

Greenville UU Fellowship
Sources VII: Sixth Source Earth Centered Traditions
© Rev. Lisa Bovee Kemper
December 8, 2019

Some argue that Earth-based spirituality in Unitarian Universalism is new – purely a 20th century phenomenon, and wonder why it is even included in the sources at all. They suggest that it began with the feminist consciousness-raising movement, which saw women in congregations exploring the feminine divine through the Cakes for the Queen of Heaven curriculum – and many of the groups that started then are still meeting today.

From the course description, “Cakes for the Queen of Heaven is a workshop series [that] examines important elements of today’s women’s lives; personal, interpersonal and societal. It examines how our culture has been influenced by Judeo Christian values. The primary question raised is: How would your life have been different if, when growing up, the divine had been imaged as female? Participants are encouraged to share their own experiences and beliefs, creating trust and strong bonds of friendship.”

It is true that current expressions of Earth-based spirituality in our congregations are heavily influenced by those events and practices. But that is not the only place we find them. In the Rise Up and Call Her Name curriculum (which was a follow up to the Cakes classes) we learn that “During the nineteenth century, Transcendentalism, a philosophy that later was embraced by many Unitarian Universalists, was articulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Henry Thoreau, and others, who championed the view that the “ordinary course of nature was endowed with divine significance.” Numerous Universalists, many of whom were women, praised the spiritual quality of nature and honored the feminine divine.”

So, values and beliefs relating to the importance of nature, the interdependence of all life, and broader expressions of the divine than Abrahamic monotheism have wide-reaching influence in our movement. These two curricula, Cakes and Rise Up, were and are a powerful experience, creating a transformative process of discovery and empowerment for many of the women in our congregations, which has had significant influence on our congregations. And Wiccan, Pagan, neopagan, and other practitioners of earth

UU Pagan Margot Adler suggested that earth-based spirituality is “a religious practice based on myth and metaphor rather than literal understanding” and Riane Eisler says, “Our early ancestors recognized that we and our natural environment are integrally linked parts of the great mystery of life and death and that all nature must therefore be treated with respect.”

Pretty much every culture includes or can trace back to earth centered spirituality of some kind. We see this expressed in indigenous religious practice, folk wisdom, healers and shamans and more.

According to UU minister Carolyn R. Brown, “The themes of earth centered traditions may include seeing the earth as a living organism, a Mother usually, with whom we have a relationship. This relationship links us, inextricably, not only to our planet but also to all the natural world surrounding us. Our lives may not be divided into segments, the spiritual on one side and the material on the other. The sacred is everywhere, in everything, all the time. Seasonal changes are significant markers on the wheel of the year... Earth centered religions do not doom us to an unending battle with our natural selves in order to become acceptable or saved from judgment. We are all right, just as we are.” <https://firstuu.net/sermons/earth-centered-traditions/>

Paul Oakley, “Sometimes Unitarian Universalists hear its wording and encapsulate it into a noun, a single abstract idea: Earth-Centered Spirituality. But there is no noun that points us where this source statement points us. Our sixth source is the action, the collection of actions that Earth-Centered Spirituality entails: celebrating, living, harmonizing.”

As with all of the other sources we have explored, there isn’t a single practice or tradition that encompasses how this source is expressed in our congregations. Just as some Unitarian Universalists are also practicing Jews or Humanists or Buddhists, the personal practice of earth centered spirituality will be grounded in the rituals and teachings of that particular tradition.

We are primarily and unavoidable interdependent. We simply cannot deny the interconnected nature of humanity. We also can’t deny the interconnected nature of nature, but that sounds silly to say. We are unavoidably and significantly interdependent – and I would argue that one can’t truly be a solitary UU. That doesn’t mean you have to belong to a brick and mortar church, though I would say it is a primary path toward engaged UUism, but that UUism is specifically and intentionally NOT a solitary practice.

As this sermon series draws to a close, I hope you will remember that our six sources are not about picking and choosing one belief or another from a large but finite list of choices, but about understanding how these sources inform and influence the values that call us into this community. And, as always in Unitarian Universalism, we live in paradox – we seek the both/and paradigm.

I saw a graphic recently – which I will show you in a moment – and it was a mind-expanding moment. You already know well that I hate the constraints of binary thinking – insistence on discrete opposites as the only option has caused unmeasurable strife and pain. It is the actual foundation of systemic oppression in every form. There are two options. If you are not A you are B. And there is ALWAYS a value judgment, that one of the options is objectively better than the other.

I have always thought of the opposite of binary as a continuum – a range, with space between two poles. Option A at one end. Option B at the other. That means absolutes on both ends, and if we start at the A side, the space in between the two poles contains points that are A bit more A than B, then equally A and B which moves into a bit more B than A and ends with absolute B.

It assumes that no matter what point you find on the line, you will end up with a total of 100% - you might be 60% A and 40% B or ALL A or who knows what percentage division, but there are only two qualities of variation available. But most binaries actually exist in a spectrum. We talk about gender, in particular, in that way. Even so, I still thought of it as looking like this continuum.

But then I saw this graphic (slide). It's a game changer! There are endless ways to express ourselves, and not just our gender.

Even as I'm speaking against absolute statements or definite answers here, I am going to risk contradicting myself and say that there is nothing under the sun that is (barring things like mathematical computations and gravity) that is absolute truth – or that has only one correct answer.

And lest you get distracted trying to think of an exception to the “rule” I've just presented – remember my main point, which is that the work we are most concerned with here in *this* place is pretty much never binary, absolute, or static. Moral values, community, spirituality, philosophy, theology, and ethics are the work around which this enterprise is built. And all of those things are complex, dynamic, and mutable. They are intertwined and interdependent. What we value informs what we believe and how we act.

Our work in this community is to support one another in our life's journey by building life-giving, life-supporting, meaningful community. Understanding our values and living them. Digging into the work of being human and considering our beliefs and how they shift and change as we shift and change. To respect the earth and to honor interdependence. To celebrate, to live, to harmonize. And to bring more love and justice into the world

May it be so.