

# wisdom of the pines

as an ecological epidemic sweeps through the mountains  
of british columbia, is anyone speaking the truth?  
eileen delehanty pearkes listens to the trees in the 7th of  
a 10-part series exploring the *yamas* & *niyamas*.

illustrations by aimée van drimmelen



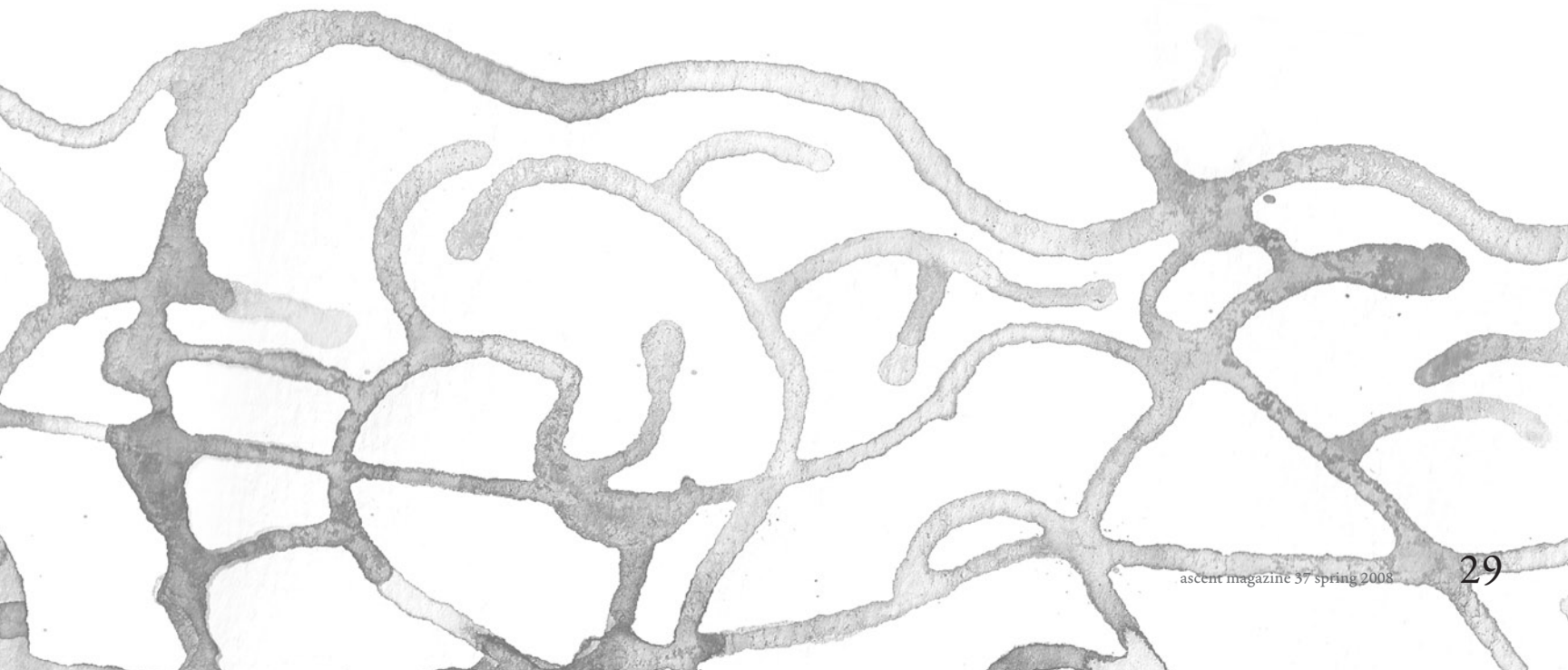
After a winter of stillness, the Earth has begun to breathe again. I can hear plants all around me responding to the signals only they understand: warmer temperatures, longer days, access to nutrients released into the soil by last autumn's leaves. The trees, the shrubs, the mosses and the bulbs below the surface speak the instinctual language of growth. I walk in the woods, listening to the chatter. Swelling branch tips capture raindrops, where the water glistens like crystals in light breaking through clouds. A riot of chartreuse leaves wave their shiny hands in the swelling air. The first flowers open delicate petals. Insects hover, waiting for pollen to dust their wings.

On the forested flanks that descend steeply to the valley floor, evergreens recite a verdant and reliable prose: hemlock, cedar, spruce and fir sprout new needles at branch tips. Their graceful limbs dance in the softening wind. The temperate, interior rainforest where I live boasts a remarkable variety of evergreen species, from those needing moist soil along creek beds to those preferring rocky outcrops and large quantities of sun.

Amidst the wash of lyrical green, I also hear the broken red language of lodgepole and ponderosa pine. These evergreens are dying in great numbers. They are two species of tree that form part of a large-scale ecological disaster in the province of British Columbia.

When I look up to the mixed forests blanketing the mountain slopes, I can pick out the pines even from a distance. They are the red ones.

The first sign of pines dying on a large scale can be traced to 1993, when forests farther north in the province began to suffer the effects of a tiny black beetle that chews on the bark of mature trees and kills them if left unchecked. Only recently has this decade-old crisis become more directly visible to me. The beetle has munched its way south. On some ridges in the valley where I live, the red has nearly eclipsed the green. The changing colour of the pines speaks a truth that is neither pleasant nor easily accepted. These hundreds of thousands of reddened trees will not



survive another year. Next spring, they will be skeletons rattling in the wind.

