



Return Again

First Church Men's Group
First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati
536 Linton Street
Cincinnati, Ohio 45219
513.281.1564
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Spirit of Life
Peter Hoyt

This song is a prayer, a powerful prayer, a powerful **Unitarian** prayer. It is basically our instructions for living.

The first lines are essential directions about right relationships with others, focused on compassion. Passion with the plight of others makes for "compassion. It helps us make sense of suffering, when suffering makes no seeming benefit at all. To live is to suffer; to survive is to make sense of suffering. What we must do is have compassion "giving life the shape of justice."

But for me, it is the penultimate line of the hymn that makes the most meaning. In her simple imagery Carolyn McDade gives us a way to look at what may seem a paradox. Wings and Roots are her instructions for achieving right relationships within ourselves.

We need roots to keep us grounded in the here and now just like a plant drawing sustenance from the earth. Messy, muddy earth. We ask for roots to hold us close, like an embrace, but not too close. I like that distinction, the way you hold a baby or a lover. It reminds us that we need to be held in the structures of family, friends and loving communities, such as our own First Church community.

But paradoxically, we pray for wings to set us free. We need at times to soar toward the infinite, to leave behind our day-to-day-life. When the stress of everyday is too much we need to contemplate freedom and to get away from it all. We might even act on this urge. This is the creative force at work in our lives.

Too much of either leads to an imbalanced life: addictions, escapism, obstructions, being stuck in the mud, paralysis. As the song says, we need both elements of this life force, roots

and wings, earth and air, to be held and to be set free. This points the way to an authentic life.

Most times when I sing this song my mind wanders toward one side or the other, depending on what struggles I am engaged in. It is too easy to dismiss this hymn as simplistic when it is, I believe, a truly profound Unitarian prayer. No pleading for heavenly interventions to be saved from whatever is messing us up. The message is “it is up to us to find the way”.

When we were discussing this hymn with Jera a few weeks ago, I said it sometimes sounded like a dirge. Couldn't it be jazzed up a bit? She didn't say a thing, she just looked at me. I was soooo wrong; it is such a profound prayer and like all good prayers, its message has been reduced to its essence. Eight words; roots and wings. We sing it with respect because we know it is right, for both soul and spirit. Gladly her silence got to me before any damage was done.

So today we pray for the Spirit of Life, come unto me and to all of us. Amen

Roots and Wings: My Journey to the Unitarian Philosophy

Jim Powell

Good morning. My name is Jim Powell. I have been a member of First Church since 2009. The lyrics “Roots hold me close/Wings set me free” from Carolyn McDade’s beautiful anthem particularly resonate with me. For they seem to be an appropriate metaphor for my personal journey into this congregation.

To my way of thinking, “Roots” are another way of referring to our pasts, our experiences, what we have learned to date. Those things we learned from parents, teachers, mentors and peers very much affect the choices we make and the beliefs we live by later in life. “Wings” serves as metaphor for our future, what remains to be experienced: our plans, hopes, dreams and even intellectual/spiritual explorations.

And they are interrelated in that we take what we learn from the past and build on it as we move into the future.

I think it is a valuable exercise to occasionally reflect on what we have learned and how we were influenced and how that relates to the future particularly in our spiritual/religious lives. So if you will allow me, I’d like briefly to share with you my personal religious “roots and wings.” They began as kid growing up on the mostly blue collar West Side of Dayton, Ohio. Much of what I learned about religion, as I’m sure is true of many of you, began by attending Sunday school and church with my parents. In my case, it was at a Methodist Episcopal church, predecessor of today’s United Methodist Church. Ironically, at that time the Methodist Episcopal Church was de facto, a racially segregated denomination.

My roots also included a passion for reading. So when I was given a gift of a volume titled “Children’s Bible Stories,” which presented a child’s level interpretation of the bible, I took an avid interest. But even then, I wondered skeptically, what actually happened in those often miraculous and colorful stories. What really occurred when, for example, Joshua fought the battle of Jericho?

As years passed, I discontinued church attendance. I felt like I did not have adequate time to reflect on spiritual matters. I found that my main concerns were earning a living and successfully raising a family.

So it was not until I neared retirement that I began to read and reflect for my personal enlightenment and enjoyment. It was around this time that I actually started to spread my spiritual wings. I read several histories of early Christianity, even alternative forms of early Christianity such as Gnosticism. I also read books by contemporary liberal theologians such as Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. Their works, in my opinion, put forth a more realistic interpretation of religion in general and Christianity specifically.

Over time, I began to search for congregations that seemed more aligned with what I was learning. After reading an intriguing book which critiqued the history of African American conservatism and discovering that it was published by Beacon Press, an imprint of the Unitarian Universalist Association, I was instantly fascinated.

I researched other titles published by Beacon and learned from the titles and descriptions that many of their books paralleled my interests and viewpoint. So I tested my wings further and flew toward taking a closer look at Unitarian philosophy.

