

Tree of Life

A Sermon by Leslie Pohl-Kosbau

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First Unitarian Church, Portland, Oregon

Childhood in the Church sanctuary was sitting on those prickly pew cushions in 1955. It was there that I spent time gazing at the Tree of Life tapestry hanging above the choir loft at the First Unitarian Church. It gleamed in ivory satin and linen, with the image of a tree in threads that now rests only in my memory. Ten years later the tapestry was consumed in a 1965 fire, which destroyed most of the Sanctuary. Determined to rise like a phoenix, the congregation banded together to rebuild. A new Tree of Life tapestry was commissioned and woven by Laurie Herrick. The new Tree of Life was created in orange earth tones, shaped in a geometric pattern. It was placed in on the wall above the pulpit, and hangs in the same place today at the Portland First Unitarian Church.

The new blue "Hymns for the Celebration of Life," imprinted with the Tree of Life, filled the newly built pews. Out of them we sang, "The Earth is Home" and "O Life that Maketh all Things New." Hope was kindled, and Unitarian Universalism was alive.

Thirty-five years later, I look for a trace of the Tree of Life, a symbol that confirmed to me that Unitarian Universalists understood their connection to nature, and that I belonged to a faith with a tradition that included the thoughts and work of Emerson and Thoreau, as well as Channing and Ballou. Certainly the chalice, a symbol of seeking truth and justice, reflects the human-to-human need. But what of a connection to the world around us? Unitarian Universalists are very careful to limit the use of symbolism and iconography. Many of us come to this faith seeking new forms of worship.

Nature appears in the Principles and Purposes, and the Sources of Unitarian Universalism. The Sixth source of the covenant of our living tradition is: "the spiritual teaching of earth-centered traditions, which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the

rhythm of nature.”

We also define our present day natural systems through the findings of science in physics, botany, biology, and chemistry, among other disciplines. An example is The Tree of Life Web project, a worldwide collaborative Internet effort produced by biologists providing information about “the diversity of organisms on Earth, and their history and characteristics.” But symbols and the mystical endure. In the current search for life on Mars with its quest for scientific evidence, the NASA project’s rover carries the name, Spirit.

But let’s look at the tree as a symbol. In many cultures of the world the tree is seen as cosmic, connecting heaven and earth, soil and atmosphere. The tree is the agent and focal point. Trees have long been used as a symbol for rebirth. Much as a snake sheds its skin, the tree sheds its bark to grow. Its sap, like blood, sustains life. It is the Norse tree Yggdrasil (steed of Odin), a symbol of the heaven to earth connection that is considered to be eternal. Its roots are watered and fed by three goddesses, while serpent beasts feed on the leaves. Massive roots reach down to the water, rock, and frost while at the opposite end the trunk rises to the heavens. Holy is this tree that Odin hangs on for nine days and nights in the quest for wisdom.

The familiar May Pole has symbolized the tree, stripped of its leaves to characterize its life in winter. In an act of rebirth and everlasting life, it is re-clothed with decorative bands and flowers, giving humans the opportunity to celebrate its re-creation. In another tradition a pole is made from the sacred cottonwood tree, which becomes the center of the Sioux peoples ceremonial sun dance. In the American Southwest the corn plant or reed is the focal symbol on which the human life journey is represented in the sacred pollen path.

As I learn more about world tree images and symbols, the connection of nature to human existence becomes clearer. People have made this connection for thousands of years in many different cultures. The tree of life is a metaphor for the path to enlightenment. Could this symbol connect Unitarian Universalists in our spiritual quest?

Jewish and Christian teachings from the Book of Genesis tell of two trees: a Tree of

Knowledge, which is the tree of good and evil, and the Tree of Life, the tree of immortality. Why is it that the first tree's fruit gets Adam and Eve kicked out of the Garden of Eden, and they don't get to touch the Tree of life, which remains untouched and guarded? We know what we lack, but not what will help. The Jewish Kabala tradition uses a Shephiretic Tree of Life with ten spheres and twenty-two paths that explain the Creation. These symbols describing the human relationships to the cosmic genesis, also parallel and relate to Babylonian, Egyptian and Sumerian ancient Trees of Life. Later, the Christians use a Tree of Life in the Biblical Revelations and in the Gnostic Gospels.

