

Our UU Theological Tapestry: The Pagan Wheel of the Year

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As the spiritual descendants of Henry David Thoreau, who contemplated nature, religion, and life in the woods overlooking Walden Pond, we are forever wont to consider our place in the universe. Thoreau, however, was not the first to explore the relationship between the inner and outer life, and how that informs and inspires how we walk in this world. Indeed, the connection between ourselves, the earth, and the great energetic Source/Force/Power that creates, destroys, and holds it all together has existed since humanity first looked upon itself and its surroundings.

This cosmic dance has been going on for a very long time, and if we were to go back to our European ancestors in the pre-Christian era, better known to us today as Pagans, we would see how this relationship became ritualized and internalized. While our predecessors lacked our present-day understanding and knowledge of evolution and the scientific deconstruction of life itself, their very existence required a more personal sense-of-knowing the world around them that many of us could never comprehend.

The Pagan recognition of the cycles of the sun and moon, of the seasons that brought forth life and took it away, of the constellations that helped them to navigate their terrain, of the male and female energies that were distinctly different from each other, but which found their full creative expression when brought together...all of that informed how they lived and died.

So intense was the latter that Pagans saw the power of the masculine and feminine in all of nature. Because they were so intimately at the mercy of those powers, they deified them and created a whole

cosmology around them. Gods and Goddesses became the progenitors of the world and affected everything upon it. Humanity held a great reverence for these nature deities, and the beliefs attributed to them were woven into the daily lives of the agrarian cultures that found their comfort, strength, inspiration and sense of direction from them. Their projections upon these gods and goddesses came from their deepest fears and most profound longings, and the offerings that were at the heart of their worship were to inspire benevolence and protection from the sufferings of life.

What is perhaps most profound about the Pagan cosmology was that it was heavily matrilineal, not dismissing its male counterpart, but recognizing that all fecundity came thru the feminine...the divine feminine. Women, after all, were the bearers of life. They were the village herbalists who healed the sick. They were the midwives who brought life into the world. They were the nurturers who suckled their babes, and kept the hearth fires burning for cooking and warmth. It only made sense that the earth, itself, was the domain of the Goddess, and the Cosmos belonged to the God, and all the minor deities in nature were reflections of each.

For the ancients, the terms science and religion would have been meaningless to them. Their world was not compartmentalized nor hidden from their sight; neither were their rituals and praxis separated by intellectual boundaries. Their beliefs were based upon their reality, and their needs and passions, grief and joy, hunger and humility, gratitude and charity were all reflected in their communal gatherings. They relied upon each other and recognized the sacredness of the earth for their very survival. As they became familiar with patterns and cycles on the earth within the circle of the year, they also identified those very same patterns and cycles within their own lives. The themes that became part of their worship wheel reflect that deep connection with their own journey through life.

When Christendom emerged into the world arena, it tried mightily to bring the earth-centered worshippers into the patriarchal fold. But try as they may, the people still worshipped the Goddess as the source of life. So the emerging church built their cathedrals over sacred wells and groves attributed to the Goddess and dedicated them to the Virgin Mary to appease the cultural proclivity for Goddess worship—although Mary was never given divine status. They usurped the seasonal celebrations and rituals of the Pagans and put their own theological spin on them which all but killed both the divine feminine and the relational balance between male and female.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word **Pagan** is derived from the Late Latin *paganus*, which was used at the end of the Roman Empire to name those who practiced a religion other than Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. Early Christians often used the term to refer to non-Christians who worshiped multiple deities. The term also became a moniker for heresy against the Church, and for centuries Pagans were spoken of with negative connotations. Evil magical attributes were associated with Paganism, and it has only been in its neopagan modern incarnation that efforts have been made to bring to light the relevance, power, and importance of the Pagan Wheel of the Year and the rituals and theology that it inspires.

While not all earth-centered traditions are the same, it is Celtic Paganism that has seen a resurgence in western cultures. Based upon ancient practices, the Pagan wheel of the year is divided into 8 sections. The Four Seasons are known as Solar Festivals, in that they mark a seasonal change caused by the Sun. The cross quarter days are marked by Fire Festivals and are usually celebrated as significant agricultural festivals. Together, the Solar and Fire festivals make-up the Pagan Wheel of the Year.

