

Roots. Go. Deep.

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The Unitarian Church in Summit NJ USA

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Steadfast as a growing tree.
The image is rich,
and profound,
filled with power
and evocative:

"Woodsman, spare that tree...."
"I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree...."
"Like a tree, planted by the waters...."
"Great oaks from little acorns...."

The tree is a dream,
curled tight within the seed.
Buried in the dark ground,
moistened by secret waters,
it swells;
it splits;
it reaches upward to the sun and
downward to the hidden heart of earth.

The farther up it reaches
into open air,
the deeper it delves into dark recesses.
Grasping rocks and boulders,
finding hidden passage ways
to water and nutrients,
roots go deep.

The crown of the tree--
the glorious dome
of limbs and branches,
delicate tracery against winter sky,
red-green litmus
detecting on-coming spring,
leafy barrier against summer sun--
the crown of the tree
is a reflection

against the dome of the sky
of the hidden root structure,
the unseen tracery
tenaciously binding tree to earth.

The bole of the tree
binds together
the seen and the unseen,
the obvious and the arcane,
the known and the unknown.
What we see as tree
depends upon
what we cannot see.

Steadfast as a growing tree,
rooted fast in the good earth,
reaching out toward the beckoning sky,
marking the seasons of life and death,
incarnating the invisible
and the ineffable,
combining sunshine and hidden water
into fruit and blossom and leaf--
steadfast as a growing tree,
a powerful metaphor
for religious community.

A religious community
is a dream
curled within a seed.
It is planted in hope;
it is watered in trust;
it reaches upward to the sun
and outward to all
who seek its environing shelter,
but the roots of the religious community go deep
into the earth and into the past.

For decades
this congregation has been rooted
in this place,
sheltering the human venture--
the searching mind,
the inquiring spirit,
the skeptical impulse,
the daring trust,
the caring heart.

For decades
this congregation has been rooted
in this place,
seeking to incarnate in itself
and in the world,
a dream,
both open and secret,
obvious and arcane,
simple and complex--
a dream of uniting heaven and earth--
a dream long in the dreaming;
of a world where life is cherished,
and death is made
the servant of life;
of a world where justice is prized,
and justice is made
the servant of mercy;
where freedom and responsibility unite
serving individual and community;
where equality
--regardless of differences--
is sought;
where diversity is seen as opportunity,
not threat,

For most of this century
this congregation has been rooted
in this place,
steadfast as a growing tree.
Our roots run deep,
out of sight,
deep into time,
deep into history.

The roots run to Spain
and France
and Switzerland,
to Michael Servetus,
Servetus who believed
human beings ought not be persecuted
for doubtful dogma
and ill-founded doctrine.
Servetus,
who would not recant his heresies
despite the threats,
Servetus,

his books strapped to his thigh,
burned at the stake in Geneva,
for his opinions,
for his refusal to be silent
bout his opinions.

The roots run deep,
out of sight,
deep into time and history.
The roots run to Basle in Switzerland,
to Sebastian Castellio,
watching the funeral pyre in Geneva,
crying out, for all the world to hear:
"To burn a man
is not to defend a doctrine;
it is to burn a man....
Why cannot I live,
and say my honest word,
and have your love....
Love is the badge of any true (religion.)"

The roots run deep,
out of sight,
into time and history,
to Transylvania,
to the Queen Mother, Isabella,
to King John Sigismund,
to the only time and place
in all human history
where our spiritual ancestors
constituted a majority,
Transylvania, where our ancestors
used their their majority
to decree tolerance,
in the ringing phrases
of the proclamation of Torda:

"None shall be required
to support a preacher
not of his choosing;
each shall be free to practice his faith,
excepting only,
he shall not interfere
in another's
practice of faith."--
a bold declaration of tolerance

in a world defined
by hatred and bigotry.

And to Francis David,
great spiritual leader
of Transylvanian Unitarianism,
Francis David,
honoring integrity of mind
above life itself,
Francis David,
dying in the dungeon at Deva
rather than be silent
concerning the truth
he needs must speak.

The roots run deep,
out of sight,
into time and history,
to Poland,
to the Minor Reformed Church of Poland,
the Polish Brethren,
and their leader, Faustus Socinus,
gentle, scholarly,
seeker of unity beyond creed and sect,
grounding faith
in loving deed;
Socinus,
great heretic of Cracow,
taunted, harried,
threatened by the violent mob,
driven into exile
because he sought a religion of reason,
defined by deed,
defying dogma.

And to England,
to John Biddle
much of his adult life spent in prison
shut away from the world
for his stubborn heresy;
to Joseph Priestly,
Unitarian preacher
and part-time scientist,
Joseph Priestly, fleeing England,
his home,
his library,

his laboratory
wrecked and in flames
because his hope and faith
required he speak out
not abstractly,
but directly,
to theological truths,
to political realities,
to social opportunities,
to concrete conditions.

