

The Banyan Tree

By Tim Toben

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Just hours after his passing, Frank's brother Ken spoke from circle of nearly 200 friends holding hands around the garden. "I think he saw us all as plant beings and he certainly was one himself." Muffled laughter mixed with tears. Frank Cook was the Banyan Tree.

If the name is not familiar, you'll remember the man. Frank stood 6'3" tall with piercing blue eyes and waist length dreadlocks. He wore simple clothes and sandals and carried a satchel over his shoulder. In Carrboro, his home was a loft bed at the residence of Beth Robinson and Alan Dehmer. He walked everywhere, once across the entire state of North Carolina, foraging for food along the way. Most of us in these modern times would die attempting such a trek. Frank feasted – both physically and spiritually.

Someone once said that we are born with two beings – one that dies and one that lives forever. That is certainly true for Frank Cook. Frank will always be known around the world for his plant knowledge and his journey to "meet" the 5000+ genera of plants. At 47 years old, he was 70% of the way to his goal. He'd chucked a promising career in computer science 20 years earlier to follow his heartsong, traveling to Namibia to meet Omumborombonga, the ancestral tree of life, and to India to meet Buckuchurbu, used to treat stomach upset.

Those of us lucky enough to cross His path were reacquainted with the native plants we loved as children. Frank could hang with the best Linnean taxonomist, but he "understood" plants more deeply – their medicinal qualities, their nutritional values, and their unique role in the interdependent ecology of nature. And he clearly loved them.

Frank would lean down and shade his small subjects with large hands and begin telling their story. The breath from his deep baritone voice seemed to lift the plantain or pepsisiwa from its roots, as he brushed the leaves from around their base. "Choose me, choose me," you could imagine them saying. In those moments, we were children again, finding a long lost love. And he was an "indigenous" teacher.

The meals between walks were just as vibrant. Reminding us that most Americans eat just 25 species of plants a year, he'd make fresh bread and soup with at least 25 species gathered during his walk. The flavors and energy in his food were life giving. He'd make teas by day and meads at night, always sharing a batch from last year in a pass-around bottle. Frank's blueberry and sumac meads were my favorite. His gatherings built community and these are the friends we'd all want at our memorials.

His "business model" baffled most. He worked for donations. You paid what you could, and that was enough to fund Frank's travels to meet plants across the globe. He'd recently completed a Masters Degree at the Schumacher Institute in the UK and written a book on Planetary Ecology. His subject matter had expanded to include "transition cultures" – those preparing for, not a low-, but a no-carbon economy.

Frank had just returned from teaching engagements in the Southwest US, but before that in South America. What he thought was travel weariness was apparently a spreading parasitic infection, which spread rapidly this week and this morning claimed his sinewy body. Thousands around the world, and several hundred in Carrboro, Chapel Hill, and Asheville weep quietly at the loss of their friend and teacher. We are ever so grateful for his many gifts, for the many seeds he planted. His spirit is alive and well.

If he'd ever have stayed in one place for more than a few months, I'm convinced that Frank's cascading dreadlocks would have taken root, like the Banyan Tree, and grown other Frank Cooks. If only that had happened, what a better world this would be.

Godspeed.