

First Unitarian Universalist Church of Berks County
August 20, 2009
Roots and Wings
Rev. Sandra Fees



The concepts for this morning's sermon "roots and wings" are taken from the hymn "Spirit of Life," which we sing each week after our chalice lighting. It's a favorite of many Unitarian Universalists. It was written by Carolyn McDade, a Unitarian Universalist herself.

Many of our congregations sing it every week as we do. In it we sing, "Roots hold me close. Wings set me free." These metaphors signal that we are anchored by tradition and also always evolving.

Let's begin by considering our roots. We each have personal roots in family, place, culture, and ethnicity, as well as in religion. We may be grounded in a way of being, a certain belief system, in relationships, or even a particular profession. Some we idealize and treasure.

Others may no longer nurture us or perhaps never did. We might just as soon reject or discard them. Coming to terms with our roots turns out to be a lifelong process. As we change and grow, we may understand and appreciate our roots differently. This is as true in our personal lives as it is in our religion.

I was raised in Pennsylvania, coming from a long line of Pennsylvanians. While I have lived in other places, including northern New Jersey and Syracuse, New York, Pennsylvania is always home to me. I grew up in an old farmhouse on four acres in Lebanon County. We ourselves weren't farmers, but we were surrounded by corn fields on all sides. Most of my ancestors were farmers.

My Pennsylvania roots go deep. My forebears were both Brethrens and Lutherans who came from Europe, many from the Palatinate area of Germany. They came to Pennsylvania as part of a great wave of people escaping religious persecution and attracted by William Penn's call. On my Mother's side, the Brethren tradition merged with Methodism, and we took the Methodist path.

In my own family tree, I would eventually find some kinship with our Unitarian Universalist forebears, some of whom also sought a safe place to practice their religion. Some came to this country to escape persecution elsewhere, and put down their Unitarian and Universalist roots in America, even right here in Pennsylvania.

Roots and Wings (cont'd.)

Rev. Sandra Fees

I admit I have not always appreciated my family's roots quite the way I do today. It wasn't until I started studying for the ministry that I truly connected the religious journey of my own ancestors with my faith today.

The roots of our Unitarian and Universalist faith shape a compelling story. They emerged in different places, times, and from many different traditions. They include a set of ethical and spiritual principles that express our common values.

On the Universalist side, in which this congregation's history is situated, those roots can be traced to Alexandrian Christian mysticism and to church fathers, Origin and Clement, in the third century. Even earlier roots lie in Jesus' inclusive gospel and the teachings of Buddha and Confucius.

Closer to home, George de Benneville came to Pennsylvania to preach universal salvation in 1741. This included running a house church in the Oley Valley. When he arrived in this country, he found ready friends in Pennsylvania pietists, including the Dunkers, Universalist Baptists, and Quakers. Before that, de Benneville had preached this doctrine of universal salvation in England, Germany, Holland, and France. Because of his role in laying the seeds of thought for universalism, de Benneville is considered to be among the American founders of Universalism.

The Unitarian side of our faith is equally intriguing. It has origins in Greek faith, in the unity of all existence, and in early Christian belief in Jesus as a prophet. The first official use of the name Unitarian happened in 1568 in Transylvania. Unitarian congregations exist to this day in Transylvania, which is part of Romania. Unitarian Universalists make regular religious pilgrimages there.

As with Universalism, Unitarianism has Pennsylvania roots. Joseph Priestley, a major figure in English Unitarianism, immigrated to Pennsylvania in 1794, and helped found the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia. It was the first permanently established church in this country to take the Unitarian name.

In large measure, early American Unitarianism was a rejection of Calvinist orthodoxy and Puritan churches. The Unitarians of this period thought of themselves, not as Unitarians. That name was bestowed upon them by their opponents. They considered themselves "liberal Christians," as do some contemporary Unitarian Universalists.

This Unitarian Enlightenment thinking emphasized a benevolent and positive doctrine of human nature. Calvinist doctrines, by sharp contrast, took a

Roots and Wings (cont'd.)

