

Sunday, November 15, 2020
“The Company of Trees”

Welcome and Lighting of Chalice/Candles – Rev. Betsy Tabor

Welcome. Here we seek justice and truth and understanding.
Here we celebrate life and contemplate mystery.
Here we seek healing and wholeness. Welcome, all.

Our democracy has weathered a trying week. Anxiety runs high as hopes for a harmonious transition have faded. People feel nervous. Fearful about what the future holds. Midweek, wise words came from group called Choose Democracy: "Acting out of our fear isn't going to make us stronger," they said. "Find your steady ground." Right away, the image of a tree came to mind. Stable. Rooted. Flexible. Quiet. Calmly breathing.

And so the call went out and people responded about how the company of trees can help us find our steady ground. Along with Shana's and the choir's music and Marion's Time for All Ages, today we'll hear reflections and poems from David Wilkins, Nancy Byrd, Barbara Bald, Peaco Todd and Eleanor Jenkins. Thanks, all.

Centering Music - "The Ash Grove"

Welsh folk song

Shared Affirmation

Hymn - "Calm Soul of All Things"

“Looking Up into a Tree” - David Wilkins



This painting by the great American modernist painter, Georgia O'Keeffe always makes my heart beat a little faster because it prompts so many memories from my childhood. I suspect it will do the same for many of you. As a kid, on summer nights I would lie on the ground and look up at the stars through the protective, spreading branches of a great tree like the one O'Keeffe has painted here. We didn't have giant sequoias like this one in Battle Creek, Michigan; what we did have were arching elms and magnificent maples.

Lying under a tree looking up at the stars was a moving experience, wasn't it? I would sense how fragile I was — I was a skinny kid — how fragile I was compared to the height and weight and breadth and age of a big tree. These trees were the grown-ups, the adults of the natural world. I would sense how young and small I was when I recited “Star Light, Star Bright, First Star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight.” I wished to be big and strong and grown-up, like those trees. I didn't know then that our universe is constantly expanding, but I did know that the trees were old and strong, that the sky was big and that I was minuscule in comparison, minuscule and fragile.

But I didn't feel insignificant; I knew I was a part of that universe, with its trees and sky and stars, and its grass tickling my neck and the backs of my knees, I was a part of something amazing. I have so many memories of looking up at the night sky through trees: through exotic trees in West Africa in 1962, when I was surprised to find the big dipper above, just like at home, or through the tall white pines that surround Silver Lake, lying side-by-side with Ann on the dock, hand in hand.

Don't go out tonight and lie on the ground beside a favorite tree — summer is over — but some clear evening soon leave your warm home and glance up through the branches and boost your self-confidence. We are each a unique part of this amazing place at this particular moment in time, and looking up through great trees at the distant stars can help bring that home.

O'Keefe created THE LAWRENCE TREE in New Mexico in 1929, and it's now in Hartford at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum. She titled it THE LAWRENCE TREE because she discovered it when she visited the American author D. H. Lawrence at a ranch he was renting during the summer of 1929.

Today happens to be Georgia O'Keeffe's birthday: she was born 133 years ago. So Happy Birthday, Georgia, and thank goodness for art, for memories, and for all trees, great and small.

A Time for All Ages - Marion Posner

I want to begin by stitching a thread from Alice's words last week about hedges to mine today about trees. I discovered recently that in Great Britain, there are an estimated 435,000 miles of hedgerows, enough to encircle the earth more than 16 times. Hedges ~ made up of trees that grow old but do not reach maturity. You can tell the age of a hedge because once every one hundred years a new tree species joins the family. A communion of trees.....

And these little, often gnarled and stunted trees do so much good when working together: A mile of new hedgerow can help reduce the rate of climate change because it can store up to 2,800 pounds of carbon dioxide every year. A hedgerow can help us share our beliefs ~ a hedge of gooseberry and currant, in London, has BLM carved into it. The carving of hedges, called topiary, has inspired extraordinary art, kept our imaginations polished.

The idea that the world could be encircled by hedgerows is my thread; it really startled me! It is a hug. A great big hug to our world! The topiary I create in my mind's eye to give me cheer in these hard times. My sewing needle now threads across to a solitary tree, a great oak, which I hug. I try to encircle it with my arms, but it is too big! I give it a hug, nevertheless.

