

Earth Based Traditions

John is not his real name. But I am calling him John today for confidentiality.

John came to me with a concern about pagans within our congregation and the UUA. This was after he got into a conflict with our congregation's CUUPS group. CUUPS is an acronym for Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans. At the time, I was our congregation's president and a member of the pastoral care team working with John who was having some difficulty managing his personal life.

John could not figure out how pagans fit under the UUA umbrella of religious beliefs and groups. He

analyzed the history of Unitarianism and Universalism and could not find any historical reference to pagans. Yet, the sixth source of our UU Principles and Purposes refer to:

“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.”

Like many Unitarian Universalists, he was perplexed.

The church we were members of, had a large and active CUUPS membership. It's my understanding that pagans and other earth-based tradition elements of Unitarian Universalism are growing more rapidly

than our other sub-groups: like the Buddhists, Christians, Jews, or humanists.

I didn't have a ready answer for John. I reminded him that our Principles and Purposes state that we respect the worth and dignity of all people. We accept and encourage each other in spiritual growth as we engage in our search for truth and meaning. We are an open and accepting association. So, why not include pagans? That was the best explanation I could give him.

But the question aroused my curiosity. I was relatively new to Unitarian Universalism when John approached me and the addition of the sixth source puzzled me

too. So, I set out to find out more about this unusual and unique facet of our Association.

The sixth source of our Principles and Purposes was only added ten years ago at the 1996 General Assembly and there was considerable controversy and struggle over the addition. Like John, many Unitarian Universalists, thought adding earth-based traditions to the UUA was a bit of a stretch.

John's view of the pagans is not unusual. When reference is made to earth based traditions some people draw a blank. Some people scoff at the idea of considering earth based traditions as real religions. And others think of witches, pagans or Native American spiritual practices.

Anthropologists find historical evidence of earth based religions as far back as 20,000 years ago. Earth based traditions probably began with the first human beings. Evidence indicates it existed all around the world. Elements of it can be found in: the Shinto religion in the East, indigenous religions in West Africa, Nordic religions in Scandinavia, the Mayan system of beliefs in the Americas and the Druidic teachings of the Celts in the British Isles.

For centuries earth based religions passed their tradition down from generation to generation. Practitioners gained knowledge of healing, weather, plants and animals. Knowledge that was often crucial for survival. Much of that knowledge remains with us today though we frequently ignore it, often to our peril.

For example, in Ireland, the Celts had established an earth based religious tradition which was thousands of years old when St. Patrick arrived in Ireland in the fifth century C.E. The Celts had many gods. They believed that divinity existed in the world around them: in the soil, in the water, in the hills, in the sky, in the home and in their own soul.

I like the words Carolyn Brown and Rev. Tom Owen-Toole used to describe it:

“The Celtic imagination embraced nature, divinity, the underworld and human existence as equal partners in one interconnected Whole. Consequently,

*animals are our ancient brothers and sisters.
Wells are sacred places. Rivers and streams
are the tears of earth's joy and despair.
Ruins house the essence of our ancestors.
The earth is simply chockfull of soul.*

*The Celts taught that nothing is ugly per se,
and everything is to be treated with dignity
and respect. We are summoned to bless all
we see!"*

Another example closer to home that most of us are familiar with are the Native American traditions. Like the Celts and other ancient cultures, they saw the forces of nature in the world around them as worthy of respect and

worship. I believe they were the original ecologists in this country. They took only those plants and animals they needed for survival, giving thanks to the Great Spirit and the natural world for sharing their bounty.

The practitioners and practices of earth based traditions may be from different cultures and may acknowledge their interconnectedness with the world in different ways, but they all are attuned to the energies, movements and forces active in the natural world.

Chief Noah Sealh describes it like this:

This we know. The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth.

This we know, All things are connected like the blood which unites one family.

All things are connected.

Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth.

We did not weave the web of life, we are merely a strand in it.

Whatever we do to the web. We do to ourselves.

Historical analysis of Judaism and Christianity reveals that many of their major holidays, festivals and rituals can be traced back to earlier earth-based traditions; for example, Christmas to the Winter Solstice, All Saints Day to Halloween or baptisms and Easter to the spring solstice.

