Blue Door Press

Learning To Breathe With Trees

By

Sarah Salway

a place close to home
becomes important as Sarah begins to recover from Covid-19

You have to breathe properly,' Richy, the Filipino nurse, tells me on my first night in the COVID isolation ward, his visor misting up with his own breath. 'You are too shallow. If you leave here, you need to put yourself out in the world more. Breathe. Breathe.'

Covid isolation ward: patient's eye view

While I'm deep breathing – slowly in through the nose, puffing out through the mouth, putting myself out there – I remember reading that every window in this hospital is supposed to look out at a tree. Somehow I manage to shuffle to the window but all I can see is a concrete courtyard and two people smoking by some bins. Determined to see some nature, I stand on tiptoes, squashing my head sideways against the glass. Ah, there it is, the top of something that looks like a….

‘What are you are doing?’ Richy has come into my room without me hearing him. A feat indeed in full PPE. ‘You’ll exhaust yourself. Get back to bed.’ I remember his ‘if’ and not ‘when’ about going home, and go back to practising my breathing.

‘All I can see is a concrete courtyard’

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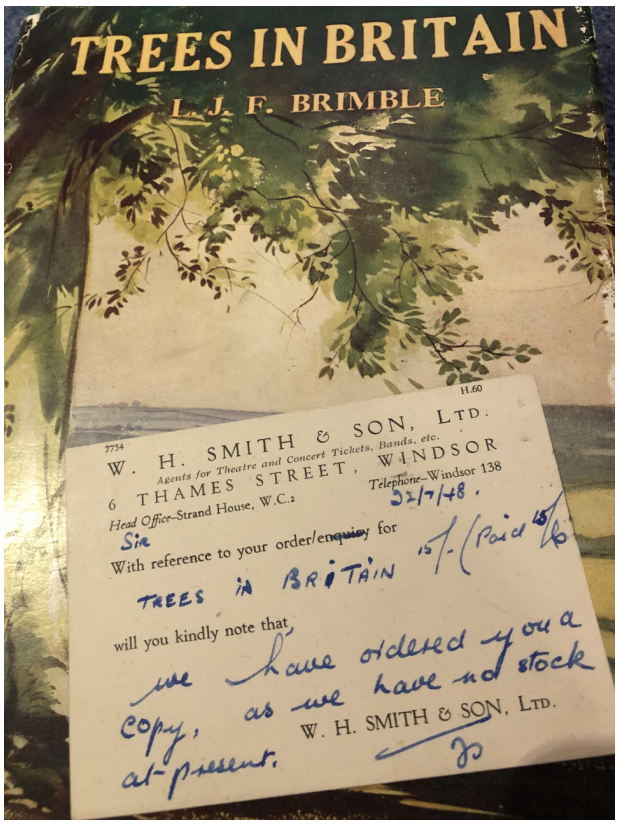
The Grove, a small park behind my house was given to Tunbridge Wells by the Duke of Buckingham in the seventeenth century. It was planted thickly and mostly with oaks as somewhere for visitors to promenade when they were tired of gambling.

After the 1987 hurricane destroyed many of the park’s trees, other varieties were planted. Before Covid, I had a plan to identify them all, and had bought an old hardback book, *Trees in Britain* by L J F Brimble from our local charity bookshop.

It was only when I'd got home that a postcard fell out – the original handwritten order from W H Smith & Son of Thames Street, Windsor, dated 22nd July 1948. I was intrigued to see it was addressed to D H Hardwick of the Military Wing of Harefield County Hospital in Uxbridge. That's interesting, I thought, putting it aside to investigate when I had more time.



'It was only when I'd got home that a postcard fell out – the original handwritten order from W H Smith & Son'

One of the common symptoms of the Corona Virus is a difficulty in breathing, but doctors are finding some patients have *Silent Hypoxia*, the medical term for when someone has dangerously low oxygen levels but is still able to function. This is the case with me.

I'm hesitant about ringing 111 at first but once the paramedics arrive and test me, it takes just minutes before I'm in an ambulance. From my seat in the back, I hear fragments from urgent sounding telephone calls, 'Red route,' 'Need to be quick', and I wonder which poor person they are talking about. Then I realise it's me. An hour later I'm in a hospital bed on oxygen, remaining there for six days.

