

OUR SACRED COSMOS
by Rev. Kit Ketcham, March 14, 2004

Years ago, when I was a kid attending Camp Arrah Wanna, just outside of Wemme, near Mt. Hood, I learned a song which may have been the very beginning of my understanding of the cosmos and my relationship to it. I'd like to sing it to you:

“Evening skies, sunrise, lakes and rushing waters
Make all things unlovely from my soul depart.
Purple mountains rising high, trees against the sky,
Life is beautiful because God speaks within my heart.

Starry skies, moonrise, far eternal heavens
Take away my smallness, make me long to grow.
Vastness of the universe, timelessness of space,
Life is wonderful because God speaks within my soul.”

Now, this song was significant to me for several reasons. First of all, to a 10 year old child, sitting near a campfire next to the noisy Salmon River, evening skies and rushing water, purple mountains and trees, stars and moon----these were all a part of the reality in which I lived at that moment.

Second, I liked the words that said that these things--stars, moon, universe, space--these things offered a gift, to help me grow out of my smallness. I'd often heard it said that Nature emphasized our smallness, made us feel small, but here were words that seemed to say that we humans could outgrow our smallness by our relationship to Nature.

And third, I wondered about the last line of each stanza, the one where it said that life was beautiful or wonderful because God was speaking to me. Though I was still a believer in the old white guy on the throne at age 10, I WAS starting to wonder about a Divinity which controlled my every move and gave me reason to live.

Somehow, I dimly sensed that life was the reason to live, and that whatever created the sun, moon, stars and trees, did not do it just so that I would learn a lesson. I sensed that a lesson was being offered but that it was my choice as to whether or not I studied it.

For me, the sun, moon, stars, trees, mountains---all this beauty and mystery was enough on its own. To arbitrarily stick the name of God into the works seemed to be an unnecessary step, one which seemed to set God aside as merely a contractor, whose achievement was indeed mighty but merely a construction project, a subdivision in space.

And now, I understand those last lines to mean “my life is beautiful because I am alive; my life is wonderful because I am in harmony with the universe.” It no longer matters much to me whether any God had a hand in creation or why any God might have created a universe. I am curious about the whole question of creation and avidly read the latest stories about science’s most recent discoveries, but I don’t HAVE to know.

I AM enough of a rationalist to believe there are logical answers to most of the questions we can think of about creation. And I am enough of a mystic to believe that it doesn’t matter if there are answers, that creation is too big for the human mind to understand completely, that our knowledge is incomplete, and that the mystery is enough.

Now, my evolving thinking is not particularly unique, I know. There are many of us---both Unitarian Universalists and others---who have found the natural world to be an important source of spiritual nurture.

So far as we can tell from history, virtually all indigenous peoples, whether in the Americas, Asia, Africa, Australia or Europe, based their earliest religious expression on their understandings of the forces of nature. “Salvation”--that bugaboo word which I define as “becoming whole”--salvation in these religions lies in living in respectful harmony with the forces of the natural world, forces which seem to manifest the presence of Spirit in all things.

Often, through ignorance or arrogance or greed, human beings fall out of harmony with this universe and need to restore it. The restoration and preservation of harmonious relationships is a basic task of nature religion or what we may call paganism. Many of its rituals and practices, since the beginning of time, focus upon re-establishing or preserving harmonious human relationships with the rest of the world.

From the perspective of nature religion, spiritual growth is judged by a person’s degree of harmony with and understanding of the spiritual forces of nature. This is in direct contrast to the emphasis of some other religions, which seem to emphasize a need to gain mastery over nature, to dominate the natural world, to subdue and suppress the desires of the body, to disdain natural impulses and seek to eliminate their influence.

Though there are many spiritual teachers within nature religions--men and women whose spiritual wisdom qualifies them as guides for others--none of these teachers are regarded as infallible. And there is no written sacred text or strongly institutionalized hierarchy.

In nature religions, the human body is the home of Spirit as well and is respected and honored and given as a gift to the community. For example, Crow Sun Dancers, who undergo painful piercings of the body during a long hot ceremonial dance, do this not to mortify the flesh, as a Christian ascetic might wear a hair shirt, but to offer up their pain in recognition of the pain of others in the community, such as the pain women experience as they bring children into the world.

Natural religion is rooted in community, rather than individuality, though persons are encouraged to be themselves as individuals. The survival of the community is dependent upon harmony within the community and harmony with the natural world.

Now, in Unitarian Universalism, the actual presence of earth-based or nature religion (also known as paganism or neo-paganism) may seem like a fairly recent phenomenon, brought about by a resurgence of interest in preserving the environment, with its attendant political issues.

But since the time of the Transcendentalists of the early 1800s, there have been Unitarians and Universalists who have looked to Nature as a primary source of inspiration and revelation. For most of our religious history, this earth-centered orientation has existed as a kind of spiritual stream flowing quietly beneath the noisier discussions about whether Unitarian Universalism should be primarily Christian, Theist, or Humanist.

When the Transcendentalist poets and essayists came on the scene in the 1800s, it was in direct opposition to the Unitarian views of the time, which were very Christian and yet becoming very rationalistic.

One of the primary figures of American Transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson resigned his pulpit in 1832, refusing to administer the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. His rational mind could not square this priestly act with what he was beginning to believe--that the doctrines of Christianity, even Unitarian Christianity, did not recognize the human relationship to the natural world and that faith which was based on miracles, rather than natural processes, was shaky and unfounded.

