

Rooted and Ready to Rise

As we go to press, many families are struggling to manage social isolation as the world experiences a **COVID-19 pandemic**. The UUA website is a rich source of parent/caregiver support. **EXPLORE, IN FAITH:** www.uua.org/parenting-pandemic



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Unitarian Universalists believe that human beings belong to Earth's interconnected web of life. Many say all life is sacred, including animals of all shapes and sizes and the trees that rise around us.  When people speak up for Earth's forests, some might call them "tree-huggers." This story tells about tree-hugging's brave history that started in India hundreds of years ago.

 For hundreds of years, the Bishnoi people in Northern India lived in harmony with the tall khejri trees that dotted their desert landscape. The Bishnoi understood that the trees were their partners in breathing, providing oxygen for people as well as animals. They knew that the trees quietly made sure all creatures could have clean water. They appreciated the beauty of a khejri tree abloom in yellow and pink. They made medicine from khejri seeds, and enjoyed generous shade on hot afternoons.

The Bishnoi people used the

sturdy wood of the khejri trees to build their homes, but took only what they needed. They did not cut down the living trees.

Among the people who loved the khejri trees was Amrita. She thought of the trees as friends. When she was grown, Amrita brought her children—Asu, Ratni, and Bhagu—to visit the khejri trees, and the children loved them too.

One day, some men approached Amrita's village with axes. Its khejri trees were desired by the ruler of the kingdom of Jodhpur to build a fine new palace. On the Maharajah's orders, these men had come to the

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Bishnoi village to chop down trees.

Amrita ran to stop the men. She wrapped her arms around one tree and told the men, "No!" She hugged the tree tightly. The men threatened her. They tried to bribe her. But she did not let go. Her beliefs and her heart told her, "Protect the tree."

The men had orders to follow. They had to cut the tree.

By now, news of the emergency had spread through the Bishnoi village. Amrita's children and many others, of all ages, hugged the trees to protect them. But the soldiers would not stop. Amrita and hundreds of others, including Amrita's children, died protecting the khejri trees.

When the Maharajah learned of the determined courage of the Bishnoi people, he was ashamed to have brought such destruction. Now he understood the sacred meaning and profound love of the trees that had led Amrita, her children, and their neighbors to say "No!" to the tree-cutters. The laws were changed to protect, instead of destroy, the khejri trees of the Bishnoi people.

EXPLORING TOGETHER

The roots are part of a tree, although they are often hidden underground. Roots hold a tree in place. Roots bring water and nutrients to keep the tree alive.  People have roots, too. Your roots are alive in the people who came before you whose stories and customs help you to live kindly, fairly, and well. Ask a parent or another older relative to tell you more about your roots!

Your roots can be your ancestors and their experiences.



Your roots can be stories of places you've come from and how you got where you are.

