

MAY DAY – We May Be Pagans

Sunday May 6, 2007
Mattatuck UU Society
Rev Carol M Wolff

OPENING WORDS –

*Spring is life
Life is trees
Trees are oxygen
They all come together on one place.
Make us breathe and live...
Spring is the giver of life.*

STORY FOR ALL AGES – May Day, Beltane, May Pole – from Mr Donn.org

PRAYER -

READING- “The Unitarian Connection” – from Drawing Down the Moon by Margot Adler

SERMON

Today we are speaking about an interesting holiday called May Day. May 1st which is when May Day falls, just might have more holidays than any other day of the year. It’s a celebration of spring. It’s a day of political protests. It’s a neopagan festival, a saint’s feast day, and a day for organized labor. In many countries, it’s national holiday.

Also known as Beltane, May Day is a Celtic calendar feast ushering in the start of summer. Bonfires were a common feature of Beltane celebrations. Related rituals included driving cattle between two fires, dancing around the fires, and burning witches in effigy.

Some cultures celebrate the fertility of the earth. In England the custom of “going A-Maying”, gathering greenery and flowers, was known as bringing in the May. The gathered bouquets would be left on doorsteps anonymously.

Another English tradition was the maypole: a tall pole or tree trunk that would be decorated with flowers, ribbons and bright colors. Young women would dance around it with garlands in their hair weaving the colorful ribbons into a design.

In most countries around the world, however, May Day has become Labor Day. On May 1, 1886 unions in the US went on strike demanding that the standard workday be shortened to eight hours. The protests, although violent in some cases were not immediately successful. Eventually however the 8 hour day took effect. Labor leaders, socialists, and anarchists around the world took the American strikes and their fallout as a rallying point, choosing May Day as a day for demonstrations, parades, protests and speeches. It became a major state holiday in the Soviet Union and other communist countries.

This Labor Day is still celebrated on May 1 in countries around the world and it is still a day for rallies. In recent years, these have been focused on globalization.

Last year even though the US no longer recognizes May 1 as Labor Day(we celebrate it in September) we once again saw widespread political action centering on immigration reform. Various groups and communities under the heading “ A Day Without Immigrants” held rallies, strikes and other boycotts to support the rights of those working and living in the US and to protest a bill that would deport many illegal immigrants.

Because of its connection to communism and other undesirable factions such as Nazi Germany, various authorities have tried to ban or undermine this kind of celebration of May Day. In 1958 England designated May Day as both Law Day and Loyalty Day, both specifically aimed at replacing the communist holiday with a more religious or patriotic one.

There doesn't seem to be any connection between the ancient May Day festival and these other secular ones. Flowers and maypoles hardly lend themselves to a protest against unfair labor practices. But it is possible the connection can be made as a day of rest and frolic, a day free from the cares and worry of work. This is just my own conjecture.

A Scottish town called Turiff celebrates May Day on the first Monday of May – school children process to the church where garlands of flowers and yew leaves are laid at the altar. Then there follows a funfair in the local park with booths and music, food and dancing.

I know of a similar event still being held today as when I first moved from New Jersey to the Midwest I was to find out that one of my duties as a music teacher was to provide music for the May Day Festival – a sort of weird amalgam of the Olympics, a picnic, Maypole dancing, and wildness as three or four elementary schools combined and converged at a huge park for the day. I still wonder how that tradition got started in a conservative, Germanic Christian community such as Belleville IL.

What is the source for this precisely placed celebration? It comes between the Spring Equinox and the Summer Solstice. By Midspring the storms have stilled says Donna Henes in her book *Celestial Auspicious Occasions*. There is a new calmness, a certain confidence, in the air. Nature has taken hold. Once tentative buds have unfolded and flourished. Flowers, food and forage are abundant and fragrant. All the vernal newborns are now practically exploding with hormones. All too ready to head out on their own determined to produce and reproduce..

This halfway point of spring is a puberty rite of passage into adolescence. The season of exuberant youth in all its boundless energy, innocent ardor and potential creativity. The spring cross-quarter day is the growing time when life seems to shoot up out of the ground and keep going on forever. The whole world is in the throes of a contagious spring fever, a delirious dance of motion and emotion. Life all around is gaudy, giddy, giggly, on an exhilarating carnival ride of heady smells and riotous color. The earth and her species are spread green with the effervescent aphrodisiac substance of life.

