

The Boy Who Planted the World

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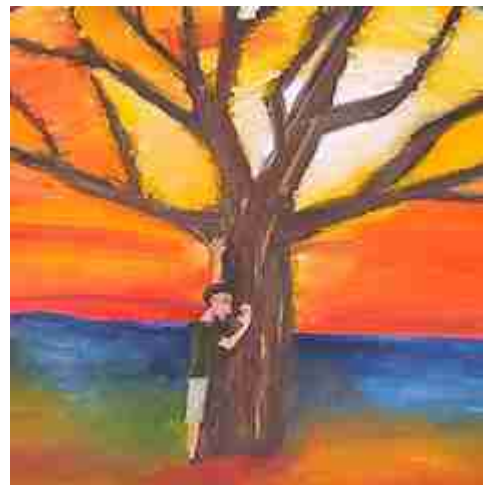
I have a picture in my head. I see it often. It's a picture of paradise, of the natural world as it once was. I imagine America only 250 years ago. But this picture keeps getting smaller, and the smaller it gets, the more important it gets. It is so covered over now that you have to know it was there in the first place to realize that something is missing.

There is a tale that has been passed down to me called *How The Boy Planted The World*. As the story goes, there was a boy who lived in a city of wires and walls, and empty faces. A city of electric lights that never slept, and a place where there was always someone working. You could not tell day from night or one day from another or one building from another. The boy and his parents lived on the ground floor of a giant building surrounding a cement courtyard. They didn't know any one else who lived there, but he'd watch people come and go and imagine their lives. Sometimes he would pass them on the street and think to say something, but it wasn't wise to look any one else in the eye.

On the night of his fourteenth birthday, while he was having dinner with his parents, someone knocked on the door. They all sat up for a moment, surprised. The boy jumped up from the table and asked if he could go to the door. "Be careful," his father said. His mother said, "You can never be too careful. Ask who it is. *Hello?*" he asked. But there was no answer. He unbolted the many locks on the steel door that opened into the courtyard. *Hello?* he asked and swung open the door. In the gray half-light there were the little limp trees held up by poles, and wire. There was the old newspaper chasing itself around and around in the dusty wind. But no one was there.

Hello? he asked a third time. This time he followed his own words out into the court yard. In the center was a large tree that he had never seen before. There were no trees like this left in the city. In its center was a deep hole. As his eyes grew used to the dark he saw a tunnel that seemed to stretch on forever, but at the end of it was a warm amber light, like a sunrise. Above him, crammed between the tops of the buildings, he could make out a bleached night with no stars, no moon. He had rarely seen the moon in the city. He could already feel his parents worrying, but he decided that tonight on his birthday, he was going to make it to the other end of this tunnel.

He crawled inside and followed the tunnel down. He got too scared and was about to turn around when a deer appeared in front of him from out of the darkness. It was frozen, and for a moment, the boy too was frozen. They stood there, eyes locked, until finally the deer turned around, and the boy followed him down the tunnel. There on the walls and ceiling were hundreds of drawings. -Animals, spirals, the moon. In one, many women, their hearts shining



like diamonds, danced around a dying man. To silent music they were bringing him back to life.

The boy stopped. Some of these drawings were of people he knew. One told a story of an unhappy man that the boy recognized from his train ride to school. In the picture only half of this man was there. He was looking over a river that he could not cross, to where his other half lived. A dragonfly came and carried him to the other side. One was a picture of the boy and his sister on a great ocean. They traveled down through the side of a magical ship and built a whole world under the waves. As he reached the other end of the tunnel he saw a picture of himself surrounded by a snake. The snake was biting him. He followed the pictures and the deer out into the full light of day.

It was morning, and the boy came to a stream and drank. He saw, reflected in the water, a crescent moon in the night sky, but when he looked up, it was day again. He sat down there to rest and fell asleep. He dreamt that a bear told him of a place he would travel. "A great bird will take you there. You must find the original picture, and you will know when you've found it because a snake will be protecting it. You must find it and plant it in the ground." said the bear to the boy, "once you plant this thing you must bring the rain, and to do so you need to stand at the center of the six directions, and ask for help. The rain will come for you. That is why you are here, so be brave." Then the bear said, "take this song with you it will give you courage and help you on your way." And he sang the boy a beautiful song.

The boy awoke and right next to him was the great bird. It began to fly and soon the boy realized that he, too, was flying. They flew a long way, over a great mountain, and finally came to a hazy dirt road. Hardened down by footsteps over thousands of years, it was the first and last road. They followed it down into a clearing. Now the great bird spoke. "When you touch the ground again, you will walk with brave feet." They landed. The boy looked around. Ahead of him was a snake as the bear had told him, coiled, waiting. The great bird looked back at the boy, called to the sky and was gone.

Now the boy was alone. It was getting dark. He was frightened, stuck. He knew that he had to get closer. The snake hissed and became very still. Without a thought, the boy began singing, it was the bear's song, and the snake looked up. As the boy kept singing inside to calm himself, the snake turned on its own circle and said, "Inside the circle I am making with my body is a picture of the way the world once was. Now it is all we have left, this fragment of a picture. The rest has been covered over by people's fear and forgetfulness. What they have forgotten of this picture, they have forgotten of themselves. What is left of this picture is here. I have been guarding it a long time. Look closely. All that is left is the size of a seed, and that is just what it is. For within any living thing is carried all the life and information needed for the future of that thing. This seed must be planted soon, but I may not plant it. The story says that a child must plant it. A child must feel its importance and plant it with such care, that it will take root. That is how it is."



