

SOURCE #6: WISDOM OF EARTH-CENTERED TRADITIONS

By Rev. Kit Ketcham, April 6, 2008

When I was a kid in elementary school, like many of you, no doubt, and like Margot Adler, we spent some extended period of time one year learning about the many gods and goddesses of early peoples: Norse, Roman, Greek, and Egyptian gods and goddesses were the basic groups we covered.

I remember being impressed that four days of the week were actually named after Norse gods and goddesses: Tuesday, for Tyr, god of war and sky; Wednesday, for Woden, god of wisdom and head honcho of the Norse pantheon; Thursday, for Thor, god of thunder; and Friday, for Freya, goddess of love and beauty (and fertility, though I didn't know it at the time).

As a young Scandinavian, I was pretty pleased with my ancestral deities, though my devout Christian parents were quick to make sure I understood that Norse, Roman, Greek, and Egyptian gods and goddesses were myths, not real. Only the Christian God and Jesus were real and I should not ever forget that!

Of course, being a heretic-in-the -making, though unaware of it at the time, I kept silent about my questions: how do we know that there's only God and Jesus? What about the similarity between the Roman god Zeus impregnating the mortal mothers of such heroic figures as Hercules and Perseus? Isn't the Christian God just as violent as Jupiter or Zeus? And as unpredictable as Loki, the Norse trickster god? If the Christian God mated with the mortal Mary, isn't the son Jesus just a godling, not a true god? And so on.

The answers to these questions never came to me with blinding clarity but it did gradually dawn on me over several years that gods and goddesses were a cultural phenomenon, that religions were often hereditary, not chosen, that understandings of the Divine were as varied as human beings are varied, and that female figures were pretty much left out of the Christian pantheon.

Since we Baptists were nervous about Catholicism, we didn't count Mary or any of the other female saints, who were clearly not godlike anyhow since they were only venerated, not really worshipped, according to our Catholic neighbors.

Eventually, I left Baptistness behind and signed up as a Unitarian Universalist and began to explore what it meant to be part of a faith tradition that was so pluralistic that it included Christians, Jews, atheists and agnostics, Buddhists, pagans, and humanists, among others.

In the process of learning about my new religious path, I began to be aware of the dearth of female spiritual and religious teaching in my past. I knew the stories of such heroines as Esther and Ruth and the Virgin Mary, from my Bible studies, but I did not know anything about women's spiritual experiences. I knew what my own spiritual experiences had been---sort of---but I had never looked at how they might be similar to other women's experiences, because of our common biology and societal roles.

Gradually, through reading such classics as "The Chalice and the Blade" by Riane Eisler and the works of such feminist theologians as the Rev. Shirley Ranck, who wrote "Cakes for the Queen of Heaven", I began to see how important the role of female experience could be to a complete understanding of my spiritual life.

I could see that traditional roles for females in the church were changing and that my life might even change because of them.

This was in the 70's and 80's, when feminism was in an earlier stage, an angry stage, a stage when women were refusing to abide by the old ways of being female, when they were demanding an equal place at the table, fighting for rights that they had long been denied.

At the same time, as Margot Adler has written, nature writers such as Loren Eiseley and Rachel Carson, were warning society that the natural world was being defiled, that human beings had misused their power on the earth, had misread the Genesis story which seems to advocate human domination over the earth.

The Transcendentalist poets and authors of the 19th century, including Henry David Thoreau, had long proclaimed that Divinity was in all of nature and Unitarians had begun to acknowledge the importance of naturalism in religion.

Searching for the roots of women's spirituality, hungry for evidence that women's strength and wisdom had once been much more important to society, eager for connection with other women to explore the spiritual meanings of female life, women began to look backwards in time, back to pre-Christian days when Mother Earth was revered and the life-giving role of woman's sexuality was more valuable than a sexy physical appearance.

Ancient Celtic traditions seemed to offer something that women had long intuited but had not concretized---rituals which celebrated woman strength, motherhood, and agedness--not servitude to males but honor and respect for wisdom which came from the female experience of menstruation, pregnancy, birth, raising young and caring for others.

Many women affiliated with Wiccan covens and other pagan religious groups, as did men who also wanted to honor female wisdom. But it wasn't easy to be a pagan worshipper in those days and even now it can be difficult.

Though the word "pagan" simply means "country dweller" and "heathen" means "heath dweller", the words had come to imply something very pejorative: witches, black magic, Satanism, evil. And though authentic Wiccan witches had good solid scholarship to back up their claims of virtue and though modern witches are not actually burned at the stake any more, to announce that one was a witch or Wiccan was tantamount to announcing one's membership in an evil cult. At least in the public eye.

