

Unitarian Society of Hartford  
Sunday January 28, 2007  
**Sengu: Linking Past and Future**  
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- **Sengu: A Shino Ritual of Renewal** - Every 20 years the fabulous shrine buildings at Japan's Ise Temple are torn down and rebuilt just across a gravel path, a ritual celebrating eternal renewal and return. How might this theme of destroying half the house toward spiritual renewal apply to us?

**Preservice Reflection:**

Superfluous beauty often marks and so helps to identify those objects and rituals, which a people hold most sacred. —Joseph Campbell

**Invocation and Chalice lighting:**

Intricate and untraceable, weaving and interweaving,  
dark strand with light; designed, beyond all spiderly contrivance...to link, not to entrap:  
elation, grief, joy, contrition, all entwined, shaking changing, forever forming, transforming: all  
praise, all praise to the great web.

**Time for All Ages:**

Once upon a time there was a little girl named O-ku who lived in Japan---  
One day she went with her mother to a beautiful new temple.  
Her mother was an artist who worked with silk fabric to create  
beautiful wall hangings for temples—  
kind of like the wonderful things that we hang here.

As her mother worked O-ku explored the new temple. Then she went outside and  
finding a loose board in the fence, she squeezed through the crack, and discovered  
on the other side of the fence... another temple, exactly like the one she had just left.

The only difference was that this temple was not quite brand new. Nobody was around.  
O-ku crept up the stairs and found inside that ....  
even the inside was exactly the same as the temple she had just left!

O-ku felt for a moment like she had fallen into a dream.  
The ONLY difference between the two temples was that the fabric wall hanging her mother  
was making was already in place in THIS temple.

O-ku yelled. What is going on here? HELLLLLLO! But nobody answered.  
This temple was empty.  
O-ku turned, ran out the door and bumped into....a young man dressed in  
the grey and white robes of a Shinto priest.

He grinned at her and said helllllo yourself!

He then explained to O-ku: here at the great shrine in our town Ise,  
we have a wonderful custom.  
We have two identical courtyards, side by side.

Every 20 years we build a new shrine on one side of the fence  
(that's where your mom is now) and then we tear down its twin on this side of the fence.  
We are in the twin temple that will soon be torn down,  
and in a few years, on this spot, we will start building another new temple.  
And when it is finished, maybe you will be the grown up artist who  
creates the wall hangings.  
Then we will go across the fence and tear down the temple  
where your mom is in right now...  
and a few years after that, on that spot, we'll build another new temple where it stood.

O-ku looked at him in amazement...why in the world would you do that?  
This temple is still fine.  
The treasures and art look brand new in here. But you are going to tear it all down soon?  
And then in 20 years you're going to tear down the one my mom is in now?  
And you do that over and over again, forever?

Yep, said the Shinto priest. We've been doing it for over a thousand years,  
over 60 times and will keep doing it forever.  
Why?, asked Oku. But at that moment she heard her mom call out,  
O-ku, where are you???

So she bowed quickly to the priest and squeezed back through the fence  
to the new temple,  
without getting an answer to her question, why in the world would you do that?

What do you think? Why would the Japanese people have a religious custom of  
tearing down and rebuilding identical shrines, complete with decorations, side by side, every  
20 years, forever?

In a few minutes I'm going to be asking the grownups that same question, so remind them to  
talk with you About it on the way home from church!

### **Prayer:**

- Let us remember others.  
Our children and youth in the Spring of life, may they have unflagging curiosity.  
Our young adults in life's summer, may they have courage and confidence,  
Our middle adults approaching autumn, may they know when to hold the reins  
and when to let them go.  
And the eldest among us, wrapped in winter,  
may they accept what is no more, may they know peace in whatever today brings,  
and feel themselves held by grace as they approach the great transition.

As our lives cycle, may we content ourselves, knowing ourselves to be part of Life's great cycling. Let it be so.

### **Sermon: "Sengu: Linking Past and Future"**

The Trees in Japan's sacred forests are marked and felled, with ceremonies honoring the Kami, or forest gods. These special logs are floated down the river, again in ceremonial fashion honoring the water Kami, and later dragged through streets of Ise by worshippers in special garb, onto the precincts of the Grand Shrine.

As materials are gathered and prepared, the ritual shrine assembly begins, each step meticulously choreographed, with specific times assigned each building task—6 AM, noon, even midnight when the moon is just so.

All worship objects adorning the inside of the shrine are created in similar fashion--over 1,600 items, categorized as "Divine apparel and treasures"-- clothing and utensils for the use of the Kami— weapons, horse accessories, musical instruments, writing implements, thread spinning tools.

