

The Circle of Life
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This morning we are concluding our six part series on the sources that feed the living tradition that is Unitarian Universalism. Every week I have told you that I view the sources as the rivers that feed the ocean that is our religious movement. The metaphor of rivers is most appropriate for the source we are discussing today - 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.

If you turn to the front of your hymnal and look for this source you won't find it. The sources in our hymnal, which was published in 1993, include the five sources that were approved at our annual General Assembly in 1984, when our seven principles were also approved. In 1995 the sixth and, as of today, final source was narrowly approved. By all accounts the discussion about adding this source was spirited. Some people did not want to add language that would include traditions such as paganism, Wicca and goddesses but more people thought this was a natural connection with our seventh principle, which reminds us to respect the interdependent web of life that we are a part, and it "officially" became one of the sources.

It is ironic that the teachings from Earth-centered traditions, such as paganism, was the last source to be added to the list of wisdom that informs what it is to be a Unitarian Universalist. Today, many people, including some UUs, think that those who turn to paganism, goddess-worship and Wicca, to be part of the new age movement, or even worse, just plain weird. Of course to some religious people all of us UUs are weird. But those people who practice the rituals of Earth-centered traditions often face even more prejudice. In some places of worship the worst thing that can be said about someone is that they are a pagan or a witch.

But the lessons and teachings of the Earth-centered traditions were around long before any of the religions of today. The Dutch theologian, Cornelis Miskotte, said it perhaps best, "To despise the pagan is to despise the human. Paganism is the world's first religion." Paganism *is* the world's first religion and all the religions that came after it have included and incorporated, even appropriated, many of the teachings and rituals it offers us.

I admitted to you a few weeks ago I didn't really understand humanism when I became a Unitarian Universalist. I could say the same thing about paganism. A few years ago I did what I recommend everyone do. I took the beliefomatic test at Beliefnet.com. Beliefnet.com is a wonderful website that teaches about the world's religions. The beliefomatic test asks a series of questions and then advises you, based on your answer, what religious traditions you are most compatible with. My top three are Unitarian Universalism, neo-paganism and liberal Quaker. I had never considered myself a neo-pagan before but today I know that neo-paganism is a term that means different things to different people (just like humanism) but they are all grounded in a common place – earth and nature.

Our sixth source reminds us that it is the Earth-centered traditions that teach us to celebrate the sacred circle of life. Celebration and ritual, as Margo Adler writes about, is part and parcel of what it means to honor the teachings of all the earth-centered traditions. Almost every religious holiday we celebrate today has its roots in the honoring of the turning of the seasons, the wisdom and hope nature offers us. Pick your favorite holiday and you will most likely find its connections to Earth – Easter, Halloween, Hanukah, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's – every single one can be traced back to a meaningful event in the cycle of nature and the cycle of life; events and cycles that the our ancestors from thousands of years ago incorporated into tribal and religious traditions.

Somewhere along the way we began, especially in Western civilization, to change our affections from the ground we walk and the sky we gaze upon, to something, or someone, that we could not see or touch. The former President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, William Schulz, asks the question, "Whom should I adore?" and writes, "Most Western religions have answered back, 'Adore

the Creator', and supplied an image (Zeus, Jehovah, Christ) to be adored. But our answer is far different. Whom should we adore? The Creation, surely, for whatever there be of the Creator will be made manifest in her handiwork. This is why we love the Earth, honor the human body, and bless the stars. Religion is not just a matter of things unseen. For us the holy is hidden but it shows its face in the blush of the world's exuberance."

The blush of the world's exuberance. Our sixth source invites us to not only celebrate the sacred circle of life that we are each a part but asks us to live in harmony with nature's blush and exuberance. Those who turn to paganism and other earth-centered traditions may be more inclined to do that than others, but it is important to remember that loving and honoring nature has long been part of our heritage.

One of our most famous Unitarian ministers, Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote his first book, Nature, in 1836 to reflect on the role nature plays in living the good life and getting closer to the divine, which Emerson called God. Emerson never would have called himself a pagan or a witch but for him nature was the essence of what it meant to be a religious person. Emerson knew a little about living in harmony with nature but his good friend Henry David Thoreau decided to take living in harmony with nature to a whole different level.

Thoreau, like many prophets before him, left society to refresh and revitalize his spirits by retreating to Walden's Pond to live in the woods for two years. He wrote about his task while living in the woods, "My profession is always to be on alert to find God in nature, to know God's lurking places, to attend to all the oratories, the operas in nature...to watch for, to describe all the divine features I detect in nature."

Matthew Fox, the contemporary theologian, priest and founder of the University of Creation Spirituality speaks succinctly about the role nature plays in cultivating our spiritual lives, "Our spiritual lives begin and end in the refreshment of the sea and earth, the mountains and the skies, the flowers and the sunshine." Our ancient brothers and sisters knew this instinctively, some of us, including me, took a little longer to learn.

I grew up in an apartment building in San Francisco and I was a city boy through and through. I loved skyscrapers and concrete monuments more than space and leaves. My friends and I spent as much time playing in hotel elevators and construction sites as we did on the concrete playground at our school. My need for the sunshine, flowers and water Matthew Fox, Emerson and Thoreau wrote about, was occasionally fed by the baseball diamond I frolicked in at Funston playground and the views of the Pacific Ocean I saw from the roller coaster at Playland at the Beach. My grandmother tried to interest me in gardening – what a bore – and my father at camping – the bugs were a pain and I never could catch a fish; when it came to nature and spirituality for that matter I was a lost cause.

