

# “From the Roots”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
28 April 2019

N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

“Roots hold me close, wings set me free...”

Isn't it interesting that the Spirit of Life comes to me,  
and you, and you, and you...

In a similar enough way that we can sing that hymn  
together so often...

And yet in specific ways,  
unique to each of us as individuals.

This “unity in diversity” or “diversity in unity” is, I think,  
one of the most beautiful and yet perplexing aspects of  
religious community--or any community, for that matter.

We enshrine this unified diversity in our first and seventh UU  
principles, affirming: “The inherent worth and dignity of every  
person,” and “the interdependent web of all existence,  
of which we are a part.”

As we turn our attention to climate change, we see these  
principles embodied in the biodiversity of our planet.

Protecting biodiversity is one of the most important things we can do to protect the earth...and that message was an important part of Peter's story today.

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As a country that has signed on to the United Nations Convention on Biodiversity, Canada has agreed to set aside 17 percent of its landmass for protected status by the year 2020.

So far though, only 10.5 percent is protected, as was recently reported in the Globe and Mail, with research from WWF Canada, the World Wildlife Foundation.

In the coming years, we hopefully will see much more action to preserve some of the 6,400 distinct habitats found across this country.

In addition to protecting animals, our commitment to biodiversity would protect forests as well, keeping carbon safe within trees and soil.

Around the world, deforestation releases more carbon into the atmosphere than cars and trucks do, so the protection of forest biomass in Canada is also a significant priority, as we meet our U.N. biodiversity commitments.

Perhaps it's not surprising that many at-risk habitats and species are located where human activity has flourished.

As human beings, we are challenged to make room now for all the other species in our interdependent web.<sup>1</sup>

And within the human family, we recognize, too, that our own diversity is essential to the Whole...

That we each respond to climate change differently, and have different, and significant, contributions to make.

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To explore how we, in our diverse ways, can live into the changes needed now...  
I want to think more about trees...  
and especially the roots.

In addition to looking up, and out, at the things we need to do, how can we reach in and down, to stay connected to the deep sources of nourishment that sustain us?

Like trees, we don't draw from our roots once and for all.

It's not a matter of "getting it" or "solving" our dilemmas and being done with them.

We need to continually seek nourishment

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<sup>1</sup> Ivan Semeniuk, "How much room does nature really need?" *The Globe and Mail*, April 22, 2019 (with sources from WWF Canada).

from the sources available to us.

Otherwise we will lose strength, wither, and be unable to withstand the storms that come.

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We now know that trees communicate with each other through vast networks of roots and fungus that intertwine underground:

Connections that mirror the networks of the human nervous system and social networks.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, when we draw from deep sources of religious tradition, from perennial wisdom (that springs up again and again in many times and places) and from our personal history, we're connected with all other human beings and all life.

Each of us is planted in specific soil, in a specific place.

That's true not only in a geographic sense, but in terms of our psyche.

It's true of organizations as much as it is of individuals.

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<sup>2</sup> "Do Trees Talk to Each Other?" <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-whispering-trees-180968084/>

It's been said that "every viewpoint is a view from a point"<sup>3</sup> and this reflects the fact that we "come from different places" in terms of our life experience.

One of the great challenges of responding to climate change is that we hear many calls from many directions, to do many things urgently--many of which are indeed extremely important.

A few of the surest ways to increase our anxiety (and I'm speaking from my own experience here) is to think we must do everything all at once, and to compare ourselves to others in what we're able to do.

Equally problematic, of course, is to tell everyone else what to do, and become anxious and frustrated when they don't do it!

But a sacred lesson that nature teaches us is that biodiversity is necessary for the ongoing well-being of the Whole.

We are part of that biodiversity, and the diversity of the human family is an essential aspect of its well-being.

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In her book, "Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in Without Going Crazy," environmentalist Joanna Macy writes:

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Rohr.