Rev. Sandra Fees

bleak view of humanity, stressing original sin, predestination, and human depravity.

As many of you know, and as you can tell from this brief history, the common religious root of Unitarianism and Universalism is liberal Christianity. It is evident in the symbols of this church building, in the stained glass windows, from our pulpit, and in our overall architecture. We claim Christianity as one of our core religious roots to this day.

We also embrace wisdom from all the world's religions as sources of our faith. As one example, Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson helped to introduce eastern thought into 19th century Unitarianism. And there are even more contemporary additions to our Unitarian Universalist sources, such as religious humanism and earth-centered spiritualities.

Our principles also root our faith. They affirm individual worth, world community, compassion, justice, our interconnectedness, the right of conscience, spiritual growth, and the search for truth and meaning.

In many ways, these sources and principles serve as a bridge. They are consistent with our extensive history of religious tolerance and freedom of religious thought. They ground us in our own religious history while preserving freedom and diversity. They are open to change and challenge – to multiple interpretations, amendments, and supplements. We are always looking to breathe new life into our existence.

We seek to move in unprecedented directions, building on the past, adapting new ideas and discoveries. In doing that, our history and shared past can be honored without our grasping onto arcane methods. Otherwise, we are simply imitating the past and holding onto what Ralph Waldo Emerson referred to as "corpse-cold religion." Or we find ourselves clinging to what William Ellery Channing called "the bondage of habit." We move in new directions without allowing ourselves simply to become merely fashionable or to follow each new trend that comes along. Change and freedom – our wings – are purposeful.

The wings that set us free are those things that help us adapt to the current contexts in which we find ourselves. They help us reach our full potential. Our wings unfurl our dreams and hopes of what our lives and the world might be. This includes our imagination, our creativity, reaching out to see and experience the larger world, trying different things, innovation, spontaneity, and even being a bit fanciful in our lives. These yield growth and excitement.

Roots and Wings (cont'd.)

Rev. Sandra Fees

Few people, if any, feel they have reached their full potential or used all of their imaginative, creative resources in all ways. There is always room for us to grow, learn, and change. There is always room to re-imagine the world and to allow new breakthroughs.

This happens with our beliefs too. The wings that set our Unitarian Universalist faith free include our adherence to religious freedom. We affirm the ever unfolding nature of the universe. Divine revelation is continuous. Life is evolutionary.

Because of this, we encourage each other and ourselves to engage in religious exploration. Ours is a religion where we can explore our beliefs openly in community. Here we can change our beliefs without needing to find a new church. For me, this gets lived out in my daily spiritual practice. My morning ritual includes journaling and simple movement exercises. It's an "East meets West" conglomeration, which taps Christian mysticism and eastern spiritualities. In our tradition, I feel encouraged and supported in exploring and experimenting with a wide range of spiritualities as part of my faith.

Just think about our opening hymn. In it, we sang about our free faith. For many people, this idea of free faith is an oxymoron. It just plain old confuses some people. Religion has as part of its intention and purpose the preservation of the past. To say it is free can appear contradictory to this conserving function.

But for Unitarian Universalists, it's a great example of how we have both roots and wings. We have a free faith. These two ideas are not in conflict. The universe itself has roots and wings. Why shouldn't we? The ultimate, source of life, divine love, God, is both the ground of our being and that which transcends all.

The metaphors of roots and wings are taken from nature. This is not accidental. These naturalistic images help to reinforce that we are part of a living tradition. We are not copying the past but seeking for ourselves in every generation a faith that is relevant and evolving. Yet it is anchored in core values, creative rituals, and a sense of purpose and meaning.

"Roots hold me close. Wings set me free. Spirit of Life, come to me." That is the essence of our living tradition. It is the essence of our free faith. When we have roots to hold us close and wings to set us free, then the Spirit of Life comes to us. The Spirit of Life becomes more present. May we each learn to tap into the roots of the past for our nourishment. May we explore the wings of our sacred journey. May it be so.

Roots and Wings (cont'd.)
Rev. Sandra Fees