

The Tree of Life

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst
The Rev. Alison Wohler
September 30, 2007

Some tend the Tree of Life and we are their grateful heirs.

A search for the metaphor of a tree as life on earth would take us to nearly every culture in the world and back in history to the first human comparisons between life's meaning and the natural objects around us. What else is as alive and so obviously experiencing the cycles and seasons of our own lives as a tree?

In the Japanese religion of Shinto trees are thought to be sacred and when animals and people die they are often portrayed as branches on a tree. The symbolism of a tree is mentioned also in the Bhagavad-Gita text of the Hindu tradition.

“Sacred in the ancient Celtic tradition was the Oak tree, which represented the *axis mundi*, the center of the world. The Celtic name for oak, *daur*, is the origin of the word *door* – the root of the oak was literally the doorway to the Otherworld. The word Druid was a combination of the words for oak and wise, so a Druid was one who was “Oak Wise,” meaning learned in Tree magick and guardian of the doorway.”
(<http://altreligion.about.com/library/glossary/symbols/bldefsceltictree.htm>)

“In Jewish and Christian mythology, a tree sits at the center of both the Heavenly and Earthly Edens. The Norse cosmic World Ash, Yggdrassil, has roots in the underworld while its branches support the abode of the Gods. [The Christianized World Tree is the Cross.] The Egyptian's Holy Sycamore stood on the threshold of life and death, connecting the worlds.

Many trees take on the appearance of death in the winter – losing their leaves, only to sprout new growth with the return of spring. This aspect makes the tree a symbol of resurrection, and a stylized tree is the symbol of many resurrected Gods – Jesus, Attis, and Osiris all have crosses as their symbols. Most of these Gods are believed to have been crucified on trees, as well.”
(<http://altreligion.about.com/library/weekly/aa102902a.htm>)

The fruits of trees (which contain the means for their continuation as a species) have always been potent symbols of fertility, immortality, and wisdom. There is a Taoist story of a tree that produces a peach every three thousand years. The one who eats the fruit received immortality. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree_of_life) And who can forget the Hebrew Bible story of that one fatal apple..... Very interesting to note is that many of these mythological trees of life are guarded, or at least nibbled at as in the case of Yggdrassil, by serpents, otherwise known as snakes.

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Trees have been the abode of Gods, and sometimes the Gods or Goddesses themselves. Asherah was a “beloved household Goddess and Mother Creatrix worshipped throughout much of the Middle East as the Tree of Life in a Garden where a Serpent was her sacred totem.” (www.orderwhitemoon.org/goddess/Asherah.html)

Asherah was widely worshipped across Ancient Israel and Judah as the wife of El, the head of the Canaanite pantheon. As Judaism gained a foothold, and struggled to eliminate the Pagan Gods and customs, Asherah gradually became a cultic object in the form of a pole, though sometimes still accompanied by snakes wound around the pole. As a symbol of fertility (she had 70 sons) and healing, this representation is with us today in the modern and universal symbol for doctors and healers. Asherah was also known as the Goddess of the Tree of Life, (<http://northernway.org/hgoddess.html>) and to some as the Tree of Life itself.

Another of Asherah’s transitions, as the Jewish faith evolved, was into a figure known as Shekinah, the feminine aspect of God that lives on today as the Queen Bride of God in the Sabbath candle lighting ceremony, in which the candles must always be lit by a woman. (www.bellaonline.com/articles/art48784.asp) In mystic Judaism, the 10th sphere of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life is called Malkut, or Kingdom, but it is also called Shekinah, as this sphere is a funnel through which the qualities of the upper nine sephirot are transmitted to the physical world.