As Wicca and other nature-based religious groups grew, so did an interest in indigenous religions, primarily Native American spirituality. The ceremonies and rituals of the First Nations were widely used by white seekers who wanted to find alternatives to traditional religious worship.

This practice was often viewed with misgiving by Native Americans, who saw their ancient rituals misappropriated by those who had no personal connection to the traditions of the ethnic group they were copying. In fact, it felt to many like additional oppression by the dominant society, particularly when some practitioners, both white and Native, commercialized the rituals by charging admission or teaching workshops so that others could make money off of the religious practice.

Despite the problems with the upsurge in interest in earth-centered religions, it was clear that the passion for nature-based religious expression emerged from a basic human understanding---that there is power beyond human power, that it is unseen and transcendent, and that it is important to find ways to be in relationship with that power, mysterious and inexplicable as it may be.

Science is inadequate to explain completely the mysteries of birth, life and death. Human will is not content to passively accept these mysteries; human will wants to know why they exist, what can be done to meet the challenges of birth, life and death, how to safeguard life, to savor life, to express gratitude for life. Human will desires meaning, not just mechanics.

And so the energy began to build among women and among nature-based practitioners to acknowledge the power of these ideas, to connect them to our UU 7th principle, our commitment to respect for the interdependent web of existence, of which human beings are all a part.

And out of this interest, a group of Unitarian Universalists who practice earth-based religious rituals formed the Covenant of UU Pagans, or CUUPs, as it is known. CUUPs groups began to invite other UUs into their circle, hosting events for the natural cycles of the earth's year: solstice, equinox, harvest, planting, birth and death.

In 1995, acceptance of the importance of earth-based traditions to our UU movement resulted in a General Assembly vote which added the 6th Source to our avowed Sources. You'll notice that in most of our hymnals, which were printed before 1995, the 6th Source does not appear. We print it on our O/S every week, however, and I would invite you to read it with me now.

Let's start with the introductory phrase: The living tradition which we share draws from many sources: and moving on down, 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.

What does the language of this Source mean to us as Unitarian Universalists? We are not all members of the Covenant of UU Pagans, for example, but this Source nevertheless enriches our spiritual lives as well.

Many of us who have given up on the traditional concept of God as an old white guy in the sky have come to see God as the power beyond human power, the natural powers of the universe, the mysteries which we only partly understand, the puzzles that science works diligently to figure out, the forces of nature which we cannot control but can only respond to---wind, rain, sun, moon, tides, gravity, night and day.

And we recognize the need to be in harmony with those mysteries, to learn to work with them instead of trying to bend them to our will.

We recognize, as well, that the earth, the universe, is the original sacred text of humankind, that all knowledge that humans have gained comes from our observations and our relationships with the earth and universe.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are committed to stewardship of the earth. We understand that we are part of the resilient yet fragile web of life, that damage to that web is damage to ourselves and our neighbors.

What does it mean that we celebrate the sacred circle of life? What does it mean to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature? It doesn't necessarily mean that we join a CUUPs chapter or live in a teepee. It does mean that when we celebrate a birthday, we think of the sacredness of each life and what that life means to us and to others. It does mean that when we come together to mourn the loss of a life, we think of the sacredness of that life and how that life has changed us, how we have been affected by that life.

It does mean that when we marry or when our friends and loved ones marry, that this relationship, this bond between two people, strengthens and increases the love in the world, thereby strengthening and increasing the love we experience in the world.

And love is surely one of those mysterious powers beyond human power, whose visibility is revealed more in actions than in science.

It means that we are respectful of the natural world, that we remember that clear-cutting a slope without repairing the damage of the loss of vegetation means that the earth downhill from the slope will be carried away by the next rains and that this will cause damage to us as well as to the earth.

It means that we grow our own food, as we can, and are attuned to what we can grow in our climate, in our soil, in our seasons, in the space we have. It means that we are careful about what we add to the soil, to the water table, to our own food supplies.

It means that we recognize that we can hurt the earth and we refrain from doing so, as much as possible. It means that we recognize that other species depend on us for justice and mercy, as do other human tribes. We recognize that we are part of the interdependent web, not the masters of it, and we are humble in that role.

