

## 2 | The Arrow Tree

From *The Arrow Tree: Healing from Long COVID* by Phyllis Weliver



WHEN I was small, my mother and I would walk from our red front door past a white house to the corner of two paved streets, one running parallel to the lakeshore of Wahbeganess and the other leading perpendicularly toward Wahbeganetta. She would lift me up and set me on an oak tree bent by the Odawak into an arrow, pointing to our lake. It had a little bump on the horizontal bit, making a perfect saddle. A nub on the other side of the trunk from my perch proved it to be a manipulated tree; this knob indicated where it had been tied as a sapling in order to redirect its growth. White oaks like this live an average of three hundred years and can mature to around six hundred. As a young tree, it had been shaped so that its trunk grew first straight up from the ground, then bent at a right angle, and then reached for the heavens with branches like elongated fingers.

This tree connects my infant experiences with my adult life. In my walks through the years, I always check to make sure that it remains, a link among the generative care of mother and child, and also those who shaped it into a marker. Artist Ladislav R. Hanka's discussions with tribal elders of the Little Traverse Bands of Odawa Indians underpin his recognition that trees bent by the Odawak are cultural as well as trail markers, indicating "mostly [...] ancient trailways," but also "an auspicious crossroads" or a cemetery. In the narrative that accompanies an exhibit of his striking etchings, Hanka calls marker trees "a living link to that earlier time, before the long-reigning balance was tipped. They are icons and carry the trace of a biological memory accreted slowly with each year's ring of growth. They are real; you can touch them; they are alive; they are a worthy subject for art." The Interlochen bent tree's memory includes my gentle fingers, decades after the touch of the hands that shaped it. When I lay my palm on it now, perhaps it can feel my own tough survival of COVID-19. Like this crooked tree, I am "fierce in a way that demands recognition – reflecting the adversity they [and I] have survived" – from lightning to road crews (Hanka).

We have more in common, for my forename means "a green leaf or bough," from the Greek *phylon*. Before being associated with the pastoral shepherdess in Renaissance madrigals like John Farmer's "Fair Phyllis I saw Sitting all Alone" (1599), Phyllis was

immortalized respectively by Herodotus and Chaucer in a myth of metamorphosis. Transformed into an almond tree when she hung herself in the belief that her lover Demophoon had abandoned her, Phyllis reemerges in Edward Burne-Jones's painting of 1870 to reclaim Demophoon.

My name holds a transformation for me, too, for I share it with my maternal grandmother. She died two years before my birth. Love, honor, loss and lineage all cohabitate in this name. With this realization of matrilineal links, I wonder what is passed down, too, through the chemical transferences during pregnancy. For female fetuses have hundreds of thousands of eggs in their ovaries by the fourth month of development. Thus, when she was pregnant with my mother, Grandma Phyllis also carried the seeds of me and my brother in a sense. What cultural memories have entered our biology through grandmothers holding daughters along with grandchildren?

At a family funeral a few years ago, I spoke with people who remembered my grandmother. "What was she like?" I asked one woman who had been her student and also boarded with the family during her senior year in high school.

She didn't miss a beat. "You are her."

I gaped. That was unexpected.

Apparently, how I hold myself, speak and interact - these attributes are shared along with our name - as well as our interests and even ambitions. My grandmother, rather unusually for a woman in the early twentieth century, had an MA in English literature. Before her premature death in 1966, she was formulating a plan to return for her doctorate. In our family, this predilection for higher education in English literature seems to have passed through the female line and I have fulfilled my grandmother's dreams.

What does biological lineage mean for my own son who came to us through adoption? Because our son mirrors our facial expressions, he carries something in him of the emotional chemicals released by our joys and our stresses, too. But, as he would proudly tell you, he is rich in ancestry by having two families: one genetic (whose identity remains hidden because of Chinese policies) and the other formed with us through culture, lived memories and daily nurturing.

The solid tree upon which my mother set me pointed with its bent trunk to the lake and, with its green boughs ("Phyllis"), to matrilineal lineage. It spoke of mother's care: of playful walks and making up songs to sing together, of learning to pay attention to the feel of rough bark and the look of light streaming through the leaves.

Mom, too, found home in a tree, although in her case it was the countless hours spent climbing the purple beech in front of her childhood home. On her 35th birthday, my parents planted another purple beech outside the living room window of our house on Duck Lake. Mom found peace and her childhood in the wind rustling its leaves, and she glimpsed the future in her grandson hanging from its branches. Hollis, too, would prefer to be reading in a tree than standing on the ground.