The roots run deep,
to New England,
to John Murray and Hosea Ballou,
founders of Universalism in America;
Murray and Ballou,
daring scorn and censure
and the charge of infidelity,
to preach that this universe
is centered in love--
a love so great
none,
not great Satan himself,
could defeat its intention
or resist its ensorcelling embrace.

To William Ellery Channing,
who fiercely defended
reasonable religion,
liberal thought,
the sovereign prerogatives
of the human mind,
to Channing
who reluctantly accepted
the Unitarian label.

To Ralph Waldo Emerson
who defied priesthood
and encouraged all
to find God in the self,
in the neighbor,
in the world,
to see individual mind
as reflection of cosmic mind,
as inlet of Great Mind.

To Margaret Fuller,
who dared believe
that talent and ability
and fullness of spirit
were not limited by gender.

To Theodore Parker
who sought that truth
which permeates all systems, all faiths,
who distilled it
from encapsulating dross
and found there an imperative
to respond to injustice
to social inequity and iniquity,
despite the frowning disapproval
of embarrassed colleagues
and co-religionists.

To Abner Kneeland,
last to be imprisoned
in free Massachusetts
for the crime of blasphemy
for his daring challenge
to idolatrous Biblicism.

To Thomas Jefferson,
who wrestled with freedom,
who believed in a human Jesus,
who resolved to be a Unitarian
alone.
And to the Adamses,
John and Abigail and John Quincy,

to Clarence Skinner
and John Haynes Holmes
and A. Powell Davies,
to Dorothea Dix;
to Susan B. Anthony,
to Julia Ward Howe,
to Olympia Brown,
and Clara Barton,
and countless others who
like Margaret Sanger,
and Adlai Stevenson,
and James Reeb,
and Whitney Young

believed that religion exists
to reshape the world
to justice,
to mold it
to mercy,
to bend it
to peace.

The roots go deep;
our roots;
deep into time,
deep into history.
We are the dream
curled in the seed,
planted in hope,
tended in faith.
We are the flowering of a long history,
the fruit of martyrs
and dreamers
and workers.
We are the outcome
of their pain
and their vision
and their labor.
Here, in this place,
we are the dream others dreamed,
the interest earned on their investment,
the outworking of their faithfulness.

We have been blessed
to inherit their tradition,
the fruit of their labor,
in relative peace,
in relative freedom,
in a time of relative tolerance.
We have been blessed with time
to live our faith
rather than defend it.
Let us be grateful
to those who lived and died
in faithfulness
to the dream which is ours.
We are rooted in the soil
of their faithfulness.

For over eighty years, in this place,
we have combined
their dream and their work,
the potential of this time
with the opportunity of this place,
to create a haven
for the searching mind,
the inquiring spirit,
the skeptical impulse,
the daring trust,
the caring heart.

We turn now to the future,
secure in our rootedness
in a unique tradition;
seeking to carry that dream
into this broken and bleeding world,
building structures
of justice and mercy,
building structures
of peace and hope,
celebrating life,
seeking its meaning and purpose,
cherishing the past
and embracing novelty,
seeing in all things hidden patterns,
secret reckonings.

Turn now to the future,
steadfast as a growing tree.
Turn now to the future,
not knowing
what that future may bring,
what storms may buffet us,
what gales we must withstand,
what frosts we must endure.

Reflections on beginnings
beget specters of endings
and a gnawing sense
of contingency and finitude
no levity can banish.
There was a time when we were not;
there may come a time
when we shall have cased to be.
When the gale gathers fury,

steadfastness
may not always be
enough.

But the life is in the roots;
the dream is in the roots;
the power is in the roots;
renewal is in the roots.

A tree, laid low by ax or storm
often returns
in numerous green sprouts
breaking through earth's crust,
reaching toward sun,
recreating the dream,
reestablishing the tree,
if the roots go deep,
if they have been nourished
by living tree,
by great sun,
by secret waters.

In our years of existence,
we have been nourished by our roots,
as, with laughter and tears,
dreams and ambitions,
and courage over-riding disappointments
we have been nourishing those roots,
living out our tradition,
incarnating its hidden imperatives,
shaping it to new times
and new duties.

We embrace the future,
proud, strong,
fearless of storms and frosts,
declaring our faith,
our hope and vision,
though all the world scowl and doubt and disapprove.

Children of a rich heritage,
we are called to dream bold dreams.
to build those dreams into reality,
to pass those dreams on
to a new generation.

Children of a rich heritage,
we embrace our future,
steadfast as a growing tree,
secure in roots which go deep.