

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Tree Huggers Unite!”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore December 16, 2007

Call to Celebration

The Trees Speak

drifting mist inhabits the air
with insubstantial leadenness
a soft day
yet beneath the woodland canopy
it rains
water condensing on the host of nodding leaves
to cleanse them
with tender rolling flow
before falling
in a gentle constant patter
to the leaf mould
below

trees
so many trees
slow and stately kinfolk
primordial and beneficent
in whom
the air becomes the earth
and the earth
becomes
the air

such an implacable and calm becoming

within the sylvan embrace
children of sky and of land
sit silent and still
innately forbearing
in their long dream

and i stand
wild and wide open
inhaling the terpene-rich breath of the forest
and i kneel

in this moist almost silence
in this ancient breathing stillness
in this endless moment
in this obeisance
the trees
speak

<http://spiritofmaat.com/archive/aug3/prns/talboys.htm>

Spoken Meditation

Seed Leaves, by Richard Wilbur on January 1, 2006

Here something stubborn comes,
Dislodging the earth crumbs
And making crusty rubble.
It comes up bending double,
And looks like a green staple.
It could be seedling maple,
Or artichoke, or bean.
That remains to be seen.

Forced to make choice of ends,
The stalk in time unbends,
Shakes off the seed-case, heaves
Aloft, and spreads two leaves
Which still display no sure
And special signature.
Toothless and fat, they keep
The oval form of sleep.

This plant would like to grow
And yet be embryo;
Increase, and yet escape
The doom of taking shape;
Be vaguely vast, and climb

To the tip end of time
With all of space to fill,
Like boundless Igdrasil
That has the stars for fruit.

But something at the root
More urgent than that urge
Bids two true leaves emerge,
And now the plant, resigned
To being self-defined
Before it can commerce
With the great universe,
Takes aim at all the sky
And starts to ramify.

Sermon

My love of trees is one of the reasons I enjoy living here in the Capital Region so much. I didn't like many of the trees I encountered when I moved west to Silicon Valley in 1977. Being a dryer climate, the Eucalyptus, Live Oak and Pacific Madrone trees weren't as lush as eastern deciduous forests I remembered growing up in Newark, Delaware. I didn't like the Florida foliage any better when Philomena, Andy and I moved there in 1993 to serve as minister of the UU Fellowship of Charlotte County. Palms are a poor excuse for a tree if you ask me. It wasn't until I did my internship in Rochester in 1988 then returned here in 1999 to serve this congregation that I realized how much I'd missed the kind of trees that grow here.

I knew I was a tree hugger back in my childhood. I used to play in the thickly wooded park behind my house. Sometimes, I just sat and watched their branches move in the wind, wondering what they might be saying to each other. When I moved west and first visited Muir Woods across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco, the awesome experience of walking through the coastal redwoods touched something very deep in my spirit. The day the admissions committee for Starr King School for the Ministry was meeting in the spring of 1986 and considering my application, I was so agitated, I couldn't work. So, I took the day off and went to these woods to calm my nerves. I found a peace and acceptance there that lifted my spirits as I walked below those quiet, ancient trees.

I want to reclaim the term "tree hugging" today. Tree hugging has developed a derogatory connotation in the media. The term projects an image of crazed

environmentalists who will do anything to prevent loggers from cutting down a tree. Some of the most celebrated tree hugging spotted owl enthusiasts who come in for the harshest treatment are those who've been trying to save the Headwaters Forest in Northern California.

