



Tree of Life

By Anthony Elia, director and J.S. Bridwell Foundation Endowed Librarian

NATURE'S BOOKS, HEALTH AND SPIRITUAL MEDICINE AT BRIDWELL LIBRARY

In the antique lands of Central Asia, the many languages that spread along the Silk Road through desolate passes, over sky-reaching mountains and into remote oases often shared vocabularies with the itinerating travelers who roamed its landscape. The similarities of one regional dialect with another stretched far back to a parent tongue that had some common meaning. These verbal relationships often took shape through environmental markings, objects, or food. In a few languages, the roots of the words for *tree* and *medicine* were identical.

This same phenomenon was not unheard of in Europe, where the use of nature to acquire medicine was widely recognized and often used. Most notably, the extraction of salicylic acid, which is found in willow bark helped to mitigate fevers. Though, it wasn't until 1899 that the chemical formulation was manufactured industrially as aspirin for the populace.

Trees themselves may serve as one of nature's most important apothecaries, but they may also be the nexus of human sustainability, growth and cultural development. In fact, beyond these healthful extractions from many trees — like alder as an astringent for wounds; ash as a laxative; beech for respiratory issues; and willow for inflammation and pain relief — the dendrological contributions to the world are even more extraordinary. Today, we live in a world that not only relies upon the legacy of trees and their medical uses, we also live on a planet that requires trees to function as the healthful filters of carbon dioxide, to yield lumber for building and furniture,

to produce fruits that go to market. And the very tissue of these organic miracles offers endless possibilities to how civilizations were founded and evolved. In the pulp of ground up wood we have gone from making paper more than a millennium ago to ingloriously adding cellulose (“saw dust”) to packaged parmesan cheese for longevity!

The seldom-used word codex — meaning “book” or “manuscript volume”— comes from Latin and is related to the earlier term caudex — or, “tree trunk” and “block of wood.” Here again, we see the great trees of the earth grow up and produce the foundations of our global societies — arguably through the codification of human ideas. Perhaps a circular definition, codification itself comes from code (“a systematic compilation of laws”), which itself comes from codex (“a book”). Therefore, there has come to be a human belief that once ideas are set into physical space, into a fixed location, into a book, then into law and regulation, they are final and determine how we need to live our lives appropriately in society.

This fixity, though, is much more malleable and fluid than many of us might imagine. Books themselves have evolved and changed. We have gone through revolutions in papermaking, ink development and printing advancements. We have seen the handwritten word yield to Chinese woodblocks, then Gutenberg in Mainz during the 15th century, commercial steel presses in the 19th century, and now digital publishing where the role of trees, wood and paper are diffuse, attenuated and obscured, but not absent.

At Bridwell, the curious connections of tree, wood, book and text have come together in innumerable and surprising ways — not just in vast collections of historical medical books, like the Sellers Collection, for example, but in the very formulation of books as healthful curatives and medicines for our mental, physical, emotional and spiritual ills. It is no coincidence that the very objects that are kept on shelves or in secured chambers and bookcases themselves resemble the chemist shops of medieval China or the ancient Near East. Very much in the way that we take our medicines, which we hope will affect us, change us and enhance us positively, the encounter with the book does the same, though in very different ways depending on how a book appears to us and what it actually says.

I have had many daily encounters with books throughout my life, and I have had equally as many distinct experiences and reactions, especially among the extraordinary tomes at Bridwell. We all have our favorite titles—in history, arts, music, literature, poetry, and social sciences—and these fields connect with our own interests and desires, just as they help us grow, learn and discern the world around us. Throughout my life I have been transformed by the entrancing prose of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Frederick Douglass, James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, among many others. The content and fluidity of their writing are not just points of information that I ingest, but soulful remedies to ills I didn't even know I had.

When I first came to Bridwell, I looked at our collections with great amazement and awe. The gorgeous and weighty tomes had embossments, illuminated pages of golds, reds and blues, and sundry articulations of fanciful imaginary beasts. In more recent years, I have come across other



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unexpected, the sublime and the exceptional creations and inspirational acquisitions that will further our mission and elevate our standing as an institution of distinction.

Among our favorite items that have recently been acquired are works that exist not simply as “traditional” or “regular” books but are themselves significantly beyond the boundaries of a traditional volume with pages and covers. Many so-called art books display aspects of sculpture and three-dimensionality that require the viewer to encounter the works in wholly new ways.

These include: multi-colored pop-up books by Tauba Auerbach, rectangular tubal carved books by Ian Tyson, a pear and body-shaped book by Jan Sobota, the Circle Press wire and paper detachable puppet books by Ron King, and perhaps my favorite, the wood trunk “tree book” also by the same artist. Indeed, we have come full circle. A book that is a tree, now a tree that is a book, a reversal of time and process. Held with a leather cord binding, demonstrably unique in every way, it is connected to both nature and the earth. Different from the literary expressionism of my favorite writers, whose own words have transformed me for what they wrote, the Ron King “tree book” transforms us through encounter—like an experience of the divine, the participation in communion or the thoughtful meditation of prayer. I see it and behold it in shock, disbelief and uncertainty, only to be relieved in the acknowledgement that I'm privileged to experience such objects and they exist in Bridwell Library. The ability for us to transform after these encounters is crucial. That is the spiritual medicine of nature's offering; it is also the medicine of the tree of life.