That began to change for me when I entered recovery at the age of 21 to fight my compulsive gambling addiction. I was told that if I had a chance to recover from an addiction that took all my money, my girlfriend and almost my life, I would have to develop a belief in a power greater than myself, a God of my own understanding. For someone who was an atheist and had no spiritual life that was going to be a big challenge.

My relationship with a higher power began when I visited a Redwood forest with a friend. Although I had been in forests before, I had never experienced the sense of mystery and awe that only a 2000 year old, 275 foot California redwood can produce, until I was actively seeking a relationship – or at least a definition – of a higher power. The Redwood tree became my symbol for that power, the entry point for me to seek a relationship with something greater than myself. Within a year or two I read Emerson's Nature and Thoreau's Walden Pond and my spiritual transformation through nature had begun.

I know my experience is not unique but I did not learn until many years later that there was a tradition among some California Native Americans to go into the Redwood forests when they needed strength. They would stand against a tree and remain there until they were literally recharged. A friend of mine incorporates into her daily spiritual practice hugging and praying with a tree. Last year I went to her house and joined her in this ritual. I felt like a bit of an idiot hugging a tree on her front lawn but I felt more grounded and more connected to the divine when I did it.

The Native Americans, the pagans, the prophets, people through all time knew what we know too. How many of us have found more comfort and inspiration by the side of a rushing, mountain stream than we have by the side of a religious leader? How often have we discovered more peace and insight while reading the patterns of the stars than we have while reading pages in sacred scriptures? How often have we found more serenity with a purring cat in our laps than we have with our hands folded in prayer? And, as hard as it might be for a preacher to believe, how often have we found more love and more joy backpacking in the woods or sitting by the ocean watching a sunrise than we have while sitting in a sanctuary listening to a sermon?

Nature speaks to us in ways which words and people rarely do. Why? Perhaps it is because nature was here before us. No matter which creation story we chose to believe – that God made humans on the sixth day after he created everything else or that we have evolved from an explosion of stars and matter millions of years ago – nature has created us and we are its children.

Our sixth source inspires us when we think of how we have been created; it can also comfort us when we consider our demise. Nature, and the religious traditions that have evolved in connection with her, teach us many lessons. Some of the lessons are warm, fuzzy and romantic. Those lessons that include beautiful sunsets, tropical beaches and breathtakingly beautiful flowers and forests. But some lessons are harsher. The wisdom of the Earth is not only beautiful but she is deadly as well. Hurricanes, earthquakes and tornadoes kill thousands of animals, flowers, trees and people every year. There randomness usually doesn't make any sense. Leafs and flowers burst alive in the spring and lie dead on the road in the fall. We may watch with joy when we see baby hippos and elephants being born on television and we may turn away when lions attack and kill hyenas, or mothers eat their young.

Nature can be a messy place. Just like life. One of my favorite and most comforting passages in the Bible, is the third chapter of Ecclesiastes. I imagine it was passed on from pagan stories from long ago. "For everything there is a season, and time for every matter under heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance."

Our sixth source is the newest addition to the ever changing, ever moving religious tradition that is called Unitarian Universalism. But it is not only a source for pagans and witches, it a source for all of us. A source that I predict will be one of the most important and relevant in the future. The ancient teachings of the Earth-centered traditions are becoming more modern and more critical to us today. How can we live in harmony with nature? This question is both a political and a religious one. "Save the planet" is not only a bumper sticker we put on our car, it is the invitation and faint whisperings of the ancient people and their religious traditions from long ago. As with all our sources and principles we find spiritual sustenance and spiritual challenge, a reminder that we must be acting in the world, if we are to truly live our faith.

Our six sources reflect the diversity of theology and inspiration we turn to so that we can craft lives of goodness, purpose and meaning. They remind us that although we may drink from different rivers we join together so that we can not only learn from our differences, in a community of memory and hope, but so that we can bring more goodness, more justice, more love to the world.

Margo Adler is a pagan but she is also a Unitarian Universalist. She ends the essay I read from earlier telling why that is so.

"Now that I've told you how wonderful these earth-centered traditions are, you may be wondering why I became a Unitarian Universalist. If the Pagan and Goddess traditions were giving me so much, why did I need an official religion, let alone a church! Goddess help us!

I guess I chose UUism because I need to live in balance. I can do all those wonderful, earth-centered spiritual things: sing under the stars, drum for hours, create moving ceremonies for the changes of seasons or the passage of time in the lives of men and women. But I also need to be a worldly, down-to-earth person in a complicated world--someone who believes

oppression is real, that tragedies happen, that chaos happens, that not everything is for a purpose. Unitarian Universalism gives me a place to be at home with some of my closest friends: my doubts. Of course, there are many rationalists within the earth-centered community, but somehow I feel more centered in this denomination. And I think, in turn, the Pagan community has brought to UUism the joy of ceremony, and a lot of creative and artistic ability that will leave the denomination with a richer liturgy and a bit more juice and mystery."

Her words provide the perfect ending to our study of the sources and remind us how we can drink from many rivers and still swim in the same ocean. And why in the midst of such theological diversity we say and try to live these words which follow the six sources...

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support. May it be so. Amen and Blessed Be.