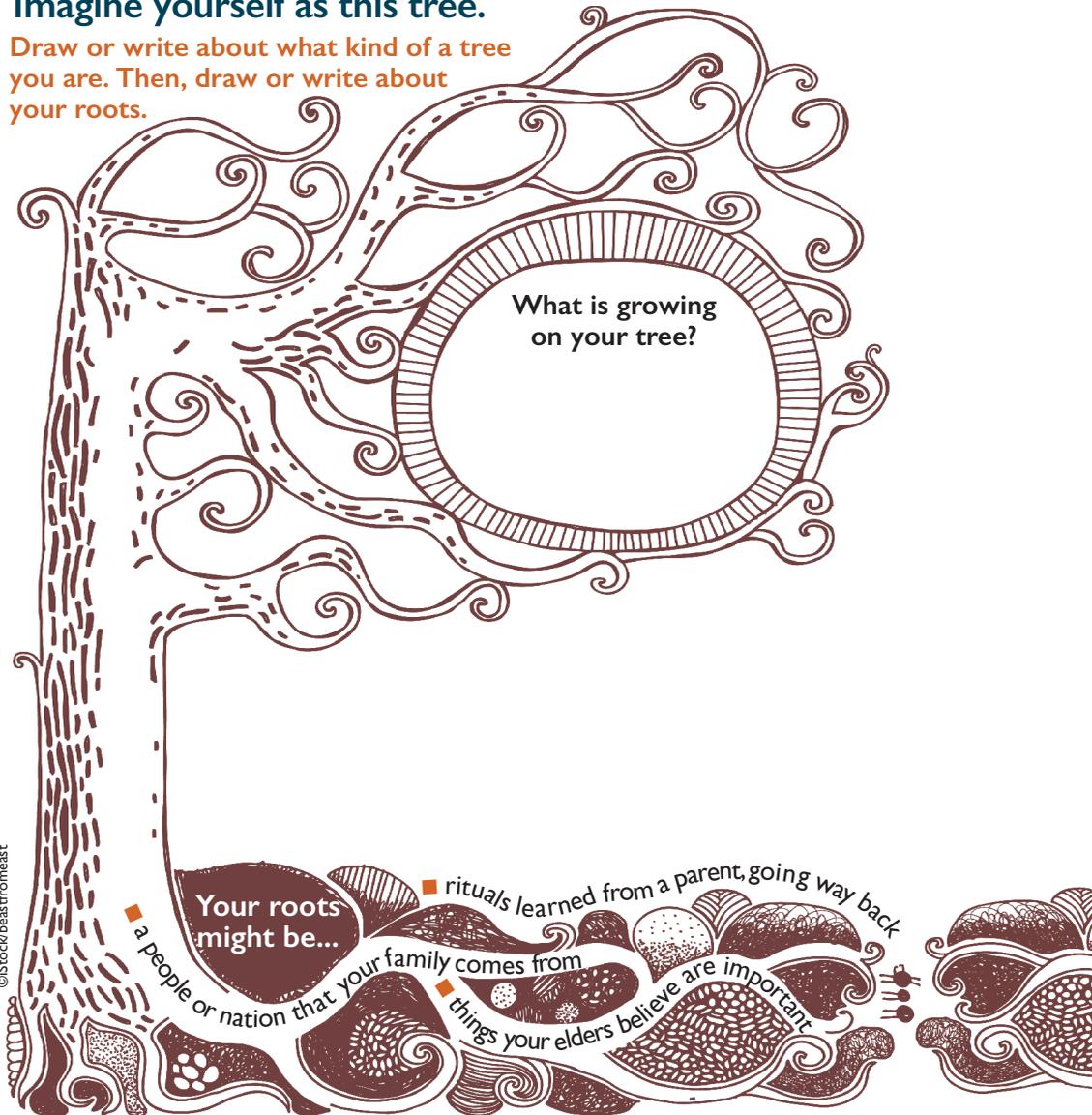


How do YOUR roots keep YOUR tree flexible and strong?

Have you noticed how a tree will bend instead of break in a storm? That's because its roots hold it steady. ■ We humans are kind of like trees. The "storms" of life may bend us, but they don't have to break us. We have "roots" that hold us steady and feed us to keep us strong.

Imagine yourself as this tree.

Draw or write about what kind of a tree you are. Then, draw or write about your roots.



There is a magic machine that sucks carbon out of the air, costs very little, and builds itself. It's called a tree.

– George Monbiot, in a short film with Greta Thunberg



The Wood Wide Web

Hidden under your feet is an information superhighway for plants. Instead of talking like we do or sharing the bits and bytes of a computer language, trees communicate through their roots.

When roots grow down into the earth, they entwine with forest fungi—mushrooms!—whose strands of their mycelia also reach into the earth seeking nutrition. Forest scientists have learned that trees respond to one another through this network. The trees can warn each other of coming danger. They can share carbon, nitrogen, and other necessities.

“These plants are not really individuals in the sense that Darwin thought, competing for survival of the fittest,” says biologist Suzanne Simard in the film, *Do Trees Communicate?* “In fact they are interactive, trying to help each other survive.”