Trail marker trees are like people who have depths that are not immediately apparent. Any passerby with knowledge of indigenous ways can read the significance of the bent tree in the woods. However, because my mother playfully sat me on it while simultaneously schooling me to pay attention to the look, feel, sound and smell of individual trees, it became part of my identity, heritage, manner of perception and subjective sense of self. While I climbed white pines in later years to play and read among their branches, this oak of which I made a steed continued to be *my* oak, not in the sense of ownership, but rather as a point of view. Because my family do not own the little wooded plot on which it grows, the arrow tree is all the dearer to me. I cannot protect it except by caring about it. I am concerned for its survival.

This tree, moreover, may not point in the direction that you think. The crooked oak to which my childish hands clung and patted seems to signpost the path between the two lakes. Frequently, kinked trees are simply “directional markers,” according to John Bailey, a citizen of the Grand River Bands of Ottawa Indians in Michigan. “They tell you, ‘We are heading north or headed west’” (cited in Puit). Certainly, this tree aligns with the east/west axis as well as the shortest portage between Wahbeganess and Wahbeganetta. However, when I discovered another such arrow tree which points south, roughly in the direction of my youthful saddle tree, I needed to reconfigure my mental map of the trail system. This newfound marker tree is preserved within a lawn, pointing parallel to the dirt road on which the house sits. Also a white oak, this arboreal signpost is about the same size and shape as the one from my childhood. Discovering this tree changed my conceptualization from a pathway between the two lakes to a trail through the trees, roughly along the Wahbeganetta shoreline. Thus the original arrow tree also indicates the woods through which you must pass alongside the water.

It takes observation and knowledge of the larger forest to see these details. When I mentioned the new trail marker to my mother, she expressed interest. She had not seen this tree in the lawn, but she told me of several along the lakeshore within the state park. In

a sense, many of these last have become ghost trees. We know of one extant white oak that continues to point south from a high bank along the shore. The rest have since fallen naturally or, if diseased, have been removed by the rangers. As trees within a first growth forest, we can be confident that they are, or were, older than the directional trees in our neighborhood, which were probably bent during the second growth reforestation at the turn of the twentieth century in order to blaze the trail afresh. In that sense, the tree of my youth was both itself and also the physical memory of earlier navigational trees. The arrow tree is a cultural sign of an intent to remain and to flourish again, despite the devastation of lumbering and forest fire.

Linked together, it would seem that perhaps there were two paths. The water route would seem to travel from the winter camp just north of the current state park, south along the state park shoreline and then turn inland for portage across the short spur of land between the two lakes that gives Interlochen its name. Geographically, this route makes sense as the quickest way to travel the network of waterways leading to Lake Michigan (it bypasses the Little Betsie River and the portage point on the Wahbekanetta shore is closer to the outlet of the Betsie River proper). Alternatively, the southern-pointing lawn tree indicates a land route through the forest, possibly an offshoot of the well-travelled Traverse City to Cadillac trail, established by at least the thirteenth century and now easily retraced by driving most of the fifty-five miles (see *Ettawagheshik*; *Crick*).

Upon reflection, as the oak tree means more than it first appears, my topic is more than that I once sat upon a tree. To the Odawak, the trail tree signified movement and navigation. It was also a testimony to the intent of the trail maker who wished to make the original way a frequented and continual path. Thus the tree communicated with future travelers. Existing in line with current roads, it reveals that we still follow these ancient ways. Eric Hemenway, Director of the Department of Reparation, Archives and Records for the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Ottawa Indians, reveals that more frequented paved roads also follow Indian trails, from Michigan Scenic Route 31 near us to large Interstates like 75 and 96 (Driscoll). The land is marked with the presence of the people who were, are and will be.

The arrow tree offers direction in my life, too. It points me along productive paths of knowing self through my forested surroundings. As I discover ancient trailways and a rich biodiversity in the woods, so can this time of healing be about perspective and fresh (in)sight.

Thus new growth sometimes arises from what at first feels destructive.



This summer in Michigan, we three family members strung brightly colored hammocks between trees like multicolored ribbons of navy, forest green, baby blue and orange. We sprayed on mosquito repellent and spent hours reading, napping or simply observing the surrounding world. Gazing up, I discovered the lively community that existed above: birds sitting on branches and squirrels daringly leaping from veritable twigs, swaying as they caught a skinny branch on the next tree. Chattering to one another, they splayed vertically on the trunk, whisking their tails in warning of my presence or that of the cat. To all sides, there was the green of pines and deciduous trees, a rich foliage with a small vee through which the lake could be glimpsed below the bluff....

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