

Arboreal Articulations: Conversations and Trees

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John Boy Walton once remarked, “Land and pine trees is sermon enough for me.” I would simply add, “Land, pine trees and music is sermon enough for me.” So allow me these few reflections on our human connection with trees, to add to the sermons, which are already before us. Of course, our very presence in this room connects us with trees. Wood from pine trees create our ceiling, and red oak wood forms the back-wall behind the choir. Delores Freiburger has filled our worship space windows and pulpit area with her Bonsai trees, and this very pulpit was crafted from ash wood by congregation member Walt Owens.

For those of us up here on this wooden platform, we look out the back row of windows upon a small bevy of trees dancing in the springtime rain/sun/wind. And of course, for those of you at the correct angle, you look out our circle window and can view the leafing sugar maple branches of the tree, which resides in the front lawn outside the church office windows.

Then there is the paper we are using this morning, much of which (if not all) is tree wood pulp paper. We live in a world wherein approximately “50% of the wood harvested for commercial application is used to produce paper pulp” (Tree Free Calendar, 1999) We Hoosiers, we humans have an ongoing complex relationship with trees and forests. It is somewhat paradoxical, our soul’s yearning to be with a tree’s living, graceful beauty, and yet our practical, artistic and even religious lives calling us to consume. Recognizing these opposing forces, Congress, in 1894, passed the Organic Act that instructed federal foresters nationwide to on one hand “improve and protect forests” while at the same time, “furnish a continuous supply of timber.” (Shroeder, Michael, *Tug of War Over Trees*, Hoosier Times, January 25, 2004, Bloomington, IN) The art of this balance and controversies regarding the methods of its implementation have challenged federal foresters and many ordinary citizens since that time.

I hope this morning’s worship can remind us to be in “awareness and gratitude” for the many ways in which trees touch our lives, from the trees, which have helped create our worship space this morning to those from our childhood and throughout our corporeal existence on this spinning blue-green planet earth.

--I just wanted to point out that *corporeal* rhymes with *arboreal* and there is probably a great poem in there somewhere, but as we well know, “Poems were

made by fools like me, but only God can create a tree.) Well God and a couple hundred million years of evolution. Which brings us back to trees—

Astronomer Carl Sagan once sagely observed,

We humans grew up in forests; we have a natural affinity for them. How lovely a tree is straining toward the sky. Its leaves harvest sunlight to photosynthesize. We humans look rather different than a tree. Without a doubt we perceive the world differently than a tree does. But down deep, at the molecular heart of life, the trees and we are essentially identical. We both use nucleic acids for heredity; we both use proteins as enzymes to control the chemistry of our cells. Most significantly, we both use precisely the same code book for translating nucleic acid information into protein information, as do most other creatures on this planet. The usual explanation of this molecular unity is that we are, all of us—trees, people, angler fish, slime molds and paramecia—descended from a single and common instance of the origin of life in the early history of our planet. (Sagan, Carl COSMOS,)

This observation can provide new perspective for our Unitarian Universalist principle, “respect for the interdependent web of which we are all a part.” All of us from people to trees to paramecia. We are part of the web of life, of this home, this mother earth, which gave us birth. Our awareness and memories of trees, are part of our earth story, our respect for the web of life.

I remember the apple tree in the backyard of my childhood home in northeastern Indiana. A part of Indiana well identified with Johnny Appleseed, the famous apple tree planter, who is buried in Ft. Wayne. I enjoyed climbing our apple tree with its several attempts at a tree house awkwardly constructed in its branches. What I really enjoyed every year was watching its slow progression of fruiting. The emergence and smell of the spring time white blossoms. The appearance of small green beads during the summer. The strokes of soft reds in the greens as summer moved toward autumn. It was during this time that I would prematurely pick one of these tiny apples and taste the bitter tartness of the tree’s cycle.

Later, as autumn arrived, so did the deep red Jonathan apples. A unique, rich sweet-tart flavor, which I still love to this day. I also remember numerous times biting into one of those Jonathans and finding another parasite had beaten me

to my fruit. Undaunted, I learned to eat around worms, and I'd throw the infested leftovers into our rhubarb patch.

As I've grown older, my relationship with trees has deepened. There is a certain reverence I experience in the presence of trees, well let me restate that, when I slow down enough to have the awareness to experience the presence of trees, there is a reverence. Our awareness and memories of trees, are part of our earth story, our respect for the web of life.

