

“Slow-Growing Trees”

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There are a couple of stories from the Talmud about trees. (The Talmud is a central text in Judaism, containing rabbinic conversations on topics such as ethics and customs.) In one story, a sage is walking along the road and sees a man planting a carob tree. The sage asks him, "How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit?" "Seventy years," replies the gardener. The sage then asks: "Are you so healthy a man that you expect to live that length of time and eat its fruit?" The man answers: "I found a fruitful world, because my ancestors planted it for me. Likewise I am planting for my children." (Talmud Ta'anit 23a)

We drink from wells we did not dig and eat from trees we did not plant (Deut. 6:11). Our physical, intellectual, and religious lives depend on those who have gone before. Following their example will lead us to plant literal and figurative trees for the world of the future.

I believe caring for ourselves AND others will help us sustain a shared life of meaning and compassion for a long time. Let's talk about why the long-term is important, and where we plant our roots as we think ahead to sheltering future generations. Imagining time, as Wendell Berry does, on the scale of slow-growing trees, we share with "the lives our lives prepare" the blessings of the earth, the mind, and the spirit.

Blessings of Earth

When I worked at Stanford University and went to seminary just up the hill from UC Berkeley, I enjoyed the fragrance of eucalyptus trees on both campuses. The dry leaves rustled in the breeze, leaves rubbing together like the wings of singing crickets. Some people were distracted by the sound and allergic to the smell, but I liked them. The eucalyptus trees were tall and graceful. One might imagine that they had always been there. There's a story about those trees. I don't know if it happened exactly this way.

The American West in the late 1800's was heavily influenced by the railroad industry. Non-native eucalyptus trees were brought from Australia because they grew quickly. Instant railroad ties, right? Not quite. Eucalyptus from Australian virgin forests, seasoned and treated properly, behaves differently than eucalyptus grown from seeds in California, hastily treated, and set down in the Nevada sand. Some of the railroad ties were so cracked they couldn't hold spikes. Some decayed within four years.
(<http://library.csustan.edu/bsantos/section2.htm>)

The trees themselves grew like weeds. They did what non-native species are famous for doing: thriving in the new environment, edging out diverse native plants that provide food and habitat, with consequences for the entire food chain. (Eucalyptus turned out to have other industrial uses. It could be argued that the benefit to introducing them was not worth the risk.) An attempt at a quick fix turned out to have unintended consequences. Recently, there has been more attention in that region to restoring native trees. To say that it will take time to replace invasive plants with mature Valley Oaks and Live Oaks is an understatement. Then again, compare that to the 2,000-year growth of some living redwood trees. May we learn patience and commitment from slow-growing trees.

Restoring relationships takes work. We know from our human relationships that repair often takes more time than the original injury, yet wholehearted reconciliation opens up channels for abundant life that we would never know if we were locked in cycles of grudges and guilt. I believe this is true for our relationship with the earth, and I believe that the ecosystem is a spiritual issue for the same reason. Putting time and effort into the environment requires a long view.

As people of faith, we are among those who have the hope and imagination it takes to envision a world of justice and compassion, a world of peace where people sit calmly in the shade of vines and fig trees (see Micah 4:4), or their local equivalents. In our neck of the woods, we might imagine a world where every person lives in safety and abundance, with access to the shade of a Black Walnut or Red Maple. The trees symbolize enough time for a generation to grow without being uprooted by hunger or violence.

The railroad eucalyptus story reminds us that some of the environmental mistakes we humans have made were decisions made by a few but using the resources and the risk pool of many. If we can make the wrong choices as a large group, we can certainly make the right choices. We can play an active role in the governments, corporations, and organizations to which we belong and who act on our behalf. Let us embody these relationships for repair and renewal.

Blessings of Mind

Thinking long-term brings blessings of the mind as well as blessings of earth. When I was in ninth grade, the youth RE class in my liberal Christian church studied animals. We looked at the poetry and symbolism of animals in the Bible and we learned what science, including evolutionary biology, had to say about the same animals.

One of our teachers was an entomologist with the Smithsonian. She was a bee and wasp specialist. We went on a field trip to the National Museum of Natural History and got to see “backstage.”

Cabinets taller than our heads held display cases that pulled out like drawers. Specimen drawers, paper files, and shelves of equipment formed a labyrinth. Some of the corners turned to face research desks, decorated with scientific illustrations and *Far Side* cartoons.