I have been conditioned by both my education and my religious upbringing to define truth as something that involves spoken or written human language. Speak the truth. Tell the truth. Write the truth. Truth, many of us would say, is a matter of knowledge or fact or belief, not the purview of trees. My observations of the natural world have always challenged the cultural tendency around me to define truth as something rational, or exclusively a product of the mind and heart. I hear truth being spoken all the time by the landscape. I try to listen, though I can't say I always like what I hear.

The sage Patanjali discusses *satya*, or, truth, in Sutra 2.36. *Satya* is the second of five *yamas*, those principles that govern our relation to the world and people around us. In the Sutras, the *yama* and *niyama* form the first two of the eight limbs of yoga. They are followed by the more familiar limb of *asanas*. The *yamas*, in particular, are a form of universal vow that the Hindu tradition asks yoga practitioners to make in an effort to relate respectfully and fruitfully with all that grows and lives in the world around us.

Interpretations of Sutra 2.36 by T.K.V. Desikachar, B.K.S. Iyengar and Sri K. Pattabhi Jois use such terms as authenticity, pure intention and rightful communication. They also present the idea of consequence. Consequence in the specific context of this sutra is any

resulting positive action that rises from the firm foundation of truth. If action is established in truth, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois says, there is surety of result. *Satya* also implies the opposite, that consequence can be negative and bear a bitter fruit from a lack of sincerity. This interplay between truth and right action connects to the Hindu concept of karma, the universal law of cause and effect.

Desikachar translates Sutra 2.36 as: "One who shows a high degree of right communication will not fail in his actions." He goes on to explain that the ability to be honest with sensitivity and necessary reflection, without hurting others or telling lies, requires a refined state of being human. Such persons capable of practising *satya* in this way, he says, cannot make mistakes in their actions.

My own life is littered with dying pines, mistaken actions that have resulted from attempts to speak the truth without adequate reflection, or from my desires to avoid truth for its unpleasantness or threat to my sense of self. I have been dishonest many times—either to avoid the full consequences of my previous actions, or to hide from the reality of my shortcomings. Even as I have learned over the years to be more honest with myself and those in my family and community, I have sometimes hurt others by speaking a truth either at a time or in a way that they did not wish to hear.

The truth of the pines can easily slip between the cracks. It moves into

a realm of language that translates only with great difficulty. Most media and government reports on the mountain pine beetle epidemic pinpoint the proliferation of the small black beetle as the singular culprit in the loss of millions of hectares of trees. They do not mention the role human beings have played. In the end, however, the red bleeding across the evergreen hillsides is a direct consequence of human action. The 100,000 hectares of threatened trees in the region where I live are only a small piece of a larger story that involves climate change, the lumber industry, the BC government and 12 million hectares of pine across the province. Already, 9.2 million hectares of forest have been destroyed.

The lodgepole pine makes up 50 percent or more of the trees in some parts of the BC interior, with vast stretches of land sometimes covered by this one tree. The dominance of the tree in the landscape dates back to the turn of the last century, when non-native settlers in the province burned the forested landscape during exploration for minerals or to facilitate agricultural development. Lodgepole pines are conditioned to respond well to fire. Their thin bark means they don't easily survive a fire when it sweeps through, but the resin that seals their cones is melted by heat. Fire releases the seeds inside the cones and a new patch of forest sprouts quickly.

That far-reaching settlement disturbance caused the lodgepole to sprout in

great numbers across vast areas within a few decades of each other. And while a natural fire cycle might have allowed patches of that uniform forest to burn and regrow at a younger age, the lumber industry that developed by mid-century wanted to keep the forests from burning—to protect the value of the timber. Human industrial values in this way created the dominant stands of lodgepole. These stands have, in the past decade, reached the age most preferred by the mountain pine beetle.

The small black beetle currently feasting on the lodgepole does not survive winter temperatures below  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$ . With cold weather in the interior of BC less and less likely to dip below that point for sustained periods, more and more beetles have survived and proliferated. Another effect of climate change—hot, dry summers—has left the trees more vulnerable to disease and pests. The life cycle of the beetle has spun faster and faster, with dense stands of lodgepole feeding more and more beetles, which kill more and more trees. Nothing can stop the epidemic now. In its wake are more consequences: potential landslides and floods from winter snows that melt more quickly or chaotically without forest cover.

Sutra 2.36 makes no mention of ecology, climate change, lodgepole pine or the lumber industry. And yet, the Earth's response to the way we treat it leads me back to the yogic principle of integrity and sincerity, as well as the dictates of cause and effect. According to

Iyengar, truth must be “whole-hearted” and not at all dissembling or disguised, even at a cellular level. Iyengar believes that spoken words mean little if the entire body does not believe what the mind is saying. If every cell does not agree, then this is not the truth.

When I look up at the mountainsides covered by dying trees, I know that the natural world where I live is not capable of dissembling. I seek contact with nature in part because it is so trustworthy, even if it reflects back to me a truth that I don't want to hear about myself or about the larger practices of my culture. Though we can suggest to ourselves that the hapless beetle is the sole author of the problem, the large swaths of red and dying trees speak a truth at the cellular level, about how human interests can quickly overwhelm the complex needs of a balanced ecosystem. ☸

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