

How to Live in the Shadow of 'Ash Tree Die Back' and Covid-19



In the bottom of my garden I have a 25 year old Ash tree. I know its age because I brought it myself to my present domicile on the Staffordshire-Cheshire border from Newcastle-under-Lyme. It was then a mere sapling less than one foot tall. It would have been much taller than its 20 feet if I did not cut it every year to stop it growing into a menace rather than a creation for enjoyment and veneration.

This tree, *my* Ash Tree has excelled every year by developing an impenetrable, almost perfectly circular crown of branches and leaves. Some Woodpigeons have attempted to build a nest, but unfortunately found the crown too tightly knit. But they seem to have found it an ideal place for games of 'hide and seek'. You can hear the cooing from inside the crown, but you do not see the birds until they break cover and fly off.

There are other reasons why I feel very close to this my personal tree in particular: According to Celtic tree astrology people born under the Ash tree sign are free thinkers who possess vivid imagination, intuition and their second nature is to be artists. The enchanters from the Ash sign are drawn towards art, writing, spiritual matters, and even science.

It is an unfortunate fact that trees are affected by diseases in the form of fungi which are often airborne and can spread over vast areas.

Like Covid-19 one such disease known as 'Ash dieback', is thought to have spread from Asia and was first recorded in this country in 2012, but could have been in the UK for some years before symptoms became apparent.

There is currently no cure for 'Ash dieback' like there is no cure for Covid-19. There is no clear method for stopping the spread of 'Ash dieback' like the powers that be are struggling to find a way of stopping Covid-19. Therefore the aim of management, as outlined in the National Chalara Management Plan*), should be to slow the spread,

minimise the impact of the disease, and preserve as many chalara-tolerant ash trees as possible.

In a strange way the notions of 'no cure' and 'no clear method of stopping its spread' seem very similar to traits of Covid-19. The aims of 'slow the spread' and 'minimise' its impact seem very similar to the policy of 'social distancing'.

The aim of preserving as many chalara-tolerant Ash trees as possible also has a strange resemblance to the desire by some public health professionals of creating "herd immunity" within a human population. This is the indirect protection from an infectious disease that occurs when a sufficient proportion of a population has become immune to an infection through previous infections or medical treatments, thus reducing the likelihood of infection for individuals without immunity.

The policy of "herd immunity" is the subject of fierce debate as far as humans are concerned, but the equivalent policy in tree management seems to have created

*) Ash dieback, latin name *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*, previously known as *Chalara fraxinea*.

some hope for the future. Initial findings suggest that there are in the country some trees that are tolerant to 'Ash dieback', meaning that the population could eventually recover over time, perhaps 50 years or more.

All my life I have enjoyed visiting my local hostelry and having a chat with whoever might be present. It therefore came as a great shock to me when after a lifetime of cultivating this habit I was denied these nightly excursions out of the home for some extra mental, spiritual, cultural as well as liquid nourishment.

My last visit to a hostelry for mainly drinking purposes was with my wife to a local hostelry in Cheshire, at lunchtime on Sunday the 15th of March. Shortly thereafter all such spontaneous activity was made illegal due to the so-called pandemic caused by the spread of a new virus which has become known as Covid-19.

Now, this virus has spread across the globe and is ravaging human populations all over the world. It is spreading fear and uncertainty about what to do and not to do to protect ourselves, it fills our thoughts and alter our behaviours — or at least the behaviours of some of us. Our leaders (politicians and scientists) become struck with panic attacks. They clearly do not know what to do.

Covid-19 is remarkable in that it is more pliable and malleable than the viruses we have come to recognize historically.

It is capable of mutate to optimise its chances of survival in a new environment and thereby move from one type of hosts say an animal, then to a human and maybe back again. It can change its build-up to evade and out-wit traditional immunity mechanisms. More and more pathways along which it transmits come to light at least monthly, weekly or even daily. They include airborne transmission which might last up to several hours where originally it was thought that transmission was only possible to the touch.

In order to keep up with the changes the powers that be implement steadily more stringent restrictions on our movements, on interpersonal and social activities

generally. They order us to wear face masks and present ourselves for tests to establish whether or not we are carriers of the virus. In all it makes us feel we are living a shadowy existence under a cloud which some day in the future may turn out to be a product of our imagination.

Every night I go to bed praying that during the day I have not in a careless moment unknowingly been infected and wondering how I shall get through the coming days if infected. Every morning – so far anyway – I wake up in an instant checking the workings of my body giving thanks to my creator that everything seems to be in order.

Similarly, every day I visit my Ash tree to look for signs of ‘dieback’ hoping not to find any. And at the same time praying that no gust of wind has been able to blow an invisible cloud of the dreaded spores onto the tree and allowed them to settle and infect the core of the tree.

We, the human population is told that wearing face masks is a helpful if not perfect way of making the transmission of viruses difficult – from the point of view of the virus that is. And one could similarly imagine that masking the trees might hinder the spread of spores of contagious fungi. However, it would also hinder the pollination and creation of seeds, and it would make the tree less attractive as a harbinger of other life.

We are told that hygiene is one important factor in keeping Covid-19 at bay especially by frequent washing and the use of disinfectant whenever and wherever possible.

Hygiene is also an important factor in seeking to control ‘Ash tree dieback’, but in this case it is about keeping the area around the tree free of leaf litter and dead wood during the autumn and winter. It might help to reduce re-infection; it disrupts the fungus's lifecycle, reduces spore production and therefore inoculum pressure the following summer.

We are used to think of trees as a kind of passive biological machines which are just tolerated for the wood and fruit they create through the process of photosynthesis. The timber industry in particular sees forests as wood-producing systems and battlegrounds for survival of the fittest. However, a realization is growing amongst professionals that trees are actually more than that. Trees are more alert, social, sophisticated—and even intelligent—than we thought.

Trees share water and nutrients through the roots, and also use the roots to communicate. They send distress signals about drought and disease or insect attacks, and other trees alter their behaviour when they receive these messages. Whether my tree has received such messages or passed them on, I am unable to say. But being social, sophisticated “and even intelligent” it may have a consciousness and awareness of its environment including the existence of and danger posed by ‘die-back’ spores.

My Ash tree along with all other plants contribute to the wellbeing of the rest of the biosphere. More specifically trees contribute in the same way not only to the physical health of humankind but also to our cultural and mental wellbeing. My Ash tree does so merely by its physical and visual presence, on this late September day still full to

bursting point of green, living leaves, defying the stormy weather of the autumn. Without any perceptible, tangible – visual or audible – communication, it conveys to me the message that life is eternal and life will win and carry all living things with it past the ‘die-back’ and the Covid-19 into eternity.

For that message and for the ability to receive it I feel an immense gratitude and wish I was able to express this in some manner intelligible to the tree. Keeping the floor clean below the tree somehow does not seem enough, but if that is what the tree needs I will carry on.

References:

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