There are amazing correlations among the mythologies of so many ancient cultures, and equally interesting is the path by which many of the ancient symbols, including Tree of Life representations, have traversed the centuries. I would guess that the idea of the Pagan Goddess, Asherah, as Tree of Life and her relationship to the Jewish Shekinah, or feminine aspect of God, *must* be connected to the idea of the Holy Spirit, or Holy Ghost of the Trinitarian Christian God. This is the aspect of God that “enters into relationships with people, instead of being a force or an impersonal principle.” (Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms, p. 131) Relationships *are* said to be a more typically feminine strength. (I really dislike making such stereotyping general statements, but I think there is actual research behind this one!)

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The Tree of Life is all about relationships and change. It’s about the interrelatedness and the interdependency of all living things. It is our history of existence. Darwin used the expression to talk about evolution. The Tree of Life contains each of our Family Trees, and our congregation’s story of founding and becoming what we are today. Each of us, and every moment too, stands on its own part of the tree, the product of our past, all connected by twigs and branches to the Larger Tree of Life which began on Earth some 3.5 (perhaps 3.8) billion years ago with a very small organism in some very hot water. Our Tree began as aquaculture.

It gets a little impractical, though, to diagram everyone’s Family Tree back to the first bacteria. Most of us only know our histories back a few generations, sometimes further

with all the databases being created these days. I'm guessing that if we knew the ancestral backgrounds of everyone in this room we would be amazed by how diverse our Trees are. Multiculturalism is already here; we may just not be talking about it. For example, although my ancestry in recent generations is decidedly European, it does include all of the British Isles, Germany, and Switzerland. If you're comfortable doing so, shout out some of *your* countries of origin.

This may not be the exact Multiculturalism that our Unitarian Universalist Association would like us all to strive for, but it sure is a start. I believe that as we get to know each other well within this community, as we explore the diversity of life that makes us complete, there will be many of us who discover interesting and previously unknown connections to each other.

There is tremendous diversity among us, yet we occasionally find ways to feel as if we are one. These are rare moments of community that don't always happen and for which we can be grateful. We are tending to the Tree of Life as others have done before us.

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And some neglect the Tree of Life, in many and varied ways, that harm us all in the end.

Some people live on their own branch of the Tree of Life and never look around them – they never know the variations on a theme living so close, and yet so far away. It is an incompleteness that detracts from life's experience.

Some pretend they're an independent shoot – not attached to the old Tree. Perhaps they are denying their own family history, ethnic or religious roots. I went to Seminary with a woman whose mother had grown up totally in denial of her Jewish identity. It had been a time in history when many people were afraid to admit their Jewish ties. I believe there is a reversal of this trend happening now – and is even exemplified by some of the families in this Society who are teaching their children some of the old ways and Jewish holidays with which perhaps they did not themselves grow up.

There are many others in this congregation who have left the Catholic Church or another denomination for various reasons and struggle to find ways to appreciate their past while at the same time they thrive in their newfound Unitarian Universalism. It is too easy, sometimes, to cut one's ties to experiences unpleasant, and yet those experiences are part of what makes us who we are. Some have not tended well to the Tree of Life and we may be their hurting heirs.

Yet, the tree grows. And will continue to add branches and new leaves, totally new-to-humankind flowers and fruits, each and every one connected in mysterious ways to their own unique and, at the same time, universal past.

This final poem speaks of a son and a father, but it could also speak of men and women, history, and mystery too.

It's called Fatherblood, by Albert DeGenova

*How did he teach me
the subtleties of my body
so like his? How did he teach me
to posture so loosely, to gesture
so emphatically, to smirk so
coolly.
How did he do it? He who was always somewhere
else.
It frightens me when I see him
in a photo of myself.
The man I least want to be
guides the way I cross my legs, the way
I press my hands fingertip to fingertip,
the way I raise my eyebrows.
Fatherblood runs through my veins
like a thief in black, like
moonless midnight.
Do I kiss my own kiss?
What else has he taught me that I cannot see
in windowpane reflections?*

What are we, that is not apparent on our surfaces?
How are we tending the Tree of Life?

These are questions for our year together.

Thank you for joining me on this journey and in this Ministry.