

The Hidden Majesty of Lightning Wood

And Other Damaged Things

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By Shaman Bob

The point of presenting this essay is to help you understand why a grown man would embark on a Quixotic-like journey to labor so long and with such dedication to making what he considers to be sacred objects from the most humble materials, including lightning-struck tree wood and insect damaged lilac wood, among others. Definitely it is not offered to display my ego or even a sense of pride, since most other people could show so much more accomplishment in the time it took for all of this to occur. Hannibal could have crossed the Pyrenees and brought the Romans to their knees a dozen times while I worked to learn the ways of shaman folk! Indeed, many empires had risen and fallen, science, medicine and all manner of endeavors had advanced in significant ways, and I'm sure you made wonderful progress in your own career and well-being during the time that I plodded the path. Indeed, you have run circles around me in every conceivable way!

So I offer this recounting merely as a miniscule footnote to that part of our existence that sometimes calls us to search for that which is not to be found and, once stumbled over, cannot be understood.

But we try.

And so it was that I regarded a former Silver Maple tree that had been struck by a massive bolt of lightning. The tree had been so beautiful. But then, high energy light, as if from nothing, had suddenly exploded into it, and in an instant, Light had been transformed. Light into matter, matter into light, from crown to root, from above to below. And back again.

And somehow, this began to bring into focus for me why I had maintained such an interest in shamanism, and why I decided to make useful things from ruined things. It is, sort of, a shaman's mission.

Then, sometime later, I was given some "dead" lilac branches that had been trimmed from a huge garden. They had been ruined by hungry insects that had bored their way along the plant's woody stalks.

That's all it took. Quixote, Parsifal, Sisyphus —all glanced my way in sympathy. A quest without end was about to begin.

It was, and is, all about a tree, a shrub and something called the Ain Soph Aur.

The Tree

A thousand years ago, human societies were more than ready to express what separated them. It was a time of intolerance, prejudice, ignorance. War and atrocious acts of cruelty swept the known world, fueled by powerful egos, cultural biases and political/religious differences. Darkness was upon the land.

Hmm...sound familiar?

I pondered. Was this human nature? Was this a species bent like ravenous beasts to attack and destroy its own kind? It sure seemed so. But, stretching back into the thin mists of early history, humankind had sought understanding of its place in the world, and from its own a number of teachers had arisen. In the East, wise and serene spiritual masters had demonstrated the transcendental nature of existence and how to find peace amid even the greatest of suffering. Elsewhere, prophets gleaned methods of right living amid the struggle of existence in captivity and exile. Much later, a cherished Messiah had appeared with a message of peace and of a new path to spiritual fulfillment. Within 500 years, another treasured prophet arrived with a holy message of brotherhood and of devotion.

And still, the world remained troubled and divided, the rifts ironically cleaved even deeper by later interpretations of the very teachers who had sought to teach peace and understanding.

Then, beginning around 1,000 CE, various scholars from the world's great religions began a revolutionary act—they sought to find that which we all have in common rather than what separates us.

It was not a well-organized effort, and was, in fact, often interrupted by the same internecine conflicts of religious differences that the scholars had sought to study. But the thinkers persisted, determined to overcome the vexation of world xenophobia and ignorance which often forced them to stay a step ahead of those who wished to persecute them. As a result, it would take roughly 300 years for a stable concept to emerge, one that had deep roots in Jewish and Eastern mysticism, and that surely included Neo-Platonism concepts. Christian and Islamic belief and understanding would also eventually influence the model.

It would become known as the Kabbalah, with core components known as the Sephiroth, which could be represented in what was called The Tree of Life. Contained within it were beautiful and magnificent insights into our common existence.

The Shrub

In my estimation, and despite some of its darker aspects, the Tree of Life remains one of humankind's most noble and majestic expressions, a spiritual synthesis of human thought and Divine inspiration. And it is right there in the open for all of us to see, even though the same forces which opposed it a thousand years ago are still conspiring against it.

As with most attempts to describe the indescribable, the Kabbalah is open to debate and interpretation. It certainly remains among the most debated concepts in some religious circles. For starters, there is not even agreement on how to spell it, (some prefer “C” as the first letter, others, “K”). So, in that regard, it is no different than any particular tenet of any religion, in that it gets too analyzed to be of much value. And, no doubt, one day there will be yet another war fought between factions of “Kabbalist truth.” I guess one could say there have already been such wars. Such an irony, because the Kabbalah and The Tree seek only to reveal a workable concept of the Divine and of our place within it. Nowhere does it profess to be the ultimate truth. And for sure, it is not perfect.

Now, I am far from being a pedigreed scholar or “learned expert.” I am more a brother of Quixote, Parsifal, Sisyphus and all other hapless ones who search without finding, or, finding, forget or fail to understand. And I sure do not seek to enter any debate or even to offer yet another interpretation of something already interpreted into oblivion. But as a former journalist, I can file an update on an evolving news story. And I could liken it in our understanding to a shrub, and to what could be known as the tree.

