

“Our Six Sources: The Sacred Circle”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
17 April 2011

Opening Words

adapted from words by Barbara Pescan

For the beauty of the earth,
this spinning blue green ball. . .

Walking gently across the back of Gaia,
the mother of everything,
we come together again in this place
to remember how we can live
to remember who we are
and to create how we will be.

Meditation

Robert T. Weston, *The Web of Life*

There is a living web that runs through us
To all the universe
Linking us each with each and through all life
On to the distant stars.
Each knows a little corner of the world, and lives
As if this were his all.
We no more see the farther reaches of the threads
Than we see of the future, yet they're there.
Touch but one thread, no matter which;
The thoughtful eye may trace to distant lands
Its firm continuing strand, yet lose its filaments as they reach out,
But fine at last it coming back to [the one] from whom it led.
We move as in a fog, aware of self
But only dimly conscious of the rest
As they are close to us in sight or feeling.
New objects loom up for a time, fade in and out;
Then, sometimes, as we look on unawares, the fog lifts
And then there's the web in shimmering beauty,
Reaching past all horizons. We catch our breath;
Stretch out our eager hands, and then
In comes the fog again, and we go on,

Feeling a little foolish, doubting what we had seen.
The hands were right. The web is real.
Our folly is that we so soon forget.

Reading “Emergent Life” by Robert T. Weston

I am amazed, and all but mute with awe
That on this cinder, hurtling around the sun,
A living thing arose, to clothe the earth;
That all this splendor of the leaf and flower,
Life in the sea and on the earth,
From crawling thing to singing bird and man,
All fruit of the same life, continually renewed
Through cell and seed and birth-
In spite of winter's storms that sweep the earth,
This miracle of shared and sharing life,
Arose and, still evolving, still goes on.
Here on this whirling ball warmed by the sun
(As on what planets of what other stars?)
Through countless deaths and many million forms
Life bore its varied cells,
And there were those from which the coral grew
To atolls in the sea;
The fish, the insects and the nesting birds
All played their varied parts through which
A widening community spread across the earth.
Thus as through us the same life flows through all
Making us debtor and creditor, brother and sister, each of all;
Each as the grass, springing from common earth,
Adding to others and receiving as well,
And all of us, seed, plant and flower and seed
En route through love and the awakening mind
To what we cannot guess.

Sermon: “The Sacred Circle”

Once upon a time¹, but not so long ago,
there was a small town that had some lessons to learn about multiculturalism.

For as long as anyone in the town could remember,
a small nativity scene had graced the front lawn of the Town Hall each December.

Since none of the town councilors
knew of anyone in the village who wasn't Christian,
they'd never thought twice about letting a local church
install the crèche year after year.

Years went by, though, and the town grew and changed, and in time,
a group of Jewish residents approached the town leaders and said,
“You know, we don't mind the nativity scene on the town square.
In fact, some of us have Christmas Trees in our own homes.

But lets put up a menorah next to the crèche
so that Hanukkah is honoured this year, too.”

Now, these town councilors were reasonable enough people,
and they agreed to place a menorah alongside the crèche.

After a while, townspeople became accustomed to seeing both symbols
on their town square, and everyone seemed content.

Then, a few years later, a group of pagans and atheists in town
decided that if there was going to be a crèche and a menorah,
there should also be a symbol honoring the winter solstice.

Mindful of how smoothly the request for the menorah had gone a few years before,
they approached the town council to make their case.

Unfortunately, though, the town's leaders had reached the limits
of their interfaith ambitions. They denied the request.

What's most inspiring about this story, though, is what happened next.

¹ This story has been freely adapted from a telling by Rev. Rob Hardies of the original story as told by Rev. Chris Buice, in his book, *Roller-skating as a Spiritual Discipline*.

Rather than heading off to the courts or out to the media,
this band of atheists and pagans
decided not to get mad, but to get creative.

On the morning of the shortest day of the year,
the good citizens of this small village woke up,
braced themselves against the cold,
and headed off for work and school.

But, that morning, while driving down Main Street,
they saw something new on the Town Square.

Overnight someone had pounded into place along the road
a series of lawn signs.

They were tasteful and read:
“Once More ‘Round the Sun. Happy Winter Solstice!”

I just love that response. I love their approach.

I admire the gentle persistence,
and I treasure that simple reminder: “Once More ‘Round the Sun.”

It is an affirmation of faith in the circle and cycles of life.

It is a reminder of the Great Wheel of the year
that turns one day to the next.

And, it is an invitation into the fullness of our lives—
to know, like kids spinning on a merry-go-round,
that there’s wonder and delight to be found each time
we go around the bend.

And, to know—to learn, if we live long enough—
that all of it also comes at some real cost.

That with every year, with each circle ‘round the sun,
we come to know ever more the struggles of this journey,
the hardship and heartbreak that attend any and every life,
the reminder that our grand adventure on this good earth
is beautiful, but ultimately bittersweet.

Every life has its part in pain.
All people eventually face their share of loss,
and some face more than they deserve.

But, that's not the whole of the story—
the story taught to us by the earth herself,
a story of circles, seasons, and cycles,
a story of balance, renewal, and release.

