

From Roots to Buds

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD, March 7, 2021

Nearly every Sunday afternoon I center myself with a hike in nature – somewhere remote, path winding through the terrain, birds chirping overhead, the smell of soil mixing with the air. In the warmer months, I find myself surrounded by a wealth of vegetation – leafy ferns coating the ground, prickly shrubs with thorns protecting leaves and petals from predators. Sometimes, I come across a mighty tree that causes me to pause. Towering overhead, the tree is made sturdy by those hidden roots, stretching deep into the soil, making sure all above it is secure. The thick trunk, rough with bark, serving as a core from which a wealth of branches emerge, delicately laden with leaves and those buds that have not quite matured yet.

I think of these mighty trees as our faith – our roots symbolizing our unique Unitarian and Universalist histories and theologies, providing the strong foundation from which our Seven Principles – as a mighty trunk – can grow, and further give way to those branches that are our unique congregations, filled with the beauty of the buds of what is yet to come. Today, we water this magnificent tree.

Today we honor and celebrate that sacred gift that is stewardship – our commitment to our faith and to our particular church community. Through our stewardship of time, talent, and treasure we sustain and cultivate our own unique branch off that towering tree of Unitarian Universalism that is Channing Memorial Church. Channing Memorial Church – our special,

sacred community. A church filled with folks with a deep, unique love of one another, with a distinctive dedication to spiritual growth and theological deepening, with that particular eagerness of welcoming other beloveds into our midst.

Stewardship is a sacred gift. It is something we can offer to sustain that which shapes who we are as an individual. It is an opportunity to provide financial sustenance to that which guides how we covenant to live in the world. Stewardship is a tangible way to express that to which we are deeply committed – our faith. Our unique, beautiful redwood tree of a faith. In committing to our church, one commits to our Principles, to our history, to our patchworks of theologies, to life giving community. Our church is soul filling worship and enriching small groups and deeply engaging book discussions and loving community and timely care for one another. Combined, this offers a deeply ingrained way of being – a source of who we are and of why we are as we interact with the world around us. Church gives us strength and encouragement to live our values each and every day and to grow spiritually. This is what we are sustaining through our stewardship – through our commitment to this church.

What is unique about Unitarian Universalism, and deserving of our commitment? We need to trace this back to our beginnings – to who we established ourselves as centuries ago – when Unitarianism and Universalism were two separate faiths. At the time these faiths were just pulling away from mainstream Christianity, with a changing belief of a Christian God and Jesus. Our distinctive history is the foundation of this current faith that sustains us each and every day.

We are Universalists. In committing to our church, in offering stewardship to our sacred community, we connect to this unique history which has always had a powerful commitment to love – stretching back to the 18th Century. At this time in the theological history of our country Calvinism prevailed, holding strong to doctrines of eternal punishment. An emerging group of biblical scholars challenged this and began to explore the bible independently of mainstream Christianity. What they found in their studies was what became the backbone of this faith – universal salvation. No one was damned – everyone was saved. Eventually these scholars began to coalesce into a movement, and Universalism was born. Universalists did not interpret God as a damning figure and did not worship God as a damning figure but instead as a benevolent, loving, forgiving entity that would ultimately save each individual. Their studies revealed a radical idea – God’s loving redemption for all. Their theology from the onset led them to embrace those who were marginalized and demonstrated the love that Jesus showed in caring for the least of these. Universalist faith worshipped a God who embraced everyone and damned no one. Sin was not eternal, but finite, and forgivable. This emerging faith emulated Jesus who was not murdered to appease an angry God but who was sent to demonstrate a life of pure goodness. These biblical scholars understood humans as doing good in the world, not out of a fear of divine punishment, but simply because that was the moral, just way of living.¹ Universalists teach us that heaven is “reflected in our love for one another.”²

¹¹ *The Unitarians and the Universalists* David Robinson

² [Values In Our History | UUA.org](https://www.uua.org/values-in-our-history)

Through our stewardship, we water these roots of a faith centered on love, whose history still dictates how Unitarian Universalists live and interact with our world today. We believe in human goodness, not depravity. We have a connection to the holy that is based in love, not fear. We do good not for fear of divine punishment but from the goodness we hold deep in our core. Universalism is a piece of each of our own theological journeys and life-giving beliefs. This theology is what we are committed to – a way of being in the world.

