

The Wisdom and Beauty of Trees

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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The time is significant. Did we notice? We're just passing through one of nature's hinge moments. The door of winter began to close last Wednesday and turning, opened its arms to the advent of Spring; do you remember last Wednesday—so full of sun and light? The day seemed perceptibly longer. And the morrow came. Thursday was the pagan festival of Imbolc, noting time's pendulum swinging from winter to spring. At Imbolc, we ride winter to its crest, and for a moment perch exactly midway twixt Winter Solstice and the Equinox of Spring. In Japan, these days were celebrated with the annual festival of Setsubun. Families and neighbours run from room to room in their homes, from street to shrines, tossing roasted soy beans and calling out *Oni wa Soto; Fuku wa Uchi* (Devil's Out! Happiness In!). After the ritual throwing of the beans, you reach down and pick up the number of beans corresponding to your age, and eat them to assure good fortune in the coming year. Reckon this: since December's Solstice, we've already traveled a quarter of the way to Summer! So says I: Hey ho! Here comes Spring, with summer following not far behind. (Neopaganism is in essence the worship of the powers of this world, beautiful or terrible, but all in a circle under the turning sky above, which is One. -- C.A. Burland, *Echoes of Magic* (1972))

And this week, beginning Tuesday evening, marks the beginning of Tu B'Shevat—where Jewish communities celebrate the swinging of the season from winter to spring in what has become a world-wide environmental festival. According to traditional Jewish custom, the age of a tree was determined by whether it was planted before or on the 15th day of the Hebrew month of Shevat, a time when, in Israel, almond trees first begin to blossom. It may seem strange for us in Vancouver to be talking about the advent of spring and flowering trees in the beginning of

February—but last Wednesday under the skies, I could read from a book clearly after 5:00pm—something impossible to do even a week ago. And haven't you noticed the first catkins dangling from birch and willow, the fiery witch hazel and the budding viburnum?

I want to say a few things about Tu B'Shevat. On a civic, public level, it has become an Earth Day celebration in the Jewish community. Individuals, congregations, and civic organizations rededicate themselves to recycling more and driving less, and trees are planted, all with an aim to leave a kinder, more responsible footprint on this earth. Again, on a public level, but with a political edge, this festival is also being framed in terms of social and economic justice with an emphasis on the complex relationships of the peoples intricately linked to the lands of Israel and Palestine. In some congregations, like those of Vancouver's Ahavat Olam Synagogue, money is raised and donated to replace Palestinian farmers' olive trees burned and destroyed by by extremist Israeli settlers.

On a more intimate level, a dinner is shared—Passover style—with family and friends. Four cups of wine or fruit juice are consumed, a variety of nuts and fruit eaten in commemoration of the seasons. There is also a mystical intent in the meal of Tu B'Shevat, where a kabbalistic understanding of the universe and our place within it is explored, deepened and celebrated—and here trees and nature play an essential role. In the “kabbalist mindset,” though there are many worlds, they share a “common underlying structure.” And though our material world of making and doing is furthest, most distanced from God, that hidden, divine realm is symbolically represented in and through nature. Contemplating it can serve as a means for insight and appreciation. And here, the figure of a tree is paramount. (see *Trees, Creation and*

Creativity: The Hillel Tu B'Shevat Seder, <http://www.hillel.org/jewish/holidays/tubshevat>)

Listen to this passage from the 12th century book of esoteric theology called the “Book of Brightness” (*Sefer ha-Bahir*); it’s about “the cosmic tree”:

I am the one who planted this tree for all the world to delight in. With it I spanned the All, calling it All, for all depends on it, emanates from it, all need it, all gaze upon it and await it. From here souls fly forth in joy. Alone I was when I made it. When I spread out the earth, in which I planted and rooted this tree—giving them joy in one another, rejoicing along with them—who was with me? To whom could I reveal this secret? (Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah*, 77)

This is the cosmic tree, source of life for the entire universe. Elsewhere, the “Book of Brightness” identifies this tree with the ten emanations, the *sefirot*, that channel and embody the constantly flowing powers of god upon and through which our world and all things depend for being and life. And so cup-by-cup, and by the eating of fruit during the dinner that will be celebrated this Tu B’Shevat eve, those who celebrate bring to mind an awareness of the vulnerability of the environment, their social and political responsibility, their appreciation of the changing cycles of the seasons, and they contemplate that cosmic tree—root and branch—symbol of the underlying structure and interdependence of all things.

The concept of the tree of life, a many branched tree illustrating the idea that all life on earth is related, is a feature of myriad religions, theologies, and myths—a mindset that revels in metaphor and that perceives and celebrates the interconnectedness of all forms of creation. We encounter it from the Lotus tree studded with angels and galaxies that stands at the furthest limit of human knowledge seen by Muhammad during his ascent to heaven, to Yggdrasil, the great Nordic ash tree which fastens the earth between the underworld and heaven with its roots, trunk and branches, to the Grandmother Cedar of the peoples of the West Coast First Nations. Countless are the variations and stories, the acts and feelings of veneration and the sublime.