If we look for it, there is ministry to be found for heavy hearts
in the testimony of water droplets that move through countless stages
and back again, or in the example of a leaf
that comes into being as a bud, grows into the fullness of its body,
at the end glows as though on fire,
and then drifts down to the earth to nurture the ongoing flow of life.

Wendell Berry gets at this strange comfort in his poem “The Peace of Wild Things”:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

This morning, we reach the end of this series of sermons
exploring the Six Sources of Unitarian Universalism.

This is a case of the last certainly not being the least!
If anything, it could be argued that this one encompasses all the others.

The Sixth Source of our faith explains that we draw
on 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.”

While this source would, in some ways,
seem the most foundational of them all, it was the last to be added.

In 1995, after several years of study and discussion,
our official Principles and Purposes were amended to include
this new statement, recognising that the web of life itself
offers us a significant source of spiritual strength and wisdom.

Now, this recognition had been building for some time.

A decade earlier, we had adopted the Seventh Principle that calls us
to honour “the interdependent web of life of which we are a part.”

But these two decisions together—
the acknowledgment of our profound interdependence
and our openness to the wisdom of earth-centred teachings—
marked an important turning point in our tradition.

After decades if not centuries of intense focus on the highly rational,
our faith was beginning to make room for other ways of knowing.

Now, being Unitarians, we did this work, of course,
with lots of discussion, voting, and wordsmithing.

(You haven’t lived until you’ve witnessed a thousand Unitarians
discussing a dangling participle at length. . . !)

When the question finally came to a vote, it wasn’t without controversy.

There were some who feared what we might become
if we were to open ourselves to the teachings of earth-based traditions.

I can appreciate those concerns—it’s not always easy
to see something you know and love and depend on change.

But our faith has been and hopefully will ever remain a living tradition—
a religion that evolves that it might remain relevant to its times.

Sixteen years on, what I believe we have become and are becoming is a faith better prepared to engage the troubling questions that have come to the fore of our common life on this planet.

There are many examples I could point to, but I'll tell you a story instead.

One of my former (and favorite!) ministers, Doris Hunter, tells of a conversation she overheard her granddaughter having with a playmate.

Her little friend was complaining about her Catholic catechism class, saying that all she ever heard at church was “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.”

Doris' granddaughter comiserated with her friend, saying that all she ever heard in her UU religious education class was “Rainforest, Rainforest, Rainforest.”

The adoption of our Sixth Source and our Seventh Principle has brought about a deepening commitment to the well-being of life on this planet—through our worship, our religious education, and our social action.

It has led hundreds of our congregations to begin working, like we are, to become Green Sanctuaries—houses of worship increasingly inspired to walk their talk, be that by reducing their congregation's carbon footprint or organising field trips to learn where our garbage really goes.

And, yet, as important as all of that is and has been, I believe our Sixth Source has sparked a deeper shift in our tradition—one that is ultimately and profoundly spiritual.

I believe it is leading us to love the earth in a new way—to better understand our place in its delicate web, and see the seasons of our own lives
in the cycles that are bigger and beyond us.

Even with our strong rationalist bent, this is work we've at for some time in this tradition, starting with those Transcendentalist Unitarians back in the 19th century,

who felt the holy could be found in the rhythms of the natural world and that our search for the divine spark need not overlook the flickering found within our own heart.

These are lessons now being reinforced—
and maybe just in the nick of time—
by our growing understanding of the sacred circle to which we belong.

As we look to earth-centred traditions to do this, Unitarian writer, Elizabeth Fisher, identifies at least three common teachings that we can find at their core²:

- + That spirit is a “dynamic essence—present in all that exists.”
- + That all people can encounter “spirit through direct experience, not dogma or dictates.”
- + And that “natural processes teach the ways of the spirit.”

She also goes on to articulate three ethical implications drawn from our Sixth Source:

- + That “we are called upon to value all elements and beings in the natural world [as well as] their interconnection[s].”
- + That “spiritual social equality exists among humans. . . and should be consciously fostered.
- + And, maybe most importantly, that
“nature is [to be] revered as [our] home rather than as [our] adversary.

I think all of these can be boiled down to two words:
reverence and responsibility.

Reverence and responsibility.

On this Earth Day Sunday,
I wonder what you find your own relationship with those two words to be.

² Elizabeth Fisher, “Unitarian Universalism, Earth-based Spirituality, and the Sixth Source, Keynote Address, Pacific Southwest District Annual Meeting, deBenneville Pines, California, May, 1997.

And, I wonder where your faith figures in.

For myself, my relationship with both words is growing.
Sometimes in fits and starts.

But my faith is calling me to keep at this work—
to look to the precious and precarious web of life and my place in it—
to allow myself to be nourished by the extravagance of sunsets
and the blessings of rain,
and to fall in love with this world enough every day
to help protect and sustain it.

Once more 'round the sun.

With the gift of each day on this good green earth,
it is our great privilege
to be swept up in the whirl and wonder of it all,
as our own beautiful blue dot swirls through space
around the Sun that is the source of our very being.

Around and around we go, for all the days of our lives,
on this most amazing of amazing rides.

Blessed Be.