

The Secret Life of Trees
A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson
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UCV

There's something about trees that fills me with a sense of appreciation, wonder and awe. Perhaps, it's having grown up in the high mountain desert valleys of the American West. Trees are neither so abundant nor attain such towering heights as here; their modest, yet stately presence in that arid place always a sign of precious water quietly gathered in spring-fed ponds or tumbling down in brooks from distant mountain snowpack melting under the summer sun.

An early, treasured image, deeply grooved in memory, is that of my dog Rusty bounding before me down an alley of fruit trees all aglow in the setting sun, pheasants startled from hiding places and flying here and thither on whirring wings. A child in Eden running with delight in orchards planted by ancestors who channeled life-giving, fruit-bearing waters in irrigation ditches dug by hand and sweat. They dreamed of a desert blooming like a rose under those vast skies and unblinking sun, and bent their backs to make it so; dreamed, as well, of a self-reliant, cooperative, local economy of home manufactures and seasonal produce grown and harvested near at hand. They would govern themselves in all things, or so they dreamed, once upon a time.

But the boy became a man; autonomy in the mountains became enmeshed in national markets; and a peculiar, immigrant people became Americans (and then some!).

In the early 90s, I commuted by bus up foothills toward work. On that climbing road, I'd always look forward to seeing an enormous orchard of fruit trees stretching out from the street to the north, when one day, looking up to see those Spring time blooming trees—a sight of devastation I'll never forget: every tree had been cut down to the root; they all lay in naked, toppled rows, one after another, to make room for a housing subdivision and strip mall.

There are chords of loyalty and memory that tie us deeply to our past. With the felling of that orchard, one of the last true lines remaining—running from who I'd been to what I'd become and with whom I'd served and grown into adulthood—was severed as irrevocably as those fruit trees had been hewn down and separated from the soil and roots and that fed them.

Do you have memories of trees, too; do they loom and stand and stretch out in your mind's eye and heart? No wonder.

Seems I can't get enough of trees. We've celebrated them here in pageants at Thanksgiving and Easter: the marvel of nurse stumps in our nearby woods, Ann Frank's horse chestnut outside her attic hideaway window, and a great and old one blown down recently in Japan whose seedlings, carefully nursed, gave it life for future generations.

And in all that snow and rain of the past weeks here, have you seen them?—catkins dangling from willows, witch hazel in yellow spiky bloom, and budding viburnum? “All beautiful the march of days,” we sang in our opening hymn. On February 2nd I noted the passing of the pagan festival of Imbolc—marking the mid-point between Winter solstice and Spring equinox—Imbolc's the hinge—and with it the door of winter began to close and the door to the advent of Spring began to open. And last Friday, was Tu B'Shevat, the Jewish environmental festival of trees in which, according to custom, the age of a tree is determined by whether it was planted before or on the Hebrew month of Shevat; a time when, in Israel and Palestine, almond trees first begin to bloom.

And there's the hidden life of trees which the sciences reveal—much to my appreciation and wonder. Trees are true, not false, alchemists; through photosynthesis, they take the simple elements of sunlight, water and carbon dioxide to create the oxygen we breathe and glucose—that sugary gold and building block of life—for creatures small and great.

Studies of rates of post-operative recovery have shown that patients with a view of trees outside their hospital windows take fewer painkillers, had fewer post surgical complications, experience less stress and anxiety, and thus had shorter hospital stays and a more rapid path to recovery.

In the urban deserts of large-scale housing projects, long-term epidemiological research revealed that those who lived near or could see, walk by, and touch trees in forbidding cityscapes socialized more often with neighbours, had stronger family and interpersonal ties and, thus, experienced a deeper sense of community. This research has even showed that if you and your family lived near and interacted with trees in the projects, then domestic violence was far rarer for you and yours compared with other families. Whether this quietly dramatic interchange is measurable or not, there is a secret but real relationship that obtains between us and trees if we extend our circle of mutuality, encounter and appreciation.