The Kabbalah’s Tree of Life attempts to offer an expansive, if not exclusive, view of what it means to be human. In short, it says there is a limit to what we know while we are here as mere shrubs, but that we can nonetheless observe that—

1. We are the Divine made manifest on the ground.
2. As such, we are holy.
3. As such, we simultaneously exist both here and elsewhere (in the Divine).
4. In a more esoteric sense, we are both male and female, as emanations of expression and reception, as it was at the beginning of all things (the singularity), when, out of the Ain (nothingness) came expression, and from the Soph (limitless) came a reception amid the manifestation of the Aur (Light).
5. We possess the dual male/female qualities of judgment and mercy, endurance and compassion, integrity and honesty, and the spark of energy of creation known as Love.
6. As energy coalesced into matter, so it became that matter returned to energy, and we stepped into the whirlwind on a progressive journey through individuation, discovery and eventual reunion.

The Ain Soph Aur

So, for the purposes of this report, my focus is on the part of the Tree of Life having to do with Ain Soph Aur (and yet another source of conflict, in that not everyone even agrees on the mere spelling of these three aspects!). Though stated in symbolic language, it is startlingly similar to modern scientific theory and the “singularity,” or Big Bang. It is a most interesting creation story to rival other ancient tales of our beginnings on Earth.

The lightning-struck wood, the lilac branches and the messages they carried came to represent for me the much larger theme of the Tree of Life. In one moment, these woods were part of a beautiful whole, but in one brief flash of intense light or as the result of one

species ingesting another, they were transformed into lone individuals destined for their own unique journeys.

I knew I was linked to them, as you and I and all things are linked, or expressed, as perhaps individual facets of one brilliant diamond, individual, yet joined. My linkage with these broken and damaged beings was deep and powerful, a partnership struggling for expression and survival in our various skins. I was not ready to help them back then because I had much to learn. Without fully knowing it, I was being led to study shamanism and the Tree of Life in order to understand these damaged and thought-to-be dead woods.

Today, like my understanding, these drums, lightning sticks, and jewelry I make are imperfect. There is much more to learn, more than can be learned. But they are symbolic of that which longs to exist and to be in union.

For example, the core of every lilac stick, every apple and most other trees and shrubs, tells the story of creation.

When you cross-cut a section (like those featured in the necklaces I offer from time to time), you see a small dot in the center. To ancient Kabbalists, the beginning of all things originated with a single dot, the Ain. Science reasons an identical principle in an originating dot of matter that exploded during the Big Bang of creation. Not surprisingly, the dot in a lilac core is most often not contained in perfect symmetry, but is irregular, as if it has broken its imprisoning boundary to join that which surrounds it. A receiving principle, the Soph (and latter becoming the concept of Sophia, the female principle), emanated around the Ain, the male, according to the Kabbalah, and from there the universe blossomed into existence with the Aur.

And when these principles are incorporated into service to others through the practice of spiritual ceremony with the use of these sacred wooden instruments and wearable symbols, there is an instantaneous flash of union that blossoms when matter joins spirit at the nexus of intention and creation.

That which was once destroyed by brilliant light and deafening sound can now echo the thunder of spiritual connection and healing. That which was once partially consumed can now reveal the pathways of its destruction in the expression of joyous union with truth and beauty. In short, that which is broken or destroyed or consumed can be reborn.

And if you study the past trajectory of creation stories, this all comports quite well.

As indicated earlier, science, at least for now, tells about how the Cosmos and then life began in violence at riotous, chaotic moments when an unknown energy catalyst detonated a previously inert brew of chemicals, acids and liquids. The terrible explosion, we are told, continues to fling debris (including us!) outward from the initial blast site, what was once an infinitesimally small pinprick of matter at the center of it all.

Sacred creation stories in some European traditions hold that a creator struck a stone which gave rise to the world, while in some Native American traditions, the formation and creation of the world began with a ball of mud on the back of a turtle. Western Christian creation stories acknowledge the beginning as starting with sound, when the Word of God becomes manifest in matter.

The Eastern Bon tradition of shamanism posits creation from an initial soft and flowing forth of the Five Pure Lights through a rift from nothingness.

A commonality among these and most other such stories is the recognition that creation started with energy, sometimes intense energy.

Interestingly, healing—which is a form of creation, or re-creation, since one is trying to re-create a state of health once enjoyed, is sometimes like that, too. It always requires energy, sometimes intense energy.

So, does healing have a creation story? If you are on the path of a shaman, you know the answer is yes!

To most shamans, the healing process they help try to create for someone who suffers begins with the energy of sacred sound— most times from a drum. The repetitious rhythm of drumming induces an altered state of consciousness which allows a shaman to journey beyond everyday reality and into what has been termed “non-ordinary reality,” where help may be obtained and returned to the person who suffers.

