

Cell phones, Celebrity hairstyles, Bonsai and Ancient Mysteries

By Andrew Smith

It's a cell-phone world, and I could call you on mine right now, if I had your number, and if your phone was on, and if there was cell service here. There isn't cell service here though, but undoubtedly there will be someday, probably soon, because everyone knows that progress is better and they wouldn't leave us alone anyway; even if it wasn't. Technology is going to finally make it possible for all of us to keep in touch all the time; if not keep in touch with each other, at least keep in touch with our cell phones and other shiny electronic gizmos; so we can walk around in crowded cities avoiding each others eyes and getting hourly tweets about the hottest celebrity hairstyles at the rehab center, and which newly reformed star has found his or herself, or possibly both, and will be featured on the next cover of Parade Magazine.

That's what I think about THAT anyway, which just shows, I suppose, that I have a natural talent for irritability and going against the grain. That used to be called "grit" and it was considered a virtue. I'm not sure it is considered a virtue anymore, and I'm not sure it's even a useful trait to have in a cell-phone world. You can drive right up to McDonalds and get anything you want for a few dollars without even getting out of your car; so what's the use of scowling about it?

But I've walked out on the Mormon Trail, in the great Wyoming desert, and been amazed at how those people crossed that desert, pushing everything they owned in handmade wooden wheelbarrows across a silent, desolate and unforgiving land. Those people didn't have cell phones, but they had grit: they had to have it or they never would have had the guts to go. Every morning when they got up they knew that it might be the last morning they ever got to get up; but they didn't go back to bed; they got up and kept going.

Kudos to them. Actually though, I don't think they had any more grit or stubbornness than you or I do, or any ten-year-old video game king for that matter. The only difference is that they knew they had it. They were intimately familiar with their own ability to clench their jaws and keep going because life frequently put them in a spot where their only possible salvation was their undying stubbornness and refusal to give up. I can still feel that stubbornness alive in me today, but when I drive up and order a cheeseburger and a minute later I get a cheeseburger, I don't quite know what to do about it. I feel like I should go inside and yell at the manager, but it's just an old habit, like a wooden wheelbarrow, long obsolete. I got my cheeseburger, but somehow, sadly, missed the battle for it. And a vague sense of confusion haunts me as I chew my food.

But I was always socially awkward.

The modern world, as advanced and amazing as it is, sometimes does not seem to satisfy my most basic instincts. I'm just an over-educated animal in Wal-Mart pajamas. Though I curse them, I desperately need to feel the cold rain, the cutting wind and the burning sun. I can't live too long under pale fluorescent lights, even the new compact seven-dollar ones. I need to bite down and taste blood. It may not be right, but it's the way I am.

Despite its much-noted wonder, all our bright technology sometimes just seems like a wound on my soul.

Bonsai, surprisingly, is the salve that soothes my wound. I don't know why that is; but it is. At the end of the day, when I go out to water my trees and walk among them, I feel at home, I feel I am among friends; they are silent, and I don't have anything to say; we share water, beauty, and the fading sun.

I sometimes feel there's something dark in bonsai that is healing, but "dark" has a negative connotation, being opposed to "light" as a common symbol of evil. It's interesting to note however, that in the Bible, "Lucifer," the ultimate symbol of evil, means, "light." But rather than dark, perhaps I should say there is something mysteriously silent in bonsai that is healing.

Silence is the absolute opposite of our modern cell-phone world. Silence is a lack of information, a lack of updates, a lack of entertaining chatter. To know silence I have to give up constantly seeking new knowledge, for at

least a while. Knowledge is the noise of the modern world; silence is what came before.

And once-in-a-while, if I can really drop everything and become silent myself, then it's like seeing a world scrubbed clean, seeing with the eyes of a child, ignorant, empty of knowledge; yet full of unexplainable wonder. And that, maybe, is what I really love about bonsai: that it still allows me access to the mystery of the world.

I could plant my shiny, beeping cell phone in the dark ground and all I'd get is some rust, faded plastic and a little toxic residue that wouldn't last a generation. But take a tiny redwood seed, smaller than a freckle, and plant it in that same dark ground and if conditions are favorable you'll get a miraculous green sprout, bursting from the soil on some spring day. And if conditions stay favorable it will keep growing and growing long past the time when you've returned to the ground yourself, and possibly in a thousand years, long after there are any cell phones left in the world, it will be 300 feet tall and as wide as a river at the bottom and still a relative youngster by redwood standards. You'd say, "wow!" if you were around to see it.

When I go out and water my trees, or work with them, they give me some connection to something beyond myself. I can care for them, I can prune them, I can shape them, I can even make a mistake and kill them; but I cannot create them. They are from a level deeper than I can reach. Like myself, their origin and destiny is unknown.

I love to sit before a really great old bonsai tree and appreciate its beauty and character. But even beauty gets static after awhile and I can only look at it for so long. There's something else there that holds me though, something silent and without a name, something I'm not fully aware of except that I don't feel it as much other places. Maybe it's just that they are alive, and all they do is live without complaining, sometimes for many centuries. So they seem peaceful. And I know that on some level we must have something in common, though we are nothing alike.

There really is a mystery to our lives, and I like to stay as close to it as I can. I feel happy when I am aware of it and sad when I am not. It's an ancient, timeless thing, not bound by past, present or future. It's like something that could very well be a dream, or could very well not be a dream at the same

time. If a cell phone gets you there, by all means use a cell phone. It hasn't worked for me, but we don't have cell service here yet, though undoubtedly we will soon.