

“When Has It Not Been Our Earth?”

A Sermon by The Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, 18 March, 2007

For The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, N.C.

Reading

Poem by Akhenaton, c. 1375 BCE

In what loveliness do you appear,
 O living sun,
 in the light-mountain of heaven,
you who of all things first began to be.
Shining forth in the eastern light-mountain,
 you fill the lands of the earth
 with your beauty.
Your beams embrace all lands,
extend to the frontiers of your whole creation.
Far removed you are yet
in your radiance present upon earth:
 we behold you,
 yet none can see your path.
 When you go down
 into the western light-mountain
 the world is in darkness,
 as if dead.

[People] raise their arms in adoration
 at your appearing.
Your rays give suck to all planted things;
 you shine forth,
 and for you they live and grow.
The world lies cradled in your hand
 as you created it.
 In your shining forth,
 [people] live;
 in your going to your rest,
 they die.
You are life's frame of time;
 in you we have our being.

Sermon

When has it not been our earth? Many Unitarians today consider nature and the Earth to be the primary source of their spirituality. This view was once so controversial that you could have been forced out of a Unitarian church for openly stating it. In one of our churches it could have cost you your life!

It's only been a few years since the UUA General Assembly at which we UU's added nature-based spirituality to the description of our Living Tradition in our Statement of Purposes and Principles. Talk about controversy! There were perhaps 1,700 delegates there taking part in the debate and vote, and we were almost exactly evenly divided.

One side said our tradition included “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.” What wild, radical, fearsome words! The other side said “this is not really part of our tradition. You’re adding new ideas that were never there before.” The response came back “That’s why it’s called a ‘Living’ Tradition. We can add to it as we grow.”

Unitarian Universalists had argued in the early 1990’s about whether or not we could add this to our Statement of Purposes and Principles. In 1995 it passed by 8 votes out of 1,700 cast, and Pagans were officially part of us. I’m proud to say that I was one of those voting for it.

The whole thing goes back to Akhenaton, the author of the poem that I read a few moments ago. In 1375 BCE in ancient Egypt, Amenhotep IV succeeded his father as Pharaoh in Egypt. His very name referred to the top god, Amon-Re, in a pantheon of gods that the Egyptians worshiped.

Amenhotep meant “Amon is satisfied.” Amon had been the boss god for 700 years by then, leading armies against other gods and other people, and always winning. He was a forerunner of George Bush’s God. His priests and his temples were everywhere in Egypt.

Then a remarkable thing happened. The young pharaoh threw off his father’s god and that god’s name, and renamed himself Akhenaton, which meant “Pleasing to Aton,” the universalistic unitarian god who was said to flow to earth in the rays of the sun. Akhenaton said Aton was the only god, and he destroyed all images of the other gods and their temples and dismissed their priests—the ones he didn’t have killed. He too was one tough cowboy.

Art in Egypt took on a naturalistic aesthetic, no longer portraying the fantasy mixtures of humans and animals as gods. Plants and animals were drawn exactly as they were seen. Poetry became naturalistic too. Human beings took their place in nature alongside plants and animals in the art.

The new god’s religion lasted just 17 years, the length of Akhenaton’s life and rule. When he died, the old ways flowed back and Egypt returned to its worship of many gods. Nature-based spirituality fell back. Akhenaton’s actions had been so offensive that his name was dropped from the official list of pharaohs, only to be restored when archeologists discovered his tomb only a little over a hundred years ago.

Considered the world’s first monotheist, Akhenaton was also the precursor of modern monotheistic nature-based spirituality. There had been Earth-based religion in the fertility rites and goddess worship of agrarian cultures before Akhenaton, but his theology, based on the warmth and light that we all see and feel flowing to earth from the sun, was the first to tie the nature worship to the idea that there is only one god, one source of all spirituality.

Nature spirituality continued to appear in many forms throughout human history, often despised by the predominant powers in society. In Christianity, trinitarianism rejected both earth-based religion and strict monotheism, praising father, son and holy spirit as three gods mystically rolled into one. Unitarianism cropped up as a heresy over and over from the time of Jesus to the present. Jesus himself was unitarian. He never claimed otherwise.

When our forebears in Salem, Massachusetts took up hanging witches three centuries ago, people were terrified by nature-based spirituality. Their worst delusions lasted only a year, but 20 people were killed in a sacrifice to Christian terrorism. That Salem church that hanged the witches has been Unitarian now for a couple of centuries. A decade ago the church held a ceremony officially taking the 20 dead witches back into membership in their church, posthumously. I’m sure it helped those poor dead women and one dead man a lot.

The controversy over nature-based religion was a long time dying. Long after the witches were killed the people of that church, and of other churches that had become Unitarian, still feared and rejected nature-based religion.

