



The Great Tree

for S. M. Mohamed Idris

Deep in the hill forests of Penang
There grew a Great Tree

Its roots were huge and
grounded deep in
the soil of the forest

Its trunk was gigantic
and it took many men to go around
to measure it

And that huge trunk became
so tall and high, it seemed
to touch the heavens

Near its top were its
branches and leaves, spread
out wide till they almost touched
those of other trees of
that same forest.

The Great Tree
together with its companions
took it upon itself
to serve both Mother Earth
and the people –
of the island
and the country
and the world

It breathed in the often polluted air from the
island and the world
and breathed out the oxygen
that every creature needed

It took in water from the
heavy rains
Through its living and fallen leaves,
and its branches and trunk

and let it drip slowly into
the ground,
until the drops formed springs
and groundwater and flowed
naturally to the rivers and
from there to the reservoirs and cities

It made sure much of the rain waters went
back to the air through its leaves,
through the wet ground,
and in the air
they formed huge clouds
that broke and fell again
as new rain
to quench the thirsty earth

Its massive roots and networks
of smaller roots
clasped the fertile Earth
so closely and tightly
that the soils could not escape.

So the soils remained as they should,
on and below the ground
And did not flow on
into the rivers.
The springs and rivers
then remained
clean and clear and
pristine – water for
the people to drink and
wash themselves,
Not fearing a sudden rainstorm
would flood away
their belongings and
their homes

You, among all others,
understood and appreciated, and you

thus had a strong kinship
with the Great Tree

That was why 60 years ago
you asked the Council
to plant thousands of
companions and brothers
and sisters
for the Great Tree
in all the streets of our city
that could nurture and grow
those trees

That was why 30 years ago
you led our campaign of
citizens to save
Penang Hill, home to many
of the big trees, and plants
and springs that
give our people their water

That was why 10 years ago you
launched a media initiative to
highlight the savaging of many of
the island's hills
– an initiative the leader should
have thanked you for
and paid attention to
but instead he called
you old and forgetful

That was why 5 years ago
you went with your friends
to hug the large trees at
the side of the big road
in an attempt to stop the
planners and leaders from
chopping down those trees,
chopping them to make way
so they could make the roads
more wide
so more motor cars could
go through faster.

That was why you
campaigned tirelessly for

decades to expand the buses,
the trams, the use of bicycles
and cycle lanes

So that public transport can bring
the people around
not half empty cars that
need more oil, more trees
to cut, more loans for
people who already have too
little income to cope

That was why you never
tired of telling us –
the trees are Nature's
way of recycling and regulating

Recycling oxygen so we
and other creatures can breathe,
Recycling water into rain and
rain into water on Earth so
that all can live

Regulating the forests, as small
as Penang's hills, as big as
the Amazon and Borneo,
– so that the atmosphere of
Mother Earth can be maintained
– so that the climate on Earth
can be stable
– so that Life small and big
can go on

It is Nature's way of giving
that life to the world

It is Heaven's gift
to Humanity and to
Mother Earth

– Now you,
our friend, our pioneer,
our Uncle, our father,
our champion,

you are no longer with us

And though we were
so close to you and
knew you so well,

Now, we are still trying to capture
our knowledge
our appreciation
our love
for the things that
moved you

That kept you awake
while others slept

That moved you from
facts to knowledge,
from knowledge to action,
from action to more
awareness, and from there
to more action

And now you are no longer with us
And our sorrow has
no boundaries

But the example you showed
in your thoughts,
and your actions
in your principles and
your ideals
in your speaking truth
and making demands
for the rakyat, the people,

These will live on
forever

So, after all, you are with us still
and still you are there,
with us,
and with Mother Nature
that you knew all along
was where we come from
and of which we
are a part

Like the Great Tree
deep in the
hills and forests of
this island
of Penang,

You have spread and sunk
your roots
deep into the ground
of Nature and
the people

And that is why like the trunk of the
Great Tree
grown 200 feet
above the ground,
Your message
which is now ours
will reach near to the sky

The younger trees and the
plants and palms and ferns
and flowers
that grow near the Great Tree,

they too have heard or
will hear the
message

And we and they and
many more others
will follow
the message and act
to save the world
and save ourselves

Meanwhile in the hilly
forests of Penang

I am not sure
if that Great Tree –
that the colonial painters
so beautifully depicted –
still exists.

It doesn't really matter
to me
Because there must be other
trees, Great, big,
medium, or small,
Magnificent, awesome,
or humble like the weed –

I take comfort that
Nature values each one
of them

And I take comfort that
you, our guide and
our friend,
are there –

Still alerting us to each
danger in our foolish acts,
in each product we use
for vanity or greed
In each project they build or
approve
that will close up the green areas
and bring on the falling of the
hillslopes,
the choking of the rivers
and the flooding
of our cities and homes.

Like the Great Tree – you
still remind us of what
Nature asks us to do

And until we reach the goal
to change the world
so that it and we
are no longer under the threat
of going extinct,

Continue to protect us
and to keep the
cycles and flows
going –

the cycle of air, of
water, of soil, of
birds and insects and
food,

the flow of caring for
humanity, of caring
for Nature,
of taking up the
cause of the poor and
vulnerable –

And we on our part
will look up or look
down and we will
seek to find the Great
Tree in each part
of Nature including in
ourselves

And we continue to
work for a better world,
a Green World,
a world that
is fair and just,
a world which will
be livable
for our children
and grand-children.

A world where there will
continue to be the Great
Trees and small
trees and all kinds
of plants and animals, and
people.

~ **Martin Khor**
Penang
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