And then there's Peter Wohlleben's recent little book *The Hidden Life of Trees*. Wohlleben was a conventionally trained forester. For most of his professional life, he sized up trees and their worth by how many board feet they could produce and what profits they could yield to logging companies. And then, about twenty years ago, he became the arborist of a forest in the Eifel Mountains in western Germany. There, among his other duties, he organized log-cabin stays for tourists and green burials in an ancient forest preserve. To his surprise, he writes, visitors "were enchanted by the crooked, gnarled trees I would previously have [overlooked and] dismissed because of their low commercial value." Walking with my guests, "I learned to pay attention to more than the quality of the trees' trunk. I began to notice things...and suddenly, I was aware of countless wonders I could hardly explain to myself."

One example—the one that got Wohlleben to fundamentally change his understanding of the trees he thought he'd known all his life. Some years ago, he stumbled across a patch of what he thought was strange-looking mossy stones, arranged in a circle, with a diameter of about five feet. Lifting the moss, what he found wasn't stone at all but ancient tree bark firmly rooted to the ground. He scraped a portion of the bark away and below the bark was a sheath of green the color of chlorophyll—the stuff that makes leaves green; and chlorophyll is something that can be stored in reserve in the trunks of living trees. Wohlleben realized he was looking at the remains of an ancient tree stump; what he thought were stones were vestiges of its outermost edge—all the interior had long ago completely rotted into humus. From this, he reckoned that the tree had been felled four or five hundred years ago.

Can you see what was strange about this? How do you account for the green chlorophyll in that ancient stump? OK, he writes: wait—“living cells must have food in the form of sugar, they must breathe, and they must grow, at least a little. But without leaves—and therefore without photosynthesis—[no,] that's impossible. No being on our planet can maintain a centuries-long fast—and certainly not a stump that has had to survive on its own without its leaves. It was clear that something else was happening...this stump must be getting assistance from the roots of neighbouring trees....the surrounding beeches were pumping sugar to the stump to keep it alive.”

With this discovery a door opened in Wohlleben's mind and imagination. Drawing on cutting edge research and his intensive, close up examination of the Eifel Mountain forests, Wohlleben now sees trees not as some many board feet, nor as stand-alone individuals in competition for survival, but as members of an interdependent social network. Stands of trees and forests are super-organisms interconnected by roots systems and mycorrhizal networks of

fungus. These networks make possible the exchange of nutrients and information crucial for survival through chemical transference and electrical signals. Seedlings and small trees languishing in the shade and starved for food actually receive carbon and other nutrients from larger photosynthesizing trees; trees even of different species. “They’re not really individuals” at all, says Dr. Suzanne Simard of UBC. “In fact, trees are interacting with each other, trying to help each other survive....Even a very mixed forest is much more connected than we ever thought.”

Ah “the results of science” (from “Sources of the Living Tradition”) and the doors of perception and awe they can open wide before us if we are but willing to walk through them! I still treasure what Tim Robinson, the British cartographer, had to say about this: “miracles are explainable; it’s the explanations that are miraculous.”

And then, there’s the secret life of trees (and us) revealed by poetry. So many poems!

Let me share just a handful:

“The trees are coming into leaf/Like something almost being said” wrote Phillip Larkin, “The recent buds relax and spread,/Their greenness is a kind of grief. /Is it that they are born again/And we grow old?/ No, they die too,/Their yearly trick of looking new/Is written down in rings of grain./Yet still the unresting castles thresh/In fullgrown thickness every May,/Last year is dead, they seem to say/Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

We are the Trees.
Our dark and leafy glade
Bands the bright earth with softer mysteries....

We are the Trees
Who bear them company
In life and death....

On us the dying rest
Their strange, sad eyes, in farewell messages.
And we, their comrades still, since earth began,
Wave mournful boughs above the grave of man,

And coffin their cold breast.

(from "Song of the Trees" by Mary Colborne-Veel)

Trees just stand around all day
and sun themselves and rest.

