

The Reconciliation of Knoll

You say you wish to comprehend the strength, the beauty and the adaptability of a tree. And so you take it apart to study each component. Yet you fail to understand that trees are not assembled from parts. Like all living things, they grow as a changing whole. And like all things that thrive, it is in the process of their growth that they find what they need. If you wish to understand the beauty of a living thing then, look at how it was grown and how it is still growing. It is in this eternal becoming that you will find the recipe for flourishing.

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Ronja looked out the window of his train and saw the city sparkle green and silver in the afternoon sun. He'd had many dreams of the city, but what he saw now was more varied than anything he'd imagined. Dotted throughout the glass and metal skyscrapers were repurposed industrial buildings and office spaces. Colorful and crooked houses were sprawling all around the high-rises, creating a sea of color reflected in the tall windows. Waterways hugged by the arms of grasses and flowers appeared wild yet ordered, like they grew out of their own ancient logic with the helping hands of attentive minds. Layers of curious treetops peeked out between the houses, with space enough to breathe and be breathed in by their cohabitants, gardens thrived on numerous terraces, and vines fell from the high-rises like waterfalls swaying in the wind.

Getting to the city hadn't been easy. Jobs were running dry in Europe, and many were making long journeys southward and eastward to seek their luck. *The City of a Hundred Towns*, as it had been named by its citizens, was perhaps the most fantasized destination amongst Ronja's old friends. He looked at the ticket that allowed him onto this train and into the neighborhood of Knoll, and thought of the woman who had offered him a chance.

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"Ronja!" Admani's voice beamed out across the train station. Ronja at first had insisted that he could find his way himself, but increasingly grew thankful for Admani's determination in picking him up. At home, train station artistry was not on par with their efficiency. But here a network of tunnels, pathways and high boardwalks connected the various platforms in a manner that was almost erratic. Everything was well signposted, but Ronja got the sense that there were a hundred ways to each platform. He gazed up at the vast glass ceilings which let in the natural light, and whose regular depressions served to direct rainwater, draining it into its own tentacular system, reaching down into the station's vegetation and water collectors. They passed small vendors selling ice cream and their feet passed over mosaics that stretched across the cobblestones. Ronja's eyes discovered a little underground aquarium, let into the

walls of one of the tunnels. There were a lot of people around, yet it never felt crowded. It was a soothing place, where one felt like slowing down - much like walking through a forest. He found himself falling in love with the city already.

“We could have taken one of the shortcuts but I wanted you to really see the place - it’s one of my favourites in the city,” Admani said.

“It’s beautiful. But who maintains all this? It must be very expensive.”

“Ah, there are communally paid cleaners of course - but much of the work is distributed. The train station is not just a station, it’s a public space and anyone is allowed to modify it, as long as they are transparent about it and seek the community's advice beforehand. People who contribute are naturally motivated to maintain it as well.”

As she explained this, Admani’s cheerful voice changed and by the time they left the station, her enthusiasm had mostly evaporated. “I can tell you’ve got something on your mind,” Ronja said. “It’s okay if you don’t want to tell me about it, but I’m happy to listen. I’ll have plenty of time to discover the city later.”

“Thanks.”

Admani took a turn down a grass footpath along a canal. Ronja, with a smile playing on his lips, wondered at grass planted specifically to be walked on, and how it seemed to almost welcome the challenge, a chance to stretch its legs as people stretched their legs over it. To the left of each grass path was what a sign had proclaimed as a ‘Wheels Lane,’ where bikes, baby carriages, wheelchairs, and two kids on roller skates rolled by. Admani slowed momentarily, and slipped off her shoes, as a child biked past with milk bottles rattling behind them.

“Good idea,” Ronja said, pulling his feet free from his old trainers and sliding off his socks. Feeling like a child again with his soles firm on the ground, and giving Admani some space for her own thoughts, he started to piece the streets and canals together in his mind. He’d never been in a city that looked like it had been grown, not built, and soon realised this might be less like piecing together a puzzle and more like weaving a tapestry.