Only the best artisans and craftsmen in the fields of sword-making, lacquerware, and textiles are employed. Inside and out, the fabulous shrine which has several buildings actually, is completed in an enclosed courtyard, just across a fence..... from its identical twin, which was completed 20 years before.

The final flourish in this ceremonial building project, which cost over 12 million dollars the sixty somethingth time it was done in 1993, is the offering of white rocks.

Carts full of grapefruit sized river rocks are pulled through the streets by people dressed in white heaving on long ropes. It's a fabulous parade and feast day. Arriving at the shrine, the stone bearers do ritual purifications of self and rock, then process in and place the rocks around the outside of the most holy building where the sacred mirror will be enthroned.

This is the only occasion after shrine completion, that anyone besides the emperor and particular priests will see this most inner sanctum of the shrine precincts.

In 1993, I was a stone bearer, one of a group of 50 folks from around the world who were the first non-Japanese people invited to place a rock at the shrine of Amaterasu, the Goddess who resides at Ise.

It was perhaps the most powerful symbolic act of embracing diversity among different peoples I have participated in,

And was the culmination of the centennial celebration of  
The World Parliament of Religions, which was held in 1893 in Chicago,  
and was spearheaded by Unitarians,  
Who brought swamis, gurus, lamas and maharishis to the US  
for the first time.

A few days after the stone laying, amidst great pomp and prayers of joy,  
the emperor himself comes, and carries the sacred mirror from her home  
in the old temple across the courtyard into her new home.  
There she resides until he returns 20 years later and moves her back across  
the courtyard to the next new temple.

This sacred mirror holds Amaterasu,  
the great sun goddess of the land of the rising sun.  
Though she is hinted at by the red circle on Japan's flag, Amaterasu,  
like every divine, worthy of worship, is never captured in a single form.

Here at her home in Ise, she is the sacred mirror, which every 20 years, reflects light on  
dancing and music, on sacred foods and offerings,  
on the most splendid matsuri or festival in all of Shinto,  
which is attended by the highest dignitaries of earth and heaven.

Amaterasu is the goddess of the emperor himself.  
In ancient time he worshipped her, and everyone else worshipped him,  
a cultural practice, which was taken advantage of by the Meiji rulers  
in the 1800s, who appropriated Shinto,  
the ancient indigenous religion of Japan, and used its practices and  
the piety of its people for military and nationalistic purposes.

After WW II all that changed, but the Ise Shrine still retains  
powerful association with Japanese Nationalism, as it honors Japan's highest goddess and  
her highest worshipper, the Emperor.

Work began on the new temple in 2005 and in exactly eight years, 2013,  
the Emperor will come and take  
the goddess for her stroll across the courtyard.

Then the remains of the old temple, which is at present the current temple,  
will go on to other glories. Each timber has a particular journey,  
perhaps being used to build a torii at a shrine someplace else in Japan.  
Sacred treasures and ornaments are predestined to similar journeys,  
to museums or as gifts to esteemed personages.  
Some things are burned or buried as they are too sacred to be used elsewhere.

The whole of Sengu - the name of this ritual rebuilding,  
is a mind boggling project, perhaps more so today than 1,000 years ago, because it's  
all done the way it was always done.

Today few craftsmen possess the expertise with ancient tools and fibers

that are needed, and the natural resources of metals, wood and worms to make silk, just so, are becoming scarce.

I read a few years ago that the particular vein of ore used to make the sacred swords was almost depleted, which could be a crisis, because the faithful transmission of technological craft and creation is vital to Sengu.

So, back to O-ku's question, why in the world do they do this ritual act, which is so labor and cost and time intensive, and what wisdom shimmers in that practice for us? The religious and cultural DNA of Sengu is complex. Today I'll highlight just one religious and one cultural strand.

First a religious reason.

Shinto, like UUism, focuses on deeds not creeds.

There is no official sacred text or theology one studies.

Shinto is a religion of ritual actions rather than words:

--rituals of purification that help one recognize and respect that which is sacred, set apart; do we have rituals of purification?

Marking respect for what is set apart?

--Shinto has rituals of presentation by which one brings gifts, offerings, the fruits of the blessings in one's life to share with the Kami;

What are our rituals of presentation? How do we give our best to the master?

--rituals of prayer (preceded by clapping to get the Kami's attention!)

by which one recognizes that we are a part of something bigger and that we need something beyond ourselves in order to live well;

what rituals do we have that point a reverent finger to that which is bigger than the rugged individual, standing alone?

