

Spirituality of Trees

Delivered at the [Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Harford County](#)

Rev. Lisa G. Ward

November 5, 2000

Tree at my window, window tree
My sash is lowered when night comes on;
But let there never be a curtain drawn
Between you and me. – *Robert Frost*

As this auction worship service was won by a native New Englander, I thought it appropriate to begin this reflection with words from an admirer of New England. And what better subject to share than spirituality of trees, which is a natural in that land of stunning fall foliage and abundant evergreens.

What a wonderful assignment, to contemplate trees, but not an easy one to capture in a sermon. The better sermon would be a walk in the woods or to stand in silence under a tree that catches your eye, taking in its oxygen, intricacy and beauty for an hour or so. But, knowing that words pale, I venture forth.

Trees have been honored throughout the world and through all time as steadfast providers. Trees generate oxygen to sustain living breath. They become shelters and burrows for animals of many shapes and sizes as well as offer resources for food and medicine. They secure ground from erosion and raw materials garnered from trees provide shelter, warmth, amenities, art and utensils.

The tree is one of humankind's most powerful symbols. It is the embodiment of life in all its realms: the point of union between heaven, earth and water. In most mythology and ancient religious imagery, the tree was believed to have an abundance of divine creative energy. During the

Middle Ages, it was common for a traveler to entrust one's health and safety to a tree spirit. These trees were known as guardian trees, and as long as they were healthy, the journey, it was believed, would go well.

The forest became the place of transformation and mystery. Priests and shaman would work their magic within tree groves and forest glens. The most sacred high altar in Korea, named "Spirit of the Lands," is located within a pine forest.

There are many approaches to take toward the spirituality of trees. I could look to the tradition of magic and explore the lore of mystical qualities attached to trees. I could go the scientific route, explore the marvel of photosynthesis and the self sustaining cycle of growth and decay. But I feel drawn to the beauty and majesty of trees and choose to focus on these extraordinary beings as spiritual guides. They are living beings which dwell rooted in the dense realm of matter extending energy into the far reaches of spirit.

"The trees indeed have hearts." wrote Henry David Thoreau, "with a certain affection the sun seems to send its farewell ray far and level over the copses of them, and they silently receive it with gratitude, like a group of settlers with their children."

In the Kabbalah, a Hebrew text of mystical teachings observed since the Middle Ages, the "sefiroth" or tree of life is the symbol of creation itself governed by the three Divine Principles of

Will, Mercy and Justice. Humans, according to the Kabbalah, were called forth in the form of the sefiroth, mirroring the qualities of the tree of life.

Trees and humans are often compared to one another. Our legs as the trunk, our arms, the branches, our hair, leaves, our blood, sap.

“I came to see trees the way my grandfather did,” writes Becca Motil, resident theologian, “as very human at times (or is it we who are tree-like?). The way that trees compete for sunlight and soil, twisting to make room for a vigorous neighbor, but always, always, seeking the light.”

In Jungian terms, the tree is a symbol in dreams and drawing of the growth and development of psychic life – a link to the collective unconscious. The tree is a key, then, to spiritual growth.

Three aspects of the living qualities of our relations, the trees, come to mind as profound spiritual guidance: Deep rootedness, unconditional generosity and radical acceptance.

In the Nordic tradition, the birch is the symbol of the Earth Mother, representing powers of growth and healing, whose strength comes from the ability to care for and support others and to cultivate unconditional love for all beings.

The presence of trees articulates that when one is well grounded, centered in one’s roots, healthy growth and flexibility in change comes from generosity of spirit, the giving of oneself. The willow giving over to wind, fruit and nut trees giving of their produce, leaves giving over to winter and decay for future growth. The way we can sustain ourselves is by giving of ourselves when we are centered. The secret to abundance, the key to stop seeking more and more is to focus on what we have to give. What Alice Walker calls the circular energy of generosity. By giving we stimulate regeneration of life and spirit and it stimulates our own growth, our own expanse. Trees tell us this. And just as each tree has its own particular gifts to offer, so do each of us.

From this strength we encounter another life-giving principle: acceptance of the stranger, welcome of the one seeking respectful relation-

ship. Two-legged, four-legged, six-legged and winged creatures all enjoy the hospitality of trees. Homes are welcome, rest is offered, protection is given, perches are formed and remembrance of the year’s encounter is written on the rings within the trunk. The trees even accept the abandoned homes, the droppings and remains that are part of the encounter. All this in steady solitude, not loneliness, but solitude, ever ready to receive what comes its way and remain rooted when leave-taking occurs.

When we love our neighbors as ourselves, we are able to remain strong in who we are, we are able to welcome the stranger and stay grounded, we are able to accept leave-taking and keep the memory as part of our being. Trees show us this. And as each tree is shaped differently by its immediate environment, so are we.

And for this third quality, deep-rootedness, how do we manifest that principle as creatures who move? What does our spiritual guide, the tree, tell us? Know where our being first sprouted, connect with that which nourishes our growth, find our balance and ever return to it and keep ourselves grounded in that which feeds our spirit. For it is then that we can reach outward and beyond, then that we can expand our horizons, then that we can generate hope and abundance in our ways and walking. Trees know this and wait for our awareness.

The man who planted trees set about his mission to regenerate life in a corner of desolation. He fostered spiritual guides for thousands and thousands to come. Each time we plant or care for a tree we are creating room and focus for pure and precious life giving energy. It is from this work that we live. It is by this beauty we are blessed. It is in this moment that we breathe. Because of trees. Because of trees.

So may it be. Amen.

Benediction – from the Trees of Endor

Trees purify the air;
they also purify the mind...
If you want to save your world,
you must save the trees.

Copyright © 2000 Rev. Lisa G. Ward. All Rights Reserved.