



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“The Tree of Life,”
a sermon given by Julie Lombard
on September 21, 2014

Have you ever noticed that faith follows us like a shadow throughout our lives, sometimes lengthening and shortening depending on where we stand?

When I was a child I had a strong, solid faith before I understood the meaning of the word. It did not stem from any religion, but rather from nature. I discovered my faith when I fell in love with a sugar maple in my neighbor's yard. The tree and I were an odd couple, she was most likely 70 years my senior. She stood at the edge of Mr. Junkins' property with a meadow behind her and directly across from the corner my home sat upon. A stone wall stretched out on either side of her base and it ran parallel to the road. I preferred her over others for many reasons; her branches, her location, and the deeper meaning she came to have in my life.

Climbing and swinging from her limbs or peeking into her sap buckets in the spring were some of the good times we had together, but my favorite time with her was when she would show herself to me on the long walks home. She would rise like the sun as I walked up the hill. First, I would see her upper most branches reaching out in every direction. As I walked she seemed to grow out of the road itself.

Eventually, I would see her in her entirety; immense and all knowing. That's what I believed, she was holy. I didn't have the words or the theological knowledge to speak about it then. In her I saw a loving God; she looked over me and watched me grow, rejoiced in my play and curiosity, and modeled to me how to be in the world. She urged me to stretch myself as I reach out in love, to share my sweetness, and to always stand strong. I studied her likeness as a child memorizes their mother's face. To me she was a sacred tree, my tree of life.

My sister had a favorite tree and her tree had a name. It was called the thinking tree. As my mother would tend to her garden she would see two small legs hanging from one of its branches. My mother would call out to my sister, “Amy, whatcha doing?” My sister only needed one word to reply, “Thinking.” You can see how it earned its name. I'm not sure who loved the thinking tree more, but I know my mother found great comfort knowing her daughter had a place to go, to practice being alone while discovering the deeper meaning of life.

It turns out my husband had a special tree, too. Maybe you did, as well? It seems that in our childhood we are not full of expectations that society and our culture forces upon us. In our youth, we know when we are in the presence of the holy and we accept it for what it is. I hadn't thought of my favorite tree for a long time until I read the poem “The Copper Beech.” Upon reading it I was convinced that the poet knew her tree was sacred, too. For the poet the tree is a metaphor for faith. Armed with that knowledge I began to understand my own faith in a new light.

Faith is a structure in our lives that supports our reasoning as it guides us to do what we are called to do.

By the time we reach adulthood some of us have witnessed how faith changes shape and size like a shadow. This can be frightening, yet we seem to know that a shadow changes due to an external source such as a source of light- mother nature's sun or humankind's street lamp. We still need a structure in our lives to support us and our understanding. We continue to seek answers and we are willing to try on new faith traditions as we discover what feels most authentic. This seeking may take us beyond the certainty of the groves we once played in as a child. At times we begin to feel lost, so many trees but never the one we need or want. We may also notice that in a forest it is hard for light to shine through making it impossible to find our shadow. It is no wonder we struggle. During these times in our life we long for the comfort and certainty that made us feel secure in our youth. Uncertainty can consume us during these darkest times, yet we still seek answers even if we are only asking why this is happening.

A place to go to aid us in understanding faith is to peek behind that Wizard of Oz like curtain we call theology. To me there is no better place for UUs to begin that journey than by reading "Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology" written by Paul Rasor. The title alone assures us that uncertainty is a part of faith formation. Rasor offers us a clear-eyed and hopeful examination that explores the dynamic tensions of liberal theology. He explains why we feel committed to individual freedom [the freedom of belief] on the one hand and community on the other. Theology is not merely a study for theologians. If we left it to them to do the understanding then we would be allowing them to decide all the answers. We know we must be in this equation. After all, we are seekers. Rasor writes for UUs and anyone who wants to understand the liberal religious tradition. Published in 2005, this book has fast become the model for contemporary liberal theology. It was used in my UU Theology Class and not all that long ago it was a book that Rev. Mary Harrington urged her entire congregation to read while she was the minister of the nearby Marblehead UU Church.

