

An Evergreen Image of Hope

The tree stands at the center of the world, at the center of human imagination, its roots reaching deep into our soul and psyche, its limbs reaching high into the heavens, cradling our immeasurable aspirations.



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Along the avenue on Manhattan's Upper Westside the Christmas-tree vendors had staked out pieces of sidewalk real estate, where the trees, evergreen but rootless on the unyielding concrete, stood leaning against makeshift railings. Caught up in the evening tide of foot traffic streaming past, I breathed the first fragrant herald of the holiday season, as the scent of fresh-cut pine trees flooded my senses with memories of Christmases past: of the annual

hunt, father and sons, for the perfect seven footer those crisp winter evenings on Christmas-tree lots in Compton, California; and sometimes having to settle for what dad could afford – a four-foot tree, raised to the stature of its aspirations on a folding card table we draped with white sheets like a blanket of snow.

The trees of those tender seasons seem far removed from the towering spectacle in Rockefeller Plaza: Ablaze in a constellation of 30,000 multi-colored lights, it commands attention and inspires awe like a burning bush before the throngs of pilgrims who have come to witness its wonder. But the humble conifers at the street vendor's stand call out to us with iconic simplicity and intimations redolent of hope, new birth and life eternal. *What child is this, who, laid to rest...* my ear unconsciously supplies the lyrics missing from the melodic strains of "Greensleeves" on the vendor's battered cassette player. Trees and seasons come and go, but the idea of the tree – like the aromatic essence of forest pines – is evergreen and timeless.

The season at our house had never officially begun until the tree was brought home and our hands were sticky with pine sap from stringing and restringing lights through its boughs, adorning its branches with ornaments and tinsel and flocking it all with frothy fake snow from an aerosol can to

simulate a white Christmas in California. Nat King Cole's silken, smoky voice making memories out of nothing in our West Coast experience – "chestnuts roasting on an open fire," "Jack Frost nipping at your nose"; Charles Brown singing, "Merry Christmas, Baby, you sure did treat me right," and sounding a little too mellow to be believed when he swears, "I haven't had a drink this morning, but I'm all lit up like a Christmas tree." Such was the warm spirit that enriched our home around the rituals of Christmas.

Whatever our circumstances, the tree would unleash such hopes and dreams that I'm sure both delighted and distressed our parents, who were quick to remind us our name was not Vanderbilt. But anticipation was catching, intoxicating, making even mundane things a sensory delight. Everything seemed new again and shining with possibility. Hope was a child reborn in all of us; an animating, vivifying spirit that spread from children to adults; a paradise lost, suddenly regained in innocence, exuberance, devilment and laughter. These are the real gifts given and received around what once was known as the paradise tree.

Paradise plays, once performed throughout Europe during the Advent season, told the story of the human race, from Adam and Eve to the birth of Jesus. And center stage, a great evergreen tree hung with apples symbolized the Garden of Paradise. From this came the custom of bringing home a "paradise tree" laden with gifts for the new-born Christ child in all of us, awakened in the spirit of giving.

But the first tree, the tree that stands at the center of the world, at the center of human imagination, is of ancient, immemorial origin. Its roots reach deep into our soul and psyche. Its limbs reach high into the heavens, cradling our immeasurable aspirations. Reaching is ingrained in its very being and in the deep longing of all life to rise up and embrace the sun. Seen silhouetted against the line of the horizon, it forms our oldest image of the cross, fused at the intersection of spirit and matter, where life and spirit struggle up toward the light against gravity, which drags matter down to the grave.

At the winter solstice on December 22nd, through the longest night of the year, this archetype of trees stands evergreen in our collective memory, rising even through the winter-white shroud of snow to bear witness to the rebirth of the Sun, the moment at which the days begin to lengthen, bringing warmth and light and new life. Throughout the world we have celebrated this rebirth by lighting candles on the tree. The symbolism is universal: sun and tree, Son of the Sun, reaching up toward the Father. "I am the light of the world," quotes John; "the Sun of righteousness," wrote Malachi.

From the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge to the trees bearing the golden apples in the Garden of Hesperides; from the sycamore that gave birth to the rising sun, Horus, to the tree on which Christ was crucified and the world made new; from the bodhi tree the Buddha sat under to the Yuletide tree of lights, trees have been a symbol of hope in all times and cultures, inspiring us with blossoming new life; transforming sunlight, earth and water into the air we breathe and the fruit we eat, into shade and shelter. In a world of wars and other unnecessary noise, their abiding grace is a silent prayer for peace on earth, the only known garden paradise in all the universe, trampled and desecrated. Let the seeds of that peace take root in the minds and hearts of men of good will.