

## Cutting the roots



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بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

A story written and  
designed

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"And verily, this Ummah of yours is One Ummah, and I am your Lord; therefore fear only Me." -Qur'an 23:52.-

I am folding the ginkgo seeds into paper towels. Water and warmth; it is all they need to germinate, or do they? My bonsais curve under a pool of light that reflects on the knuckles of my hands. I remember my trip to the nursery, and I think that we often get the unexpected in life.

I had arrived in the nursery a few hours ago. I loved working with trees; one of my hobbies was to photograph nature. There was a world to discover among forests and marshes, a world immobile and sensitive that often escaped us. I had brought my specimens with me, hoping that the gardener would have some idea on how to make them healthier. Junipers were maybe the hardiest trees I knew as far as the art of bonsai is concerned, but I think I had woken them too soon from their dormant state. These trees cast their branches far away into the air, as if for reaching. Even if they were winter trees, evergreen, they still shed leaves during the cold seasons. And, who can reach without losing something of himself? My trees had grown too quickly this year; they now looked exhausted.



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I had just picked what looked singularly like a small pebble from a pot when the gardener came in and took one between his fingers and smashed it. It burst, releasing a drop of liquid.

"I'm sorry, but I saw you so perplexed. I splashed it over your scarf. But see, it is fertilizer."

"O!" I said, "slow-release fertilizers then. I imagined the pebbles were used to cut the monotony of the dark shadows of the soil, in the pots."

"They do both," he said, smiling. I smiled back.

I put a plastic cover over the seeds. In two weeks I should have ginkgo roots... insha Allah-- if God Wills. Somehow I was not so happy about it.

I felt a little discouraged as I walked slowly from one spot to another. Going to the nursery had not helped in the way I had expected. I was afraid I might lose the Junipers, and the Hornbeam had leaves brown at the edges. I had probably watered them too much. The gardener had advised to trim the roots and watch for fungi, but I still hesitated because it might affect the tree's health.

On the pot's earth, it was possible to see where the light hit and where it did not.

When the sun rose at the limit of the neighbors' houses, the shadows were in many ways similar to people's minds: full of contradictions or full of surprises. Shadows reminded me of the Zen gardens, and all these plows that were the decorations of the mind. Well, huh... fertilizers... so much for decoration...

I looked at the junipers. Next to them, I had grown a Fuji Cherry with broad leaves that twisted like overgrown finger nails. They were shiny and inspired me with the vision of kites juggling before my window each time I reached for them. Next to it, a Korean Hornbeam swayed its trunk in spirals over the pot.

These trees, I thought, are like people to me: they have lives of their own, unpredictable when you did not know how to handle them. They were dying and this was due to ignorance, not to good will. Each one was given the gift of life and it was impossible to know if they would survive the year. That's what made them so valuable.



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I reflected upon the abundance of this earth; Allah was certainly generous in his wisdom since there were so much spending of life for a single life. How many seeds did a tree

need to give away to squirrels, birds, the earth, to see only one germinate?

And men who wanted to reverse this natural selection!

How many diseases were created playing with life! How many?

Like humans, trees came from a tiny seed, and came in many shapes. Some split at the base to become twins; other grew straight and tall. I had seen trunks growing around wires or panels, folding it like waist bands under love handles or like pans overwhelmed by an overgrown soufflé; the flesh eating over the metal. I even remembered a hollow tree, with a completely empty trunk through and through, that still carried beautiful branches continuously growing green leaves. These trees, I remember, reminded me of so many people around, healthy without a heart or looking good from outside, eaten up, sickened, from inside.

Year after year the forestry department of the town planned to cut down more and more trees. My plan was to grow my own trees, indoors, away from pollution, away with small living creatures that could destroy them. My plan was a bonsai tree... a healthy tree.

The gardener invited me to his private bonsai nursery, showing me specimens 4" to 7" tall. He immediately began playing with pill-bugs while pointed to the roots of the trees.

He explained: "These roll up when you touch them. Try! They are very gentle creatures."

I caressed their backs; they looked like grey armors and fitted perfectly against the trunk of the miniature fig tree. I felt delighted. I wondered how they benefited the trees. Maybe they ate smaller insects. I did not know.

The man explained that it was hard to grow trees with big roots because it took years of constant care.

"You see, bonsais need a lot of love, a lot of consideration. You have to establish a spiritual relationship with them if you want them to be happy. They respond to you as human beings do. But you need to change your habits. At least it is like that for me. When I take care of them, I have to forget about my laziness. I have to wake up early and watch out for any problem. But sometimes it is not enough." I looked at one maple tree. I immediately noticed dark areas around the leaves:

"Does the cutting of roots hurt the trees?"

