



Roots and Wings of a Unitarian Lent

Clay Nelson © 2 April 2017

Each week we sing “Roots hold me close; wings set me free.” It is the *Spirit of Life* residing within each of us. The image resonates with a truth so deeply entrenched in us it could be part of our DNA. The metaphor is universal. I wonder if it might go back to our earliest ancestor, one that we all share. Carl Jung might consider it an archetype: A concept that resides in our collective unconscious the world over.

The idea that our lives are grounded and nourished by our roots doesn't have to be explained. We know its truth. Our intuition and experience say so. Without roots we are lost. We don't know who we are or what our purpose might be.

But roots without wings can trap us in our past and the expectations of others. Our roots can prevent us from seeing the world more fully from the perspective and experience of others. They can hold us so fast that we are blinded to our potential and paralysed to act. Roots can keep our hopes and dreams at the airport waiting for the fog to lift as many were in Wellington this week. What happened that shouldn't have because someone couldn't get to his or her destination? What didn't happen? Either way, for the lack of wings, the world did not become all it could be this week.

For me, my taproot is the Episcopal Church I grew up in. I didn't choose it, my parents did. From the time I was five my family went to church every Sunday. We all participated in our parish's life in ways appropriate to our age and gifts. We moved a lot when I was a kid. In that respect, I was rootless. But the first thing we did upon arrival in the new town was to connect with the local church. While we moved, our community of faith was already there. Waiting to welcome us. Its traditions, liturgy, expectations, offerings were familiar and consistent over time and space. We knew what to expect and where we fitted in. It grounded me. It gave me the security to enter the foreign, sometimes frightening territory of the new community to which we had moved. As a kid it was not an easy thing to be the new kid in school seven different times in twelve years. My taproot made it easier.

Many churches celebrated different seasons throughout the year. Christmas is twelve days. Easter is 50 days. Advent is the four weeks before Christmas. That's the season this child spent wondering what he was going to get under the tree. Then there is my favourite one. Lent, even though it is the season where the question is, “What are you going to give up?”

Not every Christian denomination celebrates Lent, but it is the forty days before Easter. It is a reminder of when Jesus spent forty days in the desert after his baptism reflecting on who he was and what that meant for his purpose in life.

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, the day after Shrove Tuesday. Even if you don't have a Christian background, you probably have heard of Mardi Gras, which literally means Fat Tuesday. Sometimes it is also known as Pancake Tuesday. It was a time to use up all the fat in the house in preparation to fast during Lent. As a teenager I remember it as time to when the youth group made and served pancakes to the congregation. That was just the beginning

of good eating during Lent. I know I said it was a time of fasting but in churches I attended one day a week the congregation would gather for religious education. There was something for all ages. It would be preceded by a potluck. I loved them. Still do. Partly, because they were a break in routine, making the ordinary event of having dinner special. But more importantly, it was the diversity of plates people brought that attracted me. It gave me a glimpse into their private lives, or at least what they ate. I remember those suppers as a time of connection. I didn't have the words yet, but they were powerful occasions of the Beloved Community in action.

When I was a child, Lent also meant giving up something like chocolate or some other favourite treat. We were to take the pennies we saved in not buying it and put them in a small box called a mite box. A mite is a small coin. On Easter Day we would bring the box and put it in the offering. The money was to help children in need around the world. I thought that was cool, but even better, Easter meant I could now eat the chocolate bunny in my Easter basket.

When I became an adult, Lent became a much deeper experience. The theatre of worship was a time of wonder and mystery, beginning with Ash Wednesday. As a priest, after the pancake supper, I would go home and take the dried palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday procession and burn them to make a fine powder of ash by pushing them through a sieve. The next day I would use them to make a cross on the forehead of each member of the congregation, reminding them, "Thou art dust and to dust thou shall return." I always found it to be a profoundly mystical experience. For the truth of those words reminds us we were all formed of the same stardust. We are one.

I came to understand the season of Lent as a designated time-out from the routines of our life. It was time to stop and reflect. Yes, it was a time of fasting, prayer and alms-giving, but they were just tools to reboot my life. It was a time for stocktaking and seeking connection to all that is sacred within and beyond me. It is a time to find healing and wholeness. Another word for that is simply salvation, not a word we use much in a Unitarian setting.

When I became your minister I thought I was giving up Lent for Lent. Certainly in the three congregations I have served there has been no mention of it or tradition of practising its disciplines. After doing some research I discovered I was wrong. Unitarians have long practised the spiritual disciplines of Lent and still do.

That is not too surprising if we remember that for most of our 500-year history we were the liberal edge of Christianity. Those are our roots, but the Unitarian history of celebrating Lent tells us how we morphed into a faith beyond Christianity. Let me make clear that moving beyond Christianity does not mean tossing it on the ash heap of history. I mean it in the same way Jesus did when he says in the Gospel of Matthew (5:17), "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil." Jesus gave wings to Hebrew wisdom taking it to a new level. Over time Unitarians did that with Christianity becoming something new in religious history, something more Christian than Christianity. It is our wings that allow us to describe ourselves as a living tradition.

Two people played a large part in attaching wings to our tradition, Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing and Universalist minister Hosea Ballou. In 1819, Channing gave an address entitled *Unitarian Christianity*. Most of us today would not agree with a lot his understandings of Christianity. For instance, Unitarian Christians at the time very much

believed that Jesus was the Son of God, not in a divine sense but as an adopted human son. However, Channing did emphasise something we still hold to today: The idea that our deeds not creeds are what define us.

A few years later he gave a blockbuster sermon entitled *Likeness to God*. It contained ideas that would shape our understanding of Lent. He explored the idea of “unfolding” our own being to discover our innate divinity to grow in our right living. To do so was to discover our likeness to God.

Hosea Ballou, a contemporary of Channing’s, challenged the orthodox view of what God’s likeness was. In his breakout sermon, with the exciting title *A Treatise on Atonement*, he rejected the idea that the death of Jesus was to appease an angry God. He argued that God did not turn away from us, but vice versa. In his words, “God is a being of eternal love who seeks the happiness of his human children.” Ballou was convinced that once people understood this, they would take pleasure in living a moral life and doing good works.

Ballou sowed the seeds for us today to embrace an ethic of responsibility based upon our interconnections and our celebration of a courageous love that calls us to heal pain and counter oppression in our world. His prevailing idea: whatever THIS is — we are in it together!

Together, Channing and Ballou, have described my understanding of Lent’s purpose: To take time out to reflect on the true nature of our being and to discover our place in the interdependent web of all existence that we might live out our common purpose to love and heal a world in pain. They did this by moving beyond Christianity and its view of God and humanity. Instead of Lent being a time of repentance for being the miserable sinners orthodoxy claimed us to be that we might seek salvation through the cruel death of God’s son, they put wings on Lent, making it about new life: a new life of interconnection with the divine love within, between and beyond us—a very different kind of salvation indeed. It is one where we do the saving.

Unitarians and Universalists took these ideas and for many years produced Lenten Manuals separately and later published them together. They were collections of forty meditations, one for each day of Lent. For the last 50 years since the merger of Unitarians and Universalists, published collections of meditations have not followed the Lenten format, with the idea that Lent does not have to be rooted in the 40 days before Easter. The practices of Lent can be done at any time we choose--the spiritual benefits are unchanged. The challenge is to actually make that time for reflection, fasting and alms-giving. It can be a little like telling someone, “Let’s do lunch sometime.” We know how often that lunch happens.

As priest on Ash Wednesday I would invite those gathered to have a “Holy Lent”. Today I invite you to have a holy Lent...sometime and may it give you wings.