

Reflection Feeling our Roots

21 April 2013
Aneta Wierzynska

Today, I thought I'd offer up a topic with which I regularly struggle in the context of my modern, multi-cultural, expatriate, formerly-catholic and now Unitarian Universalist life. As most of the adjectives I just used pertain to most of you gathered here around me, I thought you may find this topic relevant. As the title of today's service indicate, the topic is "roots."

I greatly appreciate that, even within our non-dogmatic, non-creedal, exploratory and ever-questioning UU faith, there is a recognition that "roots" are nevertheless important to spiritual and personal wholeness, even though roots are a concept that rather connotes being linked to a past which we do not choose, and allowing it to lay claim on who we are supposed to be and what we are to believe. Even our beloved song, Spirit of Life, emphasizes the need for "roots to hold me close" while, at the same time, "wings [should be] setting me free."

So today, I wanted to pose the following questions: Do you think roots are important? Do you feel your rootedness enough? Does it take work to maintain roots? What kind? And how do we balance roots with wings?

As you ponder, perhaps I can offer up a few thoughts of my own. As I sat down to write my reflection, my first inclination was to remind us of one of our UU "sources": "The Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love." My go-to book on UU, "A Chosen Faith" suggests that, to understand UU roots, we should familiarize ourselves with the stories of Genevan Michael Servetus, Unitarian Founder John Murray, and activists like Margaret Fuller. However, as I was reading through Servetus's biography and theological teachings, I felt an emotional void which I couldn't ignore. It forced me to recognize what Greg Ratta seemed to have known right away when he altered the title of today's service from the one I gave him. Originally I had offered up the title: "Roots Hold me Close: Which Roots? How Close", but he came back with "Feeling your Roots."

Indeed, Greg, you are right: Roots—authentic roots—are felt, not intellectually understood. So reading about Servetus does not address the emotional dimension of rootedness. It is this emotional dimension that I miss in my current reality:

Not only did I grow up in America, a world foreign to my Polish heritage, but once I began to feel at home there, I moved here, to an entirely new and foreign culture. And now, I watch as my own children grow up calling this entirely foreign place home, and I wonder—can one split cultural “rootedness” 3 ways or is this 1 or 2 splits too many, and have I condemned myself and my children to a rootless modern “internationalness”, which I find profoundly hollow? When I see the modern, multi-cultural, intellectual, faith-less internationalists which we all meet in Geneva, I sense a dimension of human-ness that has been lost. And yet I am effectively such a person, am I not?

There are many reasons why I find roots, be they spiritual, familial, or heritage-related, to be important. I find they help set our moral backbone. They also provide safe shelter in the context of the unknown, and they often give answers to deeply emotional needs. So, to give you an example of the moral backbone role, I often drew courage and solace from the history of Poland, and the courage generations of Poles have shown over the last two centuries to stand up for their national identity, despite 100 years of partition and then the communist regime. I often think—gosh, if my forefathers were willing to stand up against dictators and risk their lives, then I what am I whimpering about now?!

My spiritual roots to this day give me safe shelter and answers when I’m at a loss: As I was leaving for Geneva, I visited a friend of mine who was expecting her first child. I deeply wanted to express how much I hoped that her pregnancy and child would be well. And the only word I could find for this deep need was: I wanted her child to be blessed. So, I put my hand on her belly, and the only way I felt I could bless that child was to draw the sign of the cross on her tummy.

Whereas I am okay with drawing on my heritage roots to this day, I must admit I was miffed with myself for drawing that cross. I wished I had developed spiritually enough to bless that child a different way, which was more consistent with my existing. But nothing else felt nearly as genuine. And then I wonder—why do I have to feel so guilty and so torn tapping into catholic ritual as a UU? Is this not what UUs mean by “roots holding us close”?

I’ve also come to realize that in my and my family’s case, maintaining rootedness takes mindful effort. My children won’t know either their Polish or American-ness unless Greg and I engage in, expose, and maintain connections with these cultures. I’ve also decided my children need to know the basics of the Catholic faith—so they can have a common language with their Polish grandparents, and frankly so that I can answer in a simplistic way questions my 3 year old has begun to ask: where do we go when we die, mommy?

But more importantly, I've come to realize that neither the UU faith, nor my current reality will feel authentic without its own set of roots. So, I have sought to dissect what creates the "feeling" of rootedness, so that these new experiences become rooted, at least for my children. Here's what I've come up with:

First, ritual creates rootedness. Great religions and ethnic traditions ooze with ritual. Ritual offers many great rooting benefits: first, rituals usually refer to some legend, myth, or story which happened a long long time ago, to which we are somehow connected. I find stories of our ancestors gives us a sense that we are, indeed, a part of a greater whole, which spans across time. Second, by engaging in the physical ritual acts, we enter into communion—togetherness—with our past. The story transcends from the cerebral sphere to an emotional one as we too engage in actions that harken back to those first acts. Finally, in ritual, we find emotional solace and shelter, for having done it over and over again, and in the context of a community of close loved ones.

When our first daughter was born, Greg and I decided to introduce ritual to our home. We started to join hands at dinner, and rather than "saying grace", we fit it to Nellia's age and started to chant "hurray hurray, we are together!" And then we'd say what we're thankful for. It felt hokey and phoney for a long time. But in the last few months, Nellia has started to initiate this ritual. And then I realized—Oh my God, she actually thinks this is authentic. This, for her, is the "right" way our family is meant to start dinner! And then, lo and behold, my own child transformed a hokey experiment into the single most authentic moment of our family life, for all of us! So, like I said, I'm a huge fan of ritual. I would even support a set of regularized, ritualistic activities in which we engage as a community, every time we meet. Singing "Spirit of Life" could be one of them.

Besides ritual, I think a living, vibrant community is also critical for a sense of rootedness. Ultimately, we root to each other, not to ideas. And again, this takes effort. Even in our family, getting us all to the dinner table every day is a serious undertaking. But for spiritual rootedness, we must—simply speaking—spend time together. Karin called me this Monday gushing about the incredible spiritual kick she got at the EUU retreat last weekend. "I was among my own, and there were so many of us!" She said. And that's exactly it. We need to feel enveloped, cuddled by a whole crowd of "our own." And our own will demand of us—they will demand time, attention, energy, doing this one way and not another—but that is just it. As the saying goes: Relatives, you can't live with them, but you can't live without 'em!

And with that, I turn to you, my community, to hear and learn from you!