

The Beauty of Bark

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Photo Di Shearer

The long, thin-coiled sheets of bark caught my attention: pale pink, ochre and mauve sheets of bark peeling from the gum trees on my daily walk. Other gums with thick grey bark peeling off in slabs, and more gums shedding crumbly brown pieces from their core. The stringy bark gums shedding long, dark brown pieces still attached to their trunks gave them a shaggy appearance. The profusion of gums shedding bark was hard to ignore.

What was left behind was often a pale pink glowing trunk, smooth to the touch, or a patchwork quilt of colours, mauve, grey and tan. After rain or a windy night there would be a thick carpet of bark sheets surrounding the trees I passed.

I was captivated. Eucalypts shed their bark at certain times of the year or it can be an ongoing process. This was the first time I had really noticed. I wondered if it was because my beloved friend was shedding her mortal self to become 'pure essence'. She helped me see with greater clarity. Her gift was presence even as her presence was slowly becoming 'essence' – a core of light and love. She was always in tune with the natural world around her. How would she interpret the shedding of eucalypts?

Eucalypts are indigenous to Australia with over 900 identified species and subspecies. They are recognized for their unique appearance and for their tendency to shed bark.¹



Why do eucalypts shed their bark?' I was certainly witnessing a profusion of bark shedding with some strands and pieces metres long and some sheets as thick and as wide as a small novel. The answer was simple. Eucalyptus trees shed their bark **to allow new growth**. They are continuously forming new bark beneath their outer layers. As the trunk increases in size, they shed the older bark to promote healthy growth and expansion to grow wider and taller.

As well as allowing the tree to expand, shedding protects it from pests and diseases by sloughing off accumulated mosses, lichens and parasites that might harm it. It can contribute to the tree's energy production with fresher bark taking part in photosynthesis and increasing the plant's vitality. The act of shedding often produces a smoother less combustible surface area in fire-prone environments.²

I wondered what shedding my bark would look like? What could be shed to grow and expand? Was it already happening in my life?

I have recently shed my role as a 'professional' stepping down from my lifelong career and more shedding has followed as my husband and I have become 'empty nesters' in the last two months.

I pondered: what else needs to be shed for new life and growth in my life? What patterns of behaviour, prejudices and attachments need to be sloughed for my inner trunk for me to grow now?

Contemplating nature as teacher I discovered a very special art exhibition in Melbourne at the Potter Museum called: *Ngarn Wa'ngal breathing for us Art of the gum tree*.³

This beautiful, varied and mesmerising exhibition was a fascinating exploration of gum trees as art, as well as a depiction of the effects of colonisation and, in particular, the life-giving role of the gum tree in First Nations culture and way of life.

¹ <https://biologyinsights.com/why-do-eucalyptus-tress-shed-their-bark> accessed 2/5/26

² ibid

³ <https://potter-museum.unimelb.edu.au/whats-on/exhibitions/art-of-the-gum-tree>

Margo Neale writes: *“Australian indigenous plants.... offer us one of many ways of connecting to Country: of being one with it. Country is not only the heartbeat of the continent but also our heartbeat. It tells us who we are, how we should live, how to care for each other and care for Country. It holds the answer to our future survival on this planet. Plants are not only part of Country – in our world view they are Country.”*⁴

Sophie Gerhard, curator, adds: *“This connection, dating back to deep time, reveals the enmeshment between gum trees and people. A mutual reliance of care and kinship. Ngarn wa’ngal. Breathing for us”*.⁵

In the spirit of connection, kinship and care, we too who are part of the Contemplation Network gather between 4 and 5 pm each afternoon, aware of all the “bark shedding” happening in both our immediate and larger worlds. How many the deaths and suffering! How many the unasked or forced letting goes and separations from the mother source!

As we gather, can we dare to hope that in all the suffering, sloughing off and dying in people, countries and earth herself, ‘presence’ is being transformed into ‘essence’. Can we trust and believe that, in all of this something new or renewed might be forming deep inside the whole?

This month we are invited once again to see what is happening in ourselves and in the larger world as we sink together into the deep tree of life that holds us all.



⁴ <https://www.simonandschuster.com.au/books/Ngarn-Wangal/Alisa-Bunbury/9780522882520> p. 107

⁵ Ibid p. 107