Reading - “Standing in a Doorway”
By Molly Brewer, Intern Minister of the First Universalist Church of Auburn, Maine and seminarian at Meadville Lombard Theological School

What do Unitarian Universalists talk about, when we talk about being Pagan?

As someone who holds both of these spiritual identities in balance—and sometimes in tension—I wonder about this often. “Pagan” is already a broad umbrella term. The Six Sources of Unitarian Universalism includes Pagans in the even bigger container of “Earth-centered traditions,” which attempts to create a unified thread in a huge number of theologies that sometimes have little in common. It’s like calling Unitarian Universalism a “Christian denomination.” Some UUs do consider themselves Christian, much like some Pagans embrace the term Earth-based. But ask a cross-section and you’ll likely discover that the label erases important truths.

Ironically, my lived experience of a Pagan identity is as important to my call to UU ministry as Unitarian Universalism itself. In Pagan practice, there is an invitation to mysticism and embodied ritual, to perceive the spirit world as a valid part of our human experience. My prayers address the Goddess Brighid just as often as the Spirit of Life and Love. My spirituality is based around Deities: I experience Them as distinct and different energies, and my relationship with Them is close to the core of my religious life. This is why I don’t describe my faith as Earth-based or Earth-centered, and the distinction is important. But believing that the Gods are present in the world around us means that the Earth and its creatures are indeed part of the Divine picture. My physical environment is essential to my experience of faith: as a born New Englander, I am a child of salt-covered rocky shores, the sunrise over the ocean, and blankets of fallen pine needles. My Pagan practice affirms the affinity I have for not only the physical locations, but also for the spirits that inhabit these places.

The flip side of this belief in radically immanent Gods means that I feel called to more than a life of mystical contemplation. Having a relationship with Them based in mutual respect and reciprocity means that I am honor-bound to do the work of justice, compassion, and equity in this world. Sounds a lot like our second Unitarian Universalist principle, right? Because of our belief in covenanted community and the work we do within it, UU is where I found my call to

leadership, and a practical way to do what my Gods were asking of me. My Pagan practice may be the natal religion of my heart, but Unitarian Universalism is its chosen family.

I find myself standing astride a doorway, one foot in my Pagan identity and the other in my UU identity. The differences between them can make it difficult for these traditions to fully mesh. Sometimes they don't endeavor to fully understand one another. But if they can, this doorway is where that alchemy happens. By positioning myself in that liminal space, I commit to holding this tension and letting these two faiths reconcile themselves within me. I am comprised of both: without Paganism, my UU side becomes activism with no theological commitment. Without UU, my Pagan side is spiritual experience with no purposeful direction. Together—but only together—they make me a minister. When Unitarian Universalists talk about being Pagan, let us recognize the nuances in our words. Let us honor our Earth, our ancestors, our Gods, our traditions, while erasing none of it. In the fullness of recognition, let us exist together in community.

So mote it be.

"Honest Pagans: The Sixth Source"
April 22, 2018
The Rev. Heather Janules

A couple weeks ago, I set aside my usual Tuesday schedule, got in my car and left my working-class neighborhood in Woburn to travel north. After driving on the interstate for about an hour, crossing the New Hampshire border, I exited onto a main road that brought me through a galaxy of small shopping centers. In time, and with another turn, the blight of seemingly endless retail fell away, bringing me through the centers of small towns, communities where the main crossroads are punctuated by the flashing yellow lights of consistently light traffic. There are no apartment buildings this deep in the country but many small houses with fading paint, some with old, rusting farm equipment in the yard. After one more turn in the tiny town center of Greenfield, I reached my destination – The Barbara Harris Retreat and Conference Center.

The retreat center is surrounded by forest, deep and thick, the land bordering a lake. But for the Center's cabins and meeting spaces, one could feel completely surrounded by the natural world – the sparkle on the water, the stark trees against the sky. I paused and took a deep breath of clean, cold air before walking into the main building.

After participating in a panel discussion, I sat with the group of seminary students I meet with monthly on-line. It was a delight to finally connect in person, face-to-face.

Our conversation was casual, touching on many subjects. I forget how we got to talking about it but Molly, the author of this morning's reading, shared a story about a conversation with a friend of hers who was raised Unitarian Universalist but no longer was part of congregational life. The reason Molly's friend dismissed her childhood faith, Molly explained, was that, in the friend's words, Unitarian Universalists "are really pagans, but just not honest about it."

The conversation took another turn so I didn't hear more about the friend's perspective. But their words stayed with me. Unitarian Universalists are "really pagans?" What could that mean?

As we gather in worship this morning, this observation seems strange. Reflecting the heritage of Unitarianism and this congregation, the stained-glass windows depict images from Jewish and Christian scripture. I wear a robe and stole, hallmarks of the Christian clergy. And there are other cultural trappings – the pipe organ, hymnals, the bell tower, pews. We burn no incense, we worship indoors and rituals are few. As any student of religious history could tell you, Christianity has been a long-time oppressor of Paganism. What could be pagan about all this?