Ralph Waldo Emerson broke the Unitarian resistance to nature spirituality in 1836 when he published his small book titled simply Nature. He had become a Unitarian minister seven years earlier and then resigned from his ministry after only three years. With that book he became known among Unitarians as an iconoclast for his theology.

One of Emerson's biographers, Sherman Paul says "By replacing a defunct Christian myth with the myth of nature, [Emerson] made primary religious experience available to all [people; his book] took religion into the open air, naturalized it and democratized it."

The heart of Emerson's vision was a concept of nature as a living, pulsing organic power still in the process of becoming. "Revelation is not sealed nor is Creation complete," he said. He wanted each of us to seek "an original relationship with the universe," not just accept what has been passed down through our heritage, lived by others and sanitized for our use by the church.

The intelligentsia of 19th century America gathered around Emerson in Massachusetts. One of his followers, Margaret Fuller, was said to be the most brilliant woman of the century. She was a bit arrogant too, as were Emerson and his young friend Henry David Thoreau. Once, after long debates with other transcendentalists in Emerson's circle Margaret Fuller was reported to have cried out enthusiastically "I accept the universe!" Hearing of that, Emerson's friend, the British essayist Thomas Carlyle snarled "By God, she'd better!"

When Emerson wrote Nature, the American Unitarian Association was only 11 years old. It had been founded on exactly the same date as the British Unitarian and Liberal Christian General Assembly had, in 1825—even though the two movements were not in contact with each other. What a coincidence. It almost makes you believe in divine providence! In the next 50 years Unitarians moved beyond the boundaries of Christianity to see themselves as the heirs of all the world's religions. By the 1880's and 90's it was hard to imagine that there had ever been an uproar over Emerson and nature as a source of inspiration and devotion. His views, once so shocking, had reached the center of the Unitarian movement.

In 1864, the hymn "For the Beauty of the Earth" had been written (I admit by an Anglican) and it's been a standard of Unitarians ever since:

For the beauty of the earth, for the splendor of the skies,
For the love which from our birth over and around us lies,
Source of all, to thee we raise, This our hymn of grateful praise.

Even Akhenaton could have sung that with gusto! The hymn originally sang "Christ, Our God, to thee we raise." When I was a boy we Unitarians and Universalists sang it as "Lord of all, to thee we raise." Now it is "Source of all." Words change. Time moves on.

When self-identified Pagans started pounding on Unitarian Universalist doors about twenty-five years ago, saying "we want in too; do you have room for us?" the answer couldn't have been long in coming—though it was still controversial.

The irony is that much of what Pagans revere has been honored in our church for a long time without being called Pagan. Native American roots—clearly Pagan—have been slowly growing in our soil. Not one Native American reading or song was in our 1961 UU hymnal even though that book had several nature pieces from India. Our 1993 hymnal that we use in this church has one Native American song and a number of readings.

The importance of nature to UU's was recognized in the first version of the UUA Statement of Purposes and Principles. The "Seventh Principle" had always said that we affirm "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." What is that but a profound admission that we are bound up in nature together with everything else in the universe?

Today there are small worship and study groups of pagans in many Unitarian Universalist churches like ours in a movement called "CUUPS," which means Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans.

I call myself a "religious naturalist." My own deepest spiritual sources lie in my relationship to the earth, the clouds that shroud her, the waters that bathe her, the land that bears our footsteps. In the words of the ancient Hebrews "I look unto the hills from whence cometh my help."

Three millennia ago people thought a tribal god lurked in those hills, and that he could come down to help them. I see nothing supernatural peering over the ancient hills of Appalachia, nor down from the Golan Heights of Syria and Israel. Nothing supernatural.

But like Akhenaton, I depend on the "shining forth of the eastern light-mountain [that fills] the lands of the earth with...beauty." Natural beauty is enough for me. It will be enough when I too "go down into the western light-mountain" and my world is the eternal darkness of death.

Between these mountains of light and darkness lies my home, trusted, loved and sometimes feared. It can be dangerous. As we listen better to others around us, those Native Americans who lived in this land before us and who live here now in an uneasy relationship with us, we're listening more closely to her whom they call mother, our Earth.

In closing I'm going to ask you to join me in a Native American chant, "The earth is our mother." Unfortunately it didn't make it into our new hymnal but I'll teach it to you if you don't already know it. It's easy.

The earth is our mother; we must take care of her;
The earth is our mother; we must take care of her.
Hey yanna, ho yanna, hey yan yan;
Hey yanna, ho yanna, hey yan yan.

The sky is our father; we must take care of him;
The sky is our father; we must take care of him.
Hey yanna, ho yanna, hey yan yan;
Hey yanna, ho yanna, hey yan yan.

Dick Weston-Jones

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough

1710 Old NC 10, Hillsborough, NC 27278, www.uuchnc.org, 919-644--0567