Could the Tree of Life, in its eclectic form, be a symbol to embolden the Unitarian Universalist Seventh Principle? Could the tree illustrate the "respect of the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part?"

Are we much like ancient people, in that we need something graceful and poetic to remind us of the connection between belief, fact-finding, and social justice in the physical world? I like to think of the journey, the growth in understanding and doing, in the shape of a sacred tree. This tree shows a connection and relationship of all beings. In this Unitarian Universalist tree, one of the branches holds our Green Sanctuary. This project takes form in congregations that want to make an environmental difference in their religious faith and congregational home.

It is a disturbing fact that we, the people in the United States are contributing to the annual loss of 50,000 species, and creating 23 tons per person of garbage for landfills each year. I have composted and recycled at home for thirty years, but have a harder time doing this at work. I am reminded by an employee about simple recycling blunders that I would never do at home. It is so easy to say, that there isn't enough time, or it is too hard to do. It takes a conscious effort to change the rhythms of habit.

Dozens of Unitarian Universalist churches are making changes by using the Green Sanctuary Handbook and programs of the Seventh Principle Project. Fourteen congregations have worked for several years to earn Green Sanctuary certification. The beauty of it is that volunteers are stepping up to make these changes. Weather-stripping, insulating, recycling,

and light bulb replacement are a few of the efforts that can be made to cut energy costs. At First Unitarian Church between 5,000-7,000 KWH have been saved per month because incandescent lights were replaced with fluorescent bulbs. Congregations have become members of Oregon Interfaith Power and Light not only to support alternative energy creation, but also to achieve collective savings in green power.

Green building is part of our Green Sanctuary Program. David Orr, professor at Oberlin College, and Seventh Principle General Assembly speaker in Cleveland, Ohio reminded us in 2001 that green building uses certified wood, non-toxic materials, recycled products, and efficient, energy saving utilities. It uses Nature as a standard by practicing "bio-mimicry." Green building finds eloquent solutions, predicated on a sense of place, and with a commitment to create no ugliness. It calls for decision making "as if Earth matters".

Unitarian Universalist environmental action is not new, but the most recent environmental UUA Statement of Conscience was the 2001 Responsible Consumption Statement, which is listed under Economic Justice at the UUA. Environmental concerns cross social justice borders, and involve us all.

Here are some steps to take to involve the whole congregation in a successful Green Sanctuary: making building improvements to save energy and to reflect environmental values; conserving energy and use recycled, non-toxic products. Then move on to creating programs for children, youth, and adults that inspire and cultivate a sense of wonder. Remember Rachel Carson? It was her influence, the support of religious education teachers, and my parents that led me to a life's work in nature and community gardens.

Scientists use the tree as a symbol to explain species relationships. Human culture creates stories about the Tree of Life. Both offer a rich contribution to the study and description of our Earth. Let's bring this into worship in story and song, as Jim Scott has done in creating the new "Earth and Spirit Songbook". What stories do our children have to tell? The creative energy and action in every person can help save a forest, rebuild a park, or start a community garden. Organize an alternative gift market or stop junk mail campaign. Partner with other

Unitarian Universalist congregations in the local council, the district, or with the Seventh Principle Project. Support environmental statements of social conscience and witness.

Unitarian Universalists have joined Jews, Muslims, and Christians who are working on environmental projects such as climate change and food security. There is much to be learned and celebrated.

Success is in the development of our leaders. We must support and cultivate healthy environmental leadership. Green Sanctuary principles will be effective when members of congregational committees and boards know and feel a compelling need for being a Green Sanctuary. They can make fully informed decisions and choose a prominent place to display the well-earned Green Sanctuary certificate.

Let us bring back the Tree of Life to its place as a symbol of Unitarian Universalist relationship with the web of life, with nature and human nature. The Tree of Life in Buddhism is the Bodhi tree, a symbol of the Great Awakener. Buddha centered himself with the tree, amidst turmoil and chaos, to achieve understanding and enlightenment. We must be awake, and act. Earth matters. What legacy will we leave for the seven generations to come? Will the Unitarian Universalist Tree of Life be there, and will the respect for the interdependent web of all existence be realized? For the beauty of the Earth, for the splendor of the skies, roots hold me close, wings set me free, Spirit of Life, Come to me, come to me. May it be so.

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