

**WELLSPRINGS OF OUR LIVING TRADITION:
SPIRITUAL TEACHINGS OF EARTH-CENTERED TRADITIONS**

A Second Sunday Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro
March 11, 2007

Let me begin by reading an excerpt from a thought-provoking little book titled *Seasons of the Self* by Max Coots. See if you can identify with the sentiments he expresses here:

By now I've had enough of Wintertime.
Too much, if my reaction to the weather means a thing.
I start to take the weather personally. No one ever should, but I admit I do.
By now I get a little April foolish about thermometers and things. . . .
At least I'm not alone in this. There's something pagan in the way I feel.
It's almost as if I could believe, as ancient people did, that along in March or April,
Winter fought with Summer for the earth, and finally compromised with Spring.
It's like a game with seasons taking sides. It's all snow and ice and cold,
Then thaw-making pools by day that night shapes back to ice, then thaw again.
The premature impertinence of something daring to leave the ground and grow.
Then, quick revenge that comes, as snow, to Winter-wish the change away.
It seems to get quite personal. . . .
But I grow pagan the end of March and start to take the seasons too much to heart.
Too much? Maybe not . . . Maybe we ought to take the seasons personally;
Identify ourselves with ancient, primal hungers of history—
To know that past, though past, is never really dead,
That we are now what we were once, and what it always has meant
To be alive and human, Winter, Fall, or Spring.

[Max A. Coots, *Seasons of the Self*, pp. 25-27]

This morning I continue my monthly sermons on the sources of our faith tradition by focusing on the sixth source of our faith tradition (highlighted on the back of your order of service): **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.** This source was added in 1995—the only addition to our denomination's statement of Principles and Purposes approved by our General Assembly since 1985. It invites us to **take nature seriously**—or as Max Coots would suggest, to take our relationship with nature **personally**. As Forrest Church says, “Our sixth source may have been an official latecomer, but it holds a primary place in our faith's typology. A sense of the earth as a touchstone of the sacred, indeed as holy ground, comes before Judaism and Christianity, before the other world religions, before all the philosophers of humanism. One sure proof of authentic religious experience is the combination of humility and awe. Though Earth-centered traditions range from simple to complex, from tribal to universal, each taps a power that no book or creed can begin to approximate—the power of creation.” [John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church, *A Chosen Faith*, pp. 189-90]

As Unitarian Universalists, we revere nature as a first-hand source of spiritual wisdom and inspiration. Answering a question posed by Saint Lawrence hundreds of years ago, William Schultz, former president of our denomination, writes, “Whom should I adore: the Creator or the Creation?” Most Western religions have answered back, ‘Adore the Creator!’ . . . But our answer is far different. Whom should we adore? The Creation, surely, for whatever there be of the Creator will be made manifest in Her handiwork. . . . The gods and goddesses—or, if you prefer, the most precious and profound—are accessible to us in the taste of honey and the touch of stone. This is why we love the earth, honor the human body, and bless the stars. Religion is not just a matter of things Unseen. For us the Holy is not hidden but shows its face in the blush of the world’s exuberance.” [quoted in Buehrens and Church, pp. 192-93]

Reverence for nature’s spiritual significance is deeply embedded in human history. Our earliest ancestors were **animists**, who believed that “every animal, every tree, sometimes every rock and stream, has its own spirit or divinity. . . . Native Americans are the best-known animists. Most tribes regard the land as their sacred mother and all creatures as their brothers and sisters. ‘Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people,’ said Chief Seattle of the Suquamish tribe, in his lament on the passing of the Native American way of life. . . . The Native Americans were amazed and horrified by the way European settlers saw nature as a wilderness to be cleared and a resource to be ruthlessly plundered.” [Paul Harrison, *The Elements of Pantheism*, pp. 57-58]

Reverence for nature is often identified with **paganism**, which connects the sacred powers of nature with specific gods and goddesses drawn from traditions around the world. Paganism, it has been said, is everyone’s “first” religion in that it revolves around our most primitive response to the wonders and terrors of Mother Nature. “The word pagan comes from the Latin *paganus*, which originally meant ‘rustic’ or ‘rural’. In religious terms, it came to be used of those people—often country-dwellers—who stuck to traditional polytheism when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century AD. Today the word is loosely used of any non-Christian who practices a polytheistic or nature-based religion.” [Harrison, p. 11] The Covenant of UU Pagans (CUUPS) was one of the driving forces that led to the addition of the sixth source in 1995.

