

The Dawn Redwood¹

Rev. Myke Johnson

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Our readings today were *When I Am Among the Trees*² by Mary Oliver and *Lost*³ by David Wagoner.

Excerpt:

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here...

Sermon:

The very first image that I saw from Allen Avenue UU Church was a picture of the Dawn Redwood tree. The uniquely interwoven branches and lower trunk were on the cover of the informational packet that I received from the search committee in 2005; they were searching for a new minister, and I was considering whether to come to A2U2. I remember thinking to myself: a congregation that puts a tree on the cover has got to be a community that I could love.

Jean Shinoda Bolen talks about Tree People. “A tree person has positive feelings for individual trees and an appreciation of trees as a species.”⁴ Did you ever have a special tree? Perhaps there was a tree you liked to climb in as a child. Perhaps you've planted a tree in your yard, and watched it grow year by year? When I lived in Boston, I found a wonderful old beech tree whose trunk divided into four main branches, close to the ground. It created a place to sit, right in the tree, and I began to come to the tree a few times a week, and sit in that space. It was the place I could feel the tenderness of the earth, could weep or smile or ponder or pray.

Now, in the midst of a busy day, I will sometimes go outside and sit quietly on the stone bench that is under the dawn redwood tree. It occurred to me that this tree might be considered the symbol of our church, something like a totem for our community. The word “totem” originated in the Ojibwe people's language, where traditionally it refers to an animal or other natural figure that spiritually represents a group of related people such as a clan. I think it might be fair to say that the Dawn Redwood tree spiritually represents the A2U2 congregation.

Our Dawn Redwood was planted shortly after our church building was finished, most likely in the spring of 1971, about 47 years ago. It was planted in memory of Dr. Harry Lyons, a Portland dentist who had been active in our church for many years. Rev. Bob Wolf, who was minister at the time, recalls that Dr. Lyons had been president of the church when Bob was called as its minister in 1969. The planting of the tree was arranged by Bill Gray, who was president of our church soon after this building was dedicated in April 1971. Bill Gray purchased the tree in Maine, and arranged for its care during its early years.

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2 From *Thirst: Poems* (Beacon Press: 2006)

3 From *Riverbed* (Indiana University Press: 1972)

4 Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Like a Tree: How Trees, Women, and Tree People Can Save the Planet*, 2011, p.xiii.

It was tiny at first, and had to be protected to keep it from being mowed over. The people of the church intentionally purchased a dawn redwood because the siding of the new church building had been made from redwood trees, and this was a way of giving back.⁵ No one remembers any sort of special ceremony for the planting of the tree. I wonder if they imagined at that time, how tall and grand the tree would become? How central it would become to our landscape?

Dawn Redwood trees have a fascinating history. They are a cousin to the great Redwoods and Giant Sequoias that are found on the west coast. But the species was unknown to the most of the world until the middle of the 20th century. For many years, scientists had been studying redwood-like fossils from North America and Asia. In 1941, a Japanese paleobotanist called Shigeru Miki noticed a fossil specimen that was similar to the sequoias but not quite the same. He published an article claiming the discovery of a new fossil genus, naming it *metasequoia*, meaning “like the sequoia.” The fossils of *metasequoia* date back 90 million years, to the time of the dinosaurs. But they seemed to disappear from the fossil record about 1.5 million years ago.

Meanwhile, close to that same time, in 1941 the Red Army was retreating from Japanese invaders to remote areas in Western China. A forester named T. Kan was puzzled by an unusual tree in Modaoqi, a small village in eastern Sichuan. The conifer stood beside the village temple. The villagers called it Shui-sa, or water fir, and said that a god lived within the ancient tree. There was a small forest of the trees near the village.

A few years later, specimens were collected and brought to the office of Professor Hu Hsen Hsu, head of the botanical institute in Beijing. Professor Hu had read the article from 1941 describing the fossil tree, and realized that they had found a living specimen of that same species. So the dawn redwood became known as a living fossil.⁶

Dr. Hu contacted botanists around the world, including Dr. Elmer Merrill, director of the Arnold Arboretum in Boston. Dr. Merrill acquired seeds from the tree in Modaoqi in 1948, and from there they were sent to institutions and arboreta around the United States, in an effort to preserve the species and see under what conditions it might grow. This was just before the Communist Party took power in China and closed trade relations with the U.S. Had the discovery happened later, we would not have the trees we now have. The trees thrived in North America, and now very large specimens can be found around the country.

So the Dawn Redwood story is a story of rebirth from near extinction. And in some ways, our congregation, planted here on Allen Avenue 47 years ago, was the rebirth of three Universalist congregations that had fallen on hard times and decided to merge. They joined together with a commitment to build a new church, and since then the church has grown and thrived, even as the tree has grown and thrived.

