

# *Pagans Among Us*

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**[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)**

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## **Reading**

from UUWorld, November 1996:

"Vibrant, Juicy, Contemporary: or, Why I Am a UU Pagan"

by Margot Adler

When I was five, I asked my father what religion we were. An atheist from a nominally Jewish background, he told me, "We believe in the brotherhood of man." Now, this did not cut it for a five-year-old, particularly when my best friend got to put on her white dress and have Holy Communion. Feeling she was getting a much better deal, I demanded that my father start to read me the Bible. And I wanted to be a Catholic.

Meanwhile, my mother was also saying, "You're Jewish," and my father was saying, "No, we're not." So I come from a background of religious confusion and even conflict. My father, although Jewish, had actually been brought up in a Lutheran household. He had never been circumcised, and he celebrated Christmas -- a tradition my family continued.

Then two things happened that really affected me spiritually. First, when I was ten years old, our entire class went out very early on May 1 to the country house of our teacher's sister. We had learned all these medieval May Day carols, and as the sun rose, we started singing them and picking flowers. We took armfuls of flowers back to New York and threw them around the school, singing the medieval May Day carols. Then we danced around the maypole. And I became a ritual junkie for life.

Then we studied ancient Greece for the entire seventh grade. This was in 1957, and there weren't a lot of powerful images of women in the society to help young girls think about who and what they wanted to be. But I was reading about Artemis and Athena, these incredible Greek goddesses. I decided way down deep I didn't want to worship them, I wanted to be them. They were the most powerful images of confidence and inner strength I had seen in the society I was growing up in. But by the time I was fourteen, I realized you do not go around worshiping the Greek gods *or pretending you are* them without ending up in a mental hospital. So I hid this stuff in psychic storage, you might say, and went on with my life.

## **Sermon**

Up until a few years ago, there was a list of five sources from which our living tradition drew. They are printed alongside our seven principles in your hymnal and are as helpful in communicating who we are as Unitarian Universalists. These sources are: the direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder; the words and deeds of prophetic

women and men; the wisdom of the world's religions; Jewish and Christian teachings, particularly that which calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves; and humanist teachings that bid us heed reason and science.

These sources are a clear articulation of that which holds us together even as we come from so many different places and perspectives in this religious journey. Moreover, they testify to our openness and diversity. However, a few years ago, a proposal was made to add a sixth such source, and the debate around it was quite substantial.

The sixth source was proposed by one of the newer subgroups in our faith tradition, the UU pagans. And watching the debate over whether to vote this source up or down was watching a test case of what it means to be always struggling to draw the circle wider. The debate brought to the surface the desire to include as many people as possible, but our fear that we would lose our center. It brought to light our desire to affirm all in their search for truth and meaning, but the embarrassment some folks have at whom you have to welcome when you choose to be welcoming. In other words, the debate over this sixth source was emblematic of a debate that we will face forever in our movement. It is our cross to bear, our spiritual exercise/discipline, the tension at the heart of who we choose to be and what it pushes up against inside of us.

The source was finally approved. It added to our other five sources the assertion that we draw also from 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." In so doing, it recognized one of the newest and least understood theological groups among us.

Part of the confusion around the pagan movement is that it is, in fact, incredibly diverse. Under this one single umbrella are included shamanism, Wicca, druidry, the indigenous faith movements of the Mayans and Native Americans, ancient Norse religion, as well as some very modern creations like the goddess movement and more. What brings someone to this faith and what unites these very different strands of the pagan movement is what I would like to touch on this morning.

Margo Adler, NPR reporter and pagan, tells about her journey to paganism, and it is a fairly typical journey. As a girl, she says, she was drawn to the ritual. She was drawn to the goddess figures -- strong women of Greek mythology that allowed her to claim greater power than the world around her did. However, where she really got drawn in was through the budding environmental movement of the 1970s. Adler writes:

Then, in 1970, right around the time of the first Earth Day, I started reading the nature writers -- Thoreau, Loren Eiseley, Rene Dubos, and Rachel Carson. Although I found myself excited and energized by the ecology movement, my response to these writings was not entirely political. As I read these writers, I was having what I can only describe now as religious feelings. I saw that this literature was about our whole relationship to the universe; it showed that everything was interconnected. It helped me understand my place in the universe in a way I had never understood it before.

Soon after that, I came across two essays that profoundly affected me: "The Religious Roots of Our Environmental Crisis" by Arnold Toynbee and "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" by Lynn White. These two essays said to me -- although I'm simplifying greatly here -- that there was a problem with the command in Genesis to "be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over the earth." This notion put human beings above nature, thereby giving us license to destroy the earth. The essays also talked about the older pagan, animistic traditions and their different notions of the divine -- that it was present in everything and that everything was alive and vital. I began to think that this older perspective gave one a more sacred sense of the planet and a reluctance to destroy the earth. I thought, "That's what I have always believed." And I started looking for an ecological religion.

