

A Late-Night Interview with the Trees

by

Robert Rietschel, June 9, 2023

On Late-Night tonight, Johnny Appleseed will interview a selection of his favorite trees. And now, here's Johnny.

Johnny: I've done my share of time trying to improve the world by planting lots and lots of trees. Mostly Apple, but I've done others as well. Up until now, I've let the world think this was all about the food supply. But tonight, I'll let the cat out of the bag. I'll blow my cover. All along I've been trying to increase the amount of intelligent life on this planet, one tree at a time. That's right. I've been secretly trying to increase the IQ of every state I've passed through, and I did that by planting trees. My first guests are Oak and Beech. Welcome and tell us about your families.

Oak and Beech: We're highly social and we like to snuggle up. People are always trying to give us space and planting us far apart. That's not our style. We like to lean on each other. We like our branches to overlap and our crowns to touch. We draw strength from each other.

Johnny: How so?

Oak and Beech: We share our sugar. You folks have to walk next door and beg for a cup of sugar. Not us. We are connected by our root structure, and we share all the time. It's a matter of principle with us. We are stronger together. Together we can fend off high wind as we can put up more resistance. When one of our team is under the weather and having trouble making sugar, we send supplements to make sure everyone has enough. No need to ask, we just know and make it happen.

Johnny: And you do that by your roots making connections?

Oak and Beech: You might say we have underground utilities. Like our plumbing is designed to make us a community. We are a community, and we understand our interdependence. You have a saying about how a chain is no stronger than its weakest link, well, we live by that credo. We don't understand why this is such a hard concept for you humans.

Johnny: Well, some humans would call that communism or socialism, and those are considered undesirable.

Oak and Beech: Isn't survival desirable?

Johnny: We say that survival of the fittest is what's desirable.

Oak and Beech: We think that over the centuries our community will survive if it maintains diversity. Most of our senior citizens are well over 100 years old, some 400 years old, and the most senior members all have stories of how a once weak member helped the community get through a rough spell. Sometimes it was fending off predators, sometimes it was alerting us to danger before we might have otherwise noticed.

Johnny: How does that work? How do you know when there is danger afoot?

Oak and Beech: We mentioned our underground utilities. They include our version of the world wide web. Our secret network is formed from fungal filaments. They carry our messages. It is true that our leaf systems send signals at only about one inch every three seconds, but when that signal gets to the root system, it gets distributed over the fungal broadcasting system and the whole forest knows that trouble has been spotted. Like a herd of deer coming to feast on our saplings or acorns. If we know they are near, we will hold off on mating.

Johnny: Wait. You time your mating? How does that work? I'm having trouble wrapping my mind around trees mating in the first place.

Oak and Beech: We have a sixth sense and we know that deer will eat our acorns and nuts that represent our next generation, so we don't want to just drop our future generation to fatten up some deer, so we hold off, sometimes for a couple of years to thin the deer population before we use our energy to grow and drop those nuts that will become our future generation. You might consider it a form of the rhythm method of reproduction. Now, not all trees practice this.

Johnny: OK, so you delay mating to increase survival. Are all trees like that?

Oak and Beech: Give us some credit. We're the smartest living things in the forest. We make every effort to ensure genetic diversity. We don't like inbreeding. If we allowed for inbreeding, we'd be susceptible to being wiped out by some pest or virus. Our willow cousins have male and female trees, and they use bees to get the pollen from one to the other. Most of us use wind, but those guys use bees. They like to grow near other fragrant flowers to increase the likelihood of interaction with bees. The boy trees bloom two weeks before the girl trees to try to increase the chances of genetic diversity. That timing makes it less likely that nearby trees will mix their genes. And then there's the Mountain Ash. Those guys are the scientists in our world. They have been doing DNA testing eons before you humans.

Johnny: Mountain Ash trees do DNA testing?

Oak and Beech: They most certainly do. They have both male and female sex organs on the same bloom and when the male pollen starts growing a tube down the bloom to seek a female ovule, the tube that is growing down is DNA tested and if it tests as self-pollinated, it is blocked from accessing the female. If the pollen is from another tree with different DNA, the tube connects with the female ovule, and we have what you might call a happy ending.

Johnny: Genetic testing in such a compact package? How?

Oak and Beech: It's a Mountain Ash thing, you wouldn't understand. We told you the trees were the smartest beings in the forest.

Johnny: And I said, I was spreading trees to improve the IQ of the places I'd been. I guess I had no idea how advanced your society was.

Oak and Beech: Yes. We've been communicating with those flying saucers that transit the night skies. And no, we won't tell you how? Well, maybe just a hint. Pheromones. We can say more with a smell than you can say in a paragraph.

Johnny: Isn't that how you ward off predators?

Oak and Beech: It's one of our ways. Sometimes we turn our leaves bitter. The ETs in those flying saucers understand our various scents and we've worked out ways to use our chlorophyll to read their green light signals. It's above your pay grade. The ETs don't want to communicate with you humans because you fail to grasp the universal oneness of creation. You don't cooperate. They like communicating with most of us. We do have our black sheep, however. There's a bunch of trees up in the northeast that used to thrive on acid rain. Some complained about it, but the ones who survived were the ones who liked acid. They have acid flashbacks to this day. And when they do, they get all trippy and talk nonsense. The ETs don't tolerate fools gladly and they have called us out on having corruptible members among us. We asked them if they didn't have miscreants in their midst and they sheepishly admitted that they did.

Johnny: What distinguishes a miscreant ET?

Oak and Beech: They are the ones who keep picking up rural humans for rectal probing.

Johnny: You mean those nutty stories in the Weekly World News are true?

Oak and Beech: The ETs swear it's only a small number of their group and they only do it under the influence of moonshine.

Johnny: I think this interview better end. If this conversation keeps going, I don't think there will be anyone claiming intelligence on this stage.

Tune in tomorrow when Johnny's guests will be Elm and Maple. Will it be the streets or the trees?
Tune in and find out.

Click here to email your comments to Bob: rrietschel@aol.com