

The Heartbeat of Trees  
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Beacon UU Congregation

Have you ever attended the ordination of a UU Minister? If so, you have witnessed the conveying of a station with the presentation of the robe (a sign of the learned ministry) and the stole (the symbol of the ordained clergy). I am wearing the stole I received at my ordination on May 20, 2000. I treasure it, even with the now-tattered edges. It represents my call.

My robe, though— all heavy black folds with velvet stripes and Harvard crimson crow's feet hangs in a garment bag in my coat closet. I wore it earlier in my ministry to be "taken seriously" and to prevent folks from critiquing my outfit. (It happens a lot, by the way, according to my female clergy friends).

But, I don't feel the need for the robe anymore in order to feel like a bona fide religious leader and well, today is something called "Clergy Appreciation Day," so you are free to consider whether you appreciate my outfit, or not.

Ordaining is taken seriously across all religious landscapes. Wiccans ordain High Priestesses just as Catholics ordain Priests; Jews ordain Rabbis and Buddhist ordain monks. Side note here – one does not get "ordained" online. One receives a certificate to perform a wedding. Just sayin'.

A very unique form of ordination takes place deep in the forests of Thailand. [According to Caroline Kornfield, in her article for *Peace Power* magazine, Fall 2007] "The environmental devastation of logging, cash crops, and slash -and-burn agriculture has been some of the worst in South East Asia.

In response, out in the small villages of rural Thailand, monks conduct the seemingly peculiar ritual of ordaining trees, by tying orange monk's robes around them. These monks are practicing engaged Buddhism by using their knowledge of community laws along with their deeply rooted religious principles to do what they can to save the environment.

We are not monks, and we are not in Thailand. But we are also facing the threat of environmental degradation, close to home here on Flagstaff, in forests nationwide, and essentially, all across our increasingly poisoned and exploited planet. How would your life be impacted without your natural places? What actions might we take as UUs to live out our principle of honoring the interdependent web? We'll circle back around to that a bit later.

You may wonder: How did these Thai monks arrive at this genius idea of ordaining trees in the first place? The monks see the forest as one of their closest connections to the teachings of the Buddha. After all, he was enlightened

under a tree - the Bodhi tree - and for centuries monastics have used the forests as a way to truly understanding the Buddhist path.

This may explain the relatively new and popular spiritual practice called Forest Bathing – essentially a walking meditation among trees. I have been doing that for years, “walking among trees,” especially in the conservation lands around Concord, MA. I didn’t know it was a “thing.”

The poet Wendell Berry captures the joy and serenity of forest bathing, when he writes:

“I go among trees and sit still.  
All my stirrings become quiet  
Around me like circles on water.  
I hear my song at last,  
And I sing it.  
As we sing,  
The day turns, the trees move.”

Like the poet, Thai monks knew it was a “thing,” and they began to organize and act by ordaining trees in forests where illegal logging was taking place. In one of the articles I read to prepare for today, there is an amazing photo of a group of monks tying an enormous saffron robe and sash around the trunk of the oldest or largest tree.

This is not done in secret. Quite the contrary. The ceremonies are large and well publicized in a hope to discourage loggers who do not want to invite the bad karma of cutting down the forest around an ordained tree.

These engaged Buddhists teach through their actions that the entire country can thrive when the individual parts are healthy. This is not just a fitting metaphor for the trees in a forest, but also for members of a society or a congregation. The whole will thrive when the individual parts are in right relationship, right intention, and right action.

Interdependence, interconnectedness, and inter-sectionality are such key concepts and practices to survival and solidarity. And, Nature itself models this for us. For instance, forests are crucial for the health and well-being of people, wildlife, and our planet.

They’re home to roughly two-thirds of all land-dwelling plant and animal species, critical lifelines for communities big and small, and one of the last lines of defense against catastrophic climate change.

Simply put, saving the forests is tied to global warming, food production, and animal extinction. The tree ordaining monks alert us to the fact that without the natural world, there can be no civilization and without civilization, there can be no community or culture.