After walking in silence for a while, Admani sighed. “My soul feels *heavy*. I made a mistake, and I don’t feel ready to apologize for it. I’m sick of apologizing!”

Ronja gave his friend an empathetic look. “Do you want to sit down somewhere and grab a drink?” “Yeah, that sounds lovely.”

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Crossing the street in front of Knoll station, Relena was delighted to see the wisteria clinging to the external structure of the market hall had finally come into bloom, casting a gentle hue of purple and a welcomed bit of shade on the local traders. She heard the clatter and clank of glass on the ground and turned, pleased to see Iena - her grandchild - having set down their first crate of bottles from their collection ride this morning. Relena began to pass them through the washing station while Iena fetched the remaining crates.

“Now let’s go find ourselves some fresh milk,” Relena said as they finished returning the bottles, and took Iena’s hand in hers, leading them through winding vendors who travelled from the city’s outskirts to sell their produce.

Iena stared at the neatly stacked milk bottles. “Are those the bottles we just returned!?”

A smile on her lips, Relena answered “No, but perhaps next time they will be. Now that they will have been washed, Otso here can take them back to his farm to refill them and sell more delicious milk tomorrow.”

“Do you want to pay with Mainland Centos or Knoll Seeds?” Otso asked.

Relena replied, “Local please,” and held her phone up to Otso’s until the tune of transfer rang.

“Why don’t we get a cow in our garden so we can make our own milk?” Iena asked their grandmother, excited at the idea of an enormous animal companion.

“I only have time to tend to so many things,” Relena replied, laughing. “And the vegetables in our communal gardens take up most of my time. This is why I love the market. Not only can we get goods we can’t make at home, but we get to meet the people who tend to our produce and thank them for providing our family with food this evening.”

Looking at Iena, Relena could tell they were still lost in dreams of cows roaming their garden, and squeezed their hand gently, leading them back into the crowd. “Iena, dear, there’s one more thing we need to get before we go home to your mother. Since you are to be the Inquirer tonight, she and I thought you’d like to pick out what you want to wear.”

Iena beamed. “You mean I get to pick a dress?”

“It can be a dress, a suit, or even plaid overalls; as long as it makes you feel strong and kind and warm all throughout.”

Iena made a beeline across the market, pulling their grandmother to a stall and burying their face in the thick soft fabric of a colourful summer dress that they’d spotted here a week ago. It was woven with yarns of deep purple, bright blue and a green so vibrant it seemed to dance. Iena thought that this green was the exact same as the one from their favorite green trousers that they had grown out of last year. It wasn’t unthinkable that after they’d returned their trousers to the market for upcycling last autumn, the weaver had unspun them into this vibrant green string and used them to make this wonderful dress. Iena looked at Relena, eyes gleaming, happy to feel the beauty that can come from

letting something go and finding it back in your life once more.

“Let’s go pick ourselves some fruit on the way home. I saw the cherries on Ember Road are ripe to pick this week.”

“Yes please!” Iena exclaimed with a big grin as they walked into the sun.

With enough cherries, apples and lemons to feed their family for a week, Iena and Relena walked their bike to the vegetable gardens. As Iena set their bike to rest by the zucchinis they heard joyful giggles coming from a couple of young people dancing on the grass and Iena grabbed their Nan’s hand and made her do a spin, like they’d seen her do with the old men at the community center. That made Relena laugh, and she pulled Iena in for a tight hug.

“So, what do we want to eat tonight?” Relena asked.

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“Okay. Admani, what’s wrong?” Ronja asked, ever the advocate for blunt love, pouring them both lemonade.

Admani sighed and looked away to the surrounding gardens. “I broke the golden rule of this city: every resident is allowed to draw on any resource in service of any end, as long as they openly seek and hear the advice of everyone who would be directly affected by their action.¹” This came out in the sing-song tone of a verse rehearsed a thousand times.

“And you did something without asking advice?” Ronja asked.

“I had to!” she exploded. “If I’d asked him for advice, he’d’ve made sure I couldn’t follow through. He never would have understood. And now they’ll expect me to apologize. But I don’t feel ready yet.”