The boy looked for the picture, but he could not see it. Nervously, he reached his hand into the

center of the circle created by the snake and felt for the picture. The snake slithered across his arm and moved herself into a much bigger circle now, surrounding the boy. He looked and felt all around himself, but he still couldn't see anything. Then he remembered the drawing that he had seen in the tunnel, and realized what was about to happen. He closed his eyes and held his arm out towards the snake. He felt the sting of the snake biting him, and suddenly he could see many things.



He saw himself high above his city in the stars. They glowed bright and untouched in the cold clear sky, and for the first time he could really see them. He took his first breath. He watched rain falling on a mountain, and turning from drops, into a stream, into a river, and rushing down to the hills where it fed a thousand creatures. Fish jumped and the river rolled on, past different tribes of people. They were in circles, dancing, singing songs, their voices carried up to him by the smoke of fires. The snow melted and they began planting. The river grew and passed through a quiet field. A grandmother was telling an old story to a group of children, a story about a boy in the sky who was listening to them even now. He followed the sound of her voice as it sailed away with the river, winding out of sight, towards the sea.

He exhaled and the sky spun and became still again. He realized that this was the way the world had always been. This was how he had always been. But way down there in his city everything was different. He watched it, and for the first time he could really see. He could hear the constant drone of talking wires, the humming and buzzing of everything. He could hear his parents still talking about how life would be good next year, and more and more not really talking about anything. Then a strange thing happened. The city began growing before his eyes, climbing up and out in all directions. Covering all the land below until soon it was everywhere, and now even here, the stars began to dim. It All became a wash of images until he realized that he was in the picture that the snake had been protecting, slowly backing out. Back out into the clearing, on the ground, holding the picture, surrounded by the snake. The boy dug down into the dirt with his fingers, and in his head he sang the bear's song. He looked closely at the picture again. He understood. And so he put the picture into the ground and covered it with dirt.

And the snake said; "now it's time for you to bring the rain". The boy looked at a clear and moonless night, full of stars. Not a cloud in sight. He asked for the sky to rain, please rain, but there was nothing. He asked again, and there was nothing. Sad that he might fail, he felt a warm breeze blow, but it was more like a whisper, "I am the west, and I have heard you." Then he remembered what the bear had told him. He faced each of the four directions, now with a hunger in his heart and he asked for rain. Then to the sky, then to the earth, he asked "please make this seed grow strong and tall." It was very still. There were no more clouds in the sky than there had been. But he asked again, and this time his voice came from such a true part of him, that as it left his lips, a tear fell from his eyes, and wet the ground. At that moment the sky filled with heavy clouds and it rained. The boy smiled, overwhelmed as a giant tree reached up out of the ground towards the sky. There were

thousands of cones hanging from its branches. Each one shone with the original picture that the snake had been protecting. The forest lit up, filled with its own music. Drenched with rain, he looked back up to the sky. There, above him, was the crescent moon.

In the center of the trunk of the tree the snake had curled herself into a new circle and told the boy that this was the way back home. The circle became a hole into the tree, and inside it was the tunnel. The boy picked a cone from the tree up off the ground and put it in his pocket. He thanked the snake, and climbed through her into the tree.

Soon, he was back at the big tree in his family's court yard. It was still night as he had left it, but now the sky was lit up as never before by that same crescent moon. His clothes had dried, and the door to his place was still cracked open as he had left it. When he went inside, his parents were still at the dinner table. His father looked up from his drink. "Who was that at the door?" The boy wasn't sure what to say, so he asked them to come outside. There's a tree, he told them. Reluctantly they followed. When he came to where the tree had been there was nothing, only a small mound of dirt. His mother said "there has never been a tree here." "He's only fooling us," his father said. "Come on, it's getting late, and the air is bad at night." The boy let them go inside and waited a moment. He realized that he still had the pinecone in his pocket, and he smiled as he sang the bear's song and planted the pine cone in the ground, right there, where he knew the tree should be.

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About "The Boy Who Planted the World"

Josh wrote "The Boy Who Planted the World" between 1997 and 1999 to be published as part of the print material on an album that was to include the songs that are now on *Spirit Touches Ground* and the song "Center of Six." The story is something of a journey through images of the songs. Sometime during his last year, when Josh re-recorded all the *Spirit Touches Ground* songs, he decided not to include the song "Center of Six" on that album. We thought about printing the story for the album, but didn't, partly because the references to "center of six" would be meaningless to most, but also because CD packages no longer included many pages of print material.

But now that "Center of Six" is released and all the relevant songs are out, this seems the right time to present the story. It seems to me that Josh must think so too because just as we were gathering the art work for the album, something guided family members to finding Josh's computer discs containing many versions of the story and notes for the album, (as well as lyrics to many as yet undiscovered songs), and to the discovery of an intriguing painting made on three concentric, stacked ovals, clearly a painting of "the boy who planted the world."

So we are posting the story and the painting on Josh's web site (www.joshclayton.com), so that they can be enjoyed and explored as we believe he intended.

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