Historically, the word pagan has been used to mean the heretics, those who have no religion -- or, more specifically, those who are not Jewish, Christian or Muslim. However, the root of the word comes from the Latin word *paganus*, which meant country-dweller and probably gets closer to its roots. The reason I say this is that what unifies the groups that call themselves pagan is not a written scripture or a uniform creed, but instead some common commitments or characteristics, and the first of these is a love for and a kinship with nature. Maybe this is where the country-dweller part of the word's origins comes in.

The love and kinship of which we speak has taken many forms. Pagan religions have been and are those traditions that see God personified in a natural feature (like a mountain or lake). They have also been those that believe in a deity who dwells in a particular place, making a natural place holy as a result. Most often, however, it means religious traditions whose rituals are tied up in the cycles of nature, and a sense of deep connection with those cycles.

For instance, timely for this season, there is the ritualized welcoming of rebirth of the natural world that comes in many pagan traditions around the spring equinox. In one such pagan ritual, the Goddess, who manifests as Ostara or Eostre with her basket of eggs, is accompanied by the Hare or Rabbit, a manifestation of the God. Does this sound familiar? Obviously some pagan practices continued long after their religious significance was forgotten.

St. Patrick's Day too seems to be a holiday tied to these earlier pagan traditions. The color that was associated with the spring equinox was most often green, because of the greening of the natural world that takes place in spring. Well, not only did St. Patty take on the symbolic green of the pagan holiday that follows his holiday by four days, but Carol tells me that St. Patrick's claim to fame was driving the snakes from Ireland -- and the snake is an ancient symbol of paganism. So, in a case of classic syncretism, this man who drives the snakes (or pagans) from Ireland takes a holiday a few days from one of the great pagan holidays, and they color him green to appease the pagans who are letting go of their traditional spring ritual. (Perhaps the St. Patty's Day tradition of drinking great quantities of beer was developed as the pagans tried to drown their sorrows for this bastardization of their sacred holiday.)

The pagan practice of finding holiness in nature has been interpreted, in recent years, in light of the ecology movement of the '70s, '80s and '90s as a religious call to restore a relationship with the Earth and to restore the Earth itself. So the care of the Earth that Adler found in her journey to paganism is one of the strongest strands that weave together religions that are under the umbrella of paganism.

Other than a deep kinship with and love for nature, another thread that tends to be true across the pagan movement is an abiding respect for pluralism of belief. Drawing here too from nature as a metaphor, there is the belief that just as a meadow thrives because of the diversity of plant life, while a cultivated field of only one crop grows barren over time, so too does the religious landscape flourish and grow fertile with many religions.

The final characteristic that tends to unite the pagan movements is a "Recognition of the Divine, which transcends gender, acknowledging both the female and male aspect of Deity" (Pagan Federation Web site). The Pagan Federation, a U.K.-based organization founded in 1971 to promote understanding about the pagan movement, is even willing to say that a religion that does not recognize the feminine face of divinity can "hardly be classified as pagan."

So pagans can be tied to ancient religious practices or devotees of relatively new, creative religious movements. They can honor religions that are indigenous to a people (their people or another) or syncretistic (pulling together parts of many faith traditions), but they can still be under this single broad umbrella. What appears to unite them is a shared reverence for and a kinship with nature, a respect for the diversity of beliefs within their movement, and a commitment to see the divine as both male and female.

About 1 percent of UUs are members of our UU pagan group, although it seems that there are far more self-identified pagans among us than that figure represents. You might wonder why these folks are in our congregations. Why would a person happy being a pagan still want to join a Unitarian Universalist community?

Well, one reason might be the issue of safety. When I read through Web sites for the Pagan Parents' network and pagans in the military and all the rest, one of the themes was the experience of harassment. Because of their unconventional beliefs, pagans seem to be the target of threats and abuse. So we, as a community that openly affirms their place in the fullest search for truth, offer them a safe place to be. It is important, I think, for us to remember that we offer that kind of sanctuary.

Margo Adler, when she posed the same question to herself, gave another answer. She wrote:

I guess I chose UUism because I need to live in balance. I can do all those wonderful, earth-centered spiritual things: sing under the stars, drum for hours, create moving ceremonies for the changes of seasons or the passage of time in the lives of men and women. But I also need to be a worldly, down-to-earth person in a complicated world -- someone who believes oppression is real, that tragedies happen, that chaos happens, that

not everything is for a purpose. Unitarian Universalism gives me a place to be at home with some of my closest friends: my doubts. Of course, there are many rationalists within the earth-centered community, but somehow I feel more centered in this denomination. And I think, in turn, the Pagan community has brought to UUism the joy of ceremony, and a lot of creative and artistic ability that will leave the denomination with a richer liturgy and a bit more juice and mystery.

Whether because in the balance there is blessedness, or because they find safety among us, let us open ourselves to what the pagans among us have to offer, and offer what we have in return. And in that spirit, may the God and the Goddess be with you. Amen.