Ronja briefly thought of asking for details, then reconsidered. He sensed that what Admani needed now was not to understand the predicament she found herself in, but only to understand that it didn’t define her life. “Let’s shake it out,” he said instead.

Admani looked at Ronja like he’d sprouted a foot out of his chest. “I thought you were new here?” Ronja shrugged. His new home may have been full of hope and healing, but in the place he’d left behind he’d known plenty of pain. Shaking it out was the one thing that had always been within reach. He placed his empty cup next to Admani’s half-empty one on a nearby table, and began to bounce at the knees, letting his weight spring into the earth and feeling waves ripple through his body, waves which spread further and grew larger in all of his limbs until movement reverberated all through Ronja’s whole being. After a begrudging start, Admani was soon dancing while Ronja spun. When it was over, Ronja opened his eyes and met Admani’s, all four irises shining.

Exhausted, they collapsed into a heap. Admani leapt up immediately, nabbed her lemonade, and brought it down to the ground where Ronja lay. They shared the rest.

“Thanks for that, it helped,” Admani said after a moment. “It knocked something loose, and now I remember that this afternoon isn’t about defending yourself like in those old courts of justice. It’s about listening and sharing ourselves. Being honest with ourselves isn’t always easy because we might not like what we see and realise, but that is what the other attendees are there for. They are there as witnesses, yes, but also as our community, and it is our duty to support each other and to accept, perhaps even love, that which others might see as ugly in themselves. I don’t need to be anything that I am not already, but I want to arrive in openness, with trust and surrounded by my community, and today that includes you.”

“Wow, you got all that from shaking?” Ronja joked. “Must be some powerful drugs in this lemonade.”

“Oh, you have no idea!” She leaned in close. “It’s all in what you feed the bees.” She jumped up, pulling Ronja with her. Admani grabbed the two cups, and they washed them in the outdoor sink with some hard soap, leaving them to dry by the pitcher with the others.

¹ This “golden rule” is based on Frederic Laloux’s (2013) formulation of the “advice process,” a common decision-making mechanism within decentralized, self-managing organizations.

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Iena sat near their mother on a wooden bench near a large oak tree, swinging their legs. Their new dress tickled their knees. They had been asked today to be the Inq-, the Inques-, the person who asks questions anyway. A slippery word that often wriggled out of their head as soon as they thought of it. But no matter, because their role was to ask the uncomfortable questions that adults might not trust themselves to ask. They were good at that.

All they had been told was that there were two people who were angry with each other, something about someone having not asked for advice, and the other one not feeling heard. Iena knew what that was like. Both forgetting to ask, and feeling unseen. But they also knew there was little that couldn’t be fixed by some good questions, and they’d gotten fizzy toes when Nan explained their role. “You’re the one steering,” she said. Iena liked that. They liked the image of themselves guiding a ship of worries to a new and safe harbor. They looked up at the old oak and imagined themselves on a tiny squirrel, flying through the leaves, and got on their feet. Everyone else came to attention, and Iena knew it was time. They walked towards the trunk, wondering if they’d ever grow big enough to wrap their arms around it, and they sat on a cushion nestled among the roots, waiting for the two people to join them at the center to begin.

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Admani set off again, down a new path, this one covered with wood chippings. “On the way, I’ll tell you the story of Helios-Become-Knoll, the story of this city.” Ronja followed. Instead of waterways either side of them they were canopied with tall old trees, leaves and branches growing over the tops of their heads. The underbrush was blanketed with old leaves and tree stumps, colorful mosses, and every so often a squirrel.

