

Our Silent Tree

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The sculptural triptych *Trees* by Terry Allen graces the landscape south of Geisel Library, as part of our campus's famed Stuart Collection [<http://stuartcollection.ucsd.edu>]. The music tree and literary tree catch the ear of pedestrians, offering snatches of songs, poems, and stories from within the eucalyptus grove. The Silent Tree, however, stands alone before the entrance to the Library, its lead-dark branches striking a somber note in an otherwise serene campus.

Stuart Collection Director Mary Beebe, under whose leadership *Trees* was commissioned and installed, recalls that the campus community did not uniformly welcome the Silent Tree, nor its prominent placement. Some said it was too gloomy, a potentially jarring presence, and perhaps even incompatible with the mission of the university https://ucsd.edu/about/index.html?_ga=2.230494555.677122240.1554056984-1903052057.1491077918]

Twice this academic year, however, I have been part of poignant gatherings at the Silent Tree that show how necessary and powerful a symbol it is for our campus. In the wake of the hate crimes committed at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA on October 27, 2018 and at the Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand in March 15, 2019, students, faculty, staff, and community members gathered at the Silent Tree to be in fellowship together as dusk fell.

The two gatherings, led respectively by Hillel and the Muslim Students Association, were strikingly similar. Each opened with a prayer: a statement of solidarity in the face of violence and a call to love in the face of grief. Each continued with impromptu words from those gathered in a large, loose-knit circle beneath the Tree: stories about the meaning of their faith, the role of their religious community in their lives, and the sense of alienation now confronting them. At each, the Chancellor and Vice Chancellors affirmed the attendees and their peers as vital members of the campus community who should never hesitate to seek assistance or counsel from university leadership. And each closed with a reminder of the ways in which faith calls its adherents to cleave to love and justice in the face of hatred.

It was a privilege to be part of these gatherings in which our own students stood forth as emissaries of peace, offering one another comfort and repudiating violence.

That these gatherings convened beneath the Silent Tree was entirely fitting. It stands before the University Library as a warning that we must never take for granted our access to the inclusive community of scholars that our Library and University represent. Its bare branches loom as a reminder to fight the encroachments of censorship, which threatens intellectual freedom and self-governance throughout our world. The very contrast between its lifeless rigidity and the fluttering grace of the live trees nearby emphasizes the seriousness of its message.

Our university is wise to embrace art that can form a centerpiece for solemn gatherings like these, as a counterpart to the exuberant presence of the King Triton statue and the Sun God, where so many joyous photos are taken by the newly admitted and the recently graduated. If we are to succeed in preparing our students for their life's journey, our university's scholarly, educational, and creative work must encompass the challenges as well as the triumphs of the human condition. We must acknowledge the fears and divisions that still plague our world in order to inspire our students to be changemakers who can address these ills.

I, for one, am deeply grateful that the Silent Tree is on our campus as a source of solidarity and inspiration.