

Sermon: “Engaging Our Sixth Source: That Old-Time Religion”

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Today’s service brings to a close our series of sermons on the six sources which Unitarian Universalism draws upon for inspiration and insight. We have talked about these six wisdom sources and how each one has changed and been changed within this faith. Today, I will share some thoughts about the sixth source; the one that was added a mere fourteen years ago in response to the growth in our membership of those claiming earth-centered traditions as the basis of their own faith. The one that reflects the passionate allegiance to and priority given by many of us to the seventh principle, which is itself a latecomer to the UU list of ethical commitments, expressed in the Principles stenciled on our wall. I mean, of course, the covenant to respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Closely linked to this Principle, both logically and intuitively, is our Sixth Source, which reads: Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

The decision to add earth-centered traditions to our Sources was very controversial. In fact, in some very Humanist congregations, it is still considered with a great deal of suspicion. Why should this be? Who can deny that many of us, if not most of us, draw spiritual nourishment from nature? Who doesn’t want to live in harmony with nature?

Well, the Sixth Source was, and is, revolutionary in several ways. First of all, its addition formally acknowledged and affirmed the presence of Paganism (or more correctly, Neopaganism) in our congregations. While some Americans continue to associate Paganism with Satanism or Black Magic, this was not the reason for the concern. Most UUs understood that their neighbors in the pews were not devil-worshippers. No, the hard pill for Unitarian Universalism to swallow had to do with (at least) three changes to our congregational culture – and cultural change is never (or hardly ever) greeted with enthusiasm by those who are the guardians, the gate-keepers of that culture.

First off, these Neopagans challenged the supremacy of reason as the sole trustworthy way of knowing and understanding the world. Now, reliance on reason, as you know, has been our claim to distinction for generations, all the way back to the founders of American Unitarianism and its forbears, the thinkers of the Enlightenment. Now, here were these upstart Pagans claiming that reason alone was not a sufficient foundation of faith for everyone. What about intuition, they asked? What about poetry and metaphor? What about direct participation in ritual, and the wisdom of the body? What about a transcendent connection to the natural world – that world which we cannot control, that world of mystery, power and awe? What about the primacy of human beings in that world? What if the Humanists had it wrong, and human beings were not the pinnacle of evolution, but merely another creature within the web of existence? The introduction of Paganism to our churches challenged these long-treasured assumptions.

What's more, the growth of Paganism in UU circles during the 1970s was thoroughly intertwined with the growth of feminism. With its emphasis on female spirituality and female power embodied in the form of the Goddess, traditional patriarchal beliefs were severely challenged. As were the male-dominated ministry and governance – the distribution of power in our churches, which we inherited from our Jewish and Christian history. As were the heterosexual assumptions of our culture prior to those tumultuous years of the 1970s.

Finally, in addition to the theological and gender challenges to UU tradition, Paganism brought with it a younger generation. This tension between the older, predominantly Humanist generation and the post-war generation in search of a more “spiritual” church experience has been played out in many of our UU churches that were founded during the Humanist boom of the 1950s and '60s.

Even now, even in congregations such as this one, in which differing theologies and world views are sincerely welcomed, I would guess that Pagans may not feel entirely comfortable sharing their beliefs with the majority, despite the fact that they are now the second-largest theological group in our churches. If they do, they may run the risk of being dismissed as flaky, superstitious or anti-intellectual.

So, before we go any farther, let's define who we're talking about when we talk about UU Pagans. Neopaganism is just like Unitarian Universalism in general in that it's hard to put it in a box, to generalize about its adherents or its tenets. In this way, Paganism is a natural addition to Unitarian Universalism. Like our wider movement, it refuses to be easily defined. It welcomes the individual seeker, whatever path he or she happens to be on. It doesn't have a creed, or a sacred text. It abhors rules and regulations. It is an open and individualistic faith tradition, a liberal religion that is nonrestrictive and demands only that its followers do no harm. It accepts a wide variety of beliefs and practices. What could be more UU?

The term Paganism embraces the Wiccan tradition – the ancient craft of herbalists and midwives known as “witches” -- the Celtic Druids, Norse and Germanic mythology, shamanism, the indigenous religions of Native Americans and others. The word “pagan” means “country-dweller” – those who were the last to be exposed to and the last to accept the dominant religions of the Book – especially Christianity. Pagans are monotheists and polytheists, pantheists and natural theists. Most UU Pagans, as true UUs, are eclectic in their beliefs. Because they need not conform to any dogma, as true UUs, they are free to pick and choose their practices and traditions. As true UUs, they are free to invent themselves. As true UUs, they define themselves by their actions and practices rather than by a commonly-held set of beliefs.

