



“Enchanted by rotten green, we have cut ourselves off from the family of trees, animals, and humans. Asserting ourselves over them we develop neighbourhoods, cities, and nations of concrete. Of profit. Of distance. But at what cost?... We forget how to tend, to grow, to relate. But not the trees. They continue to feed, breathe, and touch our spirit with theirs.”

– Frank Scofield Nellessen, *Where the Concrete Cracks*, p. 52

STUDY GUIDE GEEZ 57: CO₂CONSPIRATORS

ABOUT GEEZ

Geez magazine is a quarterly, nonprofit, ad-free, print magazine about social justice, art, and activism for people at the fringes of faith in both Canada and the U.S.

Our aim is to nurture a community of faith-oriented folks that are concerned about the environment, peace, racial and gender justice, decolonization, and other social concerns. At best, we offer a prophetic and provocative voice to the institutional church and a pastoral presence to those laboring at the front lines of social change.

The work of *Geez* is storytelling. We believe that stories are crucial to the ongoing struggles for justice – that they are part of what sustains us, gives us rest, and offers hope. Stories come out of movement and can be gifted back to movement. *Geez* is committed to not just raging against oppression, but offering the hope, beauty, and power alive in local communities doing their work.

INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE

Geez 57: CO₂conspirators, Communing with Trees, an extended issue, gives space for trees to hold our weary beings. In this time of great uncertainty and change, the trees keep finding us here – wherever we may be.

We breathe and the trees are fed. The trees breathe and we are fed. Right now, they are not afraid of our breath. In fact, they want more breathing and less production. They need no social distance from us. And in our panic and grief, they never stop breathing upon us. Trees are our coconspirators. We give one another life.

Each of us picks up this issue with an aching heart. We have been walking with loneliness, despair, fear, and grief. We lay all of that upon this issue right here and right now. Let the trees hold us. Let us be undone, exposed, and slowly, slowly feel glimpses of hope and wholeness.

ACTIVITY

Before you read the issue or begin this study guide, we encourage you to choose a tree to be in relationship with as you engage the text. Maybe you know which tree immediately or maybe you need to walk a while to find one that feels like home. As Rose Berger reminded us in *Geez* 54: Climate Justice, it is important to be “particular in our affections” with these tall leafy creatures. Use Sarah Holst’s words at the beginning and end of the issue (pages 1, 2, 3, 76, 77) to help guide you. Throughout the issue and study guide, there will be many opportunities to engage with trees. Let yourself keep coming back to this tree.

GOZ **OUT LOUD** Page 8 – Breathing in, I am Alive by Lydia Wylie-Kellermann

Geez Out Loud is a listening series that offers audio accompaniment by the author for select stories, geezmagazine.org/geez-out-loud. Look for the icon to identify pieces with audio.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

Whether you are in conversation with folks in a classroom, at a dining room table, or on the internet, be mindful that this work is not just intellectual but work of the heart. Be gentle with one another along our different journeys.

- Part 1: Trees as Kin
- Part 2: Trees as Prophet
- Part 3: Trees as Medicine
- Part 4: Trees as Haven
- Part 5: Trees as Witness
- Part 6: Trees as Beings

To order copies of this issue, visit geezmagazine.org/store.

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PART 1 TREES AS KIN

RECOMMENDED READING

Page 9 – Elderword by *Ched Myers*

Page 12 – I Asked the Redwoods by *Nichola Torbett*

Page 15 – “Seeing Tree (Mark 8:24)” by *Petra Zantingh*



Page 17 – Becoming-with Birch by *Adrian M. Downey*

TREE WISDOM

 **Birches** are first to return after a fire. Their roots then draw buried nutrients that restore topsoil by dropping leaves that decompose.

 **Thirsty? Sycamores** hold large quantities of water – drinkable sap when you need it.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are the costs of not seeing trees as kin? How would things shift if we started seeing kin in the trees?
2. Think back on your childhood. Was there a tree you had a special connection with? How and why has your relationship with this tree changed as you've grown older?

ACTIVITY

1. Grab some paper and walk through the prompts found in the Eco-identity Activity by Ruth Wilson on page 20.
2. Write your own “COVID Companion.” What tree has helped hold you, and how, during this season of pandemic?
3. Rewrite an ending to The Giving Tree that could accompany the artwork on pages 20-21.

PART 2 TREES AS PROPHET

RECOMMENDED READING

Page 26 – Radical Rootedness by *Kim Redigan*

Page 28 – “Mentorship” by *Ricardo Levins Morales*



Page 29 – The Tree that Fell in the Forest by *Avery Lamb*

TREE WISDOM

 In Greece, an **olive tree** is planted when a child is born. It grows with the child and bears fruit for their future generations.

 **Ash tree** berries can be made into jam after a freeze – a good source of protein, fibre, vitamin A and C, iron, and perhaps cyanide.

 **Bald cypress** are known for their knees – bent, elevated roots that anchor the tree and transport air for water-submerged roots.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does your spiritual journey entwine with particular trees? If you practice in a spiritual tradition, where and how do trees show up in the tradition's practice and history?
2. Amidst the chaos of the world, what can trees teach us about rootedness?
3. In “The Tree that Fell in the Forest,” Avery Lamb asks us: “For what will we be a nurse log?” As we face climate crisis, how are you already growing new ways of being? What parts of yourself might you need to let decompose in order to nurture this new life?

