

Tree Music

Dana Lyons

2005

When I was 26, needing to rest after injuring my back while landscaping, I realized that I would much rather relax in the forest of Washington's Olympic Peninsula than in Seattle. So I drove out to Graves Creek Campground on the Quinalt River, and spent four days reading and playing my guitar next to a giant Douglas Fir tree. At the end of the four days, right before I left to return home, the song "The Tree" came flowing out. I looked up at the big Douglas Fir and said "I bet this is your song."

For years after that I'd sing "The Tree" and mention that I thought it was the big Douglas Fir's song. It seemed like a nice thought, and as the concept of a tree having "a song" had never come up in my scientifically oriented Western education, I only light-heartedly believed it.

A few years later I was invited to a celebration on Orcas Island, where the Lummi Indians and their allies had succeeded in saving a place called Madrona Point, where a developer had hoped to build condominiums on top of a Lummi Indian burial ground. After a 10-year battle, the United States Congress appropriated money to buy the land and give it back to the Lummi people.

The celebration was held at the Oddfellows hall on Madrona Point near Eastsound. Several hundred people gathered from the Lummi Reservation and Orcas Island. There was a huge potluck feast with salmon and berry pies and salads and fried bread. Spirits were high and children ran around everywhere.

The man who invited me to the celebration then told me that the chief wanted me to sing "The Tree." I expressed reluctance, however, unsure whether this quiet song could be heard over the clanking dishes and spirited children. My friend simply restated, "The chief would like to hear 'The Tree.'"

After I was introduced, the place quieted down and I began to sing, noticing immediately something that had never happened before at one of my concerts. While everyone seemed to be enjoying the tune, the elder Lummi were riveted, holding on to every note, every word. I felt honored that they would care so much about this song. Afterwards I spoke with the chief and several elders. I told them the story of spending four days with the old Douglas Fir tree by the Quinalt River and how I had always thought it was the Tree's song.

"It is," said the chief, "I recognize the tune. It is a song from a tree in our region. In Lummi tradition, and for many of the peoples of this region, we get our music from trees. Each tree has its own song. We go out and spend three or four days next to a tree where we fast and pray and listen for that tree's song. We take the song and sing it or play it on the flute. In this era when so many of our ancient trees are being cut down, we go out and learn their songs before they die, as a way of honoring the great trees. We are working to save the last remaining ancient groves on our territory."

I have never looked at a tree in the same way since then. I have never looked at any creature in the same way since then.

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Further Reading

Lyons, Dana. *The Tree*. Bellevue, WA: Illumination Arts, 2002.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GD43c-UXk9I>

The Ted K Archive

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Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature.

<religionandnature.com/ern/sample/Lyons-tm.pdf> & <thetedykarchive.com>

Dana Lyons is an American folk and alternative rock musician, who wrote and performed the 1996 comedic folk song “Cows With Guns”.

www.thetedykarchive.com