We are also Unitarians. This piece of our history – these roots holding us firmly on solid ground – stem all the way back to sixteenth-century Transylvania, when a group of heretics made the audacious claim that God was one. God was not a trinity composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but as single – as the Father. This meant Jesus was a figure who was fully human. Unitarians believed Jesus to be an exemplar of goodness, justice, and faith in the world – that he was meant to be emulated, not worshipped. Eventually, these ideas began to emerge in our country, just as mainstream Christianity held Puritan beliefs. Puritan orthodoxy saw humans as inherently depraved, Unitarians had faith that humans were inherently good and worthy. There was a firm belief in “free human will” and the “loving benevolence of God.”³ This is our faith! Our roots. Our history. A piece of our own theology and worldview we steward to this very day. Unitarianism holds sacred to our church, as our namesake – William Ellery Channing – was a pivotal figure in this movement! This is who we are at our roots – not only as a denomination, but also as a church! Channing shared the profound idea that God was an ultimate, perfect figure of love and goodness and our greatest aspiration is to live in “likeness

³ *The Unitarians and the Universalists* David Robinson pg 4

to God.”⁴ Even if we do not believe in this idea of God, we are called to live a life of goodness. To this day we are committed to love. He taught us to recognize human goodness. To live a life serving the least of these, emulating a fully human Jesus, who demonstrated a life of radical love. He taught us to connect to a holy that is not one of fear and judgement. We are a faith that worked to better an aching world – this is the foundation of our church.

Let us commit to this as well, through our sacred act of stewardship. Let us water these roots that sustain our faith to this very day. We have been a faith based on the power of love from the onset – both Unitarians and Universalists dictated their lives around love – the love of humans and the love of God. We still carry this with us today. We need not believe in the Christian understanding of God to emulate these beliefs in our lives – any understanding of the holy is good, whole, and fulfilling – whether that be God, Goddess, Allah, spirit of life, higher power, nature, science. What we do need to believe in is goodness. Is wholeness. In the transformational power of love in our daily lives.

What can we take away from these histories and these theologies? From these roots arise our Seven Principles – the trunk of the tree of our faith from which all congregations stem – including our very own. In our faith, we gather together in shared values, not shared beliefs. At the core of our faith is our covenant to one another to live in accordance with our Seven Principles. Our Principles are our greatest commitment as Unitarian Universalists.

We covenant to see the inherent worth and dignity in every person. Each and every person at their core is inherently good – this is what our very first principle tells us. Does this not directly

⁴ *Likeness to God* William Ellery Channing

echo the basic tenets we heard earlier? Not damned – but good and holy. Not sinful, but forgivable. That essential goodness may be layered in trauma that causes one to do harm. But deep in our core, where our inner being truly resides, there is goodness. It is there. We can each do work to access this.

We covenant on a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Each one of us is on a spiritual journey, growing and deepening each time we engage with our spiritual practices, connecting to our core through the practice of meditation, feeding our souls through the study of theologians, growing spiritually each time we connect with our soul or our holy in a personal prayer, gaining depth each time we ask, “why?” or “how?” As Unitarian Universalists, as members of Channing Memorial Church, we are each seeking answers to the big questions – we are encouraged to do this! No two people will have the same answer! And yet we are doing it together. And while our journeys are laid with a common foundation in love, our paths differ, and that is simply perfect.

We covenant to respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. We are one with nature and we are one with each other. Each action we take has a ripple effect – an echo – that ultimately touches each and every soul – each and every living entity – all living things held together in this sacred web. Who we are and what we do affects everything around us. So let us center – always – in love. In care for each other and in care for our delicate planet.

These are three of the principles to which we each commit ourselves. This shapes why we do what we do and how we do what we do. This impacts each of our decisions and each of our relationships. And this is why we steward to this faith – to provide sustenance to that which

gives strength to our lives – that connects us to something bigger than ourselves – that is a source of who we are in the world.

Those are our roots – our history and theology. That is our trunk – our principles through which we covenant. All of this sustains the branch that is this sacred community – Channing Memorial Church. We are Unitarian Universalists – and yet within our community we have our own, special flavoring of Unitarian Universalism not found in any other church. We have a deep, profound love for one another. We have a resounding commitment to spiritual growth and questioning. We have a desire to learn and explore theology and life’s big questions. This is our core! This is what each one of us has committed to. This is what guides us. Our unique and worthy mission: “To invite seekers into spiritual community, connect souls in mystery and wonder, and ignite compassion into action.” We join together as a community to invite, connect, and ignite as we interact meaningfully with the world around us. This is what we commit too. This is why we offer our time, talent, and treasure – to connect with something greater than ourselves. This is why my husband Eric and I give what we are able – because of the spiritual nurture of this community and its challenge to us to grow. The future we envision is why we are increasing our pledge this year.

Our canvassing theme this year is “Into the Future... Together.” To me this is those tiny buds about to burst held on our metaphorical tree, held strong by our history, theology, principles, and our mission as a church. And what a bright future we have! What can each one of you envision? We are on a space search, looking for our next home. We continue to grow and transform as we offer new and emerging programming, delving into those deep life

questions. We continue to find ways to share our love with one another. We grapple each day within this community about who we want to be in the world and why. Let us water the tree of our faith with our stewardship – with our time, talent, and treasure. In this way we grow, develop, and strengthen, and in this way we commit ourselves to a bright and promising future. May we be reminded of our history, may we be reminded of our principles, may we be reminded of our church and our mission, and may we be reminded to be stewards of this love, this day, and every day.

May it be so, and amen.