What Pagan traditions do have in common is a love for and a felt kinship with nature. They take nature seriously. Nature is not just a pretty backdrop to our human activities. It is the personification of the Divine. Pagan rituals are tied to the cycles of nature – cycles that govern us human beings as they do all of creation. Humans are not separate from the natural world. We **are** the natural world, neither more nor less than the

oak tree, the mountain, the cloud or the owl. Our call as humans is to honor and restore the earth to wholeness.

Another shared characteristic in the honor paid to the feminine aspect of the Divine. Goddess worship is central to many Pagan belief systems. The Goddess, presented in the three aspects of the Maiden, the Mother and the Crone, represents the power of conception and birth, the regeneration of the earth, the wisdom of the healer, the eternal Mother, and the power that dwells within women. The Goddess represents the gifts inherent in all the stages of a woman's life, in challenge to our culture's fixation on sexual desirability and availability as the determinants of a woman's worth.

What is more, the deity or deities of Paganism exist alongside us. They are present in our daily lives and we are able to interact with them. This is not the God of the Book, the God who hands down His laws and operates as the Holy Enforcer from on high. These are manifestations of the divine that are apparent all around us – in the wind, the fire, the animals, rocks and flowers – in our very selves. As Starhawk, the well-known Wiccan author and activist has written, “The Goddess does not rule the world; she **is** the world.”

Paganism in all its forms is inspired by the oldest religions of them all – the Goddess-based religions that allowed early humankind to pay homage to the generative powers of the earth and of the female body. We know that Easter, Harvest festivals and Christmas itself were Christian co-optations of Pagan traditions honoring the earth, its cycles and rhythms, life and death and rebirth. Modern Pagans seek to reaffirm the value and power of these Ur-religions.

And, as with the wider Unitarian Universalist movement, Paganism asserts the ability of humans to make things happen in the world. We are not the helpless playthings or hapless servants of a distant or harsh God. What we do makes a difference. We hold the power to affect our surroundings. We exist in relationship to the Holy – a relationship that is loving and reciprocal.

The Sacred in Nature, the individual quest, the dependence on direct experience of the Divine – these aspects of Paganism are reminiscent of another development in our UU tradition that was, in its time, equally controversial. I'm talking about Transcendentalism. Transcendentalism, with its insistence on the immanence, or presence of the Divine, in our lives; with its search for direct mystical experience of the Divine as manifested in nature, was also perceived as threatening to the orthodox Unitarianism of its day.

And, as with Transcendentalism, Paganism has enriched our Unitarian Universalist spirituality and expanded our freedom to express that spirituality. What has paganism given to our movement?

Well, for one thing, it has taken us out of our comfort zone, and that is always a good thing. It has reunited our heads with our hearts and our bodies. It proclaims that both the body and the mind are holy. It has fed our hunger for ritual, for participatory worship. It has updated our language, making it more gender-neutral and more poetic. It has added a

certain exuberance to our traditions with its frank celebration of the body and its connections to sexuality and the rhythms of nature. It has made us less prudish about the experience of ecstasy and transcendence, about our hunger for worship and ritual. It has reminded us of the human need to celebrate as well as to analyze and understand. It ties us to the real: to the movements of the earth and the moon, to planting and harvest, birth and death. It leavens our sometimes dreary and overly solemn intellectualism with the possibility of reverence, pleasure, delight and joy. I dare say it is the most creative and innovative of the threads that currently make up our UU fabric. It reminds us that spirit and matter are one; nature and humankind are one; divinity and humankind are one. And that we, therefore, are all one, all part of this joyful and astonishing and mysterious life that we share on this one precious planet.

More than any other of our treasured sources, these earth-centered traditions, this Neopaganism, has enriched our understanding of what it really means to be part of the interdependent web of existence. This is a new and invaluable understanding of what it means to be Unitarian: We are all children of the same natural phenomena and laws, the same life force, the same Spirit of Life. And it gives us a deeper understanding of what it means to be a Universalist: Without making claims that it is for everyone, Paganism affirms that we are all in this together. What affects one of us affects us all. We are participants in this web of life, not bystanders.

Unitarian Universalism will never be the same, thanks to our inclusion of earth-centered religions, the challenge and the richness they present to us. Do these beliefs and practices make it more complicated to define the heart of Unitarian Universalism? Undoubtedly. We refuse to limit ourselves to orthodoxy, old or new. Our understanding of truth and meaning is ever unfolding. This is the very essence of our Living Tradition. And for this we can be truly thankful.