

## 5/1/11 Sermon

"Ancient Roots"

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To be a pagan is, I believe, to allow your emotions over intellect to lead you to a place of transcendence. I want to share this poem by Patrick Murfin as a reflection of that sentiment:

*We have seen the great cathedrals,  
stone laid upon stone,  
carved and cared for  
by centuries of certain hands;  
Seen the slender minarets  
soar from dusty streets  
to raise the cry of faith  
to the One and Only God;  
Seen the placid pagodas  
where gilded Buddhas squat  
amid the temple bells and incense.*

*We have seen the tumbled temples  
half-buried in the sands,  
choked with verdant tangles,  
sunk in corralled seas—  
old truths toppled and forgotten.  
We have even seen the wattled huts,  
the sweat lodge hogans,  
the wheeled yurts,  
and the Ice Age caverns  
where unwritten worship  
raised its knowing voices.*

*But here we build temples in our hearts.  
Side by side we gather.*

*We mix the mortar of the scattered dust  
of the Holy of Holies  
with the sacred water  
of the Ganges;  
Lay Moorish alabaster  
on the blocks of Angkor Wat  
and rough-hewn Stonehenge slabs;*

*Plumb Doric columns for strength of reason,  
square them with stern Protestant planks,  
and illuminate all with Chartres' jeweled windows  
and the brilliant lamps of science.*

*Yes here we build temples in our hearts.  
side by side we come,  
scavenging the ages for wisdom,  
cobbling together as best we may  
the stones of a thousand altars, leveling with doubt,  
framing with skepticism,  
measuring by logic,  
sinking firm foundations in the earth  
as we reach for the heavens.*

*Here we build temples in our hearts—  
a temple for each heart,  
a village of temples,  
none shading another,  
connected by well-worn paths,  
built alike on sacred ground.*

Unitarian Universalists welcome many paths leading to inner truth and harmony – whether Pagan, Buddhist, Christian, Jew, Hindu. Each offers us a unique and welcome path to wisdom and spiritual enlightenment. However we express our faith in the infinite and in each other, we do build temples in our hearts.

Paganism is both new and modern but has its roots in primitive tribal pre-history out of which western religions have sprung. It is as mainstream as Christianity or Judaism but more ancient.

Paganism is a nature-centered umbrella term without a centralized religious body or a standardized dogma. This sometimes makes those unschooled in Pagan traditions suspicious of the fringe elements it sometimes attract and the language of witchcraft and black arts they use that is not part of mainstream Paganism.

There are more Pagans than you might think. Some estimates have Pagans numbering more than a million in America, far more than there are UUs. As one of the very few faiths to embrace pagan traditions, UUs would do well to better integrate Pagans into our worship and communal life.

The core Pagan beliefs of interconnectedness and blessedness are as mainstream as Unitarian Universalism is – and you know how mainstream we are!

Most Pagans – according to Joyce and River Higginbotham, authors of “Paganism, an Introduction,” from whom I take inspiration – believe that all parts of the universe, whether animate or inanimate are connected at very deep levels that extend beyond the boundaries of space-time as we know them.

Because of this, Pagans believe they are able to interact with the universe and the Divine creators in an intimate way, similar to the way Christians speak of having a personal relationship with Christ.

The belief that every part of the universe is blessed in its nature, and that nothing is wrong, flawed or corrupt with the universe or with you, means that the purpose of Pagan spiritual practices differs from that of religions focused on issues of purification or salvation.

Pagans, like UUs, believe that no one is spiritually doomed or damned, and they reflect a humanist belief that people are born with all the innate tools necessary to live ethically and spiritually, and are naturally oriented towards their own greatest growth and development. Neither of these traditions needs an outside motivator although Pagans are far more receptive to a Goddess/ God embodied and imminent.

Those of a more traditional fundamental background have dismissed Paganism as a cult but the Supreme Court has ruled that Paganism meets the test of a modern religion.

Unitarian Universalists have been criticized in the same manner. Paganism and UUism need no defending for we are religions like all others that seek to find the sources of ultimate meaning to life. We question and seek to know if there is a God, what if anything exists after death and how we understand our place in the universe. These are the questions of ultimacy at the core of any faith.

Differing from mainline religions, Pagans and UUs trust personal experience over belief, doctrine or dogma. Both are inclusive and welcoming of other religions and world views. I am intrigued that Pagans stress even more personal responsibility than UUs about developing their own spiritual practices, beliefs and ethics. This often leads to the existence of many solitary Pagans who belong to no defined community of faith.

