’wuf root that seemed to carry our prayers up and up and up, and out into the blue playground of the clouds.

It was an extraordinarily moving and significant experience, and now, when things seem particularly grim, I relive that sacred memory and somehow find the strength to go on.

was translated for my benefit, but I was spellbound by the words. Later my hosts gave me an English translation of their reading:

For me, trees have always been the most penetrating preachers. I revere them when they live in tribes and families, in forests and groves. And even more I revere them when they stand alone. They are like lonely persons. Not like hermits who have stolen away out of some weakness, but like great, solitary men, like Beethoven and Nietzsche. In their highest boughs the world rustles, their roots rest in infinity; but they do not lose themselves there, they struggle with all the force of their lives for one thing only: to fulfill themselves according to their own laws, to build up their own form, to represent themselves.

—*Herman Hesse, 1918*

When the last word died away, the lead player of the orchestra, who had been keeping his hands warm under a thick anorak, produced a flute. With his hands losing their warmth and his fingers stiffening, with the spit freezing in the pipe, he nevertheless played a beautiful piece of music, also inspired by trees. I can never forget that occasion—standing in the clean, cold air and listening to the haunting sounds of the flute, sounding for all the world like the singing of trees as they endure the winter, knowing the spring will come. I was in a trancelike state when the music ended, slowly awakening to frozen hands and feet, hastening inside for hot mulled wine.

It is hardly surprising that trees were worshiped, venerated for their age and endurance. Cults of tree worship have existed almost everywhere, and there are still sacred woods in India, Bali, Japan, Africa, and undoubtedly other places too. A number of different species have inspired awe throughout the ages. In ancient Egypt, the sycamore was especially revered—twin sycamores were believed to stand at the eastern gate of heaven through which Ra, the sun god,

came each day. These trees were often planted near tombs, and coffins were made of their wood.

In ancient Greece and Rome there were many sacred groves of olive, ash, and oak, and the Celtic tribes in ancient Britain also revered oak trees that were thought, by some, to be the source of sacred wisdom. Perhaps they are, these old trees. Perhaps we simply need to find a way to understand their message, to hear their voices.

In Nepal, in both the Hindu and the Buddhist religions, the two most sacred trees are the bar or banyan (*Ficus benghalensis* L.) and the peepal (*Ficus religiosa*). Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, the highest gods in Hinduism, are all thought to be present in the peaceful shade of these trees, and in ancient times people would gather under their shade for discussion—often the king and his ministers would administer justice in the presence of the holy trees. It was under a famous *Ficus religiosa*, also known as the Bodhi Tree, that Buddha received enlightenment. Seedlings from the sacred Bodhi Tree have been transported to many Buddhist nations throughout the world.