They never walk or run away
and surely that is best... (from "Trees," by Aileen Fisher)

Not Dead, writes Robert Graves

Walking through trees to cool my heat and pain,
I know that David's with me here again.
All that is simple, happy, strong, he is.
Caressingly I stroke
Rough bark of the friendly oak.
A brook goes bubbling by: the voice is his.
Turf burns with pleasant smoke;
I laugh at chaffinch and at primroses.
All that is simple, happy, strong, he is.
Over the whole wood in a little while
Breaks his slow smile.

Let the trees be consulted John Wright

Let the trees be consulted before you take any action
every time you breathe in thank a tree
let tree roots crack parking lots at the world bank headquarters
let loggers be druids specially trained and rewarded
to sacrifice trees at auspicious times
let carpenters be master artisans
let lumber be treasured like gold
let chain saws be played like saxophones
let soldiers on maneuvers plant trees give police and criminals a shovel
and a thousand seedlings
let businessmen carry pocketfuls of acorns
let newlyweds honeymoon in the woods
walk don't drive
stop reading newspapers
stop writing poetry
squat under a tree and tell stories.

Recently, someone asked me: “what about mysticism; are there mystics, is there a mystic way among Unitarians?” (or words to that effect) I’ve not met Unitarians passing as shamans; nor sweat it out in a low-roofed, heat-stoked Unitarian lodge. There are Unitarians who may pray, as we discovered a couple of weeks ago. Others, here even, in our courtyard and on the Fremlin street side of this Sanctuary, walk labyrinths. Unitarians sit in meditation; some even make pilgrimage to exotic places, or so I’ve been told. Do these spiritual disciplines lead to illumination, to depth experiences of that “transcending mystery and wonder” of which we speak as among the sources of our living tradition? Is there anything distinctly Unitarian about them, or are they Unitarian because *we’re the ones* who practice and experience whatever it is that may occur?

Like all religions, Unitarianism, as best it can, in its various halting ways, for centuries now, has sought to convey a kind of power: the kind which would enable us to experience and achieve significant, life-changing, meaning bestowing transformation in our lives. We do it through worship, ritual, and art, through education, community building, sincere pastoral care for one another, social justice work and environmental responsibility. We cultivate and convey these cultural forms of expression and ways of being as means for releasing life-transformative power.

There is another way to experience this kind of power...I’ve been pointing to it throughout this sermon. Trees “never walk or run away.” With one stroke of “a friendly oak” they can “cool the heat and pain” of loss. Their roots can “crack the parking lots” of our thick hides, our busyness, our forgetting, our routine. Trees caring for an ancient stump recall us to oft unseen but real interdependence. Their outstretched forms, golden in the sun of memory, root us in the past, and call to mind what we have lost, *and gained* in the twisting journey of our lives.

“Unresting castles...[they]“thresh/In fullgrown thickness every May,/Last year is dead, they seem to say/Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.” “Trees need not walk the earth/For beauty or for bread/Beauty will come to them/ Where they stand.” No wonder the poet says: “Let the trees be consulted before you take any action...”

When was the last time I stood in counsel with a tree and let its slow presence speak and move within me? Walking through the forests of Japan, wooded grounds of Shinto shrines, sidewalks, even, on busy streets, one often comes across a large tree whose trunk is girded with a sacred straw rope—a *shimenawa*. That sacred rope is a reminder, it slows down the passerby; it functions as a gate which, if attention is paid, swings open to connect us to awe-inspiring power—the mystery and wonder affirmed in all cultures—that pervades all things embodied in something like the concentrated presence of the tree—a tangible gateway to an intimacy with the world, one’s people, and oneself.

When we get lost in the details of everyday life, when we disconnect from the capacity for awe, we often feel a sense of homelessness. The *shimenawa* encircling a tree shows the way back home.

The mystic path? We don’t have to go to Japan, or literally braid a sacred rope, or undergo some rigorous discipline. Direct experience of that which roots us in mystery and wonder stands outside these walls gathering in beauty, residing in power, and say to us: “begin afresh, afresh, afresh.”

Want mysticism?—take time to be holy and stand in counsel with a tree; let its slow presence speak and move within thee, and me.