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## Trees and Education

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There is something wonderful about an old tree whose branches soar while the roots display themselves above the ground and point to the possibility of depth below. One gets the sense of the “soul” of the tree. This image and reality of the tree resonates with the archetypal sacred image of the Tree of Life common to many spiritual traditions. The beauty of this piece of nature has inspired me to think about how trees can inform my pilgrimage as a Clinical Pastoral Education Supervisor.

The roots of a tree reach deep to harvest water and nutrients from the richness of the earth. I imagine the roots are confused by sidewalks and premature uprooting or being planted in poor soil. They require the space to find good enough soil in which to thrive. In addition, trees that are well planted may need space to explore the deepening of their roots.

In the process of action/reflection education, students’ roots are given room to find their best soil. In this space they may discern with reclaimed wisdom where to dig deep in order to find nourishment. Here, new orientation is received and the process of replanting or re-routing the roots can begin. No one can make this discernment other than the one putting down roots. The educator can give space for the learner to untangle old perceptions and old ways of being rooted. In this process, the student begins to trust the possibilities of his or her search and the richness of the soil.

Once the student gains a sense that he or she does not need to continue to attempt to take root in poor soil or that their roots have other options to explore, this awareness leads the student to pursue the right place to grow. This takes time; roots take a while to develop. This nascent journey is a fragile time. Students used to dominating voices claiming wisdom will find it a familiar habit to be distracted by external authority figures. The unfolding personal journey of discernment takes careful tending.

Some trees exhibit great flexibility and other possess a rigid strength. The “soul” wisdom of each type of tree will awaken to its own limitations and strengths. The “soul” of the student will begin to resonate with other similar souls and will find a map in resonance and in attunement to these awakened souls with similar essences. There is an emerging realization that other trees can sway, bend, break, endure, and deepen.

Once a student has begun the process of rooting himself or herself, the best support is to help provide safe boundaries and remind the student to nourish their soul as well as celebrating successful deepening or re-routing. With the student, the educator notices when the soul’s roots seem to be holding steady and reflects back with exploration when the process seems to be off course.

Trees need their own space to breathe. The educator provides some gentle protection in this process – a process that is carried lightly and steadily. The choices are the student’s choices; fusion with the student can provide serious distraction. The educator’s journey of continually noticing his or her own rootedness as well as his or her struggles to remain rooted is a crucial aspect of this process.

The focus continuing on the process of rootedness can help provide a space and respect for the ongoing nature of the journey. Premature, over attention to the leaves and to the branches and how they are functioning can distract from the ultimate process of healing, cultivation, and rootedness.

Cultivation is an exploration of ways to help tune the soul to its wisdom. Each soul will need different sorts of cultivation, different sorts of resources and nutrients and knowledge. Spiritual practice and rootedness in one’s own tradition are crucial aspects to this process. While growing roots it is helpful to ask, What is helpful about one’s tradition and what may need to be reframed or reclaimed?

Cultivation with intentionality can lead to the possibility of a parallel process that the chaplain-educator is interested in conveying – the student gains in his or her ability to transfer this cultivation with patients. The process of parallel awakening and the resultant quality of care can be a liberating experience for the student and the patient in pastoral care. It can be a process of slowing down enough to know that the roots of us all are ultimately connected like a grove of trees.

Exploration of the process can lead to areas of “stuckness”; this is part of the discernment and the deepening. These areas are to be treated with respect and with an awareness of the surrounding earth and territory. They are to be explored with curiosity and with clarity about what is real in the moment. Does another path of growth need to be pursued? Is the stuckness an invitation to listen for the wisdom that is present?

In addition, the educator holds responsibility for providing knowledge that is vital to the cultivation: What is the nature of the growth process? What are some common paths and stumbling blocks? How have trees flourished in the past? As cultivation continues, the student has more access to their re-grounded voice and thus offers it with more spontaneity, freedom, and helpful clarity.

Ultimately this process is held in the Creator’s hands. We as educators and as students hear our calling and live the healing and vocation in the context of this holding. The process of deepening and finding our nutrient rich soil is supported in the Creator’s unfolding creation and ever present Love and Grace. There are so many possibilities, so many moments of beauty and brokenness to embrace. Trees are very creative in finding ways to become rooted.

If we stand in the presence of a well-rooted tree with the awareness of the holding of the Creator, we are reminded that there are seasons and changes that will occur naturally. The soul of the tree knows the right time for these changes to occur. As we try to impose our own timing, the possibility exists that the soul will lose touch with its wisdom.

When our soul wisdom has been distorted or twisted, abiding with one who can stand in the presence of the Creator with us and help us to create, to remember and to observe wholeness, can ultimately lead us to healing and peace and an ability to serve out of our soul’s work. The branches will begin to soar and bloom. As testified by a well weathered tree, this work takes courage, sacrifice, and time.

The grove of trees around us can hold us steady as we heal. The journey is a mutual one between educator and student. However, the educator’s role is to have experience with being on this healing, awakening, journey, so that the distractions along the way do not overwhelm. Steady on, leaves falling, branches swaying, roots deepening, water found, new green blooming – over and over again. What a journey, what a sacred tree of life!