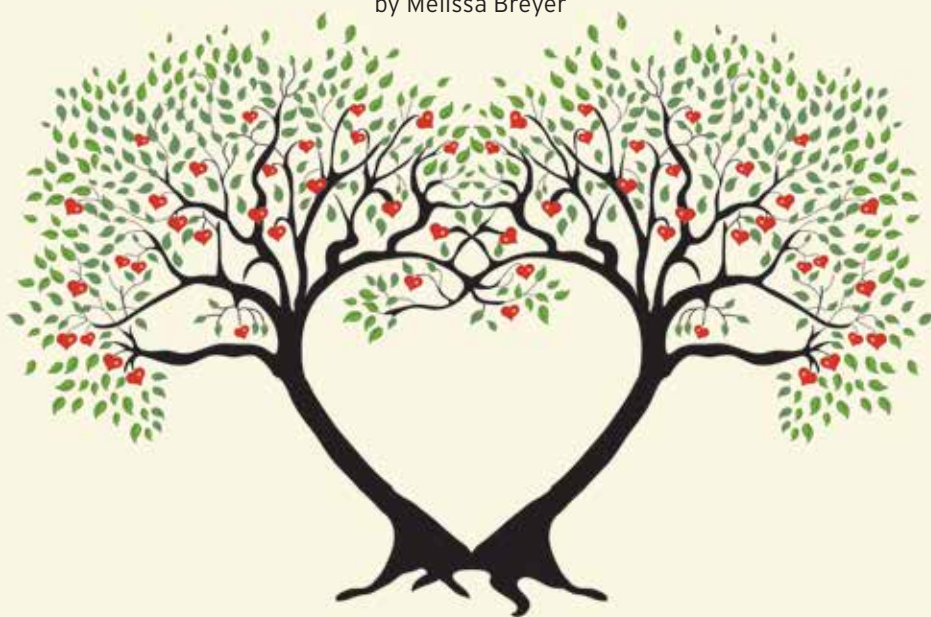


Tree-mendous Love

How Trees Care for Each Other

by Melissa Breyer



ImagePlus/Shutterstock.com

From learning to communicate to physically caring for each other, the secret lives of trees are wildly deep and complex. “They can count, learn and remember; nurse sick neighbors; warn each other of danger by sending electrical signals across a fungal network known as the ‘wood wide web’; and keep the ancient stumps of long-felled companions alive for centuries by feeding them a sugar solution through their roots,” reveals Peter Wohlleben, a German forest ranger and author of *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from a Secret World*, released in September.

Upon seeing two soaring beeches in the forest, Wohlleben observes, “These trees are friends. See how the thick branches point away from each other? That’s so they don’t block their buddy’s light. Sometimes, pairs are so interconnected at the roots that when one tree dies, the other one dies, too.”

Wohlleben is rekindling a re-imagining of trees even as many people consider their role is only to supply us with oxygen and wood. Using a mix of scientific research and his own observations from studying forestry and working in the forest since 1987, the man who speaks for the trees does so in decidedly anthropomorphic terms.

“Scientific language removes all the emotion, and people don’t understand it anymore. I use a human language. When I say, ‘Trees suckle their children,’ everyone knows immediately what I mean,” he says.

After years of working for the state forestry administration in Rhineland-Palatinate, and then as a forester managing 3,000 acres of woods near Cologne, he began to understand that contemporary practices were not serving the trees or those that depend on them very well. Artificially spacing out trees ensures that trees get more sunlight and grow faster, but naturalists report that trees exist less like individuals and more as communal beings. By working together in networks and sharing resources, they increase their resistance to potentially damaging influences.

After researching alternative approaches, Wohlleben began implementing some revolutionary concepts. He replaced heavy machinery with horses, stopped using insecticides and let the woods become wilder. The pilot German forest plot went from losing money to posting a profit in two years.

As Dr. Seuss’ tree-loving Lorax says, “I speak for the trees. I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues.”

Melissa Breyer, of Brooklyn, NY, is the editor of Treehugger.com from which this article was adapted.