ACTIVITY

1. Journal about “Mentorship” on page 28. What does that artwork summon in you? Where do you find yourself in the image? What are the roots? Is there gratitude that must be offered in response?
2. Return to a beloved fictional book that speaks of trees. Be washed over by the words.
3. Sit with your tree. Listen. Do you hear or imagine the prophetic callings from your tree? Write them down.

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PART 3 TREES AS MEDICINE

RECOMMENDED READING

Page 33 – Instructions on Being with Trees by *Dee Dee Risher and Erin Cutler*



Page 36 – Tree Medicine by *Chrystal Wāban*

Page 38 – Homestead-Style Maple Syrup by *Lenae Chambers*

TREE WISDOM



Tamarack is a word from the Abenaki language, which simply means “wood used for snowshoes.”



Maple root systems are powerful – dense and fibrous, they inhibit plant growth beneath them.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Growing up, what did you learn about the medicinal wisdom of plants and trees?
2. In “Tree Medicine,” Chrystal Wāban writes of the “humble offerings” given to us by trees. How do trees restore you? How does it feel to receive medicine from their safety, nourishment, or shade?
3. In our current moment of unprecedented medical care, what can we learn from trees about how we care for one another’s bodies and souls? As we struggle with this deadly respiratory virus, what plants and trees in your area are good for boosting your immune system and supporting your respiratory system?

ACTIVITY

1. Read through “Instructions on Being with Trees” as if it were a prayer. Choose one to meditate upon for the day. Let it be a mantra on your lips and in your heart.
2. Make pancakes and drizzle them in real maple syrup. Taste the tree. Taste the gift. Delight in the goodness.

PART 4 TREES AS HAVEN

RECOMMENDED READING

Page 43 – The Prayer Tree by *Joseph Farnes*

Page 47 – A Thin Place, Lessons Learned from the Leaven Center *an interview with Melanie Morrison and Joe Riley* by *Owólabi*

Page 49 – The Grey-Green Divide by *Leslie Sinclair*

TREE WISDOM



The only **apple** native to North America is the crab apple. John Chapman seeded Pennsylvania, Ontario, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois as food for coming settlers.



Oaks are more likely to be struck by lightning than other trees. Druids who seek awen, or inspiration, “court the flash” by seeking out oaks.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do we create more spaces for rest and shelter? Are there spaces rich in trees that have become haven and retreat for weary activists?
2. Can you see correlations where you live between trees (their numbers, their size) and income? Do you have stories about the ways that trees have been violently used against people? How does tree planting become an act of restorative justice, racial justice, and climate justice?

ACTIVITY

1. Plant a haven for future generations. Join an organized tree planting, donate to tree planting efforts, or find a spot in your own yard or in a vacant lot.
2. Return to a tree that has offered haven and offer the tree a gift of gratitude.

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PART 5 TREES AS WITNESS

RECOMMENDED READING

Page 52 – *Where the Concrete Cracks* by Frank Scofield Nellesen

Page 55 – *The Trees Are on our Side* by Grace Aheron

Page 57 – *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, book review by Tommy Airey

TREE WISDOM



Indigenous peoples stripped young **basswood** branches of their stringy inner fibres to weave rope.



Indigenous peoples would harvest **cedar** bark, dry it, grind it to a powder, and eat it while travelling or as an emergency.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. This issue went to print before George Floyd was killed. Since then the trees have witnessed another historical turning point. What would the trees say? How are the trees helping us hold this moment?
2. In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone writes that it is impossible to comprehend both the brutality and the beauty of the cross “unless one is standing in solidarity with those who are powerless.” How does identifying the cross with a lynching tree shift your conception of crucifixion? Of lynching? What do the trees have to teach us about bearing witness to this legacy of slavery and white supremacy?

ACTIVITY

1. What is the history of the place where you live? Choose an old tree in a central area where you live and chronicle the history that tree may have witnessed.
2. Visit a nearby cemetery.
3. Purchase, borrow, or beg for a copy of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by James Cone. If you haven't read it recently, read it again. Bonus points for starting a book club!

PART 6 TREES AS BEINGS

RECOMMENDED READING

Page 60 – *The Tree of Heaven* by D.L. Mayfield

Page 62 – *How to Protect that Which We Cannot Name* by Kyra Hanson

Page 64 – *Small Stones* by Cara Unger Hart

Page 65 – *Rooted in a Changing World: A One Player Game* by Roberta Taylor

TREE WISDOM



The **tree of heaven** grows an incredible 3-5 feet annually and is resilient to air and ground pollutants.



To support their shallow root system, older **beech trees** propagate and spread smaller trees to create a woven support system.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What trees are in the background of your daily life? What do you know about their histories, their dispositions, their roots?
2. Where do you see trees simply being themselves?

ACTIVITY

1. Learn some new names of species in your area. Some new birds or bugs, too. Let us protect that which we can name.
2. Play Roberta Taylor's one-player game, “Rooted in a Changing World,” on page 65.
3. Write your own “Small Stones.” Carry a little pad of paper and jot down meditative observations about trees throughout your day.