

UFC Chair's Reflection - November 2021

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Why do leaves fall from trees?

Did you ever asked yourself why leaves turn color in the fall and ultimately are shed off the branches of some trees?



I am sure you did it way back, as a child. The most common and widely accepted explanation is that in the fall daylight is shorter and air temperatures drop precipitously, so leaves stop their food-making process. The chlorophyll breaks down, the green color disappears.



And then the yellow to orange colors become visible and give the leaves part of their fall splendor.



And then I am sure you all had your 'aha moment': you look through the window and you see some landscapes like the ones here, in which only some leaves are down, others not yet, while some are still green.



And you may say: well, not all branches are exposed to same temperatures, sunlight, so it is only natural that some leaves fall early, some later, depending on the local natural conditions. And you say, like that Zorba the Greek with a curious, child-like mind: hm. Then, one day you are playing with your camera, taking test shots using a new lens, and you see something else.



This is an even more extreme situation: all leaves are brown and lying on the ground, except for one branch, which is still full of green, healthy leaves. How come? What is with this branch? Well, it turns out that this is a late spring branch, something that the arborists call 'suckers', which typically appear too late to have flowers or to bear fruit that year. And that peach tree branch appeared 4 weeks later than when all the other leaves emerged from the tiny early spring buds. Interestingly, this branch's leaves turned yellow-brown and fell off the tree exactly 4 weeks later! So, is it possible that this is not all environment, but also genetics? In other words, epigenetics, or the complex interplay between apoptosis or programmed death and environment-triggered events? I will not claim that I have any significant horticultural knowledge or expertise in genetics, but I think an observation like this has the classical imprint of how new discoveries happen. And isn't this all about why we are where we are, as curious, inquisitive minds: in an academic environment?

And you may ask yourself: what is the relevance of dying leaves here?

The metaphor is for something far grimmer, one of the most tragic events, the loss of human life. Sometimes we find out that someone close to us left us behind. At times we hear that some

horrible pandemic took someone too early, too young. Some of us work in a medical unit in which loss of human life is way too frequent and adjusting to this reality takes a huge toll. Some fall off their life orbits because their genetics or a larger plan dictate it, others because of the environment; some because some terrible disease shortens their stay on this planet, while others may have taken their own lives. We have all heard about the medical residents in a NY hospital, who under tremendous pressure and extreme exhaustion, tragically, committed suicide. Similarly, you may have heard recently about the students at UNC who also, tragically, took their own lives. And unfortunately, we do not lack examples. Some mental conditions are highly influenced by the genetic makeup of the individual, while others are mainly exacerbated by the environment (such as stress, trauma, lack of family or social connections).

We have to pay attention to our environment, to our families, to our workplace or schools, we have to work hard to make our reality better. Loss of life by either intentional or unintentional means is always tragic. So let's all act fast to improve the lives and the work conditions of the individuals who constitute our microenvironments. Let's try hard not to lose any more loved ones.

For this reason and at this moment in time, I thought I would tackle this difficult topic and also to bring under the larger umbrella of programing for wellness and wellbeing the available resources we have at our disposal to cope with loss, stress, isolation, virtual interactions and/or confinement. For this reason today, before the executive session, we will hear from one of our Emory chaplains, from the office of Spiritual and Religious Life, who will provide us an overview of available resources for us to use in difficult times like these.

Thank you.