--and rituals of pleasure, of matsuri or festivals including dancing, eating, playful affirmations of the goodness of life and the natural world;

what are our rituals of pleasure??

Like Shinto, our faith includes rituals of purification, presentation, prayer, and pleasure though we may not always recognize them as such.

It's not surprising that Shintoists, who so value all these non-verbal ways to act out things vital to fullness of human life, would create and carry out for centuries this most intricate ritual act of Sengu, which includes years' worth of ceremonies of purification, presentation, prayer, and pleasure.

Now a cultural reason.

Sengu preserves the knowledge of ancient methods and materials,

passing from one generation to the next the craft and culture

it represents, and more importantly passing on the confidence that the Japanese people will always have what they need to be fully themselves, that they will be

eternally renewed, that the sun will always rise on Japan.  
It's a way of speaking in spite of fear or concern,  
a confidence that - **The sun will rise.**

Sengu is a kind of prayer for ongoing rejuvenation of the life  
of the Japanese nation and the heart of her people.  
They claim it is a uniquely Japanese practice,  
not replicated through out the world.

**This astounding ritual raises many questions in me as a person of faith,  
a person who has made building structures of faith her life's work.**

Sengu challenges me to think again about tradition,  
about how it can entwine our hearts to what is most precious and enduring in  
the human spirit, and how it can entrap and suffocate as well,  
drawing down our precious and perhaps non-renewable resources.

To continue rebuilding the same house feels like suicide in some ways.  
In my life, I will deprive myself of what is possible now,  
If I keep rebuilding structures that my spirit dwelt in yesterday.  
If I continue working from the blue print of a 35 year old Southerner,  
Who is wife and mother and daughter and college teacher,  
I will miss the richness and pleasure and peace of this age and place and people.

To drive through life looking only in the rear view mirror,  
To maintain monuments that are more museums  
than house to hold tomorrow  
contradicts our knowing that transformation, adaptability,  
evolution are what we need, to survive, to thrive!

We know that if we do not seek out and support age and eon appropriate goals  
for ourselves here, in our house of faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,  
it will become, no longer a Meeting House, but a ghost house.

This literal structure is breathtakingly beautiful, and we treasure it,  
but today we would build a very different kind of Meeting House,  
because our needs and resources are different now.

We don't have the luxury to consider literally rebuilding our faith structure  
every 20 years, but we do have the chance to rebuild  
what we dream and what we do in it,  
to look at and list the resources we have today,  
to build something more appropriate to the hopes and dreams of this day, this people, this  
town.

How do we figure out which practices and programs and rituals acts  
to carry forward, and which to leave behind?  
Which are part of an enduring tradition necessary to our very identity  
and which are temporal entrapments in the past

which will stultify or suffocate us?

I'm reminded of the Buddha's story of the raft at the river,  
one that always shimmers with spirit for me.  
The man came to a river on his journey and found no bridge.  
Over many days he built a sturdy raft and forded with his family and belongings.  
Once crossed, should he take the raft along with him?  
They could encounter another river;  
it took a long time to build this sturdy raft.  
They could use it, propped on its side for shelter from wind and rain  
at night, or as a platform for dancing or sleeping above the mud.  
It has many uses.  
The Buddha advised, Leave the Raft at the river and go on.

As a questing Hindu creating an offshoot religion without knowing it,  
Siddharta Gautama knew the challenge of deciding what to leave  
and what to take along, especially regarding building structures of faith.

The shaman's drum of tradition carries the powerful heart beat  
of the human race, helps us remember the dance of humanity at its best.  
Tradition is vital.

And, at the same time, that raft may become so awkward  
and out of synch with our current needs that we sometimes must  
put it down to move ahead in order to have the fullness of life  
uniquely given anew with each new day.  
--Some things, though precious, are not meant to survive,  
Though we fear speaking this truth.

When might we not mind tearing down something, which is still good enough,  
for something else which doesn't even look all that different?  
The questions swirl. It is mind boggling trying to figure out what to recreate,  
age to age the same, with proud integrity,  
and what to innovate, adapt for posterity and prosperity!

There is that which endures age to age the same,  
which we can capture for a moment in the repetitious rebuilding  
of some ritual or relationship or behavior.  
What commitments do you renew every day or week,  
and what motivates you?  
And what eternal human values underlie your motivations?

Every Sunday that you and I show up here, we are ritually rebuilding  
something eternal, honoring a traditional structure,  
and because ours is a house of spirit and a faith that is free,  
we sometimes tear down half the house.  
We were not meant to survive, and...we are star dust which enjoys eternal life.

(end)