Pacific Lumber harvested trees there in a sustainable way until 1985 when the corporate raider Charles Hurwitz bought the company. Hurwitz borrowed heavily against the value of the company's tree assets. To pay the interest, he set out to clear-cut much of the company's old growth forest. A little group of tree hugging environmentalists stood in his way. Camping 200 feet up in the limbs of ancient redwoods, trespassing, suing, sitting in, lobbying, praying, and defying pepper-spraying police, defenders of the Headwaters Forest fought a 12 year battle to save the Northern California ecosystem. People like 16-year-old Spring, her eyes scorched with pepper spray during a peaceful protest; tree-sitter Butterfly, riding out violent windstorms; and Doug Thron ... who secretly wanders the forest, evading corporate security while photographing the beauty and destruction" These people aren't freaks, they're eco-heroes. One greedy corporate raider has wreaked untold havoc on the forests, orchards, rivers, fisheries, and the economy of Humboldt County – capitalism at its worst – with only these courageous advocates for the trees standing in his way.

I was surprised to learn tree hugging was the term used for a protest movement started in India in the 1970's. The Chipko movement (which means "to cling" in Hindi) began with a group of peasants in the Ut-tarak-hand region of India. They clasped hands around tree trunks in 1973 in the Cham-oli district to prevent them from being cut by a contracting system of the state Forest department. This system threatened their traditional rights to sustainably harvest and protect their forest.

One of Chipko's most salient features was the mass participation of women villagers. As the backbone of [their] agrarian economy, women were most directly affected by environmental degradation and deforestation, and thus connected to the issues most easily...At its height, Chipko gained widespread attention from the international environmental movement. Unlike, environmentalists of the West, Chipko was thought to embody an "environmentalism of the poor" and thus a novel example of the growing reach of environmental concerns. The tactic of tree hugging, long an epithet for environmental activists in general, also inspired and fired the imagination of activists in the West. (1)

Another group of tree huggers developed in Thailand. A Buddhist monk, P-hrak-hru Pi-tak, shortly after his ordination in the mid-1970's lived in a remote mountain

village affected by deforestation. He watched with concern the promotion of cash crops and consumerism. He became alarmed at the damaged watersheds in the region. Large companies extensively practiced both legal and illegal logging. Northern Thai farmers were clear-cutting the forest in order to plant maize as a cash crop. The maize itself caused significant erosion and damage to the soil, necessitating further clear-cutting for

agricultural land. This caused his district to become the poorest and driest in the province, with the highest rate of adults migrating to find work in Bangkok.

Even though the monk talked about conservation in his sermons, and stressed the interconnections between the social and natural environments, people didn't get the message and kept cutting the trees. After witnessing the first tree ordination in Phayao Province in 1990, he sponsored the first tree ordination in a community forest in his home village, wrapping a monk's saffron robe around a large tree. The next year he performed a second to sanctify the forest surrounding ten neighboring villages. This was just a part of an aggressive campaign of education, training and promotion of economic alternatives to growing cash crops that encouraged forest ecosystem preservation.

Creating sacred groves is a time-honored tradition around the world. According to the Egyptian Book of Dead, twin sycamores stood at the eastern gate of heaven from which the sun god Ra emerged each morning. Sycamores were often planted near tombs, and burial in coffins made of sycamore wood returned the dead person to the womb of the mother tree goddess. In Japan, sacred groves are often associated with Shinto shrines. The Cryptomeria tree is venerated in Shinto practice and is considered sacred. In India, 14,000 sacred groves have been reported which are often the abodes of Hindu Gods. They are maintained by local communities as reservoirs for rare fauna and flora with hunting and logging strictly prohibited. In Nigeria, the Os-un-Os-og-bo Sacred Grove, one of the last virgin dense high forests, dedicated to the fertility god in Yoruba mythology, is dotted with shrines and sculptures.

One tradition of sacred trees is culturally closer to us. You heard a quick reference to it in the meditation by Richard Wilbur. (a special thanks to Mary Applegate for this reference) It is the Germanic Yggdrasil tree, or the tree of life.

When Christian missionaries came to convert the Teutonic tribes, they first encountered the tradition of this sacred and universal tree. At the heart of Germanic mythology stands this invisible living energy exchange of the whole universe. It is upon this ever-green tree, whose nature or species no one knows, that the chief Germanic god Odin comes to realize who he is. At its feet is the deepest of all wells,

the Well of Time, whose bottom no one has fathomed. Around the tree sit three blind women, spinning the threads of our lives, measuring our fate and then cutting it.