"At the beginning, yes. It takes time for trees to get accustomed to privation, but they get around it. You have to keep them moist even if they sometimes appreciate periods of drought. See the moss? It constitutes a reserve of water that does not evaporate as fast as plain soil. Roots need more water."



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I could not stop looking at the small trees, imagining how they would be in normal size, probably not much different; straighter, maybe. I thought about the destiny as I

inspected the beautiful shape of the roots rolling out of the soil like white cobras.

There was one thing impossible to know on earth and that was destiny. Were we also twisted by destiny? Did we have a choice, at one time, either to be like a bonsai or like a fully developed tree? Were there decisions to be made?

Whether we grew up in a rough terrain or in a perfect setting, choices always came to test our strength.

Japanese liked bonsais because they could understand and see life better through the miniature trees. Not only nature's ways, but also our choices as cultivators. The tree's health reflected our ability to take care of them, our way of life, the quality of the water we used, our tolerance for pollution, etc. No wonder the gardeners used the term "educating trees." I stared at the Japanese maples. I loved them because I could see the changing of the seasons in their leaves. For a long time I had asked myself why leaves turned the colors of the rainbow before falling down. Leaves were like us: with the time, they lost some chemical elements as our hair gradually changes color to white or grey. As the red chemicals are used up, other chemicals signaled by different colors (red, yellow, brown, etc)

begin to emerge from down under the original green, until cut from the stem.

Are we also cut from a stem? I pondered.



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Age probably revealed our true colors like time did for trees. I suddenly thought how foreign I was, cut from the roots -- growing new roots. In a way, I was twice a foreigner. I was a foreigner by my religion and I was a foreigner by my origins. Even in my country, I had felt like a foreigner, living a culture inside another culture, nurturing a world inside an opposite

world. Maybe these bonsais were a little like me, cut from their original destiny but following their path, making things more different for others...



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The older man explained the art of cultivating the trees and advised me on some procedures. On our way to the main gate, he showed me the miniature pond of the nursery. He dipped his fingers into the fresh liquid, rubbing the backs of the gold fish.

There was a natural in this man that told about the purity of his soul.

I could not resist patting fish in return, touched.

I did not know more friendly companions than goldfishes. They looked comic, sucking the tips of your fingers or releasing a bubble of oxygen as they looked straight at you. Could they see us or did they just feel us? Most animals had a poor vision or saw differently than we do. Maybe I would never get a straight answer.

Now, I was reading in my encyclopaedia of plants:

"Ginkgo biloba. A unique tree. The only survivor of primitive, ancient plant family. A conifer, but has deciduous, fan-shaped leaves with lovely golden yellow leaf color in fall. Very resistant to insects and disease!"

In one way, I thought, he gave me part of himself.

The gardener did not give me solutions, but he replaced my seedlings by others. Could we replace trees we learned to love by others?

He had explained that he loved that species over all other tree species. Funny! I thought. This is maybe one of the rare trees whose leaves are deeply veined and whose texture look like

tree trunks. I did not really like them myself, but everybody loved something unique, I thought, not because it was truly unique, but because it was unique to our heart.

The man left me with a few words:

"Since you are a foreigner, you put all your efforts in being accepted by people, isn't it?"

"Yes," I replied, "that's why I began talking to people I would never be in contact with in my native land. Sometimes you do not want to be in contact with persons who do not have a clean appearance -- like you do not want to be in contact with certain plants"

"Poison ivy might be one?"

"Right!"

"But as a lover of nature, you have to force yourself. I have traveled all over the world myself. This is how you learn to see the heart and forget about the appearances. Traveling is going through a spiritual growth, you add layers like trees add layers to their trunk each year. And it is hard."

"I guess to learn how to truly communicate is like educating my bonsais. You firstly have to make the trees suffer. Bonsai have hard time to adjust to unnatural conditions,

but they slowly adapt and become healthy. They are a reflection of the world, a mirror of the world as the Japanese mean it. Through miniature trees, you see the world better."

"In my religion, Islam, it is prescribed to be kind and generous towards travelers. You give him money and shelter. The one who travels carries the world inside himself, you see. And I truly feel each time I meet a new person, I can really feel that I have a portion of the world inside me, to offer, that reaches out."

"Now, reach for new trees, " he said putting the seedlings in my hands, "and see what you can do for these."