What’s under the trees where you live? Imagine how roots underground connect trees to their neighbors in one cooperative family.

What Else Is Underground?



Earthworms like to burrow near roots. When it rains they sometimes come above ground. ■ After a rain, go on a worm rescue! If any worms are stuck on pavement, they might dry out and die. Remove worms carefully and gently from the pavement. Move them to a grassy or dirt-covered area.

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Feeling Rooted!

Have a partner read you the directions and help you bend, stretch, or sway the way you want. This exercise is not too strenuous. You only have to move a little bit! Have a partner read you the directions and help you move the way you want to.

1 Start in a comfortable position—sit or stand with your feet planted firmly on the ground.



2 Close your eyes. Take three deep breaths—in... and out, in... and out, in... and out.

3 Raise your arms. Stretch to the sky. Now, reach toward the floor. Maybe you can touch it with your palms or your fingers. Slowly roll back up.



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Pretend your body has a web of roots that bring it nourishment.

Feel the ground hold you as you push your feet down. How far can you sway with your feet rooted like this?

**What is growing downward into the earth?
What grows out of you toward the sky?**

Give and Take, with Trees

In the picture book by Shel Silverstein, *The Giving Tree*, a boy visits a tree as he grows up, each time wishing for something the tree then provides: shade, wood for a boat, etc. Finally, the tree has nothing left to give, but invites the boy, now an old man, to rest on its stump.

The tree demonstrates selfless giving. It gives all it has to the boy. The story affirms our UU seventh Principle: that we share an interconnected web with all life. But the sharing between boy and tree is not very equitable. Some fail to find the story charming or its lessons healthy. Do we want to teach our children to deplete themselves with giving, like the tree? Comfort themselves with taking, like the boy?

And how is our sharing these days, between humankind and trees? Trees give, whether they want to or not. We know that a tree canopy cleans our

air of carbons so we have oxygen to breathe. We know our cities are heating up, due to waste and pollution, and urban trees are more important than ever. Research correlates access to green space with reduced child obesity; in Chicago, a 20-minute visit to a natural park was found to mitigate children's ADHD symptoms. In one study, adults who self-reported poor sleep also reported less access to green, natural spaces than those who slept better.

We take from the trees. What do we give back? What are we doing to combat large-scale systems of fossil fuel extraction and deforestation? To protect biodiversity?

When we promote the life of trees, we promote human life, as well.



■ Explore maps and photos that show where trees are, and where trees aren't.

Talk with children about how an area's trees, or lack of trees, might affect the people who live there as well as people who live somewhere else.

■ Close to home, what opportunities are there to plant trees?

What trees, near or far, need your family's commitment to be their stewards or advocates?



Children help to plant a tree at The Mountain, a UU retreat center in North Carolina, during a climate conference. Many consider environmental restoration a sacred practice, and there are ways for all ages to participate.

■ Where are trees near you?

How do you interact with them? What habits can you and your family cultivate to show respect for trees and appreciation for the way their lives intertwine with ours?

FAMILIES: WEAVE A TAPESTRY OF FAITH

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FIND OUT MORE

■ There's a nature app! The iNaturalist "Seek!" mobile app encourages investigation of the plants and animals around us. Kid-safe, the app protects users' privacy while building a community of observers and learners. One reviewer wrote, "This app makes me want to go outside and find things in the real world, resulting in as much extra walking as Pokémon did. It's also very useful as it alerted me to the fact that the ant on my deck was a carpenter ant!" inaturalist.org

■ There's a family card deck! The 78 *Our Sense-Able Nature* cards come with a guidebook in a burlap pouch. Engage all ages in nature-based observation activities that awaken our senses of form and design, pressure, light, and more. "When we come back to our senses and realize that we are all connected, through this restored relationship we become whole once again," said ecopsychologist Kate Trnka, the cards' creator. thesacredearthinstitute.org