“There was the old and there was the new,” said Admani. Her voice took on the quality of a story well worn. “The static city and the perpetually changing one, ‘Helios’ what became a ‘lab,’ what became ‘Knoll.’ The fact that they called it a laboratory gives you an idea of the type of people who created Helios: tech-optimists from Europe, who sought to perfect their understanding of the city, to make it more efficient in the hopes of avoiding the crash they felt was arriving. They couldn’t make it happen on the old continent - too many regulations, too expensive. So they did what they always do; they colonised. Of course, all legal, they bought the land or made deals with local governments. Somehow, we shall be thankful for their blind ambition of absolute efficiency and perfect, scientific knowledge. After all, they created something new: a huge territory of institutionalised transformation, of recurring trial and error. A playground as big as Wales, on ‘burned land.’ The soil here before Helios was so damaged by intensive agriculture that it could barely sustain a potato plant on its own. When it was created in 2047, Helios was an “urban lab” for climate tech, things they couldn’t test on the old continent. But their genius was not in the direction of their effort, but in the legal constitution of Helios. They created a framework allowing for almost infinite flexibility in matters of governance, justice, economy and ecology. There were no limits for innovation, they thought. And got caught at their own game.”

There she stopped and looked at Ronja. “What they did not foresee is that it isn’t possible to create a place for radical experimentation and hope to stay in control. They created something so beautiful that it transcended them. Within a couple of years, the scientific and artist residencies of Helios were filled with climate activists from all over the world. The place became a hub for experimenting on new economic models, new ways of living, of building, of interweaving natural and human activity. And festivals - oh, the festivals! The founders of Helios created it with the idea that tech could solve the climate crisis if it only had a big enough lab, and the space they created mutated away from their original dream. No longer a controlled environment, Helios became a wild garden.”

Ronja breathed out. Lost in the story, he had quite stopped examining everything they had passed. The trees had blended together, and the path woven through small changes as they went, and now they were in front of a sudden clearing. Paths snaked around the circular space. A large tree towered over them in the center.

Admani began to talk again. “This is Helios-Become-Knoll, the epicenter of our neighborhood. Well, we mostly call it the Old Oak. Forty years ago, the ideological differences between the original founders of Helios and the growing community that was to become Knoll culminated in three long years of protest and rebellion. Eventually, the founders of Helios gave way to what had grown to replace them.

That was when the community built this monument. You see, in the old worlds, monuments are homages to the victors of great conflicts. Less frequently they are in memory of the fallen. But almost always they commemorate an outcome. A moment in time, fixed in some medium. Forever declaring the superiority of a single party in a long-forgotten conflict. Helios-Become-Knoll is different. The budding community of Knoll didn't have the illusion they had won anything, they knew times would be hard and weathering the climate crisis wouldn't be easy. So they had carved two benches out of stone, and stood them facing each other. These benches they placed next to an oak tree they planted, and on these benches sat two young activists, drawn closer in the course of conflict. When Helios faded, they turned to each other and instead of harmony, found themselves divided by their visions for the city's future. In order for there to be a cohesive move forward, they needed to first understand each other. So with the young tree listening nearby in the freshly turned soil, they faced each other, and began to argue. They accused and they shouted and they admitted and they listened and they learned and finally they forgave. And everyone was allowed to watch. That's when people started understanding."

Admani paused. They both breathed out at the entrance to the outer circle of wooden benches. From where they were standing, Ronja could see that the two benches, both perfectly straight and parallel to each other at the ends furthest from the big oak, had been shaped to meet each other at the trunk of the tree. Where the tree had grown to swallow up the edges of the stone benches, they looked entirely like massive stone roots shooting out in either direction. For anyone sitting on the benches, the message of the artwork was clear: 'We may be facing each other in conflict today, but we are both roots of the same tree.'

Admani gently held Ronja's hands and said, "Thank you. Thank you for coming with me. It feels good to know you'll be here in the outer circle." She gestured to the few people who had nodded quietly when they walked up. "You're part of Knoll now," she said, and hugged Ronja. When she pulled away, he sat down. Admani straightened her shoulders, and wagged her fingers like she was getting rid of old energy. She turned, walked towards the remaining empty bench and took a seat.

Across her sat the man she had crossed and between them, a child in a colorful blue, green and purple dress. She wasn't nervous anymore. *This is good*, she thought. *He'll listen as I tell my story, as I will as he tells his*. She looked to Iena, who gave her a smile and asked the opening question.

"What's it like to be you right now?"

Bibliography

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