



The fig tree, the sawmill, and the dance of resilience

My family moved to the little town of Mount Molloy about 14 years ago. Perched just west of the Great Dividing Range, we are here on the headwaters of the mighty Mitchell River, ancestral home of the Koko Muluridji people.

On the corner of the main street is an intriguing pile of bricks and iron machinery which comprise the heritage listed remains of the JM Johnston Sawmill. There's a steam power winch, reciprocating engine, and brick boiler with a chimney rising up in a sturdy square tower. The ruins are interesting in their own right, but what really sticks out is the bright green of an enthusiastic fig tree bursting from the top of the old boiler's chimney like living woodsmoke.

And yes, the combination of "heritage listed" and "enthusiastic fig tree" is fundamentally problematic. It's the central tension for this story I'd like to share with you.

In 1880s colonial history, Mount Molloy was just a waypoint for Cobb & Co. A settlement sprang up when copper was discovered. By 1903 an open-cut mine and underground workings had been developed, a smelter built, and a staggering sum of money raised to build a private railway for hauling refined copper to the railhead at Mareeba. But in 1907 disaster struck: a Wall Street hustler's stock empire imploded and the resulting panic in New York precipitated a global collapse of copper prices. Overnight the Mount Molloy mine was shuttered and railway construction halted, just a few miles short of town. The situation looked grim. The well-connected money men pivoted. Brainstorm: the train could cart timber

instead of copper. They pulled in political favours, secured monopoly logging rights on the country around Mount Molloy, and set up a mill.

Sawmilling was a good move. Our region was rich with Cadaghi, Hickory, Red Cedar, Silky Oak, and the truly colossal Kauri Pine. A newspaper report from 1913 glowed: "There are millions and millions of feet of timber within a few miles of Mt. Molloy awaiting a market." People of that time convinced themselves the forests would go on forever. And for a couple of decades they were right.

But by the 1970s the biggest of the timber was long gone. Heavy machinery, politicians, and bureaucrats allowed crews to chase remnants further and further into the high country, hacking hideous scars into these living lands.

Amongst this mayhem, a number of foresters, along with researchers from CSIRO, were looking for a better way. They developed a set of methods and protocols that could have led to a sustainable (circular) process for tropical hardwood cultivation, care, and harvest. This alternative approach could have secured jobs, resources, and habitat for generations to come. But it was a lost cause. The sawmillers, with their insatiable thirst for maximising capital returns, required an uninterrupted supply of logs. Their demand drove ongoing savagery in the bush.

In due course the public revolted. Appalled at the decimation of the rainforests, local folks — as well as highly motivated activists from down south — rallied, ranted, wrote letters and chained themselves to bulldozers. It worked. The political pendulum was pushed to the other extreme and in 1988 the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area was declared.

With a stroke of the pen every sawmilling job disappeared. The pain shifted from the forests to the community. Businesses closed, tradies packed up their tools, and the big saws whined to a halt. Families with roots now three generations deep realised they would have to leave the region to find work elsewhere. What had been a vibrant and resourceful community grew frail, a victim of its own speculation: boom and bust, extraction and destruction.

And around this time some bowerbird, or maybe it was a top-knot pigeon, dropped a splat of their half-digested lunch on the top of the now-cold chimney of the old sawmill boiler. And a sort of mundane miracle occurred: a little fig tree sprouted right up there on the top.

In just a few short years the little fig had dug its way firmly into the gaps between iron and brick and stretched roots all the way down to earth, repeating an adaptive formula for success refined over millennia and expressed through the fig tree's living code.

Figs are a broad family of ancient plants that have been flourishing on the planet since the dinosaurs. Figs are special. They provide a remarkable range of services to their ecosystems and are considered the "Queens of the Rainforest." They have managed to thrive through times so difficult that most all other living things on earth perished. One secret to their success is their relationship with the tiny wasps that pollinate the flowers inside the hollow fleshy stem that will become a fruit. The figs and the wasps are mutually dependent, a testament to the enduring wisdom of cooperative reciprocity.

Most of the people I talked to insisted that the fig tree had to be killed before it destroyed the brick boiler. Indeed, several locals have tried to chop and poison the fig, but it keeps coming back. Meanwhile, in a different echo chamber, the true believers want to see the fig tree take over the whole boiler and reduce it to rubble, creating a sort of North Queensland Angkor Wat. These folks are nature lovers. They don't see any reason to celebrate the industrial flotsam thrown off by our culture.

If the normies win, the fig loses. If the fig wins, then we lose a bit of our cultural heritage. So it looks like an either-or situation. Indeed, our modern minds are primed to interpret the world through the lens of competition, a selfish-gene view that sees only winners and losers. But surely the story of life is more complex?

