

Tree of Life



By **Robert Greene Sands**

[Email the author](#)

Published 6:57 pm Friday, January 11, 2019

“It’s a huge pecan tree, felled in a hurricane a few years ago. It just keeled over, this honking big root ball almost ripped from the ground. Limbs, some of them at least three or four feet in diameter, now run parallel to the ground at the same time they still shoot upward. And right now, the tree has no leaves, just the naked limbs.”

I was trying to explain to my sister over the phone last week about the tree that defines the back boundary of our Healing and Artful Gardens at Rose Haven Center of Healing. I was sure I wasn’t doing justice to the strange yet compelling living creature of nature that continues to grow despite having suffered a near fatal event.

“From the main trunk, the smaller limbs shooting up are all gnarled and knotted, almost like it has chronic arthritis. The tree even looks like an inverted octopus reaching for the sky.”

And here I caught myself pantomiming with my own limbs an “air” tree, which of course was not visible to her in Maine.

“We call it the Tree of Life,” I told her. “Can you envision it?”

It was important that she did. She was designing the Japanese Meditation Garden at the Center that would incorporate the tree and provide a healing place for women veterans and other veterans dealing with issues of trauma and reintegration into civilian life.

“I think so,” she answered. “Although it’s kind of hard to imagine an arboreal octopus,” she laughingly added.

“I know.”

That day, for some reason, I stopped moving dirt to form an apron for our council ring. I looked at the tree against the gray overcast clouds forming a brooding afternoon canvas. I told her over the miles, I really saw the tree for the first time, without its summer green, pared back to the bone. How I sensed its inner strength of resolve to not just survive but live a full life despite the apocalyptic insult of the hurricane.

I said, “I saw you.”

My sister is a recovering addict. She is open about her struggles and her journey and now serves as a sponsor for her Narcotics Anonymous group. She has found a new lease and purpose in life and a comfort with herself that makes me envious.

She loved my image of her as the tree, and in a throaty chuckle she replied, “Robbie, of course you saw me, and all those in recovery, in that tree. You saw it without its summer coat, stripped down to the bark, standing resolute and finding strength and courage to continue to live. That’s why we want that tree to be the center of the Meditation Garden.”

Yes, we do want to feature that tree, I told her. When the veterans are in the gardens working or just out in nature, that tree will be a companion and a memory to take with them.

Its mere existence provides a powerful reminder of survival against impossible odds and bolsters resilience in anyone that encounters it. A symbol of strength to grow stronger, even after nature hurls a hurricane from afar.

Robert Greene-Sands is an anthropologist and CEO of the non-profit Pamlico Rose Institute for Sustainable Communities located in Washington.