It is wonderful to think that the great oak I hug can be home to over 500 species at some time in its life cycle: slugs, snails, wood lice, beetles, millipedes, centipedes, caterpillars, earwigs, ants and spiders. Owls, jay, magpies, wood ducks, wild turkeys, mountain quail, flickers and acorn woodpeckers, ring-tail cats and squirrels. Oak worms. And tent caterpillars, Red oak borer. Oak sawfly.....among almost three hundred other insects.... That is a large and varied community, is it not?

And I would like to add to that 500 ~ Me. Us. At least as visitors. Because, as a teacher and student, I discovered that one of the best classrooms of all is a tree. When I was much younger, I had to learn lines for a play. Oh no, so many lines. I can't. I can't. "Go choose a tree," said my teacher, "lean up against it, or climb into its branches. Stay there as long as you wish"....I did. I called it "The Happy Tree." I remember feeling that I was in an enchanted world, a magical place. I learned those lines! No drudgery, pure happiness! In a tree you can wonder about many things, as did Alice through the looking glass:

"I wonder if the snow loves the trees and fields, that it kisses them so gently?"

I have often asked my students to write while sitting up a tree, to draw, pen poetry while in a tree. I have received as a result some extraordinary creative writing that I do not think could have been written at a desk in a classroom; it was perhaps writing borne of the deep companionship with a tree.

When out walking in our glorious woods here I see trees growing atop glacial boulders. These are trees that have grown from just a little soil and, as they struggled upward for light, their roots had to grow inquisitively down to find nourishment.

Roots. Some of those roots then travel many feet over the years to continue to maintain their strength and keep that tree steady on top of its great rock that has withstood the ages. I shall never forget seeing, deep down in a cave in Southern France, the base of a tree. Over the years, its roots had reached down from the surface above, down, down through the dank depths of this ancient cave, until they found sustenance in the cave's floor. They might also of course have been hoping to gaze in wonder at the thousands of year old paintings that grace the cave walls....I walked up and outside the cave and looked at the tree as it reached up to the sky above the cave. An inspiring lesson in perseverance?

"It is not so much for its beauty that the forest makes a claim upon men's hearts, as for that subtle something, that quality of air that emanation from old trees, that so wonderfully changes and renews a weary spirit."

— *Robert Louis Stevenson*

“Trees are poems that the earth writes upon the sky.”

— *Kahlil Gibran*

Let's now leave our present reality. I would like to take you outside for a while. If you would be happy to ~ close your eyes. We step out into the frosted air. Breathe it in. feel its sudden fresh chill. We walk on the soft carpeting of leaves. We stop.

You are a tree. Think of what kind of tree you are. A white smooth barked birch, a sugar maple, an apple tree still carrying the sweet scent of apples? Your hands and arms are its branches, your body its trunk, and your feet and toes are its roots reaching deep in the earth. You stand tall, in the good company of many trees. A breeze whispers in the fallen leaves. You sway and feel its gentle coolness. The breeze picks up and gathers momentum until it is a wind that blows and blusters you, causing your branches to sway more. You move with the wind. To and fro, dance like. You let it move you. Your body is relaxed.

The wind turns into a gale, buffeting you this way and that, hard, persistent. Fear creeps in as you sense a losing of control but then...you feel your roots, Your toes, your feet, your roots are planted deeply into the earth. They hold you safe, they hold you sound.

And now the storm abates, it lulls, it gentles and you relax and sway in its gentle breezes. And as the sun finds its golden way through the canopy, your bark is warm, and you know your roots have held you, anchored you. You breathe with the forest, in and out; you breathe in the smell of the earth and out. You breathe in the voices of the trees that stand by you. And out with relief that they are there with you. You breathe in and lift your branches, your arms up to reach the sky, and out to welcome the warm earth.

And now, opening your eyes and being you again, sit down against a large, friendly leaf tree and, on a lighter note, listen to Shel Silverstein's poem, "Poet's Tree":

Underneath the poet tree
Come and rest awhile with me
And watch the way the word web weaves
Between the shady story leaves.

The branches of the poet tree
Reach from the mountains to the sea.
So come and sit . . . and dream . . . and climb—
Just don't get hit by falling rhymes.

Music - "Ash Grove" reprise

Tree Memories - Nancy Byrd**“My Tree”**

A young human primate sits in a tree,
 High up an Australian pine.
 Contented, she looks toward the mainland city
 From her tree near the shore of Miami Beach.

Over the waters of Biscayne Bay,
 This eight year old child sees city and sky,
 She sees bridges and boats and pelicans fishing,
 And delights that she's higher than they.

She senses the wind as it powers the tree
 And the power becomes her own,
 To spread out over foam topped waters
 Rippling, in the caressing breeze.

