

The Sources of Our Faith: Earth-Centered Traditions

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Living in California has changed me.
I never thought I would have a Goddess Tarot app on my iPhone.
But I do now.
I got my iPhone as a practical tool. It's got my calendar, to-do list,
phone numbers and addresses, and that is the only reason I wanted it.
None of this silly time-wasting computer game stuff for me, oh, no!
But one day not so long ago,
I came across a mention of this little app,
a little software program you can download onto your phone.
Just for fun, I told myself, I'd give it a try.
It's research!
And it was free, so why not?
So today now I have an app on my phone,
with beautiful pictures of ancient goddesses
and inspirational messages which in truth are a little corny
but which also, sometimes, touch me
and help me feel creative
about facing whatever might be coming in the future.
Whether the tarot part can actually predict the future,
oh, gosh, I have no idea.
But I like thinking about the goddesses
and the inspiration they give me to look at the challenges in my life
from a different perspective,
and maybe to get in touch with inner resources
I hadn't realized I had.

And, truthfully, I feel a little shy telling you all this,
but I want you to have a flavor of where I'm coming from

on this Sunday when we have the chance to immerse ourselves
in the last one of the six traditions
that we formally claim as sources of our religion
in our statement of Purposes and Principles.

In our worship over the last few months,
we've engaged with all six sources:
our direct experience of mystery and wonder,
without which religion is only an intellectual exercise;
the words and deeds of prophetic women and men
whose lives challenge us to do justice and practice love,
without which religion is only a pretty fantasy
of no use to those in need;
wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us
in our ethical and spiritual lives,
and here we claim that freedom which is so central to our tradition,
the freedom to explore and learn from the teachings
of all the great religious leaders of the world;
humanist teachings which call us to use our powers of reason
and embrace what science tells us about our world,
without which religion is irrelevant
and incapable of helping us solve the problems of our society;
and, today, *Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life*
and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Now, there are a whole lot of religious traditions
all around the world that are Earth-centered,
that teach us to live in harmony with the natural world,
not least the Native American religions that grew up on this land
and flourished for thousands of years
and are still hanging on in spite of everything.
That would be a whole lot of sermons right there.

But today
I want to talk about one Earth-centered tradition in particular,

because of the history of how our formal statement of sources
came to be written
and who thought it was important
for Earth-centered teachings to be in there.

The original statement of sources was adopted
along with our Seven Principles in 1985.
At that time, there were only five sources.
The list stopped with humanist teachings.
But now fast-forward ten years to 1995,
when something new has been welling up
among Unitarian Universalists.
In fact, it's happening all over, not just among UUs.
Groups of people are getting together
and putting together creative new rituals
and calling themselves Pagans,
practitioners of a religion that is simultaneously very new
and very old, grounded in the rhythms of the seasons,
celebrating the cycles of the year
with carefully constructed rituals;
a religion that finds mystery and magic all around us,
revering the wildness of the animals and plants, rocks and rivers;
attuned to the secret whisperings of the heart,
seeking to burst the bounds of a materialist culture
which says science knows all that can be known;
drawing on intuition, emotion, subtly perceived flows of energy;
daring to be extravagantly beautiful;
drawing on the ancient myths of Gods and Goddesses,
inviting its followers to touch the divine energies within themselves.

Paganism today isn't just one thing.
There isn't any central hierarchy
or even a formal association like we have.
Different Pagan groups believe different things
and practice in different ways.

There is no Pagan creed.
In that sense it's very like our Unitarian Universalist tradition,
only a little less organized.

But there are some common themes—
maybe you could say, too, a common feeling-tone.
Ritual is very important.
Many Pagans believe rituals,
when they are done with a focused intent and a belief in their power,
can actually change the structure of the material world.
Ritual works. Material objects have spiritual power.
Words have power.
And what words! There's a fearlessness about Pagan liturgies:
the ritual language has this wonderful extravagant lushness:

I who am the beauty of the green earth
and the white moon among the stars
and the mysteries of the waters¹—

that reading we shared earlier: this is wild stuff.
You can't write like this without a freedom, a wildness inside you,
a willingness to go deep and be drawn down deep.

There's also an understanding in the Pagan community
that, in some way, what they're doing is going back to old traditions,
ancient ways that were known to our foremothers and fathers,
around the world but especially the Celtic lands of Europe—
Ireland, Wales, Scotland—
long before Christianity came to be.
Now, in all honesty I do need to tell you,
in the academic world there is a very lively debate
whether contemporary Pagan rituals and beliefs
can really be traced back to religions of the ancient past.
And I would say, on a purely scholarly, historical-fact level,

¹ Doreen Valiente, adapted by Starhawk, *Singing the Living Tradition* #517.

I have my doubts about how close the connection is.
But as a person of faith,
to me, it really doesn't matter a whole lot
whether Pagan spirituality today
is exactly the same kind of spirituality
that our ancient ancestors experienced.
The real question is,
does my religion help me live a better life here in *this* moment?

Still, I know that for a lot of Pagans,
being able to trace their spiritual ancestry back into the distant past
feels profoundly important as a way of legitimating who they are
in a culture that may not understand or respect their religion.
I get that.
It is not always easy to be a member of a minority religion!
The contemporary Pagan Starhawk speaks to this,
and I want to quote her to you now:

The validity of our spiritual choices [does not] depend on
documenting their origins, their antiquity, or their provenance.
...[T]he truth of our experience is valid whether it has roots
thousands of years old or thirty minutes old...
there is a mythic truth whose proof is shown...
in the way it engages strong emotions, mobilizes deep life energies,
and gives us a sense of history, purpose, and place in the world.²

I so appreciate her idea of mythic truth.
I think what she's saying is, our religion is true—
true in the sense of trustworthy,
worthy of our trust and our loyalty—
when it touches not only our mind but our heart,
the very depths of our being.
Our religion is true when it shows us how to direct our energy

² Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, 20th anniversary edition (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 4.

for good, for healing and justice and compassion here and now.
Our religion is true when it helps us tell a story
about who we are, where we come from, where we are going,
and that story feeds us and gives us life abundant.

