

Roots and Wings

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First Parish in Brookline

Imagine for a moment a California hillside overlooking the ocean, on its steep slopes a number of young pine trees sitting in the sun; in one of the trees a bird's nest with several newly hatched birds. Such a lovely sight, full of hope and promise, and yet deeply vulnerable! Imagine a long rain leading to a mudslide down these steep slopes which then rips these young trees out of their ground, and the young birds, with still immature wings unable to fly away, are carried with the rain, the dirt, and the trees down into the abyss. This world is often a less gentle place than many of us would wish.

Many Unitarian Universalists have come out from other religious traditions, and we are sometimes accused of forming our roots only on the surface of things, and trying to fly with immature wings. I want to speak this morning about the critical need we each have of firm, deep roots to cling to in the midst of strife and storm. I also want to speak about the importance of developing our wings, so we may soar through the air to new and rewarding heights of being! Both are critical to our long term wellbeing on the spiritual path. We must extend our roots deeply, build our foundations carefully, but never forget that we were born to soar on the wings of eagles!

I grew up in a small town, Tiverton, RI, where the roots ran deep but there was little room for aspiration, not to mention a total absence of soaring on the wings of eagles. What few jobs there were paid poorly, most young people who stayed there after high school seemed to drift aimlessly without larger aspirations until they could get married and build a family as a source of meaning. My parents were well educated, and so they held out to us a larger vision of what was possible in this life, and as a result every one of my nine siblings and I left Tiverton behind when we went to college and never looked back. We were glad for the strong roots that came with being from a large family in a small town, but we learned in college to fly away and as a result six of my siblings went on to become college professors, a career not even conceivable in such a town, and I went on to become an entrepreneur, an investor in biotechnology, and then a minister.

My path out to seemingly endless possibilities was through attending Yale College. But I was deeply surprised there to discover young people whose problem was not insufficient wings but rather was insufficient roots. This was the early 1970's and Yale like most liberal arts colleges of the time had been "liberated" by the first wave of the baby boomers! The Vietnam War protests had made all authority suspect, freedom from constraints became the ultimate goal. Course requirements had been slashed, the notion of "in locus parent" had been devastated, and many very bright, very promising young people were lost into the abyss of drugs, drinks, and groundless freedom to behave as they will, even when it clearly was not in their best interests or even remotely in fulfillment of their fullness of being! It was a time of great joy and horrible destruction, with many never recovering from such freedom. I look back now with both joy and sadness for that time.

I am reminded of an ancient Greek myth that I first encountered at Yale, the story of Icarus, the boy who flew too close to the sun. His father Daedalus loved him deeply and wished for him all the freedom that life can hold. They however were trapped in the labyrinth of the Minotaur on the island of Crete. In order to save them his father gathered feathers and wax to construct wings that they could fly upon. Daedalus warned his son not to fly too close to the sun, as it would melt his wings, and not too close to the sea, as it would dampen them and make it impossible to fly. They successfully flew from Crete but then Icarus grew exhilarated by the sheer thrill of flying and flew too close to the sun. His wings melted from the heat and he fell to his death, drowning in the sea.

I don't want to be melodramatic, few of us here are at risk of falling from the sun, but I do want to remember the importance of providing both roots and wings for life's journey. I agree with Jonas Salk that "good parents give their children roots and wings. Roots to know where home is, wings to fly away and exercise what has been taught them." Roots and wings are the two most important things we can give our children to help them into their fullness of being. To be rooted and grounded in the love of family, the love of community, and the love of justice and compassion, this is to be well rooted in life. To be given freedom to soar mightily, to find that which one can do in this world and do it with passion and integrity, this is to be given wings for the journey, wings with which to find peace and joy!

May we all find such wings! We come into community seeking to be more fully ourselves, knowing that we do not live alone, knowing that we cannot

live fully if we are for ourselves alone. We come as ordinary people, each with strengths and weaknesses, each aware of our own shortcomings. Too often we fall short of our best expectations of ourselves, hence we give up our dream of ourselves. We are ignorant, or impatient, or angry, or weak, or lacking vision so we are beaten down by life's obstacles and forget that we were born with wings as well as roots. Yet, here we are, not always perfect, or patient, or strong or wise, yet we are gloriously and miraculously human, alive, breathing and capable of tremendous things! If only we remember to honor our roots and practice our wings as we prepare to soar above life's tribulations.

We sang "Spirit of Life" again today, partly so our youth could enjoy its prayerful surrender to the challenges of life, but also to remind us we cannot do this alone, we need help on this journey. Carolyn McDade invokes this Spirit of Life to bring to her heart stirrings of compassion giving life the shape of justice. Like roots and wings, compassion and justice can do us harm when taken separately, but together they give the resources to shape our lives. We cannot fly alone but must be in relationship to be able to fully master the journey. When I was new to Unitarian Universalism, I was extraordinarily proud of the breadth of my learning, but most of it was self-taught and came from my passion to read often alone. I was puzzled when I first encountered the ancient teaching, "He who is entirely self-taught has a fool for a teacher!" The spiritual journey, whereby we find meaning and resources for this life, was never intended to be a solo exploration. For a thousand years the Upanishads were not written down because they were considered dangerous learning unless one was under the tutelage of a spiritual teacher. For a thousand years the Books of Moses were always supplemented by the unwritten Torah, because their deeper meanings could only be explored under the direction of a teacher. Freedom without structure is like wings without roots, it feels deeply exhilarating, up until we encounter inevitable destruction.

There is nothing wrong with this world as such, as Anne so playfully told us in her story for all ages, the Creator of all being simply seems to have given us a double dose of freedom and consequences. Such a world can be full of joy happiness and hope, but we must carefully remember that it also holds a substantial measure of pain and suffering, not necessarily earned or deserved, but there nevertheless as part of the texture of the cosmos. As William Ellery Channing, the father of American Unitarianism, writes: Human beings are made to love, but we must remember to love what is

worthy. He says we will know what is worthy by three features: 1) it feels right or apt to our deepest sense of being; 2) it evokes a promise, a vow or a covenant to become our best self; 3) it brings us into relationship with that which brings us beyond our narrow selfish self and into community with the divine.

Martha emailed me a poem on Tuesday concerning this our metaphysical dilemma. It is called "Lost" by David Waggoner. "Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you are not lost. Wherever you are is called here, and you must treat it as a powerful stranger, must ask permission to know it and be known. The forest breathes. Listen. It answers, I have made this place around you, if you leave it you may come back again, saying here. No two branches are the same to Raven. No two branches are the same to Wren. If what a tree or bush does is lost on you, you are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows where you are. You must let it find you. You must let it find you."

Rooted here in this community of love and hope it is possible for each of us to take flight. Birds make their homes safely nestled among our branches. The poet Terry Tempest Williams writes:

I pray to the birds. I pray to the birds because I believe they will carry the messages of my heart upward. I pray to them because I believe in their existence,
the way their songs begin and end each day –the invocations and benedictions of earth.
I pray to the birds because they remind me of what I love rather than what I fear.
And at the end of my prayers, they teach me how to listen.

We are each of us that tree on the side of a steep hill, needing strong roots deeply buried in the earth to hold us secure in the storm. This earth which is the sacred ground which Martha preached last Sunday is our ground of being and becoming. And we are each of us that baby bird, still weak and uncertain in our wings in our times of testing, yet yearning to fly freely, to soar above mundane reality and feel the joy of pure freedom. We are beings born to be both deeply rooted and yearning to fly freely. The metaphysical challenge is to love both our roots and our wings! So may it be for each of us. Amen and blessed be.