“Here is where we keep the Oh Mys,” my teacher said as we came to one of the cabinets. She pulled out a case of mounted insects that were impressive in size, several with wingspans larger than my hand. That was just one drawer. There was a whole stack of cases in the cabinet, full of pieces that were arranged to make a big impression. It worked. That visit captured my imagination, inspiring awe and curiosity for our planet, and a desire to protect the home we share with these creatures on the edge of our understanding.

Institutions like museums and libraries and practices like accurate science education are caretakers of knowledge and wisdom. It takes time and foresight to establish them.

These treasures are central to passing along critical thinking skills. With the help of curators, librarians, and teachers, we can understand and use the information at hand to work toward our planet's survival. It seems to me that liberal spiritual communities are especially well-suited to embrace the fullness of time, to reach back to the ancient ethical and poetic traditions for inspiration while reaching forward with open minds for the truth that discovery may bring.

Celebrating scientific knowledge as a faith community is an act of religious witness. The sources of our faith specifically include “the guidance of reason and the results of science.” That’s one reason why we promote the Our Whole Lives class: reality-based, comprehensive, age-appropriate sexuality education driven by the values of our faith. In the winter quarter, we’ll be offering Our Whole Lives (OWL for short) at the upper elementary and adult levels.

It matters that UU’s offer comprehensive sex education, including material on decision-making and values. It matters that our celebrations of awe and wonder include the guidance of reason. And that goes beyond those of us in this room. This church’s membership as a congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association lends strength and encouragement to other congregations all over the country.

Long-term thinking cultivates the blessing of mind. We need the long traditions of education and culture. We need the boldness of scientists and artists. We need yesterday and tomorrow. Wendell Berry writes:

*Memory, native to this valley, will spread over it
like a grove, and memory will grow into legend,
legend into song, song into sacrament*

The blessings of mind, in our congregation now and in the world of the poet’s imagination, weave knowledge and joy into spirituality. May we have memory and hope for sustaining these blessings for generations to come.

Blessings of Spirit

In addition to the blessings of mind and earth, thinking long-term acquaints us with the blessings of spiritual community.

The song “Morning Has Broken” reminds me of this. “Morning Has Broken” is one of the first hymns I remember from my childhood. I imagine the line about “God’s re-creation” is a pun. It is creation all over again, every day. It is also recreation, play and joy for Divine forces.

Re-creation is a good word for churches. Congregations form and re-form. Board membership rotates. Members reach turning points in life, and we remind each other that we are not alone in those times. We are always creating and re-creating ourselves in partnership with the sacred. When people share their stories honestly and listen to each other deeply, that builds the sanctuary of the heart, a home for trust, compassion, and hospitality. The strength of that invisible sanctuary is its resilience, its acceptance of new stories in our lives and new lives that come into the story of this congregation.

Putting down roots in a spiritual community means growing shelter for those who will follow in the generations to come. We make the beloved community real and long-lasting when we show up, when we deal with our challenges together faithfully, when we give from the heart with our talent and resources. Letting our roots reach down into the rich soil, being authentic, is part of what will nourish this congregation for a long life.

Conclusion

A sage is walking along the path and comes across a group of people planting maple trees. They are young and old together, diverse in appearance and obvious in their friendship with one another. The sage asks, “How long will it take until these trees are grown?” The people discuss various opinions among themselves and reply with the general opinion that it will be at least thirty years before their stand of trees reaches seed-bearing maturity.

The sage asks, “Do you all expect to live so long as to enjoy the shade and the syrup from these trees?” One answers, “We found a world rich with oxygen because of the trees that were planted before we were born.” Another remembers, “My grandparents

harvested syrup from their maple trees for me to taste. I want to do the same for my grandchildren." A third says, "Beauty was here before us, and we hope to leave some beauty behind us." They all agree that, meanwhile, they enjoyed learning about the trees and strengthening their friendship with a shared task.

We drink from wells we did not dig and eat from trees we did not plant. As a spiritual community, part of our task is to muster the hope and imagination it takes to consider "the lives our lives will prepare." We think long-term. The blessings of earth, mind, and spirit are ours to enjoy and ours to grow for future generations.

So be it. Blessed be. Amen.