Once called "the high priestess of American Transcendentalism", Margaret Fuller was one of our movement's earliest feminists, unwilling to let traditional religious beliefs circumscribe women's lives into servitude and dependency. She recognized that women's contributions to the universe were equal to those of men and that women deserved the same honor and respect as men, not more, not less.

According to present day Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church, son of Frank Church, the late Idaho senator for whom the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness area is named, by tapping our Transcendentalist roots, we modern day UUs are acknowledging that much of our experience and everything that lies beyond our experience, defies rational analysis.

Most sacred clues, appearing during dreaming, lovemaking and stargazing, to name a few moments, spring from deep within the transrational realm. This is a kind of reality that we cannot pin down or mount as a trophy on the wall of human knowledge. It is knowable only in terms of symbols, metaphors, and stories---not facts.

As our faith tradition acknowledges and accepts the transrational (note that I don't use the word irrational, meaning non-factual---transrational means beyond rationality, beyond human knowledge and logic), as we do so, ancient religious practices common to indigenous peoples for millennia have come into usage in our midst, for many UUs find that they strike a chord so deep in our memory banks that they are almost irresistible.

Others, in exploring their own heritage, have discovered strands of religious practice that give deeper meaning to current thought. Feminism and the exploration of women's spirituality have prompted many to form study groups which investigate women's unique contributions to spiritual understandings.

The feminine principle has always been important and even primary in earth-based religions. Recognition of the earth as the mother of creation permeates most nature religions and in earliest times in European traditions, the Goddess was the primary deity, not a masculine God figure. My colleague, the Rev. Shirley Ranck wrote a wonderful curriculum entitled "Cakes for the Queen of Heaven" which gave women and men an opportunity to delve into the history of women's spiritual power and influence.

Let me quote Gus diZerega, in his article “Nature Religion and the Modern World: The Returning Relevance of Pagan Spirituality”,

“The spiritual path opened by the nature religions enables us to enter into a deep and profound relationship with the immanent (or indwelling) aspect of the divine. In doing so, like all genuine religious traditions, it encourages possibility for personal transformation, away from egoism and towards love, away from selfishness and towards compassion, away from need and towards abundance.”

Perhaps modern day practitioners of nature or earth based religions focus on spirit in nature as a source of meaning because the society in which we live so often denies and masks such meaning. Our earliest ancestors lived in societies where religion and daily life were completely integrated, so that even the most ordinary activities had spiritual dimensions. Contemporary pagans or practitioners of nature religions are slowly rediscovering this ancient premise and learning to live life in gratitude for its blessings.

Now, paganism, or earth-based religious expression, simply doesn't work for everyone. Many Unitarian Universalists find their most meaningful expressions of faith in other ways. My colleague the Rev. Peter Richardson, in his book “Four Spiritualities”, has researched the data produced by the Meyers-Briggs personality inventories and suggests that there is a correlation between one's Meyers-Briggs type and the religious expression one finds most satisfying.

I may preach about it sometime, but for now, suffice it to say that it's different strokes for different folks, and that's okay.

Unitarian Universalism has its 7 principles, which you can find in the front part of your hymnal. You will also find there a list of the sources from which we draw our living tradition: direct human experience, words and deeds of prophetic women and men, wisdom from the world's religions, Jewish and Christian teachings, Humanist teachings, and one more, which may not be listed in your hymnal if it was printed before 1995.

For in a historic act, at the Unitarian Universalist Association's General Assembly in Spokane in 1995, the body of delegates lobbied and debated and eventually voted into acceptance the 6th Source of our living tradition, adding the words which acknowledge as a source 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."

Since that time, Unitarian Universalists have been learning to understand and appreciate the contributions of earth-centered religious expression. Our congregations have enjoyed worship services which celebrate the cycles of nature, which celebrate the feminine principle as a creative force, which explore the origins of ritual springing from natural rhythms.

As Unitarian Universalism evolves, it seems to me to be creating a new kind of religion, one that is interfaith, not exclusionary, more pluralistic than any other religious group I can name.

I also think that we use a different sacred text than most other faith traditions. Islam uses the Quran as its text, Judaism the Torah, Christians the Bible, Confucianism the teachings of Confucius, Hindus the Vedas; we too use these sources of wisdom, as well as such documents as the law, the Constitution of the US and the Bill of Rights, but I believe that we have an unwritten sacred text. I think we use nature as our primary sacred text, whether we are pagan or not.

We find meaning for our own human lives in the unfolding of nature's cycles and rhythms. We find spring to be a guidepost for our own renewal; we look to the weather for metaphors to understand our lives. We watch nature kill and heal, grow and die; we use gravity to strengthen our bodies; we understand that we are not stronger than natural law but that we can use it to learn and grow. But again, that's a sermon for another day!

There is something terrifically exciting to me about our living tradition, which takes meaning from so many varied sources. I want to be in a faith community where we are all so different in our ways of viewing the world; I want to be in a faith community where we actively reach out to people of differing perspectives, striving to overcome our fear and ignorance and working toward a life together which is wholesome and nurturing and accepting.

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

Our closing hymn is #175, We Celebrate the Web of Life.

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 the beauty that surrounds us, the strength that flows into us, the love that binds us-----all these are components of the human life which is the gift we receive from nature. May we revere and protect that source from which we spring.

Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.