



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Roots Hold Me Close. Wings Set Me Free.”

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Reflections delivered on July 30, 2017

by Melanie Hennings & Marco Messori

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

“Give the ones you love wings to fly, roots to come back and reasons to stay.” Dalai Lama

“My heart wants roots. My mind wants wings. I cannot bear their bickerings.” E.Y. Harburg

“After all . . . Tomorrow is another day.” Rosella (Scarlett) O’Hara

Melanie’s Reflection:

When Marco and I were asked to speak to the congregation, I felt honored and a little intimidated, to be honest, as well. Then the topic “roots and wings” really did speak to me. I often think about home and its meaning to others and to me. What are my roots? What are roots?

From a biology perspective, roots of plants have two types of systems. One is a taproot system that has a main root with minimal branching. These roots can access deep waters. The other type is fibrous roots that are a network of branching roots that are close to the topsoil. Most plants have one or the other, but there are some that have both types. So far, I’ve been talking about the physical roots of plants, and now I want to extend these roots to the ones people have. You know the ones where you have put down roots and established a community, made a home, lived at least part of your life.

I have sometimes been envious of the people with roots that are deep like tap roots. They grew up in one place, have a deep sense of connection to the people and the physical places. There are other people who have fibrous roots that have many branches that are closer to the topsoil. I grew up in a lot of different places from Florida, Texas, to Alaska and have the fibrous root system. I added to these branches when I studied, lived, and worked in Costa Rica, Italy, and France. I have a certain sense of home when I go back to these places. I remember the houses and apartments, the people that I knew and loved, and know where most things are despite the inevitable changes that the areas have undergone.

Luckily, we are all given wings to fly to different places than where our roots are located. Some choose never to fly, some occasionally, but I’m more of a frequent flyer who takes almost every chance to discover someplace new. I sometimes have had difficulty understanding why people who can spread their wings and travel choose not to do so.

Let's think about some reasons that people don't use their wings:

1. I recently read about the cartoonist of Dilbert, Scott Adams, in a Bloomberg article where he said, "I don't like being uncomfortable, and travel is uncomfortable." I paused when I read that, as I realized that I rarely let comfort stop me. Why I wondered? I certainly do let comfort stop me from doing so many other things...hmmm...for example, I find mountain biking painful, just bending over and holding the handle bars. I also really want to see the Southwest US, but until I can go in another season besides the summer I'm not that interested. It seems to be a very real factor that unless they can stay in a nice hotel with a bathroom and have comfortable forms of transportation like taxis or rent-a-cars, some people aren't interested.
2. Fear is another thing that stops people, and me too, sometimes. For example, I am not planning to jump out of any planes testing those wings of parachutes anytime soon. There is also fear that I have of traveling in certain countries, especially if I don't speak the language or there is civil unrest. So much of the world is blocked off due to these factors (no Venezuela or North Korea trips in my near future, for example). The rewards of traveling have been exponentially more rewarding for me personally than any discomfort or fear that I experienced.
3. Of course, there is the very real economic limitation that makes travel cost prohibitive. Again, I think that there are many ways to travel cheaply, but that usually makes it more uncomfortable by most people's standards. For example, when I lived in Costa Rica as a foreign exchange student, money was tight, and I traveled around like a local. When my mother came to visit, I made my mom travel like I did. In one instance, we took the cheap bus trip to a beach, a trip that lasted over four hours. It was standing room only with lots of chickens. My mom insisted on flying back to San Jose and not repeating the experience. I wouldn't have been able to see the country if I had insisted on more comfort like that though.

However, I think there are many ways to spread your wings besides traveling. Books, watching movies, and having new experiences are other ways. Books and movies can drop you into the lives of a variety of different people, show you new perspectives, tell you unknown stories, and bring you to faraway lands, especially if you are willing to watch movies with subtitles. I know some people who don't spread their wings and watch the same genre of movies over and over. I can be guilty of that sometimes, too, myself. You can meet new people that are not in your usual circle by going salsa dancing or visit a hammam, which is kind of like a spa of steam baths found in the Middle East or wherever there is a large group of Muslims living. There are some in Atlanta if you are interested! These experiences will put you in contact with other people of different cultures. I highly recommend both.