Reading Rasor helps me to know why my favorite tree was sacred to me; he explains that she was my teacher of ethics and moral character. Ethics is the underpinning of our doing and theology explains the ethics we come to claim. Doctrine is not what drives us in our creedless faith tradition, we are a covenantal faith- we live by a promise made within each faith community. In this promise we have determined we would rather walk together than to think alike. Theology explains doctrine and other tricky subjects we dare try to comprehend. We have moved away from the early seventeenth century Calvinism and its central doctrine of "total depravity of the self" made famous by New England Puritans. We are the descendants of the reformers, the free thinkers who did not want to focus on the doctrine of original sin. Have any of you seen my bumper sticker that states Unitarian Universalists believe in original innocence? Yes, we are free thinkers, free to develop our own theology.

I think theology and faith are inherently connected. Your theology doesn't have to include God, atheists have a theology. Theology is the way we work out the deeper meaning of our lives, it sets the beat to our faith. It can even determine when we will struggle with our faith because if we do not grasp a particular part of theology when trouble arises then we struggle.

There is no quick fix despite how we wish we could find one. It takes an entire lifetime to attain these answers. Upon our deaths we most likely will still be avid seekers. Don't wait until you feel

completely lost to begin seeking the answers, faith formation needs to be an ongoing process throughout our lives. Maybe you have noticed that as you have lived these answers have changed. Faith follows us like a shadow, sometimes lengthening and shortening depending on where we stand.

A month ago I experienced a good example of what faith throughout a lifetime can look like by attending a 50th anniversary party for some friends. They are members of the UU Church of Manchester where I was a student minister. At their party they packed a hall with family, friends, and folks from three different UU churches; Arlington Street Church-the church where they met in and were married, First Parish of Brookline- the church where they raised their children, and the Manchester Church- where they have attended since their move to NH after their retirement. There were so many UUs in that hall it was like a mini General Assembly.

As the guests arrived each was warmly greeted and directed to find their name tag on one side of a welcome table and on the other side of the table was a tree project we were asked to visit. The tree was a painting of a leafless tree. It was the task of the guests to decorate the tree with our thumb prints using green colored inks. Soon the tree was in full bloom with the markings of their family and friends- their chosen community. It was a tree of life because it represented the faith community who had been significant throughout their lives, their enduring faith, and a moral and ethical structure that supports everything they do.

At that event I lead a meditation written by the minister who had married them 50 years earlier. These are the meditative words of Rev. Jack Mendelsohn. May his meditation remind us why we come together in faith.

"Here in this sanctuary of ancient dreams and wisdom and beauty, we come to grow, to be healed, to stretch minds and hearts, to be challenged, renewed; to be helped in our own continuing struggles for meaning and for love; to help build a world with more justice and mercy in it; to be counted among the hoppers and doers.

In the face of cynicism, darkness, brutality around us and within, we seek to align ourselves with a living community that would affirm rather than despair, that would think and act rather than simply adjust and succumb.

Here we invite the spirit of our own humanity and the healing powers under, around, through and beyond it, to give us the nerve and grace, the toughness and sensitivity, to search out the truth that frees, and the life that maketh all things new."

Spiritual Siblings, I have no doubt that that couple are hoppers and doers just like you. They have found in their latter years that their faith, like their marriage, is a sanctuary; a place to grow, to be healed, to stretch their minds and hearts, and to be challenged and renewed. At their party folks celebrated these two souls for enduring their long journey; one that was not always easy, one that offered many struggles, one they both worked on throughout the years. Marriage formation and faith formation sound similar, don't they? It's work, but well worth the sweat and tears in the end.

May that couples' dedication to one another and their faith inspire us all. Let us give thanks for the example of their endurance and for our own endurance, for our chosen community, and finally to this faith we share that has been a constant companion to us all.

Your faith may not be understood through a relationship you've had with a special tree, but let trees remind you of the support structure faith offers. A month ago guests at the anniversary party resurrected a tree of life which the couple now finds great comfort in. That tree reminds them that they are protected by a loving companion, their faith and the community that comes with it. It is a safe harbor that shelters them from the harshest storms, ones that we also wish we might escape. Let me ask you, what does your faith do for you?

May it be so. Amen.