On our hikes through old growth forest, arching high overhead, cathedral-like they tower; or in desert landscapes where twisted, water-scarce, heated-blasted pinon stand isolate and immobile like scattered, surreal candelabra, we, too, have had our heightened moments of reverence and awe encountering and contemplating them—experiences that provoke religious emotions—the kind that have parented forth rituals and created a worldwide stock of mythic narratives and legendary beings. Root, trunk, and branch, needles, leaves and fruit, twisted with age, stripling straight and tall—isn't there a kind of kinship, don't we sense a remote identity between ourselves and trees—save that, in contrast to our wandering, feckless changeability, our brief years and chattiness, they stand out—rooted, resolute and monumental, clad in the silence of a wholly different element of being, time and wisdom. No wonder they seem cosmic. And we? And us?—weighed and found wanting *and* ennobled by proximity and likeness to them. ***“I think of the trees,”*** writes May Sarton, ***“and how simply they let go, let fall the riches of a season; how without grief (it seems) they can let go and go deep into their roots for renewal and sleep....Does anything in nature despair except man? Imitate the trees. Learn to lose in order to recover, and remember that nothing stays the same for long, not even pain. Sit it out. Let it go.”***

And not just in religion, myth and poetic insight—the tree, the tree of life is a central, key metaphor for exploring and describing the relationship of all life on earth in an evolutionary context. In Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1857, the only illustration in the book is that of a branched diagram that looks very much like a tree. Here he speculates that every single organism alive or extinct can trace its path back to a single common ancestor. Evolutionary biologists to this day still use tree diagrams to depict evolution because such

diagrams effectively convey the concept that the formation of new species occurs through adaptive and random splitting of lineages—a process that Darwin called “generation” and “ramification.” This is how Darwin wrote about the tree of life in a later edition of his classic book:

The affinities of all beings...have sometimes been represented by a great tree. I believe this largely speaks the truth. The green and budding twigs may represent existing species; and those produced during former years may represent the long succession of extinct [ones]. At each period of growth all the growing twigs have tried to branch out on all sides, and to overtop...the surrounding twigs and branches....Of all the many twigs which flourished when the tree was a mere bush, only two or three, now grown to great branches, yet survive and bear the other branches....[And] as buds give rise by growth to fresh buds, and these, if vigorous, branch out and overtop on all sides many a feebler branch, so by generation I believe it has been with the great Tree of Life, which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever-branching and beautiful ramifications.(Darwin, *The Origin of Species...*, 6th ed, 1872, pp 104–5)

“The great Tree of Life...with its ever-branching and beautiful ramifications”—we’re back in the realm of poetry, imagination and feeling. It reminds me of the comment made by Stephen Weinberg, the Nobel Prize winning astrophysicist and committed atheist, when he said: “I have to admit that sometimes nature seems more *beautiful* than is strictly necessary.” We reach for poetic language, we diagram out the story of life in the figure of a tree, we strive to explain why so much of nature seems so extraordinarily beautiful and akin to our best selves because, as the biologist, Edward O. Wilson suggests, natural selection may have instilled in us a “biophilia,” or reverence for nature, that benefits both us and those creatures and forms of inanimate and animate life with whom we enjoy mutually beneficial relationships. (on Weinberg and

Wilson, see John Horgan, *Rational Mysticism...*, 227)

In the beginning was relation,” Martin Buber, wrote. Indeed, we begin and walk through the course of our days woven within a deep web of social mutuality and interdependence with an extensive, myriad web of life. For as long as we have felt the transience of mortality and striven to prolong time and memory beyond the ravaging, inexorable dimming erasure of the passage of time, we have sought refuge and sustenance literally and symbolically in trees.

Steadfast providers of oxygen, they sustain our living breath. Deep rooted, they secure the ground from erosion. Generously extended toward the skies and horizons, they shelter myriad forms of life and mitigate the extremes of cold and heat. True alchemists, they take base elements: sunlight, water and carbon dioxide to create oxygen and glucose—the very sugary gold, the building block of growth. Each teems abundantly with food. They are nature’s larder, its pantry for creatures small and great, furred and feathered. And from their limbs we pluck the dazzling, many hued fruits of life.