Naturalist Colin Tudge draws a contrast between the growth of a tree and the building of a cathedral:

A cathedral or a mosque is built; it does not grow. Until it is complete it is useless, and probably unstable. It must be held up by scaffold. When it is finished it remains as it was made for as long as it lasts—or until some later architect designs it afresh, and rebuilds.

⁵ Thanks to Janet Stover, Pat McLaughlin, Rev. Bob Wolf, and others for their memories.

⁶ This story was compiled from several sources, including: *Meetings with Remarkable Trees*, by Thomas Pakenham, p.184-5.

A tree, by contrast, may grow to be tall as a church and yet must be fully functional from the moment it germinates. It must fashion and refashion itself as it grows, for as it increases in size so the stresses alter—the tension and compression on each part. To achieve hugeness and yet be self-building—no scaffold or outside agencies required—and to operate for good measure as an independent living creature through all phases of growth is beyond anything that human engineers have achieved.⁷

Now, a church is not really the building in which it meets—a church is a community. So its growth is more like that of a tree than like that of the building in which it is housed. A building has a boundary, a wall that holds what is sacred inside. But a tree is constantly reaching out to relate to the world around it, it breathes, takes in new nutrients, adds new branches and leaves, expands into its environment.

It is tempting sometimes to think of our community as a contained within a boundary. We feel strong bonds between the members, and keep lists of who to count. But really, the community is not contained like that. There are people who live at the core of our life together, but there are always new people coming in, and others at the margins, and even others “outside” who find some inspiration here. Marge Piercy says, “keep reaching out, keep bringing in...”⁸ A congregation is like a tree.

Dawn Redwoods are an unusual tree in that they are deciduous conifers. Most conifers are evergreen, but the needle leaves of the dawn redwood turn a rusty orange color in the fall, and are shed in winter. Then, in the spring, all the needles are re-grown and beautifully green again. Growth of a church is like that too. There are expansive seasons and seasons of dormancy, where the needles are shed. Yet even during those dormancy times, the roots and branches may be building strength for the coming seasons. The Dawn Redwood tree reminds us that growth comes in cycles, that we must always be ready to change and adapt, and that we are always in relationship to the environment around us.

Did you know that the trees in the old growth forests function as a cooperative community? Through their network of roots and fungi, the mature trees support and communicate with each other. When one tree is ailing, the others send chemical nutrients to strengthen its immune system.

Jean Shinoda Bolen compares this to the feminine tendency to reach out, listen, and empathize with others when under stress. We hear a lot about the “fight or flight” reaction to danger—but researchers have discovered that there is another mode that can be found, especially but not exclusively, in women. In the face of danger, our response is to “tend and befriend.” We need more tending and befriending in this time of global stress.

Trees can teach us a lot about community. Each species of tree supports an ecosystem around it. Botanist Diana Beresford-Kroeger tells us that there is a rule of thumb that estimates the way diversity is amplified by trees. Each species of tree is responsible for about forty species of insect. Each species of tree also supports a specific type of fungi. For example, the morel mushroom is paired with the American elm. Squirrels, rodents, mammals large and small, migrating birds, raptors—the diversity of life is built up from the diversity of the tree species in the forest.⁹

7 Colin Tudge, *The Tree*, (2006, p. 75), cited in Bolen, p. 2-3.

8 Connections are Made Slowly (The Seven of Pentacles), #568 in *Hymns of the Living Tradition*.

9 Diana Beresford-Kroeger, *The Global Forest*, 2010, p. 28-31.

We are just beginning to learn about the complexity of this interdependent community. Beresford-Kroeger writes, for example, about the hidden connections between trees and fish, of all things. Trees in the “walnut family drop juglone sedatives into the water in the fall. These sedatives affect the dormancy of fish and water creatures, helping to stabilize and maintain their lowered basal metabolic rate.”¹⁰

Bill Mollison describes “how bacterial colonies on the leaves of trees are carried aloft by the wind high into the clouds, where ice crystals form around them, and as they get heavier and fall, they seed the clouds and cause rain to fall on the trees. The rain that falls through the tree canopy [becomes] a rich nutrient soup that washes off the minerals that were left on the leaves by evaporation, providing these nutrients for the ground cover” plants. It soaks into the soil, where it is absorbed by the roots of the tree, and brought up to nourish the leaves. Forests of trees keep the rain going.¹¹

When we consider the interconnected community of earth, we can uncover the many tangible ways the trees care for us in the human community. We are often taught how the trees maintain the oxygen in our atmosphere—they breathe in the carbon dioxide, for photosynthesis, and breathe out oxygen that we need to live. We hear less often about how the trees were significant in *creating* the atmosphere that sustains life as we know it. Without the trees there would have been no human beings.