She hears the whisper of branchlet on branch,
 And basks in the splendor of green, lofty perch.
 This human aerie, how soothing and safe!
 “This is my tree!” says the child,
 At peace on a Florida afternoon.

“A Virginia Maple” - Nancy Byrd

*Written about 2000. An Ode to a tree in my back yard in Annandale Virginia.
 I moved to New Hampshire in 2007.*

Over 30 years ago, I planted a maple tree, I am not exactly sure what variety. It was supposed to be a red maple, but it looks more like a sugar maple. It was one of the little sticks, I ordered by mail. “Twelve trees for \$2.98” said the ad. The first 5 years of its life were hard. Twice, my husband mowed it down, and later put a nasty gouge in its side. But somehow it survived, and grew and grew. It now must be 120 feet tall and delights me every year. By the time it was 80 feet tall, its every branch was home to a different animal or served as a waiting perch for chow from the feeders at the free restaurant in my back yard.

It is an impatient tree. It always tries to beat the spring. It bloomed in early January this year, but it will bloom again later, next time hopefully not until spring. But it will be early, early to give its babies the advantage to survive the competitive soils of Annandale. The tree is prolific; its seedlings colonize any tiny patch of ground available up to hundreds of feet away from the tree.

My tree is a greedy thing. Because it is so big, it gets the sunlight first and shoots its leaves in all directions to take it. Its roots span my yard and probably my neighbors' as well. If water is scarce during growing season, the tree may be green, but all else will die, for the tree will take all the water in the yard.

I have read that trees are magnificent pumps, transferring huge amounts of water from soil to atmosphere on a summer day. A big tree's ability to make chemical energy from solar energy and to remove great quantities of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere are legendary. My tree is alive; it breathes the gases of the Earth in and out, CO₂, O₂, CH₄, N₂ and in symbiosis with other life, fixes nitrogen in its roots. Its branches can die; I can see dead branches in its crown far above where I could reach, even with a bucket truck. A hurricane, this year, could clean them out. And I have seen worrisome infestations under its bark. If the tree were to die, I would grieve immensely.

Still to me, the maple tree is beautiful, and I am in love with it. On my deck where I take my summers' lunches, I sit transfixed by the graceful dance of wind and maple leaves. It is love at first sight, every time I see it.

Joys & Concerns -The warmth of community is a kind of "steady ground" in good times and in difficult times. Sharing a personal joy, a personal sorrow in your life provides an opening for compassion. This is one of the ways, week after week, that we look after one other.

"Sonata in F"

Domenico Scarlatti

Played by Eve Goss

Music - "Spirit of Life" (All Souls in DC)

Meditation and Prayer

We give thanks for this day – for the crowns of trees, for more open views
For this community of listening and loving and seeking justice

This cold morning, we are grateful for the comforts of shelter, warmth, food on the table
We remember our neighbors and loved ones, who are hungry and cold

We hold in our hearts friends, family, each others' loved ones who live with pain.
Pain of the body, the heart, the spirit
May all who are nearing the end of life know that that their life has mattered,
that we will carry them forward in ours always

May we overcome discomfort that keeps us at a distance from people we care about
May we reach out. Call. Stop by. Send greetings.

As Covid cases surge, we remember those most affected:
people in nursing homes, in hospitals, in jails,
people who work in stores and restaurants, essential workers,
black and brown people, first responders,
people struggling to make ends meet

Close to home, we invite prayers and good wishes for UUFES friends undergoing tests: Ingrid Albee and Josephine Alcott in the coming week – and to friends who are building strength after

wearying hospital stays (Mark Allen, Warren Lindsey). We wish Bill and Jacquie Lotz good home karma as they hope for a buyer and look forward to a new chapter.

We pray for the capacity to hold ourselves thoughtfully
And to speak with kindness,
Rooted in what is good and true and holy. Amen.

[Respond to Joys and Concerns]

Poem

“The Teacher”

By Barbara Bald

A mighty tree lives behind our house.
Pasture tree, spared by a farmer who left her
to shade his herd on open land, she remains
rooted where cattle once grazed.

The white pine with massive limbs and furrowed bole,
now perches on a forested ridge. She towers over saplings
of hemlock and beech, above new growth of red oak
and civilized trappings below.

Stories hide in broken branches and cankered scars.
Plump folds resemble voluptuous bodies of strong women,
hint at just how long she’s guarded this sacred space.
Native priestess, she stands sentinel over winter deer-yards.