My understanding of Unitarian Universalism's connection to pagan traditions grew through reading an anthology of essays, "Pagan and Earth-Centered Voices in Unitarian Universalism." I read this collection as part of my exploration of the Six Sources of Unitarian Universalism. As we recognize Earth Day today, we are called to consider the Sixth Source: "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." And, while it may be a stretch to summarize Unitarian Universalism as "paganism in Protestant drag," the

resonance between pagan traditions and the spiritual community in which we gather are clear.

Like any spiritual tradition, we cannot approach paganism as a defined canon or "pagan" and "earth-centered" as synonymous. As there are branches of Catholicism, Judaism and Islam, paganism and earth-centered traditions are varied and diverse, each with distinct practices, rituals and beliefs.

Yet, where there is reverence for the feminine divine, there are parallels to paganism. As a woman, most familiar with the Catholic mass at the time, I will never forget the pleasant shock I felt when I first opened the hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, to find little mention of a patriarchal God but hymns like "Mother Spirit, Father Spirit" that affirmed a sense of the sacred that transcended narrow confines of gender.

And women are also recognized as spiritual leaders in this faith. Currently, within Unitarian Universalism, there are more female ministers than male, with the gender gap only growing and the number of transgender and genderfluid religious professionals also increasing.

Where there is rejection of the biblical permission in Genesis to wield dominion over the Earth and it's creatures, there are parallels to paganism. The language of the Sixth Source itself, with its charge "to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature," challenges the entitlement of human beings to exploit the earth for our benefit and pleasure.

And where there is an ethos of collaboration and shared power, there are parallels to paganism. As part of a pluralist, covenantal tradition, founded on relationship and mutual promise instead of creed, Unitarian Universalist communities at their best illustrate the collective wisdom of the whole over concentration of authority in one person, one group, or even one understanding of God.

So, maybe there is something to this idea of Unitarian Universalism as "paganism in disguise."

These cultural values - honoring the divine feminine, celebrating stewardship of the earth and fostering collaborative ways of being - have long roots in Unitarian Universalism. The 19th century Transcendentalist movement, drawing on Unitarian Christianity and eastern faith traditions, proclaimed that the sacred dwells in nature and in the individual. Over time, mainstream Unitarianism adopted these philosophies while still worshipping in a traditionally Christian context, complete with its patriarchal trappings.

But in 1977, the Unitarian Universalist Association's General Assembly passed the Women in Religion Resolution, calling on Unitarian Universalists, in part, "to examine carefully their own religious beliefs and the extent to which these beliefs influence sex-role stereotypes." The Resolution further charges leaders to abandon sexist language and assumptions within the life of the faith.[1]

After this historic Resolution, Shirley Ranck created an adult education curriculum, centered on feminist theology and ancient traditions that revere Goddesses, called "Cakes for the Queen of Heaven." The impact was significant, giving many women spiritual resources that affirmed their female identity and introducing others to pagan traditions that honor the Goddess. A subsequent curriculum, "Rise Up and Call Her Name" by Elizabeth Fisher, further strengthened the emerging earth-centered movement.

The first known UU pagan service was held in 1980 at the UU Continental Feminist Theology Convocation, a service that included a water communion. Participants brought water from where they lived and gathered it in a common bowl. Since then congregations, like this one, have adopted this ritual, with community members bringing water to worship at the first service of the congregational year.

At the 1985 General Assembly, practicing UU pagans first began to organize, leading to the formation of the Covenant of UU Pagans, or CUUPS. Many congregations have active CUUPS chapters.

These collective developments within Unitarian Universalist institutions were instrumental in the movement to add the Seventh Principle – "respect for the

[1] https://www.uua.org/action/statements/women-and-religion

interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part" – and, in 1995, articulation of the Sixth Source.[2]

The Sixth Source invites us to draw from "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." While the charge to "live in harmony with the rhythms of nature" is a challenging expectation, considering the ecological desecration all around us, the experiential connection between human beings and the natural world offers inspiration and spiritual sustenance.

This connection with the earth was the catalyst for John Gilmore's conversion. Raised in a strict Pentecostal community, Gilmore longed for something different in an environment where difference equaled deviance.

In his reflection, "Touched by a Goddess," Gilmore – who now goes by the name Om Prakash – recalled his path into paganism. He writes:

> when I [was]…living alone in San Diego, working hard with barely any money, I began to notice all the pain and suffering around me and to identify with it until it was all I could see…
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> I worked alone at night as a security guard, making rounds sometimes under the most beautiful skies I had ever seen. I was crushed, totally depressed, but when I looked up at the brilliant moon surrounded by stars I sensed something there drawing me out of myself. I knew what it was. It was what Pentecostals had warned me about, something seductive and satanic. Yet it wasn't. It was warm, beautiful and alluring. I wanted to connect with that feeling, go deeper, let my feelings of fear and depression wash away and join completely with Her. Somewhere inside I knew it was Her but I fought for my life, resisting.