Artist Bessie Harvey, in an exhibition entitled "Black Art—Ancestral Legacy, stated, "Trees is soul people to me, maybe not to other people, but I have watched the trees when they pray, and I've watched them shout and sometimes they give thanks slowly and quietly." Sister Macrina Wiederkehr writes, "Every time I meet a tree, if I am truly awake, I stand in awe before it. I listen to its voice, a silent sermon moving me to the depths, touching my heart, and stirring up within my soul a yearning to give my all." (A Tree Full of Angels, 1988)

Let me pause here for a moment, and introduce a few questions. How do you relate to trees? Intellectually? Emotionally? Ecologically? Spiritually? Is there a special tree from your childhood, or adulthood, that resides in your heart? If so, imagine in your minds eye, the last time you saw it. Where was this tree? What kind of tree was it? Did it have broad leaves or needles? What colors did it display? What did its bark feel like? What did it smell like? Again, how would you describe your relationship to this tree? (pause) Our awareness and memories of trees, are part of our earth story, our respect for the web of life.

(share thoughts in conversation with someone next to you)

In preparing for this sermon I did something a little different than I usually do. After engaging in some basic research, I ventured out and had conversations about trees. I selected several people to converse with. Folks whom I knew had a good foundation of the biology/ecology of trees, balanced well with a more non-rational love and relational respect of trees. And I had separate conversations with each. My conversation partners were: Sean Breeden-Ost. Marti Crouch. Melinda Swenson and Dan Willard.

I sat with Sean on his back porch. Marti on her front porch. And I joined Melinda, Dan and their son-n-law for lunch on their screened-in deck-porch. I realized later that these verbal exchanges were in the presence of many a tree. So,

I wanted to share a few highlights I gleaned from this tree talk. First, inevitably in each of our conversations, the topic turned to forests. In one way or another, we touched upon what aspects contribute to making a healthy forest: maintenance of old growth trees as well as various age trees; biological diversity in the forest; limitation of non-native species in the forest; contact with human species that is non-invasive and non-eroding to the soil.

As I sat down with Sean on his porch, after perusing the backyard garden, he pointed out the profound evolutionary presence of trees; (After all the first forests developed some 350 to 400 million years ago compared to our initial human origins, which, in accordance with findings in 2002, occurred between 6 and 7 million years ago.) “Trees, evolutionary, have a deeper memory of nature.” Sean shared, “A tree by itself is a wonderful thing, but forests become a whole, dynamic, incredible process. And if you rip parts of that out, particularly in old growth forests, well, there are things in there we just do not understand.” So we do not just kill off trees, we kill off part of our opportunity to understand.

When I joined Marti on her porch, she echoed some of Sean’s observations, “Forests have their own lives. The process of forests is beyond our understanding and description. We humans probably depend on that process more than we know. We need to see agriculture and forests on a continuum. It’s not enough to set aside land for forests and land for humans. Creating tree museums. We need more forest woods as corridors in our farmlands and countryside. Everything we do should allow forests to thrive. Most tree plantations, like crops of Douglas Firs, are monocultures not forests. Research suggests that these monocultures deplete the soil’s micronutrients. After several cycles of this, we could have massive forest decline,” she remarked as her black cat Katuah came out on the porch to say hello.

While I ate some Sushi at Dan and Melinda’s , Dan told me about the trees on White Mountain in Nevada. White Bark Pines. Their average height is about as tall as a human. They are some 4,000 years old. In a recent controversial act, someone cut down one of these white bark pines to determine its age more accurately. (pause) “In terms of the forest vs timber controversy,” Dan said, “We’ll still cut trees. We need wood. We need to replant. Save some in lumps. Just to know what we got. Cut from the edges and replace. Cut and restore. Cut and restore. Cut and restore. Plant mixed forests. Some private companies are beginning to do that.”

What I learned from all three of them is that often there is not a lot of discernment in determining what gets cut, or the ecological implications of what it

takes to create some marketable woods. For instance, it will take Pines 40 years of growth to become marketable. Oak will take around 100 years of growth to become marketable. And Redwood, Redwood takes 300 years of growth to become marketable. Somehow 300 years of growth and marketability seem like an ecological oxymoron to me.

So, then Dan pointed out the great irony that on the Indiana University Campus when you walk into the building, which houses the School of Public and Environmental Affairs (SPEA) and look up, the ceiling is made of Redwood. I about lost my sushi on that one. However, I also know that the Indiana University campus has taken many important steps to create an ecologically balanced campus. I consider the Redwood ceiling one of those decisions that was made by the wrong people at the wrong time.