We inherit this tradition too because Unitarianism and Universalism have a Jewish and Christian heritage. But there is a more direct subsequent connection between earth-based traditions and Unitarian Universalism.

Unitarian Transcendentalists of the 19th century connected with earth-based traditions. Famous

Unitarians Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson were all Transcendentalists.

Transcendentalism was a mid-19th century reaction to the intellectualism of Unitarianism, as taught at Harvard Divinity School, and to the general society and culture of the time. Transcendentalists believed that the spirit transcends the physical and empirical and is realized through intuition, rather than through religious doctrine. *(repeat)*

Also during that time period, new Bible analysis and experimental methods were calling into question the claims of rational religion of the previous decades. John Johnson Lewis describes it like this:

“This new generation decided that the revolutions had not gone far enough, and had stayed too much in the rational mode ‘Corpse-cold’ Emerson called the previous generation of rational religion.”

We are inextricably linked to the health of our planet. Researcher Riane Eisler, author of *The Chalice and the Bible* states that:

“Our early ancestors recognized that we and our natural environment are integrally linked parts of the great mystery of life and death and that all nature must therefore be treated with respect.”

We tend to be biased towards empirical evidence and knowledge found in books or that we can know by their effects, such as electricity and gravity. We distinguish between religions based on direct experience (earth centered) vs. religions based on books and writings. Ironically, we are inclined to accept written religious traditions based on myth and metaphor while those of direct experience are dismissed. Thus, many Unitarian Universalists view earth based traditions with a bit of embarrassment or nervousness.

I agree with Carolyn Brown's argument that Unitarian Universalists have a special responsibility to acknowledge and honor the importance of earth

based traditions. They teach us balance via the rhythms of nature and the cycle of the seasons.

Earth based traditions have developed folklore and passed it on to us. Sometimes we are too quick to dismiss folklore that has been passed down from generation to generation. But folklore has taught people how to exist in community and to handle the vicissitudes of the natural world. For example, how can our children learn what is important in life? They often learn through stories and parables, folklore, such as they just heard from Misha Lentz.

Earth based traditions teach us to delve into nature and that there is no difference between the spiritual and the material, between the plant and the animal,

they are one. Buddhism also emphasizes this interconnectedness-that we are one. Some people believe that humankind has dominion over the rest of the world and act accordingly, thus, we have species extinction and a planet that is now threatened by the very cycles of the natural world.

Earth based traditions teach us to value ritual. Life is full of ritual. We cannot manage without it. Walking the dog to lighting a chalice at the start of our worship service to partaking of coffee hour after church are rituals. Remember, there was no eighth day of creation where God said, all is well, now I'll have a cup of coffee. But coffee hour has become a very important post-worship service ritual for us. And

people have told me they just come to church for the coffee hour.

Earth based traditions encourage us to look inward rather than outward for our religious sustenance. To look for what Quakers call the Inner Light, the divine spark of God, which dwells within everyone. To look for a religion that can be felt and lived. As Emerson said, a religion that is not “corpse cold.”

The teachings of earth based traditions can be important tools in our efforts to increase environmental consciousness and create a cooperative world community.

A closer connection with the earth can generate more positive attitudes within us and towards others. A high regard for the earth knows no boundaries. It is a language that we all can speak. Connecting with the natural world provides an important grounding for us.

Our world is at an important crossroads. Not only are the people of the world at risk but the future of the very planet earth is at stake. Wars have ravaged the planet for centuries. But new and more formidable dangers are on the horizon.

Dangers that know no battlefield, borders or articles of war: increasing pollution brought on by development in emerging nations, strange new diseases that may not respond to our current medical regimen, climatic

changes that may bring devastating geographical changes and a growing disparity between the rich and the poor which poses a serious risk to world peace.

We are called upon to support the indigenous earth based traditions of the world. They have much to teach us and can be a source of wisdom and spiritual support as we tackle the challenges of the next century.

We are called to connect with nature. Experience the oneness, the interconnectedness.

I close with these words adapted from Black Elk:

Peace...comes within the souls of men [and women] when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize that at the center of the Universe dwells Wakan-Tanka, [all the spirits] and that this center is really everywhere, it is within each of us.

May it be so!