One of the marvellous privileges of living close to the land is the opportunity to witness the daily practice of alternatives to a simplistic win/lose worldview. Slow down just for a moment and you realise *country* is always inviting us to observe and participate in a local web of relationships that serve to increase mutual benefit. To develop and complexify, these relationship patterns require time. Time and endurance: the foundation of resilience.

We can think of ancient ecosystems as a sort of living reference library. Stored in those mysterious dimensions are vast numbers of cooperative solution-patterns where long chains of benefit flow with subtle grace across webs of relationality. As we bring our attention into focus, taking the time to observe and reflect deeply, we begin to see the multiplicity of ways other living beings negotiate the tensions between self-preservation and community-scale resilience. Imagine the metaphors we could draw on to refresh our social imaginations if we took the time to learn from our fellow beings. It's an especially painful irony that the Mount Molloy timber speculators were hacking down the oldest continuous rainforest in the world, the Daintree, in a pretence of economic necessity. Like deciding to burn DaVinci's original manuscripts to roast marshmallows. What a pitiful catastrophe.

The ruins of the JM Johnston Sawmill are an unmissable feature of our village. Located on 1ha of land fronting the Mulligan Highway, gateway to Cape York, the artefacts are a connection to memories and they invite the question "what's next?" In 2000 we formed a small not-for-profit called the Mount Molloy Boiler Block Benefit Committee and secured finance to purchase the property. The theme of the project is "Toward village-scale self-sufficiency." We have two main goals: caretake and preserve the heritage artefacts; and develop a community skills venue where people can come together and practice bushcraft, metal-working, timber milling and other subsistence technologies using a combination of what worked well in the past and what might work in the uncertain future.

One of our first conversations was how to understand the fig tree. After careful inspection we determined that the fig is not immediately endangering the brickwork. So instead of trying to eradicate the plant, we have decided to collaborate with it. We will give the fig a very hard prune every year and will keep a close eye on its tendency to spread. In return, the fig will continue to grow, set fruit, and enjoy its life. The fig will serve as a reminder of the other-than-human priorities that exist all around us. The vigilance and caretaking we contribute is a reminder that attention to the world is both our duty and our gift.

This modest effort at reframing the story of our community appears to be taking hold. In one recent meeting it was suggested that we sprout seedlings from the “Boiler Block Fig” and offer them as gifts, along with the story, to anyone who has a bit of land that they can grow a fig tree on. Another suggestion was that we set up a small greenhouse nursery to propagate Cadaghi, Red Cedar, and Kauri Pine seedlings as a fundraiser and as a contribution to recovering the forests that the sawmill processed. And each time a visitor or a local asks about the fig it gives us a chance to repeat this idea of belonging. We all have a place within the community of beings whether we are fig trees or timber getters, macropods or machinists, rivers or rainforest ecologists.

As an educated white male, my personal history sensitises me to the critiques of colonialism, extractivism, and the irreducible darkness at the core of capitalism. My heart groans when I look around this fragmented landscape. In a single generation between 1870 and 1920, unfathomable disturbance was wrought across some of the oldest ecosystems on earth while the local people were savagely dispersed to make way for what we call civilisation, or modernity. With the introduction of heavy machinery after 1945, the pace of environmental simplification hockey-sticked. Our enlightenment notion of the great arc of progress hit the ground in the form of a chain grinding up the “scrub” between two D10s.

As much as circularity is an invitation to holism, it is also a warning that what goes around comes around. Karma is a bitch. You reap what you sow. Who can be surprised at the mess that confronts us each day now, given the barbarity of this culture’s so-recent past? Of course we yearn — deeply — to do better. The question is how to make each step a bit more positive than the one before. Contemplation of our cultural *ouroboros*, the snake eating its own tail, may lead us toward a model of spirals, not closed loops.

We are knit together as social creatures, from kin to culture, in a tapestry whose defining characteristics are revealed through the narratives that we recite to one another. In Mount Molloy we have an irrepressible fig tree held in balance with the chimney, a reminder of the remarkable and troubling story of modernity. We have selected a symbol that reminds us of the constant attention life requires if it is to be lived well, and if we are to become more resilient dancers in service to an ever-changing world.

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Author Bio

John Brisbin BSc (Marine Engineering and Nautical Science), MSc (Complex Systems Theory and Organisational Development) arrived in Australia in 1993 after leaving the USA over irreconcilable political and cultural differences. He served as Chair of the Northern Gulf Resource Management Group, and is a Director of various public-good organisations including the National Landcare Network, the Mitchell River Watershed Catchment Group, and the Australian Rangeland Society.

John, Caroline, their two blossoms, and co-family at Loveheart Farm are opening up the heavy shale-clay soils and fascinating social strata of the Mount Molloy district with an eye toward patterning a tropically-adapted Ayurvedic community garden. John writes and researches on village-scale self-sufficiency and an entropy-grounded theory of ethics. He is guided by a personal mantra: "i am what i eat <==> i am the change i want to see".



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