According to the US Forest Service, in our state of Indiana, forests cover about 19.6% of Indiana's almost 23 million acres. The modern low was 15.6% in 1938. In the early 17th century, it is estimated that 85% of Hoosier-land was forest. Our awareness and memories of trees, are part of our earth story, our respect for the web of life.

Sean remembers having a special connection with trees from a young age, "And I remember seeing a skit on Sesame Street once. They were doing a parody of "This Is Your Life", and they brought out this little wooden chair and guests came in and said, "Remember when you were just a little seedling. You came from a tree." It was the first time I understood that wood came from a tree. For me, it was an important realization," he paused and then reflected, "I hope we can raise my son to be well connected to trees and nature. To care about his environment. But, in the end, that's an unknown like everything else."

"My first memory is of a tree," Marti told me as I leaned back in my rocking chair and took a sip of water, "A Weeping Willow in bloom. I remember lying on cardboard, sheltered under that tree. Seeing my Mom folding laundry in the distance. Trees as shelter. That's what they were for me. Later I read "Wind in the Willows, and I wanted to live under a tree. In the roots."

In a combined dialogue Melinda and Dan expressed, "The full canopy that trees create. Trees make a room. A Hall. You walk into this big hall. A roof above. The understory clear. The leaves are stained glass. The shadows create an exotic carpet."

“Trees like it here in this area,” Dan continued, “we have the biggest bunch of southern hardwood. Everything here wants to go to tree, if we’d let it. Cut and restore. Cut and restore.”

“When I plant trees, I have an overwhelming sense of happiness,” Sean said, “to plant things that could be alive 100 years from now. There’s a woman down the street, who recently died, but she had been here since 1948. She had planted pine trees on the corner down there,” Sean pointed out to me, “She told me they were scrawny when she planted them. And she was very proud of how they had grown. For me, she is infused with those living trees. A part of her still connected. Now a part of my memory.” He concluded as his partner and young son joined us on the porch under the shade of the sweet gum tree.

Marti told me that she initially planted trees in her yard, “But now I wait for them,” she said, “for example, I was waiting for a sassafras tree, eventually I saw a little sapling getting started in the yard, so I just weeded around it, and helped it nourish itself. And now there it is,” she pointed out over the porch railing.

“I did plant one tree back in 1997,” Marti continued. “From an acorn which came from the biggest tree on campus, the Burr Oak in front of the Memorial Union. That oak has huge sweet acorns, and my tree had its first acorns this year.” She walked me over to the part of her yard where the 7 ½ year old oak was standing. I was amazed at its height. It was at least 15-18 feet tall. “Planting trees does require some patience, but people just don’t realize how quickly they grow,” she said as I kept looking up in astonishment...thinking just 8 years ago this was a little acorn. “And this tree is shaping my relationship with my land. I was going to build a house over here, but now I can see that this tree dictates the green space. And I have a commitment to it.” Marti, by the way, has willed her lot to the Sycamore Land Trust with an essay about the Burr Oak. Our awareness and memories of trees, are part of our earth story, our respect for the web of life.,

This past Friday, April 30th, was Arbor Day for those of us here in Indiana. In her book “The Attentive Heart: Conversations with Trees” (Shambhala Press, 1996) author Stephanie Kaza writes the following in her chapter entitled, “Arbor Day”:

Redwoods, pines, firs,--these foot-long sprouts are a gangly bunch of teachers. As students of trees, seeking hope, inspiration, and a chance to reconnect with the landscape, we expect a lot of these youngsters. The slim stems,

which look more like prunings than trees, carry our aspirations for a better world, our weighty desires to do good deeds on behalf of the environment.

Arbor Day, I believe, represents some of the best of our Unitarian Universalist theology. It is about planting hope and inspiration for our immediate and distant future. It is not a theology of a foreseeable Armageddon, which many religious fundamentalist, now point to. It is not a theology of nuclear weapons and ignorance regarding the environment. It is a theology about understanding and proclaiming, and standing for those things we cherish in the blue green hills of our home, our earth.

May this mornings arboreal articulations create within you awareness, gratitude and hope. We are part of the interconnected web of life. We are part of the earth story. And as liberal religious seekers, I believe it is up to each of us to live up to our part.

I encourage you then to go out and listen to the silent sermons and prayers the trees offer. In these trying times in our country and global community, I believe there is a wisdom and comfort you can find in their presence. A place for your soul to rest. And remember.... the Buddha attained enlightenment while sitting under a tree!

Allow me to close with these words from Greta Crosby, "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."

May you all be blessed with such open arms.

So may it be.