Contemporary pagans pay particular attention to the feminine element in spirituality. Our hymnbook includes the following selection by the feminist pagan known as Starhawk:

Earth mother, star mother, You are called by a thousand names,
 May all remember we are cells in your body and dance together.
 You are the grain and the loaf that sustains us each day,
 And as you are patient with our struggles to learn,
 So shall we be patient with ourselves and each other.
 We are radiant light and sacred dark—the balance—
 You are the embrace that heartens and the freedom beyond fear.
 Within you we are born, we grow, live, and die—
 You bring us around the circle to rebirth,
 Within us you dance forever. [Singing the Living Tradition, # 524]

The need for balance and harmony with natural forces is also a major theme in **Taoism**, which arose in China between the sixth and third centuries BCE. Its classic scripture, the *Tao Te Ching*, “never speaks of a transcendent God or gods. Its central focus is the Tao or Way, conceived of as a mysterious and numinous unity, infinite and eternal, underlying all things and sustaining them. Here is an excerpt from the 25th chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* [trans. by Thomas H. Miles]:

There was something formed from Chaos, born before Heaven and Earth,
 Ultimate and wonderful, existing alone without change,
 Circulating cyclically without depletion, It acts as the mother of the world. . . .
 In the midst of our world there are these four great things, and human beings are one of them.
 Humans are conditioned by Earth. Earth is conditioned by Heaven.
 Heaven is conditioned by Tao. Tao is conditioned by its own nature.

And this from the 46th chapter:

There is no misfortune greater than not knowing when enough is enough.
 There is no mistake greater than wanting to get more and more.
 Therefore, to know the contentment of contentment is to be constantly content.

Most of the world’s spiritual traditions pay homage to the sacredness of nature. However, the monotheistic religions that arose in the Middle East (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) subsume reverence for nature to reverence toward a personal deity who stands **outside** of nature. The spiritual traditions I have described to you this morning regard nature as **sacred in and of itself**. Therefore they might be considered various forms of **pantheism**. In his helpful little book on pantheism, Paul Harrison says, “For pantheists, nature is sacred. Sacred does not mean supernatural or spooky; it means imbued with profound value, worthy of deep respect and reverence. When [Yahweh] called out to Moses from the burning bush, he said: ‘Take off your sandals, for the place you are standing is holy ground.’ But for pantheists all natural areas are sacred objects that must be treated with the highest consideration and compassion. . . . Pantheism sees us as members of the natural community of all life on earth, with the same rights as other members, but with greater duties because of our greater power to do harm. Pantheists believe we must be partners and participants in nature.” [Harrison, p. 63] Anything else we may choose to believe about the **source** of our remarkable and mysterious universe is a matter of personal preference.

“In pantheism, the universe as a whole is regarded as divine and things are part of that unity. This means that every natural thing is an integral member of the divine. Every natural thing is one spark that goes to make up the whole fire. If we revere the fire, we are obliged to respect and cherish the sparks that make it up. As far as our fundamental relation to the divine universe is concerned, humans are not superior to animals, nor animals to plants, nor plants to rocks or clouds or streams. All natural things are on the same level. We are all parts of a single whole, a vast community of being.” [Harrison, p. 72] In that spirit, let me invite you to join me in a responsive reading of **selection # 529** in our hymnbook, written by the great spiritual poet of India, Rabindranath Tagore. [After this reading:] **My friends, the Universe is alive, and so are we.**