It's fundamentally about being open to meeting new people, having new experiences, and learning. This isn't always fun or comfortable, but it has always been worth it to me. Seeing the world differently makes me a more understanding and more compassionate person. When I'm doing that, I feel like I'm flying, and my invisible wings are working hard. I still need my roots to keep me grounded, though, and bring me back to some structure of life. The vagabond endless travel life ultimately is not for me.

My roots, while shallow, still sustain and nourish me, and my wings let me explore and experience new things, gathering energy, empathy, and wisdom. May all of you hold onto your roots and not let comfort, fear, or finances keep you from using your wings and flying.

Marco's Reflection:

We are not all equal, as we all are different from each other. We cannot be equally influenced by events occurring in our lives, as we are even not the same as the day before. As we tend to connect with others or ourselves, there is always something in the middle, falling in our way to what we want or what we want to be or feel . . . like feeling well and comfortable or connected to others or in peace with ourselves. Let's go back to 2016 before November . . . If you were a Bernie supporter, have you ever tried to understand Hillary supporters or vice versa? . . . If you supported instead a Republican candidate, did you try to have civil conversations with supporters of other candidates of your party? Did anybody still believing in our candidates try to convince you of the necessity to vote to help people that didn't feel represented at all? As we sometimes have to come to terms and accept our differences with others, we also can accept that some life events or decisions can change ourselves and the way we see others and the world around us.

I have chosen to live in a country different than my native one, to spread my wings and decide that home is where I am with my new family. My native culture, my roots, are in me, undeniably. I don't feel the need to find Italian immigrants here as I am trying instead to embrace the culture my new family lives in and with. When I go back to Italy, my dearest friends call me "l'americano," and when people meet me here, they ask me questions about my native country after a few minutes of conversations. There's more to it for them and for myself. Labeling others cannot serve any other purpose than finding comfort, mostly for ourselves, or to try to ease communication. As I decided to live in a different country than my native one, I made the conscious decision to live out of my comfort zone every day of the rest of my life, and so far I have enjoyed this challenge. It keeps me going and growing.

Only travelling and discovering my adopted country has brought the challenge to a new level: exploring its diversity and my reactions to it. I do believe that sometimes in my travelling, more than seeing places, I discover changes in myself, in my reactions to novelty and how sometimes biases or stereotyping interfere with living the moment or respecting the culture, people, or places I am in that moment. A few days ago, as we were reaching a longed-for destination for our road trip, the Southeast Unitarian Universalist Summer Institute (SUUSI), I was noticing many people of any age missing teeth and started joking about them until Melanie told me, "Marco, those people are in that situation because they probably can't afford healthcare." My world sank under my feet!

Travelling also helps me enjoy living in the moment and rediscovering and cultivating the sensation of awe that sometimes we lose in our illusions of maturity in adulthood, or worse, we consider childish. Driving and biking in the Grand Tetons National Park, hiking in the Badlands

National Park, walking between geyser sources in Yellowstone, discovering spruce trees in Olympic National Park, sitting on the banks of the Great Lakes, visiting the New York Public Library or Grand Central station in New York City, walking on the battlefields of Gettysburg, Antietam and Manassas, following a guided tour on campus at Yale University, being in the audience at a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Central Park, and all this with my family, the people I love the most, my roots. The roots I cultivate day by day and that help me recenter when I get lost in myself or pretend to be the center of my world. They are the roots that help me spread my wings when I feel I am ready. They are there when they are somewhere else and also when it's time to go home, in an airplane, in our car or in a camper van, this last one a vehicle of priceless building-memories-trips.

A few days ago, I shared with Nicolo', Maddalena, and Melanie the image that better summed up our trip. In the last day of our residence at SUUSI and of our long trip, after helping pack up and loading the van, I left the loading zone of the parking lot and let them check out with new friends. While I was waiting for them in the camper van, I processed all our family vacation together, and after a few minutes I felt an urge to get back in touch with them . . . yes, my roots, and after texting Melanie, I drove to our meeting place. Seeing them in the distance in front of majestic mountains of North Carolina, all three waiting to get on the road again together filled my heart Time to spread our wings again and find our way home.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. What strategies do you use to make yourself or others feel safe?
2. How do you feel when you take risks? What reactions do you experience mentally or physically when you take risks?
3. In order to experience love, do you have to feel safe or take risks? Why?