

“A Rooted Life”

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
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Have you ever been walking through the woods and come across a tree toppled over with all the roots suddenly exposed? This sight has always amazed me . . . the hidden underworld of a mass of roots that reach deep into the earth for the water, the nutrients, and the hold that keeps the tree alive. Walking through a forest, admiring the height of trees and the beauty of the foliage, it can be easy to forget that an unseen world of roots enables the life of trees.

For me, a powerful reminder of the role of roots can be found in my favorite spiritual symbol, the Tree of Life. The image of the Tree of Life is usually portrayed as a deciduous tree with a rounded crown of leaves suggestive of an abundance of life. Significantly, most images of the Tree of Life also include a substantial root system as a mirror image of the branches and leaves. The roots and leaf crown are balanced in size, suggesting that *both* are necessary to the flourishing of life.

Indeed, I believe that we do need roots that go deep into the soil of life and seek out, bring forth, and hold fast to what we need to flourish as humans. We need roots to help sustain us through the seasons and the storms of life—roots that connect us to sources of renewal and strength both when the rain hasn't fallen in weeks and when the storms are threatening to topple us over.

There are many different kinds of roots in life—some of them are as simple as a good night's sleep that helps restore us. Connections with family or with an old friend can also be important roots that deeply ground us. At their best, I believe religion and religious traditions can also be roots that nourish our spirits.

In the reading, Kathleen Norris offers a way of thinking about our religious roots. She explains that the Latin root of religion is linked *both* to ligature—a cord that binds us—*and* to ligament—a linking connection that enables movement. Religious roots, she insists, do not need to be enslaving bonds, they can also be ligaments that help us to move.

To illustrate, she describes the ligaments with her two grandmothers. Norris does not hold back her critical words. She describes the faith of one grandmother as “easy answers of fundamentalism” and the faith of the other grandmother as “over-intellectualized banalities.” Although clearly she does not agree wholeheartedly with either of her grandmothers, she still claims a connection—a ligament, a root—to her grandmothers’ faith. She claims that her own faith is what it is *because* of her connections to her roots.

As you may have already learned about me, my grandparents are important roots for me. Like Norris, I feel as if I have learned much from my grandparents . . . even when it has meant learning how I differ from them. To illustrate what I mean about learning *and* differing, I’d like to share a story with you about my grandfather Harold.

In the summer of 1942, my grandfather, Harold Sibley, had just enlisted in the army. Due to leave for basic training shortly, the minister was called to the house to offer a prayer and a blessing upon Harold. Harold knelt in the middle of the living room as the minister laid his hands upon him and his family gathered around him. I can only imagine how many times the minister had already been called to offer such a prayer—to offer a word of hope not only the young man about to go to war, but also to the mothers and fathers, siblings, friends, and, at least in my grandfather’s case, a new bride, Betty.

Searching for the right words, the minister chose Psalm 91—telling Harold and his family that he was claiming the promises of Psalm 91 for Harold. To give you a sense of these promises, let me read some excerpts from this Psalm:

*Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."*

*Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare
and from the deadly pestilence.
He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.*

*You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,
nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.
A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
"Because he loves me," says the Lord, "I will rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.
He will call on me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble,
I will deliver him and honor him.
With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation."*

The Psalm was to be both an assurance of God's protection *and* a challenge to hold on to his faith in God in the midst of war. But would the promises of safety actually come true?

As a soldier in World War II, Harold became a part of the First Special Service Forces, the forerunner to today's Green Berets and other special forces. Specially trained, the Force—as Grandpa called it—was sent to do work others could not do. For example, in December of 1943, they scaled the steep mountainside of Mount La Defensa in Italy in the middle of the night. Surprising the Germans with their ascent, they took the mountain, a battle that would eventually help open the way to Rome.

The Battle of La Defensa was reenacted in the 1968 movie, *The Devil's Brigade*. Quentin Tarantino also cited the Force as an inspiration for his movie *Inglorious Bastards*. When Quentin Tarantino picks something as inspiration for one of his violence soaked films, that's not a good sign. Indeed, the Force suffered a more than 50% mortality rate.

My grandfather Harold? He returned whole in body if not always in spirit—suffering, like many combat veterans, from nightmares that sometimes wracked his sleep. But he *did* come home. For the rest of his life, he would continue to claim Psalm 91 as a promise and ground for his faith: *A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.*

That story of the Psalm and of the many, many times my grandfather should have died in World War II helped to shape my religious imagination as a girl. Such a story made it easy to believe in a personal God who took care of those who had faith in Him.

Harold never spoke much about his faith, but I knew that story. I also watched him as he lived out his faith in service. I watched as he ushered at the Central United Methodist church with a white carnation tucked into his lapel. I watched as he stood on a ladder repainting the parsonage or as he sang hymns so sweetly in his rich baritone voice.

Sitting beside him in church as he sang...is one of my favorite childhood memories. He and I also sang hymns together at my grandmother's bedside as she died from cancer. And, when I sat alone in the pew for his memorial service, I wept.