The ever-productive tree is always being consumed by stags that nibble at its leaves. An enormous serpent continually tries to devour its roots deep underground. Yggdrasil survives by continually producing as much as is consumed so it is never diminished, always in balance. It has only two enemies: the primal non-living forces of cold and heat.

The great danger to the tree is the glacier from the North that overwhelms everything in its path. When the glacier comes, the great serpent will attack the god Thor and kill him with his venomous fangs just as Thor buries his great hammer in the serpents head killing it. An apocalypse will result as earthquakes shake the whole of the middle world and raging flames will reach to the sun and the moon. Fire and ice will battle each other for dominance.

All human beings will be destroyed--except for two. Before the final, terrifying cataclysm takes place, Yggdrasil will open up its great tree trunk to admit the last boy and girl and will then close around them to protect them and keep them safe throughout the time of the end of the world. When the end is over, the tree will have survived. And as a new sky appears with a new sun and a new moon and stars, and when the meadows first turn green again with new grass, the tree will open up and let the boy and girl emerge to start again in the new world. Yggdrasil is, for human beings, the Savior Tree.

I love this image of the tree as the protector of humanity. That image is so different from the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden. Rather than tempting us to evil, Yggdrasil protects humanity from harm and gives birth again to us in a new world.

Archeologists have discovered the ancient Germanic practice of burying people inside of hollowed out tree trunks, perhaps thinking Yggdrasil would give their departed a new life. This may be the mythological source of burying our dead in wooden coffins.

The curious concept of salvation through being "within the tree" may also have given birth to the magnificent wooden stave churches of Norway, many of which have lasted down to our own day... A visitor who approaches a stave church will be shocked to see that the sanctuary portal, the doorway, is nothing other than a representation of Yggdrasil, the Tree of Life. It even has a stag carved into the lower branches, performing his traditional function of

devouring the lower branches. Most remarkably, the tree trunk, the central portion of the large carving, opens up, revealing itself to be a door allowing the visitor to enter the tree.

As you can see, bringing an evergreen tree into our homes this time of year has strong Germanic mythological roots. Unitarian minister Charles Follen is credited with bringing this German tradition to New England in the nineteenth century. Our Puritan forbears prohibited the celebration of Christmas – another great reason for us to have broken away from them. Evergreen Yggdrasil is a wonderful symbol for us as we shiver with cold in the darkest days of winter that the light will return again.

The great thing about being Unitarian Universalist is we have no need to purify Christmas of these pagan trappings. On the contrary, we can appreciate how a vision of a tree saving humanity, resonates with the Christian vision of a baby in a wooden manger growing up to be a carpenter who eventually will die on a wooden cross.

For us the Tree of Life can be a powerful symbol of the Spirit of Life. Think of the wonderful lyrics from the song “Spirit of Life,” “roots hold me close, wings set me free.” “With its branches reaching into the sky, and roots deep in the earth, it dwells in three worlds- [linking] heaven, the earth, and the underworld, uniting above and below.” It is both a feminine symbol, bearing sustenance, and a masculine phallic symbol of the upward projection of the earth’s power.

In so many ways, we are Yggdrasil’s fruit and thus we must love the trees and protect the forests from harm. So let us celebrate tree hugging today as a holy practice to honor this evergreen guardian of humanity.

Benediction

A Blessing for the Woods by Michael S. Glaser

Before I leave, almost without noticing,
before I cross the road and head toward
what I have intentionally postponed—

Let me stop to say a blessing for these woods:
for crows barking and squirrels scampering,
for trees and fungus and multi-colored leaves,

for the way sunlight laces with shadows
through each branch and leaf of tree,
for these paths that take me in,
for these paths that lead me out.

Go in Peace. Make Peace. Be at Peace.

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