



CONFESSIONS OF A TREE HUGGER

"How did the 70s differ from our own times?" There is a 65 year gap between me and the person sitting across the desk taking notes. How can I answer her question? First, I wonder what are "MY own times"? Next, I realize that in many ways I would like to forget about the 70s. The face of Richard Nixon looms large in my imagination. The 60s were not all happy hippie times either. There was a downside which slowly grew and erupted in the next decade and which, it could be argued, is still with us.

There was a mixture of strong movements in the 70s. On the one hand, there was a Conservative Backlash of the "silent majority" to things like the Summer

of Love in 1967. There was no way these folks would put some flowers in their hair and come to San Francisco — as The Mamas & The Papas urged. On the other hand were the growing fight of marginalized people to gain equality for; women, African Americans, Latinx, LGBTQ, the disabled and others.



In the political arena polarization was rampant — as it is today. President Lyndon Johnson, who preceded Nixon, focused on poor people. Nixon's policies favored the middle class who felt ignored by Johnson's “War on Poverty.” And there were many other issues separating citizens; the Vietnam War and constant protest against it, the AIDS pandemic, the Watergate scandal, Nixon's impeachment and resignation, meltdowns at nuclear power plants, etc. etc.

There were rough times in the 70s. Take the antiwar movement for example. In 1970 when Nixon invaded Cambodia, thousands of protesters took to the streets and on college campuses. On May 4, 1970 National Guardsmen shot four student demonstrators during an antiwar rally at Kent State University in Ohio. A few days later police officers killed two African American student protesters at Mississippi's JacksonState University. Congress attempted to limit the president's power by revoking the resolution authorizing the use of military force but Nixon simply ignored Congress. Even after the *New York Times* published the Pentagon Papers which called the government's justification for war into question, the bloody conflict went on until 1973. But it did not end there. There were many long term wounds to the bodies and psyches of men and women who had been thrown into that war.



Are there some parallels between 2019 and the 70s? It certainly feels like it, which is probably why I am reluctant to look back on those days.

It was such a tumultuous time in the 70s that many people eventually just withdrew from political concerns and found their own private ways to happiness. Some of these were very destructive, others were pretty good.



The environmental movement took its first baby steps in the 70s. Americans celebrated their first Earth Day in 1970. The U.S. Forest Service had Woodsy Owl who would interrupt Saturday cartoons to remind kids to *“Give a Hoot; Don't Pollute.”*

Our Sister Marti (1939–2016) was an early advocate of the “Back to the Land” movement following the example of many others like Wendell Berry (1934–). She was particularly concerned about the environment for the children living with us, many of whom had major challenges. We moved from San Francisco's



Haight–Ashbury District to a bucolic corner of Sonoma County in 1976. That's when tree-hugging came into our lives.

Friends from the cities began coming out to visit. Many were very involved in the frustrating political struggles of the day. A fair number of them were veterans. They were just looking for some simple way to bring more balance in their lives. We had a lot of trees. We would just urge people to put their arms around one of them.

There is something quite powerful that happens when a person does that. I would suggest that people talk to the tree, tell the tree about their frustrations and disappointments. And next to sit down and lean against the tree, feel the strength of this living co-inhabitant of our

planet.

I actually thought we had invented a meditative process. But through the years, I learned about people doing this for a long time before us in many different places.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1926 –), the Zen Master and Vietnamese peace activist encouraged tree hugging in 1966,

In my hermitage I have planted beautiful trees. When I do walking meditation, I often stop and hug one of the trees, breathing in and out. It's very nourishing. The tree gives a strength, and it also seems to be that the tree responds to my hugging and breathing.



What is so special about a tree? Why not just lean against a concrete wall? I think it has something to do with the difference between how we look at time and a tree's experience of time.

My good friend Katherine, one of the great tree planters of Starcross, gave me a book entitled *The Hidden Life of Trees*, written by Peter Wohlleben, a forester in Germany's Eifel Mountains. The book begins by calling attention to a spruce tree in Scandinavia which is more than 9,500 years old. It would be living the equivalent of more than 115 average human lifetimes. As the book puts it, *"Creatures with such a luxury of time on their hands can afford to take things at a leisurely pace."* Compare this to the concept of time in New York City.



There is something breathtaking about being next to one of these ancient trees. We have destroyed many of them but in California there is still a redwood that is 379 feet high. And once in Palestine I saw an olive tree with an enormous trunk. I was told it was a young tree when Jesus of Nazareth would have walked on the nearby roadway. The tree still produces olives. Did I sit under its branches? Yes. I have the feeling that in some manner trees are inviting us to engage with them for a moment — to connect with their concept of time. As Thich Nhat Hanh would probably put it, let us set aside our frantic pace and simply breathe in and breathe out.



There have been times in my life when I had major questions about what to do and where to go. Sometimes I took those questions and that anxiety to a tree.



I embraced it. I sat down and leaned against it. I spoke to it. I listened to it. When I stood up I was at peace and my questions had turned to answers. Can I explain this? No. But I do believe there is great wisdom in the concluding advice in the book Katherine gave me,

When you take your next walk in the forest, give free reign to your imagination — in many cases, what you imagine is not so far removed from reality, after all!

Brother Toby