Her hillock-roots protect red squirrel caches
and noisy nuthatches hang upside down on a trunk
warm from sunsets long absent from the valleys.
A lumberman’s axe no longer threatens her gnarled wood.

I talk to her sometimes—
tell her my bones ache, that my mind argues with my heart.
In her deep, wrinkled bark, I see my own aging face,
sense her enduring wisdom.

Her old encrusted stem strikes a rigid pose,
yet new growth, high above the canopy, continues
to bend with the wind. Limbs held wide, she beckons,
shelters like the arms of Christ.

I linger for lessons, disciple inhaling every word.

Music - "Find A Stillness"

Special Collection - Tamworth Community Christmas Project, with Donna Ulitz

Anthem - "Etz Chaim" (*tree of life*) Jewish song

Poem

"Sisters"

By Peaco Todd

in a garden of pitch pines
beside a barely trodden trail
as the morning light swells
two trees bend to each other
almost twins in girth
and height they stand
where they were born
apart but not separate
sharing the destiny of trees
to know only place
and time measured in rings

something remains but they
are there no longer, passed on
to wherever tree souls go
perhaps to golden fields
where they run free as air
but here what's left are
the bones of trunk and limb
their cobbled bark disrobed
and pooled at their splayed feet
like skirts of a long-forgotten
dancing frock gently arrayed
upon a mourning ground

"The Company of Trees" - Eleanor Jenkins

How does the company of trees influence your sense of "steady ground," Betsy asks.

I grew up in the company of trees. My mother loved morning glories, but my father loved trees. He planted a new tree for each child as they were born. From my earliest memory, I have always known that the flowering crab apple tree was my tree. It made me feel special. Who knew then what apple trees would come to mean to me in the future.

Then there were the two oaks my father planted from acorns from his Grandfather's tree in Connecticut, the tamarack he dug up from somewhere along the East Madison Road and replanted next to the pond, the Ginko tree given to him by my two sisters and me, along with a

song, the American Elm bred to withstand the blight, as was the American Chestnut tree, gifted much later. Oh, there was the sugar maple given by Cousin Lida and Cousin Ben, and the Kousa dogwood that mother had wanted for so long. Did I forget mother's Bechtel Crab, sister Genie's pussy willow and brother Phelps' Mountain Ash. And that is just a start. There was Harry Lauder's Walking Stick, rooted from a branch, as was the curly willow. The holly planted next to the house had seeded out into the field by birds. I gave Dad an 88th birthday present of an Esopus Spitzenberg apple tree, a favorite of Thomas Jefferson, knowing it is never too late to learn to prune.

Back in 1972, even before our second child was born, my paleontologist husband, Farish, and I purchased an old farm in South Eaton so that I could satisfy my need to live in the country, at least in the summers. And wouldn't you know, *he* started planting trees..... *apple* trees. Now I won't go into naming all 70-odd varieties of them, planted five each year along the stone walls that he cleared of overgrown trees every August after returning from his 8 long weeks in the field. Come spring, we would prune the trees together, a truly collaborative effort, endlessly worthy of grave discussion. Bill Lord, of UNH fame, taught us that "There are no bad cuts, there are just cuts that are better than others."

Ultimately, the apple trees became like children, watching them grow, each taking on their own personalities. I can name them all, taste them all, tell a different story about them all, well almost. How does the company of trees influence your sense of "steady ground," Reverend Betsy asks? As you can see, when I am in the company of trees, I am with friends.

As for the "sense of steady ground" part of the question, all I can say is that a sense of place is of utmost importance to me. Recently, I have felt ready to face old age now that I have decided where I want my ashes buried, where my final resting place is going to be. It feels like finding my "steady ground" at this point in my life, approaching 80 and a pandemic in full swing. And where might that literal "steady ground" be, you ask? Part of my ashes should be settled in the Rock Hill Cemetery in Foxboro MA, where the Tracy family plot overlooks the pond and over to my childhood home; the remainder of me I would like scattered around some of the apple trees on my farm. "Which of the trees?" you ask? "Surprise me!" I say.*

**Quoted from UUFES' own David Emerson, who wrote his own funeral service before dying of cancer about ten years ago. He chose two out of the three hymns, and indicated who should sing or play them. For the third hymn, he just instructed: 'Surprise me!'*

Music - "For the Beauty" segue

Community Response

- 1.Name a tree that is special to you.
- 2.What feeling comes up?
- 3.What is the tree nearest to you right now?