Yet now, in our foolishness, human beings are destroying trees at a rate of 20 to 30 million acres per year.¹² Forests remove and sequester carbon from the atmosphere--the loss of global forests is currently the second largest cause of the rise of carbon dioxide, which contributes to the greenhouse effect that causes global warming. We need more trees and less people if we are to move the atmosphere toward a balance for the health of life.

Now, not everything about trees is easy. We are about to enter the season of the yellow pine pollen, which can make it hard to breathe if one is allergic. But I was amazed to learn that in a diverse forest, there might have been natural relief. The bergamot fragrance produced by the bee balm flower has a bronchodilating effect right when pollen levels are high in the forest. Pine trees themselves emit odors that are medicinal. Pinosylvan is a natural antibiotic. As an aerosol, it has a stimulating effect on our breathing, and also functions as a mild narcotic, bringing a sense of well-being and relaxation to anyone who is strolling through the pine forest.¹³

The more I learn about trees, the more I am amazed by them, and also saddened that we humans are so ignorant in our relationship to the world forests. Every year, March 21st is the International Day of the Forests. This year, the theme was how forests contribute to sustainable cities.

I have been learning about the trees in our yard in Portland. The oldest is our white pine tree. At 102 inches in circumference, it could be up to 160 years old. There are only a few similar old trees in the neighborhood, and I wonder what they must have seen in the days since the late 19th century. I treasure this old tree, and mourn the original white pine forests that were all cut down for masts for ships, or for boards of their wood by the mid 1800s. I have become a tree-hugger.

10 Beresford-Kroeger, p. 31

11 Bolen, p. 6-7.

12 One figure is 18 million at <https://www.livescience.com/27692-deforestation.html>, but then <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/deforestation-and-global-warming/> says 32 million.

13 Beresford-Kroeger, p. 79-81.

The original Tree-Huggers were from a village in India. In 1730 A.D., the king's army came to cut down a grove of sacred Khejri trees. Amrita Devi and her three daughters sacrificed their own lives to protect the trees. Inspired by their example, more than 300 people of the Bishnoi tribe began to hug the trees and were killed, before the army lost heart and returned to the king. Amrita Devi said: "If a tree is saved even at the cost of one's head, it's worth it."¹⁴ Jean Shinoda Bolen imagines that tree people are the ones who might be able to save the planet.

The Dawn Redwood tree has a trunk that rises up straight and tall—it reminds the congregation that we need a strong center—a strong mission—to keep our community growing. The tree also has multiple branches that intertwine and stretch out in all directions. Likewise, our community must include many diverse people who can follow their own passion, while holding fast to the center. We don't know how tall the tree might eventually grow. It is not unusual for Dawn Redwoods to grow to 100 or possibly even 200 feet. Fifty years is still quite young for a tree. It might yet outgrow the space in which it is planted. And who knows how this congregation might grow into its future?

In order to grow, a congregation must be tended. It must be watered with kindness, lit with honesty, faithful to the center, and the soil enriched by shedding what is no longer needed. Every person here must be a gardener of the spirit. I am so thankful to all the people who have been tenders of our spiritual tree.

Those who have worked on fundraisers, come to planning meetings, and faithfully carried out duties large and small. Those who have listened with kindness, told stories and sung songs, taught our children, and visited our elders. Those who have tended our literal gardens, and watched over the building, and befriended newcomers. Those who have kept track of the calendar, and updated the website, told jokes, and entered donations into the database. A community is nourished by this tending, and in turn nourishes those who tend it. Just like a tree.

If we pay close attention, we might discover many more lessons that we can learn from our Dawn Redwood tree. In this time of change and transition, I invite you to find inspiration in that tree. Take photos, write poems, sit on the benches. If you are having a hard time, see if its shade might offer some comfort, and then also reach out to the community for tending and befriending. As David Wagoner reminds us, "If you are lost, stand still. The forest knows where you are. Let it find you."¹⁵

Remember, like a tree, our community reminds us we are here to "go easy, be filled with light, and to shine."¹⁶ May it be so!

Closing Words

"I thank You God for most this amazing day:
for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;
and for everything which is natural
which is infinite which is yes." Blessed be.

e. e. cummings

14 <http://treesforfree.blogspot.com/2007/10/tree-huggers-origin.html>

15 David Wagoner, "Lost."

16 Mary Oliver, "When I Am Among the Trees."