Empirical studies have shown that patients with a view of trees outside their window had shorter post-operative stays, suffered less post-op anxiety and stress, took fewer painkillers and had fewer postsurgical complications. A long-term University of Illinois Environmental study that took place in the heart of one of Chicago’s largest and most forbidding housing Projects—an urban desert, nearly bereft of plants and flowers—revealed that those who lived near or could see and walk by the few trees in the Project had significantly better relations and stronger ties with their neighbours; they socialized more often and had a deeper sense of community. Researchers even found that incidents of domestic violence were significantly lower among families who lived near and interacted with trees in the Project than those families that did not. There is an uncommon, quietly dramatic relationship between us and our arboreal companions. In this city

prodigal with trees, do we recognize the wonder and drama occurring every day around us? Of the silent, steadfast benevolence of trees, and of our mortal dependence upon them? (Ulrich, View through a window may influence recovery from surgery, *Science* 27 April 1984: Vol. 224 no. 4647 pp. 420-421; see “The Forest Where We Live,” at www.lpb.org/programs/forest/chicago)

Two stories and I’ll bring these remarks to an end. In Tolstoy’s great novel *War and Peace*, there is a pivotal section in the book that changes the life of one of his three main characters, and it has everything to do with his relationship with a tree. Prince Andrei Bolkonsky has been gravely wounded in one of the battles in the wars Russia waged with Napoleon’s army. He’s missing in action and his family has given up hope of seeing him ever again. But he has recovered from his wounds, and races home only to arrive to find that his young wife has died giving birth to their first child. With her death, something dies in him as well.

Sometime later, Bolkonsky travels to visit one of his estates and is riding in an open carriage through the woods. They are alive with the first real signs of spring: “birches strewn with sticky green leaves...the first green grass and purple flowers poking through and lifting up the last year’s leaves.” And then:

“At the side of the road stood an oak. Probably ten times older than the birches...ten times as thick and twice as tall...With its huge, gnarled, ungainly, unsymmetrically spread arms and fingers, it stood, old, angry, scornful and ugly amidst the smiling birches. It alone did not want to submit to the charm of spring and did not want to see either springtime or the sun. ‘Spring, and love, and happiness!’ the oak seemed to say. ‘And how is it you’re not bored with the same stupid, senseless deception!... As they’ve grown, so I stand, and I don’t believe in your hopes, and happiness and deception’ ‘Yes it’s right, a thousand times right, this oak,’ thought Prince Andrei. ‘Let others, the young ones succumb afresh to this deception, but we know life—our life is over!’”

But not after this, Bolkonsky meets the young Natasha Rostov with whom he is going to fall in love. (This is great romantic, tragic stuff, I love it!) And some weeks later, Bolkonsky is passing through the same birch woods where “the gnarled old oak had struck him so strangely and memorably.” But where is it, he thought, looking around. And there it was “quite transformed, Tolstoy writes:

“spreading out a canopy of juicy, dark greenery, basking, barely swaying in the rays of the evening sun. Of the gnarled fingers, the scars, the old grief and mistrust—nothing could be seen.... ‘Yes, it’s the same oak,’ thought Prince Andrei, and suddenly a causeless springtime feeling of joy and renewal came over him. All the best moments of his life suddenly recalled themselves to him at the same time.... ‘No, life isn’t over...’ Prince Andrei suddenly decided definitively, immutably. ‘It’s not enough that I know all that’s in me.... everyone else must know me too, so that my life is not only for myself.’” (*War and Peace*, Pevear and Volkhonsky, trans., pp. 419-23)

Second story. Next to an irrigation ditch, that carried water from mountain streams to the east, my maternal grandfather Arthur planted a red plum tree. I remember him well, a mountain of a man, tending and pruning fruit trees and digging in his vegetable garden though I was only four when he died. Thereafter, each year, that red plum tree extravagantly put forth the most delicious, beautiful dark fruit. I can see and taste them now. Years passed, and I had returned to Utah. We were a struggling graduate student family; I was doing dissertation research and took up odd jobs to make ends meet.

At that time, we were also volunteering work and time with a Cambodian refugee community; driving them to church, going with them to doctors’ offices and job interviews—doing something to help them acclimate to an alien place and culture. One day, we drove to the airport in a van to meet newly arriving refugees, fresh from living for years in camps run by the UN on the Cambodia/Thai border. Fragile, smiling, awkward, tentative, overwhelmed. Dressed

simply, wearing small, towel-like scarves around their necks. Children and adults. Maybe a dozen altogether.

My grandmother had died recently, and my family lived in her home while uncles and aunts were deciding what to do with her effects and property. And it was there we drove the van—my family and a dozen or so Cambodians fresh off the plane.

All I really remember about that day is this: that incomprehensible gulf, that strangeness, all the barriers to communication and connection dissolved away when they saw my grandfather's plum tree laden with fruit. All of them climbed into its branches, picking and eating the red plums, talking and laughing.

It was as if Arthur, my grandfather, had turned into a red plum tree. And they were climbing his great body, and his arms outstretched cradled them, welcomed them in a language universal and without borders—that language and hope that defies the passing of time and knits places and people together.

“I would like to believe, wrote May Sarton, I would like to believe when I die that I have given myself away like a tree that sows seed every spring and never counts the loss, because it is not loss, it is adding to future life. It is the tree's way of being. Strongly rooted perhaps, but spilling out its treasure on the wind.”

In trees we see something of a reflection of ourselves—our fragility, our strength, our destiny rooted in a single life—one that spreads out like roots and branches into space and generations to come. May we be conscious and grateful for them, and for the extraordinary ways they call us to numinously and ethically attend to the circle of life and its great web in which we move, and breathe and have our being.