(It is not hard to see the connections to Christian holy days.)

SAMHAIN (October 31) (*Cross-quarter, Fire Festival*)

Samhain (SOW-in) represents the final harvest before the long winter. It's a time to honor our ancestors and embrace the darker half of the year. This also marks the beginning of the New Year in many Pagan traditions.

YULE / MIDWINTER / WINTER SOLSTICE (December 20-23)

(*Quarter Festival, Solstice*)

Yule marks the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. From now on, the days become longer and we celebrate the return of the sun back to the earth. It begins the dream time.

IMBOLC / CANDLEMAS (February 2) (Cross-quarter, Fire Festival)

Imbolc is a festival of fire and light, and in many Pagan traditions celebrates the Celtic hearth goddess, Brigid. It marks the midpoint between winter and spring. This is a festival of purification (If we were at a true Pagan service, the worship leader would take a broom and symbolically brush your auric field to cleanse you from whatever is stifling your personal growth), cleaning your house, a festival of light and fertility, and new beginnings...where seeds are germinating deep in the earth, and seeds of change are also germinating in your thoughts and minds.

OSTARA / SPRING EQUINOX (March 20-23) (*Quarter Festival,*

Equinox)

Ostara is the celebration of the spring equinox, and is a time to prepare for the beginnings of new life each year. The hours of day and night are equal, and light is overtaking darkness. Coloring eggs is commonly associated with Ostara.

BEALTAINÉ / MAY DAY (May 1) (*Cross-quarter, Fire Festival*)

Bealtaine is a spring celebration that honours the fertility of the earth. A time of lust, passion, fire, flowers, and abundance. (If only my

elementary school teachers knew what that Maypole REALLY represented!)

LITHA / MIDSUMMER / SUMMER SOLSTICE (June 20-23)

(Quarter Festival, Solstice)

Litha is the time of the Summer Solstice, the longest day of the year. It's a celebration of light's triumph over darkness and that of the bountiful beauty that light brings into our lives.

LUGHNASADH / LAMMAS (August 1) *(Cross-quarter, Fire Festival)*

Lughnasadh (LOO-na-saa) is a celebration in honour of the Celtic god, Lugh. For others, this festival is observed as Lammas, and celebrates the early grain harvest. This is the first harvest festival, when plants drop their seeds to ensure future crops.

MABON / AUTUMN EQUINOX (September 20-23) *(Quarter Festival, Equinox)*

Mabon is a time of thanksgiving that celebrates the second harvest, and the autumn equinox. The days and nights are once again equal, with the night continuing to grow longer.

UU interest in Paganism began back in the 1970's with the advent of Feminist Theology. The Covenant of UU Pagans, otherwise known as CUUPS, was established in the 1980's and has chapters all over North America. It recognizes spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythm of nature.

The Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans, Inc. (CUUPS) is an independent affiliate of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) honoring goddess-based, earth-centered, tribal and pagan spiritual paths. UU Paganism is a liturgical and theological community under the umbrella of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Membership in

CUUPS is open to Unitarian Universalists and those in sympathy with Unitarian Universalist Purposes and Principles.

CUUPS seeks to return us to that time when nature and religion were one. Its liturgies and rituals remind us of the sacredness of life, of the seasons of the earth and the human body and soul that are all intertwined. Honoring the Divine Feminine alongside the Male aspect creates an inner and outer balance. While we are far removed from sacred wells and holy oak groves, creating sacred space simply requires intention and a sensitivity to the forces that move in us and through us, inspiring us to live in harmony with each other and the earth that sustains us. Even though our invocations to the gods and goddesses are more symbolic than actual, they still bring us into a deeper communion with our ancestral DNA and the essential elements of our very existence.

The next time you find yourself walking on a path in the woods, or sitting by a fire on a cold winter's night, or looking up at the night sky on a clear summer's night, let the boundaries between yourself and the natural order melt away for a moment. Imagine that the earth is sacred, that your life is sacred, and listen carefully. You just might hear sounds from an ancient past memory reminding you that body, mind, spirit, earth, and stars are connected through mystery, miracle, and the building blocks of the Universe. That brings reverence and respect to a whole new level.

Paganism is another important thread in our UU theological tapestry. Its mantra is "Do no harm."

Blessed Be