In the past, canonical Buddhism was ambiguous about certain ecological ideas, especially the notion of flora having the same importance as sentient beings like animals and humans. But over time, there has been an embrace of the idea that rocks, trees, waterfalls, air all carry Buddha nature.

The Native Americans have recognized divinity in all living things as a fundamental basis of their spiritual framework. We celebrate them this Monday on Indigenous People's Day, given that Columbus did not discover America...he arrived here, among the First Nations, with colonial arrogance.

And yes, Western Judeo-Christian Biblical beliefs that humankind (actually, "man") was given dominion over the planet and all living things has not led to stewardship of our resources. Look around - we are plagued with clear-cutting of forests, factory farming, catastrophic climate change, and groundwater contamination. I haven't heard of any multi-national corporations ordaining any trees, have you?

We can learn so much from the spiritual traditions of our Native people and from Eastern spiritual perspectives like Buddhism. If we listen to the heartbeat of trees, we might act to save the planet and ourselves. And yes, grow spiritually in the process.

In the Native American story of the Sacred Tree, our meditation today, we heard this warning: "The ancient ones taught us that the life of the Tree is the life of the people. If the people wander far away from the protective shadow of the Tree, if they forget to seek the nourishment of its fruit, or if they should turn against the Tree and attempt to destroy it, great sorrow will fall upon the people. They will cease to dream dreams and see visions."

"They will begin to quarrel among themselves over worthless trifles. They will become unable to tell the truth and to deal with each other honestly. They will forget how to survive in their own land. Their lives will become filled with anger and gloom. Little by little they will poison themselves and all they touch. It was foretold that these things would come to pass, but that the Tree would never die. And as long as the Tree lives, the people live."

In other words, as long as the forest continues to possess a beating heart, we too shall live. My sermon title, "The Heartbeat of Trees," sounds like a poetic allusion, I know. Yet, there is scientific evidence in it, too. Many people in the forest at night have voiced a suspicion that the trees are somehow awake and

moving. Tolkien famously made use of this concept in the Old Forest and Fangorn in his books.

I was fascinated to learn during my research that science has discovered that some trees raise and lower their branches several times in the course of the night, in some process of transporting water and sugar through tracheids (the plant equivalent of veins) – their own form of a heartbeat. One Danish researcher also tracked the shrinking and expanding of tree trunks during the night.

Trees also share resources through funghoids, passed through their root systems to their wooded pals in need of a boost. If this isn't a metaphor for interdependence and solidarity through our rootedness to this place and one another, I don't know what is.

This scientific work is an example of the growing body of literature exposing the secret life of trees and their capacity to support one another and communicate messages, verifying to some extent, centuries of supposed folklore and myth. Now scientists are studying the effects of stress of trees. It's all utterly eye-opening and fascinating.

Consider these findings the next time you are out forest bathing. Oh, and give a tree a robust squeeze while you're at it. Not that you need more convincing that trees are a valuable resource, but science has also validated that hugging a tree or even being in the vicinity of them can boost our mental health.

In the book, Blinded by Science, author Matthew Silverstone notes countless studies citing the beneficial effects of nature on conditions such as ADHD, migraines, depression and anxiety. It was recorded that children function better cognitively and emotionally in green environments and have more creative play in green spaces. Adults, too, I reckon.

What is the connection? Yes, the open, natural and pleasing space makes a difference. But Silverstone shows that it's more than this theory; instead he explains how it's the vibrational properties of the trees and plants that also offer health benefits. When one touches a tree, or even better, hugs it, its vibrational pattern will affect our own. "Human beings can only live outside of the laws of nature for so long before symptoms of disconnect be made manifest."

The poet, David Rosenthal reminds us,

Trees need not walk the earth  
For beauty or for bread;  
Beauty will come to them  
Where they stand.

Trees need not walk the earth. But we must. Our hearts would be broken without our natural places.

May we deepen our roots and be ordained to good stewardship of this church and this planet. May we ever awaken and seek the Sacred Tree. May we honor the living traditions of the Native people, Monday and everyday, and may we all do what we can to preserve our wild places, so we too, can walk in beauty, our own hearts beating, in rhythm with the trees.

Blessed be.

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