

The Sacred Circle of Life
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia
Rev. Paige Getty
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The living Unitarian Universalist tradition we share draws from many sources. One of them is 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.

Call to Worship – *Why I Wake Early*, by Mary Oliver

Reading – *Such Singing in the Wild Branches*, by Mary Oliver

Sermon:

This morning, as I often do, I woke up early, and especially early today—before the alarm, long before the sun rose, and in this case, long before even the dog was interested in rousing from her cozy bed. The house was unusually quiet, and I sat for a few minutes on the sofa before turning on the computer, before turning on the coffee pot. After a few moments I heard sounds from outside—rain, I thought? Must be. But when I looked through the window I realized it was more than just rain. The deck was icy and slick, and the temperature was right at freezing. I made a mental note to myself: Paige, you are a klutz, and you are pregnant. Leave early to get to church this morning. Wear sensible shoes. Be careful. Don't be in your usual rush.

And what I realized as I took these notes is that this is winter's message—not just this morning, not just this year, but every year. Paige, you are a mammal, a product of this earth, and you must pay attention to what the earth is telling you. Winter is a time of darkening, of the earth forcing you to slow down and take long winter's naps. You need not be in such a hurry all the time. Your body needs to take it easy, to rest, and Mother Earth is trying to help.

And yet it is a message from which we—at least, we who have means in the industrialized world—have so effectively insulated ourselves. We have built dwellings that literally insulate our bodies from natural elements, where we can, if we choose, maintain a pleasant temperature of 70 degrees year-round. We hardly depend on the land anymore for our sustenance—and definitely not on the local land. There were strawberries and tomatoes on the produce shelves in the supermarket yesterday—and I *know* neither of those is being harvested here locally in December.

So it is with a sense of challenge, and maybe a bit of reticence, that I'm talking today about a source of our Unitarian Universalist faith that instructs us to live *in harmony* with the rhythms of nature.

First, let's step back a bit and remind ourselves about these sources of our faith. With no creed, no formal doctrine, no single sacred text, Unitarian Universalism affirms and promotes belief in ongoing revelation. Truth is not sealed, nor should be our minds. This is the foundation of our tradition—we place our faith, our hope for our future, in large part in the belief that wisdom and meaning are always accessible to us, in myriad ways, with myriad truths to enrich and ennoble our lives.

And so, in our covenant with one another as Unitarian Universalists, we affirm that our living tradition has many sources of truth and meaning—and we, in upholding the covenant, promise to open ourselves to the truths and meanings that come from each of them, rather than limiting ourselves to only one or a few sources of such wisdom and insight. We as a denomination have formalized a list of six sources—and *they are not a multiple-choice list*. If we are to be sincere practitioners of Unitarian Universalism, then we are called to understand and open ourselves to all of them. Today, we focus on number six—*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*.

Earth-centered traditions... ancient animist traditions, Native American traditions, Wicca, neo-paganism, Shinto in Japan... These and others all are traditions that revere the Earth, recognizing the sacred in the natural world, and recognizing the human responsibility to respect and defend that sacredness. But these are traditions also often labeled pejoratively as “primitive” or “superstitious” by so many of us formally educated folks who value words and ideas above all else—essentially dismissing our relationship with the physical, material world as incidental, irrelevant to religious purposes, unsophisticated and therefore unworthy of our devotion.

How unfortunate that we—and I certainly include myself—have so limited ourselves! But the gift of delving more deeply and directly into these sources as I develop this sermon series is that I am reflecting more intently on their value and meaning for my life as a Unitarian Universalist—not just on their poetic words and sometimes abstract language, but on what they have to say about the reality of our shared human experience... and our approach to that experience as persons of faith.

And so recently I really have thought more deliberately about *celebrating the sacred circle of life*, and learning to live more intentionally *in harmony with the rhythms of nature*. The wording of the source is clear—we are *instructed* to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature. Not to consider it as an option, but to *do it*.

And one of the things I've realized in this exploration and reflection is that earth-centered traditions call us, perhaps more than any of the other sources, to three things that I have long believed are the hallmarks of authentic religious devotion... Humility, Gratitude and Awe.

Humility as a virtue has received the short shrift, at least in our culture. We have come to believe that to be humble is to be weak, passive, submissive... when humility is not inherently any of those things. Humility is about an honest recognition of one's place in the world—not to believe oneself to be greater than one is; nor to believe oneself to be less than one is. To be humble, says my favorite definition, is to remain teachable. To be humble, in a simplified sense, is to realize both the limits of one's powers, and also the expanses of those powers—and to accept the responsibility of using those powers conscientiously. We are instructed to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature. We must, then, remain instruct-able about how to do so.