The summer after he died I had the opportunity to travel to Italy. While there, I decided to make a pilgrimage to see Mount La Defensa. Studying a map, I found the place then headed toward a small town at the foot of the mountain. When I arrived, I drove slowly through the town and looked up. Uncertain of what I was seeing, I stopped and asked a

young couple out walking if *that* was La Defensa. Although they spoke a bit of English, they were a French couple visiting her grandmother and didn't know the area well.

But, they brought me to her grandmother who exclaimed that the neighbor would know! Walking in a small group, we approached a villa. The woman who answered the door said, *Ci, ci*, her husband, Angelo, could help.

Angelo, as it turned out, was a retired Italian paratrooper whose hobby was to walk the mountains collecting remnants of the War. The lower-level of his house was an amateur museum dedicated to the Force. Proudly, reverently, Angelo showed me around the relics of canteens, helmets, and shrapnel. Sixty-five years after the battle, the reality of Grandpa's stories lay there in a basement in Italy. Angelo explained that La Defensa has a sister-peak, Mount Camino, which the British overtook as the Force took Defensa. He was about to lead a group up Mount Camino—the neighbors and their visitors whom I had just met—did I want to come?

Following a caravan of cars, we made our way around rustic back roads of the mountains, then parked before setting off on foot up a trail. There were 16 of us from school-age kids to an older, gray-haired grandmother. As we followed a well worn, but by no means flat, trail, conversations in Italian, French, and English flowed.

When we arrived at the top, there was a small stone chapel. The kids were allowed to pull the bell a few times. The older woman set to sweeping the interior. Outside, backpacks were laid open upon large rocks and out came a feast of breads, cheeses, figs, peaches, plums, sausage, pepperoni, and, of course, wine (local, without a label). By this point, the sun was setting over the mountains to the west. After descending in the twilight, I extended my deepest thanks and took my leave.

I suspect that for many of us, it might be easy to disparage the notion that a personal God would protect one man in the midst of a war. Rationally, it doesn't make sense to me. Yet, when I sat in the chapel on the peak of Mount Camino I felt a deep sense of

connection across the decades to that place, to whatever causes and circumstances had kept my grandfather alive...and which gave him to me for so many precious years. And so, sitting in that little stone chapel on a mountain peak, I said a prayer of gratitude for my grandfather's safety, for the life he had and that I as his grandchild shared in.

I felt that I understood something about him and his faith after sitting there, praying there, feasting there. I think that he spent most of the rest of his life simply glad to be alive. Whether or not we agreed that he was alive because of Psalm 91 or a personal God, his gratitude for life showed in how he lived and shaped my own sense of gratitude for life.

He never spoke about his faith and so he never preached at me about dogma. Rather, he showed me his faith by how he lived—with gratitude and in service to others. And that kind of faith is what I hold on to: that faith of gratitude and service is a ligature, a link between us.

We all have spiritual and religious roots. We are linked to people present and past who have shaped how we understand and experience our religious beliefs, our own sense of what is worth holding on to. We have all received lessons about religion and values from others—family members, friends, a minister, rabbi, or teacher.

I don't believe that our faith arises in an isolated vacuum. Rather, our values and our religious beliefs emerge within particular contexts of family, specific religious traditions such as lighting candles, singing songs, marking some holidays and not others. Whether we grew up Catholic, Methodist, Muslim, Jewish, atheist, or Unitarian Universalist, I believe that we all carry within ourselves a living link to those traditions, to those roots.

What are your roots that help to hold you, to sustain you, to nurture you?

I feel deeply that fostering the roots of our own personal religious and spiritual pasts *can* be an important source of spiritual sustenance. Once again, this does *not* mean we can't be critical of our roots. We do not need to be *bound* to the religious views of our parents, our friends, or our former church, temple, minister, or teacher. But we do need to recognize how we've been shaped by those experiences and beliefs. Our religious roots can be *ligaments* connecting us to our pasts even as we find our own way forward.

This may sound very conceptual, but over the upcoming holiday season, many of us will be sitting down to meals with extended family where we'll come face to face with our roots. When you find your blood pressure rising, I encourage you to look for the connections that you can celebrate. Look for the lessons and the values that you've received from those roots. Ask yourself how those roots are connected to the person you are today.

A number of years ago, I realized that I have a habit of humming the Christian hymns of my youth when I am feeling particularly happy. Let's be clear, I *am* critical of much of the language and theology of these hymns. But, I have been shaped deeply into my *subconscious* by the feelings of hope and happiness, love and gratitude, which my childhood religious experiences infused into these hymns. At first, when I recognized what I was doing, I would stop my humming—disdainful of these remnants of my religious past.

Now, I smile and keep on humming. I allow my rootedness in the memories of singing hymns with my grandfather to feed my spirit.

Reading from *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* by Kathleen Norris

At its Latin root, the word religion is linked to the words ligature and ligament, words having both negative and positive connotations, offering both bondage and freedom of movement. For me, religion is the ligament that connects me to my grandmothers, who, representing so clearly the negative and positive aspects of the Christian tradition, made it impossible for me to reject or accept the religion wholesale. They made it unlikely that I would settle for either the easy answers of fundamentalism or the over-intellectualized banalities of a conventionally liberal faith. Instead, the more deeply I've reclaimed what was good in their faith, the more they have set me free to find my own way.