

First UU Church of Berks
UU Source 6: Earth-Centered Spirituality
Rev. Sandra Fees
April 6, 2008



Today we have reached the last sermon in a series on our six Unitarian Universalist sources. We have talked about direct experience, prophetic witness, wisdom from the world's religions, Jewish and Christian teachings, and humanism.

The sixth source is: “the 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.”

This source is the newest to Unitarian Universalism. It was added in 1995. While it is new, its importance to our faith is not. The sixth source is deeply rooted in our heritage. The earth-centered focus emerged from the insights of our 19th century Unitarian Transcendentalist forbearers, among them Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller. For them, nature formed the centerpiece of theology. The search for the holy always began in creation. (Our Chosen Faith, “For the Beauty of the Earth,” Forrest Church)

Just as Earth-centered traditions are not truly new to Unitarian Universalism, this spirituality is also not a cultural fad or new age movement. They are firmly rooted in ancient spirituality dating back thousands of years. We find this spirituality being practiced today by people who are looking at what their ancestors were involved in 4,000 or 5,000 years ago and seeking to recreate that in contemporary forms (“Vibrant, Juicy, Contemporary: or, Why I Am a UU Pagan,” World Magazine, Margot Adler).

It includes Indigenous traditions, paganism, goddess spirituality, and Wicca. These various spiritualities, though diverse, share some common theology, ethics, and concerns.

For one thing, as their name suggests, they reflect a love of the earth. But it is more than that. They see nature as holy. The forest and pond are sacred. Through nature, we can partake directly of the experience of sacredness (adapted from a quote by Richard Nelson).

They seek an intimate experience of the power and mystery of nature. If we see nature as holy, we are going to want a more intimate experience of it. They also honor the goodness of creation. This includes honoring the human body.

Earth-centered traditions place a high value on human relationship to earth. There is a strong correlation between this source and our seventh principle which affirms that everything is connected in an interdependent web of existence. Our recognition of our relatedness to all life – to the whole of creation – calls on us to live an environmental ethic of care for the earth. Our respect for and love of earth necessitates our concern for it.

In the earth-centered traditions, the divine is understood as imminent rather than transcendent. The deity is not distant from us but immediate and all around us. Everything is part of the sacred. Divinity is in all living things – in the trees, grass, mountains, birds, and in people.

Unitarian Universalist Source 2: Words and Deeds of Prophets (cont'd.)

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Another distinctive feature of the earth-centered traditions is their emphasis on personal experience. They are not concerned with creeds and doctrines. It is easy to see the tie in here with the transcendentalists. And also with Unitarian Universalism in general. Rather than emphasizing the traditional creeds, earth-centered spirituality is open to new revelations. Margot Adler describes this kind of spirituality as vibrant and juicy.

I am grateful to our UU tradition for offering me some deep religious encounters from the threads of earth-centered spirituality. Like so many Unitarian Universalists, I have a strong, abiding, and intimate relationship with creation that began in my childhood and continues to this day.

Our faith has helped me nurture and sustain that. Some of my strongest mystical and religious experiences have occurred in nature. It is through the natural world and rituals incorporating elements from nature that I am most easily able to experience the sacred.

There are some particular opportunities I have had to explore this source. They include my participation in a sweat lodge with a group of seventh graders about four years ago. It's the only sweat lodge I've done. I'm sure a number of you have tried this.

The sweat lodge is a Native American time of prayer and purification. It helps renew and strengthen a person's relationship with that which is sacred. In the sweat lodge, we prayed. We chanted. We actually chanted in four rounds – one for each of the directions. We ended each direction by saying together, “for all our relations.” This all occurred as hot rocks were placed in a center pit, and the space became hotter and ever hotter. Our lungs were hotter than we thought possible

By the time we exited the lodge, our bodies were steaming. When we stretched out on the ground in shorts and t-shirts in mid-February, it came as an extraordinary relief. The cool earth embraced us.

I have participated in “Cakes for the Queen of Heaven” twice – once here and previously at another congregation. This curriculum focuses on goddess spirituality from a Western perspective. I have also participated in “Rise Up and Call Her Name,” a similar curriculum for women which focuses on world goddess traditions.