I do not view practitioners of earth-based rituals as superstitious. Rather I view them as humble—recognizing our utter dependence on the earth and all her creatures; recognizing our interconnectedness with all of life; and—because we humans are self-aware, and therefore aware of our own participation in that circle—acknowledging at the same time our responsibility to honor and defend the natural world.

As with all religious rituals, we might ask ourselves who the ritual is for? Do we believe that in monotheistic traditions the rituals really are for God—because God needs them?—or for the persons performing the ritual? Similarly, do we believe that the Goddesses and Gods in pagan traditions need our rituals in order for the sun to return? I don't. I believe that *we* need the rituals to remind *ourselves* to be humble—to remind ourselves that we are powerless to control the movement of the earth, the ebb and flow of the tides, the majesty of the stars. We depend on their power for our very lives, and we are wise to remember our place in this world, lest we should willfully or incidentally devastate it with our carelessness.

Once we take a stance of humility, we are then open more fully to acknowledge and express our gratitude and awe—two other integral virtues for the person of faith, utterly interconnected with one another and with humility. Without humility we likely will destroy the earth and ourselves along with it. Humility rightfully leads to gratitude, without which our hearts grow cold, isolated, ungenerous. In gratitude, we recognize not only our own place in the world, but then we give back through a generosity of spirit—saying thank you to the universe for our very lives, for the bounty of blessings we know. Don't you teach your children to say thank you because you believe it will benefit the child ultimately, not merely because the recipient needs to hear it?

If humility and gratitude are requirements of spiritual discipline, then awe is a fringe benefit. And awe is, perhaps, what most of us consider first when thinking of the natural

world—the awesome expanse of the galaxy; the majesty of the mountains; the unfathomable depths of the seas; the powerfully evocative fragrance of a flower; the striking brilliance of a sunset; the sheer beauty, I’m told, of childbirth. Awe... that experience that transcends ideas, that is viscerally real and brings to life meaning that is inexpressible with mere words...

What better than the sacred circle of life to inspire us in humility, gratitude and awe? We are a part of that circle—connected with one another and with all of the natural world, and at the same time able to stand apart from it, observing in gratitude and awe our often insignificant and utterly dependent relationship to it.

The Rev. Forrest Church tells a story of his father—a self-described lapsed Catholic and secular humanist who was technically “unchurched”, and yet profoundly in touch with a sense of holiness and holy ground. On his tombstone, his children used his own words: “I never knew a person who felt self-important in the morning after spending the night in the open on an Idaho mountainside under a star-studded summer sky.” Oh, but how self-important we so often seem to be...

Speaking personally, I have never been a nature-lover. An admirer, yes. But while I love the days when I can throw open the windows and breathe the fresh air, I don’t consider camping a vacation, and hiking in the mountains is definitely work. Whitewater rafting is invigorating, but my clearest memories of those trips are about family squabbles over who would steer the raft.

And yet, despite this sometimes ambivalent relationship with the natural world, I do find myself grateful, humbled by its awesome powers as I allow it to inform and inspire my sense of the mysteries of existence.

I moved to the Boston area when I was 25 years old, and that was my first experience living in a climate with un-subtle changes in the seasons—without a car, and located inconveniently away from public transportation, I walked 30 minutes each way to and from school, and that first winter was bitter cold. But I found myself surprisingly invigorated by it—recognizing without a doubt that I was fully alive, otherwise I would not have *felt* the growing frostbite in my toes.

And it is because of my respect for the sacred circle of life—there is no absolute beginning, no absolute ending to Life itself—and the calling to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature that I can embrace death as an integral part of life... death, without which life would have no real meaning at all.

And it is because of a sense of sheer humility and awe in the face of nature that I struggle so to respond when somebody asks me what it feels like to be pregnant. It’s like, well, magic. How can I possibly explain what it feels like to have another living being

growing inside me? And how, though I may have participated in this act of creation, I was, and am, *so not* in control of it. How privileged and rare an experience this seems—after all, it's in my body, and only I can feel it—while I recognize that zillions and zillions of females before me, and with me, and after me, experience the same things.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition celebrates the sacred circle of life and *instructs* us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature. To open ourselves to the physical world, in humility and gratitude and awe. To live in the world, rather than just observing it. To resist the urge to put everything into words and ideas. To allow the rhythms of nature to guide us—when to rest, to renew, to create, to harvest.

*Listen, [says Mary Oliver,] everyone has a chance.
Is it spring, is it morning?*

*Are there trees near you,
and does your own soul need comforting?
Quick, then—open the door and fly on your heavy feet; the song
may already be drifting away.*

My wish for us all today is that we, too, may be more open to that sacred circle of life.

Blessed Be and Amen.