

Ancient Lessons for Thriving in Difficult Times

Written by Dr. Deborah Sandella | Wednesday, 17 November 2010 00:00



The ancient sages described the most effortless way to bond with the universe and fulfill our desires was to act in accordance with the laws of nature. Recently, when I hiked among a grove of amazing redwood giants in Yosemite National Park, their stories revealed powerful lessons about surviving. Might the wisdom gleaned from the oldest and largest living organisms on the planet be relevant for us during these challenging times?

The Giant Sequoia redwoods in Northern California are descendants of an ancient line of trees and can live for two to three thousand years. With individual names like "Forest Queen and Grizzle Giant," their trunks can reach a diameter of 90 feet and grow taller than a 30-story building.

During the first hundred-year history of the park, these beloved trees were protected from fire in hopes of extending their life span. Although these actions were well intentioned, research later revealed fires help these trees thrive by clearing away the ground around them and exposing bare mineral soil for tiny seeds to take root.

→ **Lesson # 1: What appears threatening and dangerous may be in the service of a richer, longer-lasting livelihood!**

Sequoia trees survive these fires by growing an extremely thick bark to protect their inner workings. In fact, the bark can be from 1-2 feet thick, and allows them to avoid damage as forest fires burn all around.

→ **Lesson #2: The core of who we are-- is natural essence--thickening our skin to the opinions of others will sustain our precious sense-of-self especially in the midst of crisis.**

In a spell of dry years, air bubbles form in a redwood's pipes and stop the continuous flow of water, and the top of the tree can die and fall off. In fact, the giant redwoods sometimes release dead branches in a process similar to "calving" icebergs. A kind of "woodberg" falls away, and as it collapses, it gives off a roar that can be heard for miles, leaving the area around the calved

redwood looking as if a tank battle had been fought there. In wetter periods, redwoods regrow tops again!

→ **Lesson #3: Let go of what has been... if it's dead, let it fall away, even if the process is noisy and scary, we'll grow something better when the timing is right!**

For years, people held hands around the Sequoia tree trunks--giving the trees a human hug, so to speak... or maybe receiving a tree hug? More recently, we've discovered that standing around the base of the trees causes damage to the roots that lie just beneath the surface.

→ **Lesson #4: Squeezing what we love too tightly stifles growth!**

These giants present an impressive image... huge, dense, ancient organisms seemingly indestructible yet--their survival depends upon two tiny species of squirrels and beetles who climb beyond the reach of ladders to giant branches, where they crack open big pine cones, and spread the redwood seeds across the forest floor. These redwood giants sometimes wait 20-30 years for these little critters to set their seeds free.

→ **Lesson #5: We can't do it alone, no matter how smart or tough we are! Being patient and finding others with whom to collaborate makes life easier and more fun!**

If these ancient trees could speak... what might they advise ...about navigating this time of great challenge... maybe to shed old ways... to shelter the integrity of the core self... and to foster relationships into a collaborative community. Just for fun, let's take an imaginary journey into one of these ancient giants to discern their secret.

As we enter this venture, take hold of my hand... and feel the warmth of our palms touching... as we explore this mystery of life.

Immediately, we are swept into the bark, hand-in-hand, as we are sucked into an energy vortex like *Alice* falling into *Wonderland*... Hmm... Looking around, we sense the insides of thick, dense and massive bark, surrounding a vital center... Free falling further down into this exterior surface that sustains the core ... we become the bark... and imagine having lived for thousands of years... season upon season, year upon year, so numerous we've lost count... and yet we sustain... our cells remember surviving freezing blizzards and blistering cold winds... forest fires climbing our sides and burning away parts of wooden flesh... and floods of muddy water covering our roots and choking out our oxygen... Very hard times... one might say... yet all the while we are patient, rooted in the earth, knowing we will survive. We were designed to live a long time, maybe forever...

And yes, there have been losses, old and dead branches have crashed to the forest floor setting off immense loud and violent shakings, times when it seemed as if the planet might explode... Yet, it didn't... The next day, we felt lighter, and better able to sustain the dry times...and when the rains came, we used our energy to grow something new ... something vibrantly alive... something rising to the sky once again... green and youthful! A new top open to the sun ... way up high, somewhere over the rainbow...

All the while... our vital center has been safely shielded... and with the mere thought of it... we drop into that which is the core... the heart... the soul... aha... the tenderness is soft, and welcomes us... there is warmth and love... a circuitry of giving and receiving working flawlessly... rays of sunlight absorbed... transformed into chlorophyll... oxygen effortlessly released into the forest... and our branches growing along with everything around us. Nestled in the center, we sense how every aspect of our being has a purpose, and is operating to the best of its ability. Feeling a deep appreciation for our wholeness... we relax and rest in gratitude for what we have, and who we are...

Yes... we welcome every moment of life... knowing it is growing us into ever-expanding greatness... we have come a long way... and the road continues... breath by breath... heartbeat by heartbeat... storm by storm... and yet... here in the vital center, we sense the energy of life itself... the creative intelligence that birthed us and breaths us and urges us forward even when we are afraid... especially when we are afraid... In this place of center... we feel it... we remember... we live vibrantly ... free from the distractions of the physical world ... independent of floods or blizzards or fires... we are free... to grow... to love... to be ourselves... for at least a couple thousands years... or so...