And in that sense it is absolutely no surprise
that Pagan spirituality has emerged at this moment in our culture.
All around us, not just among Pagans but *all* of us,
there is this vast, uneasy sense
that our culture has made a terribly serious mistake
in how we relate to the Earth.

The journalist Margot Adler says most Pagan groups are in cities,
where obviously there are more people—
but more importantly, cities are where we really experience
the loss of our connection to nature.³

We have become alienated from the land, from natural cycles;
we have forgotten how to sense the sacredness of place;
we have taken too much
and wasted too much.

We have hurt ourselves by cutting ourselves off from wild places,
from the stars in the sky,
the creatures who share this land with us.

We have manipulated the material stuff of the earth
in ways that are harmful and destructive
to ourselves and to our fellow-creatures.

And the Pagan tradition speaks so directly to this.
It calls us to fall in love with the Earth once again,
to experience the Earth as a sacred whole,
to see ourselves not so much as stewards of the Earth,
in the language of the Judeo-Christian tradition,
but as beloved children of the Earth, Mother of us all.

³ Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*, revised & expanded edition (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 4.

This is what has been emerging all around the country and within Unitarian Universalism too. These are the people who, 15 years ago, were longing for their spiritual path to be recognized as one of many flavors or articulations of our Unitarian Universalist faith. They had already formed an association called CUUPS, short for the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans, and today there are multiple CUUPS chapters in local UU congregations not too far away from us. The closest one right now is at the UU Church of Berkeley. I know this congregation had a Goddess exploration group here for a number of years. Anyway, you can see UU Pagans had been doing their thing and getting organized. So, as is our way, back in 1995, the people in CUUPS asked for the language of Earth-centered traditions to be added to our statement of religious sources, and as is our way, much discussion ensued, and eventually it was passed, and in retrospect of *course* it should be there, of *course* this is part of who we are.

I should say, the Pagan tradition is one that I personally have experienced mostly from the outside. I'm a dabbler, really. But what I've witnessed has been very beautiful. And what I want you to know is that you don't have to call yourself a Pagan to draw on any of the practices or the wisdom of this tradition if they are speaking to you.

As I've said, Pagans are very non-hierarchical anyway. There's no Pagan police that's going to show up and tell you you're doing it wrong.

A huge part of the spirit of the movement
is to invite people to draw on their own creativity
and be where they need to be.

And to be clear, it's perfectly OK from a Pagan perspective,
and from a Unitarian Universalist perspective, to be a Pagan UU.
You don't have to choose.

If you can hold the traditions in harmony within yourself,
then blessings on that. That's really all you need.

Let me close by telling you just a little about how that actually works
in the lives of people here in this congregation.

I spoke the other day with two Pagans
whom we are lucky to have in our congregation.

They gave me their permission to share with you what they told me
about what their religion means to them.

What they said was this:

Paganism is about finding religion in nature and the seasons
and what's right here in front of us.

They told me, this is an Earth-centered religion
that celebrates the solstices and equinoxes as religious holidays.

They celebrate the winter solstice, the shortest day, the longest night
as Yule, a festival of hope and gratitude
for the light returning.

They don't celebrate Thanksgiving in November,
but they celebrate Samhain,

better known to most of us as Halloween,
as a day of thanks for the harvest and all that the Earth gives us.

They told me sometimes they feel defensive about their faith.

They get tired of having to explain to other people
that their religion is just as worthy of respect as anyone else's.

Sometimes they feel harassed.

But they are where they belong.

They told me trying to be in harmony to the changing seasons
is a really important spiritual practice for them.

They talked about how changing their seasonal altar,
and just paying attention to what's happening outside,
helps them contemplate where their lives are now,
where they might be headed.

They talked about inviting the energies of each season
to be present in their lives.

This speaks to me too.

Where the Pagan tradition speaks to me most deeply right now
is in its sense of time.

In a few months I'm going to be turning 40.

Those who are older may chuckle and call me an infant still;
those who are younger may not have aging on their minds at all.

But in this moment of my life,
it feels bittersweet, this growing older,
not being able to go backwards.

I find I need to believe that time itself is trustworthy,
that it's OK to get old,
that time has a shape, and that shape is beautiful.

We all need ways to experience

“Sacred Time and Space,” in the words of our meditation,
“a way of seeing that is broad and spacious.”⁴

Some of us may find it in the beautiful rituals of the Pagan tradition
created to honor the changing seasons,
the Wheel of the Year.

Just as the Christian calendar is structured around Easter and
Christmas and Lent, the Christian liturgical year,
a story that returns again and again,
holding us as we change and grow and deepen,
so the Pagan Wheel of the Year invites us to experience time
in a sacred manner, the passage of our own lives
connected to the rhythms of the Earth, turning and turning,
winter to spring, summer to fall,

⁴ Sedonia Cahill, *Circle Wisdom*, at <http://www.worldprayers.org/>.

in a cosmic dance of days and years and lifespans
and the deep time of the universe itself.
We all need that.

We all need a religion that speaks to the very depths of our being.
We all need a religion that shows us how to use our energy
for healing and justice and compassion.
We all need a religion that tells us a lifegiving story
about who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.
Beloved friends, what a blessing
that we have such a rich source of faith to draw on.
May your heart be light,
your deeds be just,
and your love be for all that makes us whole,
here on this precious Earth.

Blessed be.