This feeling was the beginning of a new spiritual journey for Om Prakash, culminating in a series of dreams, including one that was a mystical experience with the goddess Diana. Om Prakash knew he needed a place to talk about his dreams but couldn't think of a community that would accept his experiences. He then remembered a Baptist missionary who warned him against the Unitarian

[2] https://www.uuworld.org/articles/how-uu-principles-purposes-were-adopted

Universalist church. The missionary had been wrong about everything else, Om Prakash thought, so maybe he was wrong about this religion too.

Om Prakash nervously attended his first service in a Unitarian Universalist congregation; he was back in a church after all. It was summertime and the services were led by church members, many of whom were mystical naturalists. Despite his Pentecostal roots and being a black man in a predominantly white community, he felt at home. As the congregational year began in earnest, he connected with the minister who introduced him to others with whom he could explore earth-based spiritualities. In time, Om Prakash joined the congregation, receiving a standing ovation when he told the story of his religious odyssey, and joined CUUPS. In conclusion, Om Prakash affirms that:

> The Goddess and I are still connected…Singing, moving meditation, and chanting often connect me to Her in all of Her forms. Not only to Her, but to every tree, flower, person on this planet, Mother Earth. To me, She became the Beloved, moving The Wheel of Time.

Thus, Om Prakash became part of a diverse community of practitioners, celebrating the cycles of the earth and the divine beings that command reverence as part of our awareness of earth's power.

Rebecca Kelley-Morgan, who serves here as Director of Lifespan Religious Education, is another practitioner, a teacher in the Reclaiming tradition. In a reflection she wrote titled "Earth Path," she affirms that:

> Paganism…is a set of practices and beliefs that are anchored by the worldview that Earth is sacred and everything that moves within, above and upon is sacred. It's pretty straight forward. You may see or hear of various groups of pagans, druids, witches, shamans and ecstatics and they ALL hold that foundational value. Just as we as Unitarian Universalists may express our individual beliefs in a wide variety of ways and YET, hold the foundational value of inclusion and connection as we create religious meaning…
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> In Earth centered religions there are no sacred texts analogous to Torah, Bible and Koran. There are no sutras or Upanishads…There are instead, the

> cycles, seasons and elements – our sacred teachers. The elements, air, fire, water and earth are teachers in fact and in metaphor. Without them we would die. This is a truth so profound it is often overlooked. The truth is that…the basic elements of life are the most indispensable. And what is essential to us, is worthy of our deepest love and devotion.[3]

These are the words of those we might call "honest pagans," those who practice rituals, who recognize the transitions throughout the growing seasons as holidays, some who worship Gods and Goddesses from ancient times.

While paganism in its varied forms is a minority tradition in our culture, there are many contemporary communities devoted to its practice. Which invites us to wonder why someone would choose to be both pagan and Unitarian Universalist.

One of the well-known public figures who was also a Unitarian Universalist was the journalist Margot Adler, author of *Drawing Down the Moon* and an elder in the Covenant of the Goddess. In a 1994 essay, Adler affirms that, like Molly Brewer, she draws meaning from both identities, that, balancing the ecstasy of her earth-based practice, the Unitarian Universalist tradition supports her in engaging with the tangible and political realities of the world. She writes:

> I believe the things of this world and this existence matter, that matter matters, and that the sacred resides in the here and now…I can do all those wonderful, earth-centered spiritual things: sing under the stars, drum for hours, create moving ceremonies for the changes of seasons or the passage of time in the lives of men and women. But I also need to be a worldly, down-to-earth person in a complicated world--someone who believes oppression is real, that tragedies happen, that chaos happens, that not everything is for a purpose. Unitarian Universalism gives me a place to be at home with some of my closest friends: my doubts…And…in turn, the Pagan community has brought to Unitarian Universalism the joy of ceremony.

As Unitarian Universalist belief in inclusion and connection transcends individual theology, so does the value of actively serving and repairing the world, a value resonating with the humanists, Christians, atheists, agnostics, pagans and others

[3] "Earth Path," Rebecca Kelley-Morgan

among us, a value that motivates many Unitarian Universalists to actively defend the earth we call home. [pause]

Life beyond the trappings of human civilization nurtures us, helps us heal, makes us whole, reminds us of our dependence upon and vulnerability within the world. Perhaps this is why there are no retreat centers amid the industrial buildings of Woburn or the strip malls of Southern New Hampshire. When we are in need of retreat, we seek communion with the earth.

This connection is at the heart of so many moments of transcendence. The words of UU minister and CUUPS board president Amy Beltaine affirm this truth and serve as a closing blessing:

> Earth demands your attention. It often provides opportunities for spiritual experiences. Perhaps it was when you pulled a weed and were enveloped by the earthy smell of freshly disturbed soil…Maybe it was when you looked up and we're stunned by a shining snow-capped mountain. These experiences can be described by cold hard facts: protons, H2O, an olfactory function. Sometimes facts are inadequate. The awe and wonder, the sense of being transported beyond yourself, or of touching an awareness of the divine, is a spiritual experience.