When I eventually come out, it is to a different world. The country's in lockdown because to touch someone could be to kill them and we are only allowed out one hour a day. I'm still frail anyway, so it is enough for me to totter round The Grove barely noticing the trees. But doing the same route daily means I'm aware of how much stronger I am getting as the weeks creep by. Like many others, I also start to hunger more for nature.

‘Was this tree always this colour?’ a man asks me during one walk. He’s standing by a copper birch, its rich purple leaves showcased by the smooth grey bark. I tell him I can’t remember, but has he seen the Christmas tree blossoms on the horse chestnut? We agree that all the trees are particularly amazing this year.

It seems the perfect time to go back to my plan of learning the trees in the park by name. I get out my old book, and the postcard falls out again.

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It’s easy to find out about Harefield Hospital, the address my book was originally sent to. It’s now one of the ‘lost hospitals of London’ but was once the home of an Australian family, the Billyard-Leakes. They’d offered it to the Australian government in wartime for the treatment of injured Australian and New Zealand soldiers, and by 1940 it had gained an international reputation for treating disease and injury to the lungs and oesophagus.

D H Hardwick, the man, takes longer to track down. Eventually I find out he was an officer of the Royal Air Force Voluntary Reserve, winning the Distinguished Flying Cross during the Battle of Arnhem. This was a brutal battle and out of nearly 9,000 men taking part from the 1st Airborne Regiment (which my D H Hardwick as Flight Officer belonged to) only 2,000 came home. So the man who first owned my tree book had officially been a survivor.

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And now I am one too. Apparently I have ‘battled’ through, I’m a ‘warrior’, and I’ve won the ultimate medal for 2020: ‘Covid Survivor’. But when I talk to others who have shared my experience of being admitted to hospital, we agree that we were never in a state to fight anything, and if there’s a metaphor that works better for us than war language, it’s the idea of a computer virus. Our bodies have been contaminated with unsafe messages rushing through our veins. So much of what we thought we knew – such as how to breathe – has to be wiped clean before we can function again.

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Stalking D H Hardwick online proves to be the perfect gentle distraction as I recover. From military websites, I’ve found out his first names were Dennis Henden and he was born in Auckland in 1917. In fact, he was one of many New Zealanders who joined the Royal Air Force, and his squadron was involved with the SOE, or Special Operations Executive. He was also described as a ‘surveyor’, which probably involved him staking out enemy territory. What I still find most interesting about him though was how, while he was recovering in a hospital so far from home and several years after the war had ended, he had ordered a book so he could learn more about English trees.

It seems an almost heroic curiosity, and makes me ashamed of how I’ve always been too busy to bother learning my own landscape properly. There are so many things we take for granted until we nearly lose them. Every day now, my phone fills with

photographs of flowers and skies from friends, and I study every one closely as if the natural world is a book I need to translate. Images of trees fill me with special delight.

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My daily breathing exercises seem to be helping. Although it looks as if one of my lungs may have some permanent damage, my oxygen levels are nearly back to normal. However on a Whatsapp group imaginatively called, 'Covid Survivors', we talk openly about PTSD and panic attacks. It's the sort of thing none of us can discuss easily with friends and family, because we're aware of how much they want us to be back to 'normal'.

I think of my father who never talked about his war experiences, and I can understand better why this was now. His bad memories were a living reminder that trauma not only sticks around, but may even be contagious. We are luckier nowadays, and in my Whatsapp group, we share the names of our therapists, talking about how they help by letting us go over everything to someone who isn't emotionally involved. We don't want to upset our families, or as one member calls everyone who hasn't had the virus, 'the civilians'.

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Dennis Hardwick flew a Stirling IV. I know this because, during one of my internet searches, I find a photograph he is credited with taking of this plane. It looks like a bulky insect, and I imagine it buzzing through the trees, dropping spies into enemy territory like eggs. I read his citation for when he received the Distinguished Flying Cross. In 1944, he was flying to drop supplies to British ground forces in Holland when his aircraft was hit, killing one member of the crew and wounding another. The aircraft went out of control, diving steeply, but Dennis succeeded in levelling out. The citation says, 'Although the damaged aircraft was difficult to control this resolute pilot flew it to base and made a safe landing. Flying Officer Hardwick displayed commendable skill and coolness in hazardous circumstances.' Even though it's ridiculous to be proud of someone with whom you have no connection, I can't help stroking my/his book. *Well done*, I whisper to it.