Dana Eilers humorously observed that, "some religions are a restaurant. You sit down and they bring you what they are serving. Paganism is more like a buffet. If you want to eat, you have to get up off your butt and serve yourself."

Served at that buffet are an eclectic mix of science, metaphysics, and mysticism and a dessert of rich spirituality that views the smallest atom to the largest planetary system as sacred.

Pagans believe in a living universe that can communicate with all parts of itself as part of the web of existence. Its core spirituality is the connections of individuals to nature, to all others and the Goddess/God and the whole of the universe.

Pagans come in many stripes and are known by many names: Wiccan, Shaman, Druid, and even Santeria of Afro-Cuban origins and others. Originally from the Latin meaning "country dweller," perhaps labeled that by the city slicker Christians who thought those OTP ("Outside the Perimeter") were bumpkins, "bubbas" or "rednecks" lacking sophistication. Sounds a lot like the early Unitarians describing the Universalist.

Pagans best capture our UU earth-centered spirituality that sanctifies our connection to the planet Earth that sustains us. This is a sacred connection that UUs hold at the very core of our belief in the interconnected web.

Much of our social justice work is centered on saving the planet and preserving the environment. This work finds its origins in Pagan naturalism and the transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau. In this practice, we find spiritual sustenance in our connection to nature and the flow of the seasons.

This May Day and the exuberant feast of Beltane today celebrates the change from winter to spring, a time of fertility and growth. Here we celebrate how our sexuality, spirituality, and creativity are all part of the same sacred source within us as well as within all plants, animals, and life. It honors the Goddess and the God as the lovers of all things. They remind us to respect and protect our bodies and the earth's body.

For Pagans, the change of seasons is less about the science of the earth's rotation on its axis around the Sun and far more about the change of emotions and consciousness of the cycles of change, originally expressed in its mythic tales that reside at the core of all religions.

The following story might give you a flavor of what I am talking about:

"When we celebrate the arrival of spring, we are tempted to ask: Why winter? Why this prolonged period of Code Gray? Weren't our eyes made for color, our skin for warmth? Why this cold, dreary season when birds abandon us and our gardens stop producing their fruits and flowers? What have we done to deserve this? Surely someone has offended the gods."

The Greek poet Homer, 27 centuries ago, offered a Pagan explanation for seasonal changes: In the once-upon-a-time of perpetual spring, Demeter, mother goddess of agriculture and fertility, makes all things grow. One day, when her daughter Persephone is gathering flowers, the earth opens and Hades, ruler of the underworld, abducts her. The maiden's screams to her father, Zeus, go unheeded. Distraught Demeter searches wildly for her lost daughter, and upon discovering that Zeus had approved the abduction, withdraws from Olympus in grief and rage, thus causing universal famine. Faced with this ongoing catastrophe, Zeus relents.

Daughter is restored to mother, whose joy again unleashes earth's fertility. But because Persephone has been tricked into tasting the pomegranate of Hades, she must return to the underworld for part of each year. And in her absence, her mourning mother weeps the world into winter.

Variations on this origin of the changing seasons appear in other myths. Aphrodite retrieves her lover, the vegetation god Adonis, from the underworld, where he must spend one third of the year.

It is also not coincidental that Jews celebrate their Passover – their emergence into a new life of freedom – and Christians the resurrection of their God in the spring.

Why winter? Because the growing season requires the fallow season; because without gray there is no joy in color; because it is loss that makes us appreciate love; because it is death that makes us value life. The wheel of the seasons turn.

Life cycles into death, which cycles into life. Let us bless these journeys that are within complete keeping with our Unitarian Universalist traditions. Are we not a faith with our own mythic stories that honor life and spirituality? Such cyclic celebrations honor our personal life passages from birth to death.

I am moved to ask, with all that Paganism offers our broader faith, why are we not all Pagans? Perhaps if you have answered the questions on Belief-net.com you may have found you are more Pagan than you ever realized.

We celebrate nature and the human life cycle. Pagans, like UUs, value

personal experience over dogma and creed. We both welcome the stranger and are comfortable with most spiritual paths. The dynamic tension that exists between the needs of the individual and the community of worshipers exists in both traditions, offering hope of a new synthesis but also the possibility for conflict.

Both traditions call for tolerance and respect for differences, and implicitly and explicitly expect both to exercise personal responsibility when practicing their own brand of faith within community. When we do, all is well with the world.

I wish in practice it was actually that simple, but we have the tools to make it happen. The real question is, do we have the will?