"A resilient ecosystem requires high levels of biodiversity. [...] It is similar with human beings.

We don't need to be...robbed of free will and individuality to experience ourselves as part of a larger whole.

The courage to listen to our conscience and live our own truth is integral to joining, rather than merging, with the larger circles of life [to which we belong]."<sup>4</sup>

When she talks about “not merging,” I think she means not passively melding into the dominant culture:

Instead, maintaining the strength we need to make our own positive and healing contribution.

By the way, after service today there will be a sharing circle inspired by the key ideas of "active hope" in Room 305,

It will be led by Eliot Feenstra and Niki Andre and all are welcome.

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Even as we affirm "the inherent worth and dignity of every person," there may be times when, called to work together to address climate change, we feel personally inadequate to the task.

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<sup>4</sup> Joanna Macy & Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're In Without Going Crazy* (New World Library: Novato, CA, 2012), 93.

When that happens, we need to seek strength “from the roots”—

To delve more deeply into our personal sources of truth and meaning, so we can make a clear and committed response that is ours alone.

I wrote the song "Tall Trees" about twenty years ago.

I was inspired by the activism of Julia Butterfly Hill, who lived in a 55 meter tall, roughly 1500 year-old California redwood for two years, from 1997 to 1999.

As is true of all songs we write, or any reflective work we may do, the process of maturing will mean that our "view from a point" may change.

I understand the song differently now than I did when I wrote it.

Yes, I still seek to cultivate courage in myself— but I no longer feel anxiety that I don't have the physical or emotional capacity to live in the branches of an ancient tree.

Instead, I'm asking myself, what are the "tall trees" that I need to climb...

The "tall orders" that are mine to address?  
What are the fears that I could overcome...  
the habits I could change?

What am I called to do, in my specific life,

right now, with the tools I have, and with life exactly as it is?

How am I called to live differently, right here on the ground?

I seek answers to these questions by getting to know myself more deeply...rooted in my actual place, family and tradition...and looking toward deep sources of insight that can sustain me when the going gets rough.

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Spiritual practice can help us draw from the roots—grounding us in the breath and the present moment.

Personal history can help us draw from the roots—reminding us of the wisdom and strength of our ancestors, and the gifts passed down to us that we can use.

And our faith traditions can help us draw from the roots—giving us access to a well of “perennial wisdom” that springs forth through so many sources throughout history.

I’m thinking now of the Passover poem from UU minister Lynn Ungar, in which the blessing of being spared one misfortune led to a dark time of exile.

What sustained the Jews during that time, continuing to this day, were the Law and religious practices, that could be carried with them wherever they went.

The Torah would be a root source of strength, no matter what future challenges arose.



Not coincidentally, that source of personal strength also pointed toward the care of others.

As the first Century Jewish historian Josephus said:  
“Someday it will become evident that the laws in the Torah are meant to lead to a universal love of humanity.”

When we find strength from deeply-rooted wisdom that teaches the love of all beings...

what sustains us will lead us to sustain others.

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Our roots will bring us strength,  
and though they are interconnected,  
they are also distinctly individual...just as every species is  
distinctly valuable and individual within the ecosystem.

What are the roots you can draw on,  
in these days of climate change?

What can remind you of your own strength,  
when you feel inadequate?

What can restore you, when you feel depleted?

Take a few minutes now to think of your roots...  
the deep sources of strength that can sustain you.

There's a space in your Order of Service to jot them down.

This will be “Inner Dialogue,” just for you, and it will serve as the dialogue noted in your Order of Service today.

**(Interlude)**

Honouring the sacred depths of nature means being rooted in the deep Self;

Affirming our specific location on this planet, and the specific landscape of our own being.

The exploration of the roots of our meaning is lifelong work.

It can foster the strength and serenity from which our most significant contributions will be made.

May your roots hold you close today.

Close to the heart of life experience;

Close to the love, peace, courage and strength that you need.

Amen.