Drums made from and/or containing the wood of lightning-struck trees have been prized for their mystical, energizing and healing properties by many South and North American, European and Asian shaman healers for millenniums. They observed, as with many universal truths, what could appear to be a paradox: not only did the wood seem to retain some of the intense energy that had destroyed the tree of which it was a part, but the energy could actually be beneficially used to promote healing and to provide protection.

While these concepts may seem obtuse at best to some modern people, they are not unknown to or estranged from Western medical or religious institutions. Even medical science relies on instruments that produce bright light and sound to facilitate diagnosis and healing. Countless modern medical instruments came into being at the birth of the nuclear age when intense energy designed to destroy was also harnessed to aid healing. Many of these rely on crystals and microcrystalline principles to operate. All of these devices, too, can seem obtuse and mystical.

Lightning wood is no different. Most all trees grow in soil that contains some proportion of sand. From the time a sapling takes root, it begins assimilating microscopic particles of silica and quartz into its system. Thus, when a tree is struck by lightning, the sand it contains is fused into crystal. And crystals can resonate with, hold and transfer energy.

All modern religions contain mystical elements, many of which are viewed as commonplace among their worshipers. Such practices as communion, prayer, immersion, and so forth are easily recognized as containing intense mystical energy and power.

So, even though shamans do not necessarily think of their drums as either scientific or religious, they do acknowledge their drums as containing similar energies recognized by both science and religion.

And definitely, these energized drums, lightning sticks and jewelry contain the potential to aid in the creation of healing. What really turns them into spiritual healing aids, though, are the sparks of your own intentions in union with Spirit and a familiarity with what to do with them in a shamanic context.

Thus, in addition to the many other mystical attributes a shaman may connect with lightning, it is primarily seen as a helper that can light the way while energizing your intention to be of service when the drum or other lightning item is activated in ceremony. A more refined principle in action that is sometimes required during a healing session actually unites a high energy charge of one's intention with the intrinsic awesome power of lightning into a brilliant laser-like beam of pure Spirit. Powerful stuff.

While playing a lightning-struck drum to facilitate a "shamanic journey" or simply a state of relaxation or meditation, it is not unusual to encounter spontaneous and intense, bright flashes of light. Often, too, and because the drums are not symmetrical, their unique tonal patterns will actually be comprised of two or more simultaneous tones that can combine and resonate to suggest the sounds of different animals, many of which may have spent time in, on or around the tree when it was living. In the shamanic viewpoint, these voices can belong to actual spirit animals who can serve as spiritual guides or healing helpers.

It is not unusual to find even greater mystery connected to the sacred lightning items, whether drum, lightning stick or jewelry. Each of them was a vital part of a once living tree apparently struck down by lightning. This awesome energy force, both fearful and beautiful to behold, maintains its supremacy as both symbol and expression of primal destruction and creation. To shamans preferring a lightning tool originating from a lightning-struck tree, these twin powers of creation and destruction remain metaphorically and metaphysically present within the drum and are allied with his or her intention of confronting, transmuting and in some cases destroying powerful adversaries like disease, imbalance, disunity, and evil.

I teach a simple principle of all of this when I ask students to light a ceremony candle and recite, "Where there is light, darkness cannot dwell." Light can heal and protect, drawing us into union with all that is around us, and with All That Is.

To me, the great and powerful truths of life are seldom displayed majestically, but rather are made manifest in the simplest of ways, and are often hidden, say in the remains of a lightning-struck tree or in a simple lilac branch, or perhaps even in a crystal.

In the disputed (of course) Book of Thomas, it is simply stated. v3: “Rather,” Jesus said, “the Kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you.”*

Further, in v. 77 he says: “Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.”*

So what are we to think when lightning blasts a tree?

A shaman may seek union with it. A piece of wood and a stone. And sometimes that act transforms into a sacred drum intended to help people heal.

This rich tradition of celebrating life and of being in service to each other goes back to the very beginning, when the first male and female beheld the stormy dawn and its fearsome magnificence on the First Day.

NOTES:

1. There is much, much more than what I’ve outlined here, of course, and if you are interested, you can start with this link to a general Wikipedia overview of the Kabbalah: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree_of_life_%28Kabbalah%29#column-one#column-one

2. You can Google Fr. Charles Moore to discover a lot more about the history of Kabbalah and related subjects. It certainly informed my understanding to read about him and to absorb his work.

3. Jesus quotes from: The Gospel of Thomas (pages 300 – 307) contained in The Other Bible, Copyright 1984, by Willis Barnstone. HarperCollins Publisher. ISBN: 0-06-250030-9

4. Some interesting mainstream research on using electrical power of trees: http://archive.boston.com/news/local/articles/2006/03/19/canton_firms_alternative_to_oil_plug_in_to_a_tree/

<https://www.livescience.com/5711-electricity-harvested-trees.html>