

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist

“Our Sacred Trees”

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Introduction

I want to thank Sharon Baiocco for helping with this Earth Day service today. We met several weeks ago to talk about the service and she suggested I see the film, *Avatar*. I did and am very grateful. We have taken the theme of this service from this film.

The tree is one of my favorite symbols. It is one of those universal symbols important to all cultures and religions. The oak tree was sacred to the Celts, the ash to the Scandinavian peoples, the fig-tree in India, and the lime-tree in Germany.

The meaning of the tree is most important. In the most general sense, according to the *Dictionary of Symbols*, it “denotes the life of the cosmos: its consistence, growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes.” (p. 347) The Dictionary also points out its relation to other symbols: like an axis it is the center of the world, its roots and branches symbolize an upward trend, as do the ladder and the mountain.

The tree is also the connection between different worlds—heaven, earth and hell. For me the most meaningful symbol of the tree is two-fold: the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge.

In the Bible we find in Paradise the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. In the Unitarian Universalist tradition, both are crucial: A commitment to life and a commitment to knowledge and understanding. The tree can symbolize both.

Martin Buber, in his writings described the many aspects of the tree. He wrote:

I contemplate a tree.

I can accept it as a picture: a rigid pillar in a flood of light, or splashes of green traversed by the gentleness of the blue silver ground.

I can feel it as movement: the flowing veins around the sturdy, striving core, the sucking of the roots, the breathing of the leaves, the infinite commerce with earth and air—and the growing itself in the darkness. (p. 13, *Tree and Jubilee*, Greta Crosby).

Ultimacy of the Symbol

Yes, the tree has all of these aspects, but the question is, how does the tree impact our lives? Is there an ultimate significance to the symbol of the tree? Paul Tillich said a symbol must have ultimacy, it must point beyond itself, for it to be meaningful. Buber would say: Does the tree become more than an It? Can it be a “Thou?” His answer is “Yes.” He writes:

But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me . . . The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it—only differently.

I agree with Buber. I have always had trees outside my windows. There is a reason we love to look at trees, and it is not just because the tree is beautiful, which it is. The tree outside my window, that tree, envelopes me, surrounds me, reaches out to me, can fall on me. The child in me wants to climb the tree and get as close to the top as I can. The adult in me, just wants to stand under the tree. I love the tree. I love the memory of marrying couples under a tree.

The tree is an ultimate symbol because it calls us to relationship. As Buber says, “it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it . . .” Yes, the tree is the symbol of life. Life calls me into relation with all of life. The Tree of Life includes birth, growth, decline and death. The tree is all of life.

My colleague, like Buber, writes about having relationship with trees. She writes:

Since I was a child, I have sought their company from time to time because I like the way I feel in their presence. I enjoy their beauty, but it is more than that. . . I feel their presence as living things. And in that presence, I often feel relaxed and centered, peaceful, restored to inner equilibrium But for me, perhaps the greatest thing about the tree is its silence. Whatever the tree says to us, whatever it answers to our questing, the tree gives its message without words. And the tree bears with us well. It does not judge. It does not react to our anxieties. It does not run after us. It just stands there with open arms. (p. 9)

Tree Is a Warning

These words are all wonderful. But they overlook the other side of the symbol of the tree: Like *Avatar*, I want us to see the tree as a warning. Like life, the tree requires of us hard work. We need to take care of the tree, a symbol of the earth.

Yes, the tree, like life, is not all roses. The symbol of the tree, like life, includes decay, decline and death. Even with these aspects of the tree, we can see the tree as part of ongoing life. Even though this particular tree dies, a new one is born, the fruits of the tree can be used, and the seeds produce new life, and life goes on.

In my former church in Delaware County, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia, we had a beautiful tree that was the center-piece of the landscape in front of the church. Couples like to be married in front of that tree. Children liked to play under the tree. I liked to contemplate as I looked at the tree. With age and thunderstorms, the tree split and we were told it was going to die.

We consulted the experts. What were we going to do with our sacred tree? The first experts all said the same thing: “Cut it down.” Jim Norcross, our conservationist, would have nothing of it. He kept calling landscapers until one said he would be glad to cable the branches together, and this would probably give the tree another ten years. This was what Jim wanted to hear. The tree was saved at least for awhile, another was planted and would become the center-piece of the building sometime in the future. The church did not lose its anchor nor its vision of the future.

I was asked to return to the church for their 50th Anniversary. The tree was gone, but a new sanctuary had been built and a new tree is now the center-piece. Trees are important symbols. May the symbol of the tree be with us. May we express words of thanks to the sacred trees, the birds, the bees and the people who have helped us in this endeavor called life.

Tree Ceremony

Before the Indians hunt they take time to thank the deer they are about to kill. They do not have dominion over the deer, but approach the deer as an equal. As the cloven-hoofed mammals must eat plants to survive, so must the Indian rely on the animals to survive.

After they kill a deer they bring it to the village and the deer would “lie in state” in the house of the hunter, wrapped in a ceremonial robe and greeted as a visitor by those who enter the house. Anything less than this ritual treatment would offend the animals and the deity in charge of all game.

We can learn from the American Indians. We can give more respect to our environment, and be thankful for that which we receive. I recommend a little ceremony when trees are removed. We could do as the Indians do--thank the tree for what it does for us, make sure we do not take more than we need.

I remember when my former congregation in Raleigh, North Carolina built a new building. An environmentalist was appointed to the Building Committee to make sure environmental concerns were included in the plan. When the design was completed and approved, a minimal number of trees were removed. We built the parking lot around many trees. Much to the chagrin of the contractor we had the supplies lifted over the trees in many cases to protect the trees from damage.

When the building was under construction the first ceremony we had was a ceremony with drums, apologizing for the damage we caused, and a promise that we would do all we could to protect the trees and the land. It was a very moving ceremony. It was a ritual of confession followed by a ritual of thanksgiving.

One of my favorite readings is by The Rev. Gordon B. McKeeman in his book of meditations titled, “To Meet the Asking Years.” The title comes from a poem titled “Discovery” by Max Kapp. Here is part of that poem:

I brought my spirit to the trees
That loomed against the sky.
I touched each wandering, careless breeze
To know if God were nigh.
And then I felt an inner flame
That fiercely burned my tears.
Uplight, I rose from bended knee
To meet the asking years.

May we all bring our spirits to the trees by taking care of the earth, the air and water. Let us also be called into relation, look for strength in life, and say farewell to those who have died or moved on, then meet the asking years. Amen.