I find a lot of value in goddess spirituality, but not because I “believe” in a goddess or goddesses. I find value in the feminine image of the divine as a contrast to the male concepts of God that have predominated Western religion.

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But perhaps even more than this, from participating in and facilitating these programs with other women, I have come to honor a spiritual practice of listening. At a profound level, at the soul level, I have come to understand the importance of our speaking about inner experience without being interrupted.

Any of you who have taken a class I have facilitated will have heard me speak about active listening. This means learning to speak and be heard without someone trying to ask a bunch of questions or have their turn or tell us how much it's like their own experience.

This is what it means to listen ourselves and each other into being. It's very counter-cultural and it arises in part from the consciousness raising groups and the women's spirituality movement of the sixties and seventies.

The women's spirituality programs, which have had a profound effect on countless women in our movement, led me to participate in neo-pagan celebrations of the winter and summer solstices. From these, I have experienced the power of our own creativity to generate rituals that have meaning.

Ritual helps connect us experientially, emotionally. Rituals grounded in the natural world hold special meaning and value for me and I find them to be easily accessible. They help remind me of my connection to nature and also to the cyclical aspects of life.

I also came into relationship with the pagan tradition through reading. One of the required texts for UU seminarians is the book Drawing Down the Moon by Margot Adler. It's a comprehensive survey of pagan, Wiccan, and goddess spirituality. It helped me understand that practitioners of these traditions are not living outside the culture as I had sometimes imagined.

It seemed a revelation to me that pagans value science and technology as much as the rest of us. They are, in most ways, like the rest of us, holding down regular jobs and having families and partners, but finding their spirituality in pagan nature rituals and ceremonies.

In terms of paganism, something else happened for me. I got to meet Margot Adler. Actually I arranged for her to be a speaker at a UU church. Up to that point, I knew Margot Adler only through her book.

I didn't even realize until I started to work on contacting her that she was also the Margot Adler who is the NPR correspondent in New York. This, frankly, made her and paganism both more interesting – and both were already pretty interesting enough.

When speaking about being a pagan, Adler emphasizes the role of paganism and earth-centered traditions in furthering diversity. She says, paganism “espouses radical polytheism. It is grounded in the view that reality is multiple and diverse.”

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She also talks about the negative connotations of paganism and the origins of that prejudice. The word actually comes from the Latin and means country dweller. It has taken on negative meanings from centuries of struggle in which Christianity in particular proved victorious over older polytheistic religions. Eventually the term pagan came to be associated with the idea of an unbeliever or godless person rather than simply someone of a different religion.

Contemporary self-described pagans and neo-pagans, however, use the term to refer to polytheistic nature religions that are based on older religions. In short, a pagan is someone who sees divinity manifest in all the processes of nature.

Adler summarizes the theology many neo-pagans share this way:

The world is holy. Nature is holy. The body is holy. Sexuality is holy. The mind is holy. The imagination is holy. You are holy. A spiritual path that is not stagnant ultimately leads on to the understanding of one's own divine nature. Thou art Goddess. Thou art God. Divinity is imminent in all Nature. It is as much within you as without.

In this church we are now fortunate to have an earth-centered group and increasingly more opportunities to participate in earth-based rituals. Many of our services throughout the year strive to incorporate elements from nature. We can see that what are considered traditional Christian holidays are deeply rooted in pagan practice and mythology. Easter and Christmas are two examples.

We have a water ceremony in the fall, a flower communion in the spring, and we recognize the winter and summer solstices in worship services. We also take time to honor Earth Day through a special collection and often an earth-friendly service.

I hope each of you will take time to consider how the sixth source is informing your faith and being expressed in your life. In what ways do you celebrate the sacred circle of life? How can you bring your life into greater harmony with the rhythms of nature? And how could this source deepen and enrich your everyday spiritual life and practice?

As with our other sources, the sixth source can enrich our spiritual lives. May we celebrate the circle of life and the ebb and flow of nature's rhythms. May we seek and find ways to attune ourselves to the natural world.

May we not only love nature and gaze at the stars in amazement, but also know that we are called upon to ensure that the stars will still be around for the generations yet to come.

May it be so. Amen.