

Are You a Tree Person?

An Interview with Jean Shinoda Bolen

by Kris Steinnes



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Jean Shinoda Bolen's new book, *Like a Tree, How Trees, Women and Tree People Can Save the Planet*, will be a treasure for you to rediscover memories of a special tree when you were a child. She brings to us the realization of the importance trees have towards the future of our planet. When speaking with her, I really understood that if we could save the trees, we could save our planet! They bring us oxygen, and water the ground for other plants to survive. You've all heard how the rain forest is so critical to our planet—but how about that big tree in your yard? How can one tree make a difference? How can one woman make a difference?

Jean had a very personal experience with a tree right by her house—a large beautiful tree, which she fought to protect from being cut down by her housing association. It provided shade for the plants below it, the pine needles caught the fog and that moisture dripped from the leaves and watered the plants below the tree. The roots held the minerals and nutrients in place, which fed the tree and all the plants around it. With this one tree gone, the ecology of the area was forever changed, and the shade loving plants underneath the tree couldn't survive.

What can one tree do? What can one person do? Remember Julia Butterfly Hill, who lived in a 1500 year-old California Redwood tree for two years to protect it from being harvested by lumber companies. She saved a grove. Now Jean's book might save a few more trees as she calls us to action to think how we can protect the trees, one tree at a time. It is personal—if we make it personal we can make a difference. It doesn't have to be an overwhelming problem that we think is too big to overcome, so we don't do anything. In Ireland, a freeway was built to go around a tree, so advocacy is growing and anything is possible!

Jean's experience with her tree inspired her to learn more about trees, and brought out her love for trees that she had since a child. This book is giving trees a voice; just as her other books bring a voice for women's rights. This is a spiritual book and a political book, it's about trees and girls, the connection, once noted, will not be missed, the next time you sit by a tree. Jean says the feminine and mother nature are interconnected spiritually.

Jean's wonder and awe of trees grew as she studied more about them. She interviewed and collected other people's stories, such as the woman who drove through a forest area, and heard the trees speak to her, she knew it wasn't her voice she was hearing. They said they needed our help. Hearing all these stories Jean realized she was not foolish for being a "tree hugging" person. And an interesting side note is she found these tree lovers she spoke to grew up as Girl Scouts, and not surprisingly so did I! I was overjoyed to be certified as a

tree lover by Jean as I remembered how trees have been a part of my life.

Jean claims she was naive in regards to her tree in her yard—thinking democracy would work in her favor, even though people had legitimate concerns of the fire hazard, limbs falling and the association being sued. But she couldn't believe they would vote to cut the tree down so she didn't take it seriously enough and did not bring the media in for pressure, because her home is private to her.

The timing of the tree coming down coincided with a trip she took to New York for the UN's Commission on the Status of Women. So that had an effect on how the book evolved. Gloria Steinem reminded her she was a writer and writers have the last word ... the tree was sacrificed but grew into something much more significant as a result. It became a book, and it speaks for trees.

Another story she heard is how a woman living on a hill had a neighbor who wanted to get rid of the trees for his view, so he poisoned them, and they died. Now the roots aren't there to hold down the soil, and it is a potential dangerous slide area. Until we realize the importance of trees to the health of our planet, and the vital work they do, we won't fight for their survival, which is ultimately our survival.

Does this sound familiar? If we don't begin to treat women and children with respect how will our world survive as well? Jean sees the similarities, and her book is written in a feminine style, as she circumambulates with stories of trees, stories of women, and returns back to the topic of trees, and then again women's issues. Just as you walk around a tree several times, you see the tree from a different angle, you notice different aspects you didn't see the first time—color, texture, shapes, scents, sounds—and you can reach a deeper level of understanding about the nature of trees and likewise to the situation of women today.

Jean's purpose? As with all topics she has incorporated in her work—it's a call to action—whether to save a tree, save a child, or bring equality to women around the globe. She finds the similarities between the harm done to women, and the harm done to trees. The juxtaposition of what is done to women who are disempowered, vulnerable and are considered property in many parts of the world, and what happens to trees—being cut down for profit, or for views, or other reasons, it is the same thing. This is a politically, spiritually, enlightening experience for Jean that her tree was cut down and to see it in a bigger perspective.

At the UN conference on Women in Beijing fifteen years ago, Hilary Clinton first stated human rights are women's rights, and women's rights are human rights, and yet it's still not a universal principle, women are treated as less than human in many parts of the world.

“Women in developing countries are the most directly affected and aware of the effects of deforestation because they are the ones who grow food, gather firewood, and carry water.”

Kris Steinnes is the founder of Women of Wisdom Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to women's empowerment and spiritual growth. As a minister, spiritual leader and meditation teacher, Kris has a commitment to bring feminine consciousness to the forefront of our collective experience.

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As Jean gained the appreciation of what one tree does, she studied what the Amazon trees do. She learned how important they are as they take in water, and let out water, which goes up to clouds, and goes in a green wave. Before it reaches the Andes, the water has gone up six times into the clouds, so the trees water the clouds, and when the rain falls from the clouds, it doesn't wash out the soil because of the tree roots, whose job it is to hold the soil in place. In addition the roots provide nutrients to the trees and plants around it.

“...preserving ancient groves is to save something of sacred value that once destroyed will be gone forever.”

There is a sacredness of trees. The indigenous wisdom from tribal societies tells them to approach trees like animals on a hunt. They connect with the spirit, and thank them for the connection. There's a proper way to approach a tree, especially an ancient tree, and it's important to spend the time to learn to meditate on a tree, enter the aura of a tree, and gain its knowledge. Jean feels it's time we develop a different relationship with trees. This is a personage from a different species.

When speaking with Jean I realized the awe and respect I also have for trees. Sometimes I approach a tree, particularly if large and obviously old, very cautiously and tentatively. I don't feel sure if I should touch it. After speaking with Jean I realized it was their venerable nature, the wisdom the tree possessed that I had to approach with respect, not just run up and grab at it, throw my arms around it, like they jokingly think tree huggers do. That respect was felt inside me and I didn't have words for it, didn't have training to how to approach an old tree, such as native wisdom teaches.

Jean shared how she hopes her writing will introduce a person to something that's already inside them. When she writes, she's aware of who might be affected by it and that it would help the trees because the stories will touch people's hearts, or help them recall memories of their experiences with trees. Here's a story, a myth if you connect with it, you discover you knew but didn't have words or have a consciousness about it. If you read the book and discover the awe and respect, it was there before—she just brought it out to your consciousness. \

Jean feels strongly until there is a balance between masculine and feminine and women are fully empowered and can bring what women carry as a culture, we won't be able to manage peace and sustainability on our planet. The UN recognizes that women need to be involved in bringing about peace in the world because women behave differently and have different priorities and we need to empower women to have a voice at the peace table all over the world.

Jean wants you to know this is a call to action. She wants to bring together the activists, the sacred feminine feminists, and spiritually oriented activists, who are outraged at what's done to girls, women, and trees, recognizing they're kindred while they do their own thing.

Jean speaks of how important it is to take on what *you* recognize as being your particular *assignment*, and not something others say you ought to do. When an assignment comes along with your name on it, you can recognize it by your answers to 3 questions:

- ◆ *Is this meaningful?*
- ◆ *Will it be fun?*
- ◆ *Is it motivated by love?*