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A few years ago I went to a workshop on Natural Navigation for a magazine article I was writing about getting lost. We were a diverse group, brought together only by a desire to learn how to find our way using clues from nature. In our introductions, one man announced he was a pilot. He could navigate anywhere in the sky, he said, but on land he was always getting lost.

I think of Dennis Hardwick as rather like that pilot. Still in a Military Hospital in 1948, unlikely to fly again, he must have been navigating a way through his new landscape tree by tree by tree.

Did he know then that the average tree produces enough oxygen in one year to keep a family of four breathing? Both Dennis and I found ourselves desperately in need of oxygen, but I think trees gave us more than simply being the world's lungs when our

own weren't working. Through them, we learnt a different language, a better way of understanding the world that we had been given this second precious chance to walk in. Perhaps us both owning this book at our different times of need is a sign of how we refused to take that for granted. Learning to call the trees by their real names was the least we can do. I imagine both of us wheezing gently through the same pages of the book, taking it out to the same type of parks, staring at the same leaves.

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I still don't know what happened to Dennis after he left the hospital, but every time I search for D H Hardwick, almost the first hit is for a logging company in New Hampshire. Part of me hopes this business wasn't set up by my Dennis, and that his interest in trees wasn't just so he could learn which to cut down.

Now when I walk round the Grove, with Dennis's book in my hand, I am able to identify the lime, horse chestnut, holly, birches (both copper and silver), yew, whitebeam, hornbeam, and also the two Scotch pines that have sprung up in the corner where we used to be allowed to dump our Christmas trees.

It's true that knowing the names of the trees changes my walks. Because I don't just go 'tree tree tree' any more, it slows me down. It feels as if I've added another layer to my landscape, almost as if the dial on a telescope has been turned so everything is in focus.

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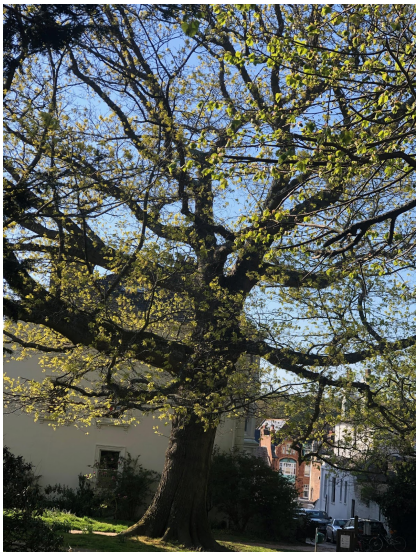
I'm looking at trees so closely that I develop favourites. Number one for me is the Turkish Oak at the entrance to the Grove. It was planted in the 1600s and is so huge that one of its limbs would be wider than most of the other trees in the park.

In fact, its size makes me nickname it the Tree Boss. Trees communicate with each other through their root systems and I like to imagine Tree Boss comforting the others, telling them that it will all be OK, that this too will pass.



'Tree Boss'

There's something so reassuring about this fantasy that one day I take a picture to use as a screensaver. Just as I'm putting my phone away, a stranger walks up to me.

'Sorry to interrupt,' she says, 'but I saw your story in the paper and I wanted to say how pleased I am that you survived.'

It's not the first time this has happened, and I've learnt just to smile and say thanks. My therapist has suggested that I stand for something bigger than myself because I'm an example of how it is possible to come through a plague alive and smiling. Perhaps this is why Dennis has come to mean so much to me too. When I walk by 'my' tree now, as well as touching it – *hello, old friend* – I wonder just how many pandemics it has seen, from the Great Plague of London through Spanish Flu, smallpox, measles, polio and more. Because long after Covid, perhaps our *Trees in Britain* book will find its way to another person just when they need it, and because long after us both, long after me, this tree will still be standing.

Sarah Salway is a novelist, teacher, journalist and poet. She has given a TEDx talk in praise of everyday words (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_KVNGzoGfrA), and currently runs a reading group in Kent for the Royal Literary Fund. In March 2020, she was hospitalised for COVID pneumonia, but has now happily recovered. www.sarahsalway.co.uk

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