11:11:06 From Peaco T: a pink dogwood in my childhood yard in Richmond

11:11:16 From David W : Japanese maple at Chatham University in Pittsburgh;
always a favorite goal of family walks

- 11:11:39 From David W: Beauty combined with delicacy
- 11:11:48 From Carol S : Japanese cherry tree in Elkridge, MD that I watered & saw grow from a twig to more than 30 feet tall. Proud of it.
- 11:11:52 From Barbara L : So grateful for today's personal reflections. Some of the loveliest poetry I've ever heard.
- 11:11:59 From Sandra C : Cypress, Swamp in Florida; awe at their age and size; pine
- 11:12:00 From Moria M : Camphor, in front of my house— feeling: protection (both its protection of me, and my protection of it) — probably fig trees, for their fruit
- 11:12:00 From Margaret R: Sugar maple on Cleveland Hill Road. My tree love. It's a plain tree that produces sap like nobody's business. I love her.
- 11:12:01 From Marsha C : Apricot tree at my childhood house
- 11:12:06 From Peggy P : maple in front of my house, watches over me
- 11:12:07 From Kim H : Cleveland Pear....one in the front, one in the back.... planted in memory of my husband....the feeling...peace
- 11:12:10 From Barbara B : Chestnut tree in Beachwood, NJ — read Nancy Drew in her branches—nostalgia, honey suckle
- 11:12:13 From Diane S : The magnolia
- 11:12:21 From Pamela A : Oak, overhanging our decks, feeling of being looked after.
- 11:12:21 From Margaret R : White pine. So gosh darn tall.
- 11:12:22 From Betsy L : white pine outside my window; majesty; always in my view.
- 11:12:34 From David W : White pine is closest to us here, but we are on the edge of the pine barren, one of only two pine barrens on the eastern coast of the US
- 11:12:38 From Eleanor J : The two large sugar maple trees in front of my house were planted when the house was first built and were called wedding trees. It was a custom.
- 11:12:41 From Marsha C : The luscious apricots picked ripe right from the tree, dripping down from my lips
- 11:13:21 From Deborah : Growing up in Massachusetts, in the spring, a Lilac tree full bloom
- 11:13:22 From Hope H : maple tree in the back yard of my childhood home, physical strength/climbing it, birch tree just outside of the window I'm looking through.
- 11:13:26 From Ellen W : A beautiful very tall hemlock full of chickadees, titmouses, and juncos flying one by one to my window feeder.
- 11:13:26 From Carol S : Beach plum in front yard in Rochester, NY – split trunk sheltered my childhood.
- 11:13:26 From Karen P : I have 4 white birches outside my window. I have a sense of pride when I look at them because I rescued them out of an ice storm a few years ago, detaching them from my roof and allowing them to stand once again. They are close to me always as they stand about 10 feet from my log cabin.
- 11:13:41 From Nancy B : a lovely Hemlock, too close to the house
- 11:13:49 From Donna S/A : The old apple tree that has taken a beating but continues to be generous giving me dozens of apples each year. Can be seen from my

kitchen window in my backyard. I talk to this tree, give her reiki and say thank you almost every day.

11:14:08 From Cindy E : Weeping willow outside my childhood home in Natick, Ma. It had many wispy branches. Crape Myrtle outside my window!

11:14:59 From Meredith M : 1. old pine, filled with holes over the years by woodpeckers, on the edge of the family lake house, 2. the tree symbolized my mother's endurance to overcome all obstacles, 3. nearest tree is a pine

11:16:48 From Barbara B : Check out—The Hidden Life of Trees

11:17:56 From Kim H : appreciation for Donna Ulitz spending time with us today. Please give generously to the Christmas Project as the need is great. Thank you all

11:18:56 From Kevin : Nearest tree, pine that got shaped into my chair. Nearest living is elderberry from NH Nursery, shot up way over my head first year, enjoying the faucet overflow, berries got picked, dried, ready for this winter's syrup slurping.

Hymn - "For the Beauty of the Earth"

Extinguishing of Chalices/Candles

Benediction

A tree is "steady as a rock and always trembling." - Poet Roger Nemerov

Let us draw on the strength of our root and, trembling, hold this precious, fragile life lightly. Stay safe and strong, your energy bright now and then, and see you soon.

Postlude - "We Shall Not Be Moved"

African American spiritual

This service can be viewed until February 15, 2021 at:

11/15/20 "The Company of Trees"

https://uuma.zoom.us/rec/share/zLeqBFDrvwcUlqpA7Tv6NLubwUgKRkcGs-5_NXW2pWtftKstG3z9eCT8W6rM8J.7_qWhwLJ7xnGs2hY

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