

Grounding Ourselves to the Earth and to Our Faith

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March 14, 2010

There is a particular day in the early part of February when you walk out the door and sense that something feels different. There may be snow on the ground and a few weeks to go before spring arrives officially but the world has shifted, just a little. A different quality to the light, more warmth to the sun and maybe a bird chirping? At that moment you are sharing an experience with countless generations of people living in those regions of the world where the seasons were distinct and winter had a significant impact on their daily routines and well-being.

For the most part our modern experience of this special moment is quite different than that of ancient peoples. We might perk up a little and get on with our day. In ancient times this annual occasion prompted a series of rituals to celebrate the first signs of spring, a very special event. It is the midway point between the darkness of winter solstice and the balanced light of the spring equinox. The first days that there is a noticeable increase in daylight. For those in more temperate zones this was the beginning of the planting season. I have my roots in the Celtic world where the Imbolc celebration marked the impending birth of lambs, a time for renewal, to clean the home and hearth and celebrate the goddess Brigid. The ancient Scots were somewhat more pessimistic as they lived farther north. This was a time to ensure that you still had sufficient firewood and feed for livestock to make it through the rest of the winter. One source I read said that it was the time for divorce in ancient Ireland. One of the common traditions in many areas was heading out to look for signs of spring in nature. They looked for hibernating animals emerging to enjoy a bit of warm sunlight and maybe feed or water before returning to their burrows. Snakes and hares were considered particularly good signs as they were associated with the goddesses of spring and fertility.

Over the years most of these so called "pagan" traditions of early February have been forgotten. The Christians did their usual rebranding and the holiday became Candlemass, marking the 40 days or so after the birth of Christ when Mary was deemed clean enough to go to the temple, covering both the goddess and cleanliness angles. In over 50 locations in North America the richness of these traditions have been distilled down to one rather sad ritual. On February 2 crowds of local citizens assemble at dawn to drag a terrified groundhog out of a hole to see whether or not spring is coming soon. This tradition of rodent abuse was brought to the US in the late 1700s by German

immigrants to Pennsylvania but few modern people realize the rich history that underlies "Groundhog Day"

Welcoming the return of light and the coming of spring is believed to be the oldest of human spiritual celebrations. Spring's arrival was marked by the ancient Babylonians 4500 years ago. Some scholars suggest that the Jews picked up this tradition during their captivity in Babylon and the celebration evolved into the Passover holiday with its theme of the delivery from the darkness of captivity.

The escape from darkness or emerging from the underworld storyline appears all over the place in the ancient traditions. We think of the joy of the goddess Demeter when her daughter Persephone emerges from the clutches of Hades, bringing spring with her from below.

One rather interesting spring festival was celebrated across the Roman empire. It was called Hilaria and was a raucous week of all night partying in mid-March. It honoured the Persian earth mother goddess Cybele. Hilaria celebrated the resurrection from the dead of the goddess's son Attis. Hmm... If you visit Rome you can go to the site of the Temple of Cybele. The original temple is long gone but you will be looking at the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore which is one of the 5 most important or "papal" churches in Rome. When you travel remember that many of the Christian churches and cathedrals are built on sites sacred to earth centred traditions.

It is not surprising that ancient peoples celebrated spring. Winter brought nothing but darkness and hardship, the further north or south you lived the worse it was. The risks of cold, starvation and predation by hungry large animals made winter a season to be feared so the signs of spring were also signs of survival. It is only relatively recently that winter has been tamed. My great-grandparents lost three homes to fire in their attempts to keep a poorly insulated house warm on the shores of Lake Nipissing in the early 1900s. Being burned out in winter in northern Ontario was a very serious situation.

There may be another reason for the spiritual significance of the coming of spring. Generally people feel better and after a long winter that in itself is a good reason to party. Humans appear to be biologically programmed to feel more energetic and friskier when the light returns. Spring fever is not a myth, although scientists have not entirely sorted it out. It is well documented that animals and humans track seasons by measuring the length of days through an internal biological clock, and this is what controls their breeding. Research

also suggests that our increased energy in the spring months is somehow linked to decreased melatonin production, due to shorter nights. Melatonin is known as the "sleepy hormone". Since the mid-1980s we have heard about seasonal affected disorder or SAD. No one knows the exact cause of SAD but there are distinct patterns of this winter depression lifting in the spring. Some believe the earlier onset of morning light is responsible for this lift in mood.

Seasonal cycles in human reproductive behaviour have also been documented. A 2001 study published in the Journal of Biological Rhythms, looked at... biological rhythms. They examined birth records going back to the 16th century. At that time birth rates increased by 20 percent in March. Since then this figure has declined but there are still 10% more births in March. This is actually a good arrangement when you think about it because in ancient times a nursing baby born in spring would have a better fed mother than one born in the autumn. So, what is going on in June to account for these spikes in births?

As spring progresses the production of the hormone that triggers testosterone in men and ovulation in women increases, peaking by an average of 20% in June. Research also shows that successful in-vitro fertilization follows the same seasonal peaks as natural births. Some researchers say that these patterns are actually influenced by culture and social factors but you have to wonder whether these human traditions really came about because of the natural cycles.

I don't know what the answer is but I don't need a room full of PhDs to prove that I feel better and have more energy beginning around the middle of February whether or not we are still having winter weather. The link between the natural cycles and the human soul seem pretty clear to me.

Last summer Monica and I carpooled to Kingston for the Canadian Unitarian Universalist Leadership (CUUL) School. As we were from the same congregation we were put into separate teams for the four days. On the way home we discussed our experience and it turned out that one of the things we enjoyed the most was the earth-centred worship. We began and closed each day with a worship service. The evening service was led by the CUUL school students. Monica's group did a service with a water theme, using rocks from a nearby Lake Ontario beach. My group decided to model our service on the campfire experience, sitting under the stars around the flames. Driving back we both observed that our home congregation seldom used an earth centred

theme for our worship and we thought this was a loss. At that point we decided that our CUUL school service would be earth-centred.