Some of you read my internet weblog, titled Ms. Kitty's Saloon and Roadshow (thank you for your readership!) and may have read recent responses to a post in which I asked people to tell me how their own UUism is enhanced or affected by our 6th Source, earth-centered religious wisdom.

There were a variety of responses to my query, one of them very critical of modern paganism, citing the lack of historical evidence for ritual forms that could be used in this century, criticizing those who seem to show off their paganism without having thought it through very thoroughly, who use pagan or native rites without a deep sense of respect and connection to the tradition. His words hit a nerve among some other responders, who felt that their legitimate religious path was being unfairly judged.

Knowing this critic very well, since he is my son, a longtime reader of my blog, I know that he is critical always of form for form's sake, critical of those who seem shallow in their understanding and passion and impatient with anyone who seems to be acting out a part rather than being authentic.

I was pleased by other readers' responses to his critique: courteous yet expressing discomfort with what felt unfair and laying out their own thoughtful foundation for their attraction to earth-based religious practices.

One such response came from a fellow I know mainly as Ogre. Ogre is a seminary student, a deep thinker and a born and raised UU. He found his UUism enhanced by the light of paganism. He wrote:

"I've come back through the door and am not an actively practicing Pagan. But I'm very sympathetic. There were insights that made Christianity far more accessible, meaningful and palatable, for example. There were experiences that left my comfortable agnostic-inclinations... at least discomfited. More than anything, it provided me a radically different perspective on religion. ...Modern Paganism, in most cases, is consistent with Classical Paganism in that it's minimally concerned with issues of orthodoxy--but rather with orthopraxy. Soaking in that for a couple decades gave me a perspective on UUism and its relationship to the mainstream of religion in North America that is incredibly valuable.

"It provides a vibrant, pulsing, living heartbeat to my UU pantheism.

"It also permitted me to participate in shaping liturgy and worship in ways that will forever be valuable to me. And I can at least see some ways to channel that into the sometimes stiff shape of a typical UU congregation and its services."

Other responders, such as Lizard Eater, said similar things: *"... it was as if I had been living locked up in a single house, and suddenly the front door was opened wide. Concepts that I had felt in my heart, had a name here, and were affirmed. Magick! A power given to all! A duality of female/male energy! Goddess! Seasons! A*

connection to the earth. A lack of judgment. A universal impetus to do good, not harm. Karma.

“Wicca was a part of my journey and parts of it remain with me still. And ultimately, it has given me a deeper appreciation for Unitarian Universalism. I was born and raised UU and so it was something that I could take for granted. But now, when someone walks in our doors and after their first UU worship experience, with glowing eyes, they say, “This is my religion, that I never knew existed” ... I know what they mean. I’ve had that moment, too. Through Wicca.”

There’s a reading in our hymnal entitled The Eternal Verity by Waldemar Argow, which reads in part: “Ancient as the home is the temple; ancient as the workbench is the altar...Older than written language is spoken prayer...religion is the first and last—the universal language of the human heart..For an eternal verity abides beneath diversities, we are children of one great love, united in our one eternal family.”

In acknowledging the wisdom of earth-based traditions, even though knowledge of their actual ancient rituals may be sketchy and modern earth rituals seek to re-enact their power, we do a very human thing. We go back in time to discover how our ancestors, our foremothers and fathers respected and sought harmony with the powers of the universe.

In our 6th Source, we UUs acknowledge that our origins offer essential pathways to relationship with all there is. Though we seek answers to our questions through science, we also know that answers do not necessarily contain meaning, that there are some things which are too important to be understood fully and that living in the mystery is sometimes more valuable than unraveling it.

Do answers diminish the importance of meaning? Not at all. But religion and culture evolve and answers change. Meaning may also change as human beings come to learn more from our relationship with mystery.

Unitarian Universalism is a process. It is not a religion carved in stone, but a living tradition, open to new understandings, new meanings.

And if, in our wondering about the mysteries of the earth and universe, we do not rush headlong into scientific inquiry but pause to reflect upon and find worth in the unexplained, the mystery, perhaps then we can understand and appreciate the magnetism of earth-centered spirituality and its importance to our own faith.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

Hymn #163, For the Earth Forever Turning

BENEDICTION:

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that our roots go deep in history, beyond early Christianity and Judaism and other world religions, into pre-history, into a time when the earth, the moon, the sun, the stars were all we knew. May we acknowledge those roots with appreciation and respect and may we bring them into our daily spiritual lives by honoring and living in harmony with the cycles of nature. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and, most especially these pagan, hallowed words, Blessed Be.