I learned about the fundamentals of the Unitarian viewpoint in such books as the Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide and A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism among others. I learned of Unitarians' commitment to social justice and equity and discovered the UU Principles and thought, alas, a set of values that spoke directly to issues and concerns of the contemporary world.

But I must admit that initially my winged flight toward joining a Unitarian church was somewhat delayed as I contemplated the prospect of possibly affiliating with an overwhelmingly white congregation. Yet I was somewhat comforted by the fact that African American William Sinkford, a former member here, was the President of the UUA at that time. In addition, I discovered that my parents were old friends of the late George and Ruby Malone, long time members here who happened to be African American. Furthermore, my brother, his wife and his daughter had visited First Church several times even before my interest developed and had reported favorably.

That settled it. A personal visit to this church was in order. From the start I felt welcomed, included and comfortable.

Since I've been a member here, I have discovered that I fit closest to the Humanist portion of the "belief continuum." Today I relate most to the category known as "Religious Humanist." That is, one who believes that the wonder and awe of the Universe could very be one in same as that "Spirit of Life" which our traditional Unitarian hymn beckons into our presence and evokes "Roots and Wings" on which we learn and grow.

So I stand before you today a proud Unitarian, member of this congregation and an African American-welcomed, accepted, comfortable. And if my "wings" will take me further, it is my wish that this beloved congregation will strive to become ever more racially diverse as we use our wings to fly toward the future.

Unfolding Wings **Peter Koenig**

This time of year, we can observe flocks of birds gathering to get ready for migration to their winter habitat. It is a powerful force of their nature that tells them to unfold their wings and move on. Seeing flocks of Canada Geese flying overhead, I can't help but feel a sense of longing to come along on their journey. Who hasn't dreamed about having wings?

The wings setting us free that Carlyne McDade's "Spirit of Life" speaks about captures that very longing, that seeking for freedom, for a clear vision and reaching beyond the surface of the earth that we seem to be bound to.

In our wish to fly we reject the limit of gravity. Spreading our wings means to dream, to envision, to reject given paradigms and to raise beyond the status quo.

The roots and wings sound like an antithesis and opposing forces. I am convinced that they are intimately connected. Roots provide us with a sense of belonging, our identity and self-awareness. We need to possess the feeling of belonging and a clear sense of identity before we can set a flight plan for where we want to be.

Hodding Carter speaks of parents giving children two lasting gifts: roots and wings. For parents, wings encapture what we wish for our children: to reach their dreams, to go beyond what we have available or could ever envision.

Long before they unfold their wings, our children dream about what their flight plan might look like. Our children articulate their own vision of their future: My eight year old daughter Julia is currently struggling between wanting to be a veterinarian and the president of the United States. Inspired by the omnipresent Harry Potter theme at church and in our house, Hermione Granger is a highly ranking role model for Julia. Hermione is a heroine who stands up for the harder, yet right choices. She is also an unusual girl in the wizarding world: she is the only witch in her family. Hermione finds her roots by working hard to learn everything she can about her new newly found identity as a witch.

This church is a large part of our children finding their roots through exploring their identity and giving them a sense of belonging. It provides a space for them to explore their dreams, visions and provides them with the basis to start they own spiritual journey.

Myself as an adolescent, I had a tight connection with my paternal grandparents. More than anything, my grandfather invited and encouraged me to envision what is possible. I cannot say that he gave me outstanding advice but on the other hand, he also didn't shoot down my pipe-dreams – he only gently redirected me from time to time. By providing me with a strong sense of belonging (roots), he gave me a place where it felt safe as an adolescent to see what it feels like to unfold your wings.

Nobody says that we can't continue to dream and strive to realize our ideals and dreams as we grow up. Beyond our ideals and dreams, the wings also symbolize stretching towards the void, trying to reach hither. It represents the longing and seeking of a larger truth. By rising above, we have the opportunity to break the ideas that hold us in place and gain sight of what lies beyond our horizon.

As adults, many of us have chosen to redefine our spiritual roots because they didn't quite feel right. James Powell spoke about how he found his roots and wings in this congregation. As Unitarian Universalists it is part of our culture to spread our spiritual wings and start searching for a larger truth and meaning.

In my own spiritual journey I have come to the realization that in my search for truth and meaning, I may never reach my destination. Yet I will not stop spreading those wings, because I know that they were made for flying.

Let me offer you this final reflection: For us as Unitarian Universalists the hymn “Spirit of life” itself is a metaphor. It is part of our very own *roots and wings*. In being such an integral part of our culture, it creates a sense of who we are as a community and creates a sense of belonging. May the stirrings of compassion and giving life the shape of justice always be part of our flight plans. We strive to enable each and every one, within and beyond these walls, to soar with their own, unique pair of wings.