In the front of the gray hymnal there is a list of the various religious and spiritual traditions that are the sources we draw on as Unitarian Universalists.

The last one on the list is *"Spiritual teachings of Earth-centred traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature"*

It was added to our sources in 1995 only after this proposed addition was discussed for six years and even then it was supported by a very narrow majority. Evidently what was perceived as "paganism" generated discomfort 15 years ago and I suspect it still does. I wonder whether a faith community that prides itself on its rational pursuit of truth wobbles a bit with the stereotypical images of modern druids meeting in the forest, or celebratory altars festooned with flowers, tree boughs and other gifts of nature. Years ago when I was living on the west coast a male friend quipped that he wasn't quite sure what some of his women friends were doing with all these goddess books but if it involved dancing naked in the moonlight his backyard was always available.

The term "Earth-centred traditions" contained in our UU sources encompasses a number of distinct spiritual paths and a variety of practices. For some it evokes aboriginal spirituality, for others it describes neo--paganism, Celtic or Wiccan communities. It may also represent ecological spirituality sometimes known as deep ecology. It may involve a goddess, a belief in some divine power evident in the world around us or the simple acceptance that humans are part of, not separate from nature. Rituals vary from those that express gratitude for the gifts of the earth to various celebrations that mark the passing of the seasons or the cycles of life and death that we witness in the natural world. A modern common thread is the understanding that when we disrespect or assault nature we impact our spiritual well-being, either individually, as a community or as a species.

In my own case my interest in spirituality and its relationship to the environment led me to the Celtic tradition, both pre and post Christian. I was nudged along this path while working in the Queen Charlotte Islands. Like many people who visit there I found myself a bit entranced by the mist, the ancient cultures and the otherworldliness of the place. I had a conversation with a Haida elder who also happened to be a United Church minister with his feet firmly planted in the two spiritual traditions. He acknowledged that many

people are touched deeply by the Islands but encouraged me to look for a spiritual home in the context of my own culture. By coincidence my cultural heritage is rooted in the equally misty islands of Ireland and Britain on the other side of the world. I think I have come to a balance between my environmental science brain, my respect for the core teachings of Christianity and thousands of years of human spirituality rooted in the cycles of life and nature. It should come as no surprise that I find myself in a Unitarian Universalist community.

The first worship service I ever attended in this building was 8 or 9 years ago. It was a women's winter solstice celebration. We marked the longest night of the year through a number of rituals that reflected the ancient themes of darkness, introspection, and renewal. There was a group in the congregation who had an interest in this sort of worship although I don't think it continued very long after that.

Shortly after I began to attend on Sundays, partly because my previous church would not have allowed a service of that nature and I wanted the freedom to explore all my spiritual interests. While I didn't feel the need to worship in this manner all the time, I thought it was pretty cool that an earth-centred celebration was welcomed by the community. While lurking around at the edge of the coffee time trying to be invisible I encountered a couple who eventually revealed to me that they were Wiccan. The woman in the couple told me that they were not sure they could be entirely open about their spirituality.

It struck me as sadly ironic that the earth centred faith tradition that underlies all of the major religions and most religious celebrations should become something so sinister. I guess hundreds of years of propaganda and oppression still haunt us. This couple didn't seem to stick around. Maybe they weren't a good fit, maybe they just moved but I wonder whether they didn't feel comfortable here. I wish I knew.

The arrival of spring with its ancient and modern celebrations is an annual reminder of our vulnerability as a species. I believe that we lose something very significant when we fail to value earth-centred spiritual traditions or view them as unsophisticated when compared to more modern intellectually based theologies. I also believe that the key to living sustainably on this planet is acknowledging our own dependence on the "inter-connected web of life" not only physically but spiritually and sharing this reverence with our children. By "being" in nature rather than "doing" in nature.

The Catholic theologian Thomas Berry considers all this in his book *The Great Work*. He wrote: "The present urgency is to begin thinking within the context of the whole planet, the integral Earth community with all its human and other-than-human components. When we discuss ethics we must understand it to mean the principles and values that govern that entire (Earth) community." Berry believes that the natural world is the physical manifestation of the divine. The survival of both religion and science depends not on one winning (because then both would lose), but on the emergence of what he calls a third story, a twenty-first-century story. As a society, we need to give nature back to our kids. Not doing that is immoral. It is unethical. "A degraded habitat will produce degraded humans," Berry writes. "If there is to be any true progress, then the entire life community must progress."

Are we listening to those who suggest we are damaging our children spiritually by not encouraging them to experience and appreciate the power and energy of the natural world? In his book *Last child in the Woods* Richard Louv examines the increasing trend to separate North American children from a direct relationship with nature in both physical and spiritual terms. He says that "Children can speak knowledgeably about the environment - the disappearing rain forest and the growing ozone layer - but many have little firsthand acquaintance with the flora and fauna outside their doors. Nature has become an abstraction, the stuff of PBS specials rather than daily life. Some children have never climbed a tree, picked violets in the spring, or watched a pale green cocoon on a milkweed leaf metamorphose into a monarch butterfly. He says that "Nature presents the young with something so much greater than they are; it offers an environment where they can easily contemplate infinity and eternity."

So this week as we celebrate the "official" arrival of spring, why not release your inner pagan? As Kath McIntyre would say, look for the signs. Give thanks to whoever or whatever for the warmth in the sun. Make sure somebody sees you skip a few steps. Clean out a closet. Goose someone (but not at your workplace) and know that you continue the most ancient of spiritual rituals.