Ah well, we might not be quite as enthusiastic about this time of year as Ms Henes but certainly as humans we cannot deny the effect this time of year has on us. As Garrison Keillor always reminds us, spring fever begins as soon as the seed catalogs arrive in February.

We seem to need this time – it tends to make us feel alive and connected to the earth as we witness cycles that are mimicked in our own lives.

So it is not surprising that our ancestors paid attention to this. They were the first religious people – creating rituals, honoring the mysteries, recognizing miracles of life and appreciated the earth and its ability to renew itself.

This understanding of pagan and earth centered religions had a trial as to its appropriateness to Unitarian Universalism. A few years after the adoption of our Purposes and Principles in 1985, a group, which became known as CUUPS – Covenant of UU Pagans approached the UUA with the request to add another source to our traditions from which we draw:

Spiritual teachings of earth-entered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature

Most mainline religions draw the line of the ancestry to the beginnings of their particular faith – which for most is Genesis and a belief that that story describes the start of human history and which defines our understanding of a relationship with some kind of creative force. Then they go on to trace their own particular history and its unique trajectory towards or away from the early Roman church.

But I have always wondered how they could ignore the fact that goddess religions, druids, etc existed long before any history of the Judeo Christian heritage could be recorded. We have evidence of this. The evolution of religion is a fascinating subject and unlike appropriating Buddhism as an example as something inherently UU, I think we can adopt these pagan ideas as our own because they are descended from human behavior related to nature – a very universal and easy to understand reaction.

In her seminal book “Drawing Down the Moon”, Margot Adler recalls the neo pagan movement as being referred to as “the new religion.” She said she would have had nothing to do with it because of that term. But we had to get a new definition of religion. Because everywhere else religion is defined in Judeo-Christian terms, it means a belief in a supreme being, heaven, hell and so forth. And none of us (referring to pagans) believe in any of that even though we consider ourselves to be deeply religious. We slowly came to understand that religion is a form of relinking , of increasing consciousness and communication. Worship is a form of communication, of communion. And communication can only be between equals. It’s can’t be abasement, a bowing down before something greater.

With this different understanding of religion, quite similar to our own, the pagan religions were seen as tribal religions, based on customs and traditions rather than dogma or creeds, grounded on what one DID rather than what one BELIEVED.

A distinction can be made between philosophical religion, taught by prophets and formulated into creeds, and natural religions, the evolving indigenous folk or pagan religions of particular peoples. The former were artificially constructed; the latter emerged out of the processes of life and nature, and continued to evolve organically. This is why I supported the addition of the earth centered tradition phrase into our principles as a source.

UUism, like paganism is an organic evolving religion not daunted by boundaries drawn by a bunch of old fathers handing down restrictions and telling us what to believe and how to believe it.

A Pagan religion is like a tree; it emerges alive from the earth, grows, changes, bears flower and fruit. And shares it life with other living beings inclusively. It may come to the end of its time but by then has already seen its progeny sprouting up all around from the Earth. A pagan religion is like a forest.

The old pagan religions were never “created” as such. What little we can trace indicates a descent from Paleolithic and Neolithic fertility cults, hence the common symbols of Earth Mother Goddess and the Horned God representing respectively, the vegetable and animal life of the Earth. We find them therefore unanimous in their veneration of Nature and their sensual celebration of Life, birth, and death as expressed seasonally in aspects of sexuality.

Thus the tree of life, with its roots deep in the earth and its branches reaching upward toward heaven, out to eternity, is the prime symbol of midspring celebrations in many cultures. Trees have long been worshipped as beneficent spirits of bounty. Trees shade and feed us, supply and sustain us. They breathe life into our lungs. Possessing potent powers of fertility, growth and longevity, trees are progenitors of the world family tree.

Every single primitive and non traditional religions have a sacred tree at its center either symbolizing the roots of human history and wisdom, or ancient seeds of creation. Even the three major religions regard the tree as central to its theology. The Koran refers to the whole cosmos

as a tree. The Buddha was born, attained enlightenment and entered Nirvana under a tree. Jesus was hung on a tree and the Hebrew goddess Asherah was symbolized by the eternally flourishing olive tree. We ritually plant trees in memory and honor of the dead.

Even Charles Darwin used the metaphor to explain his theory of natural selection :
As buds give rise by growth to fresh buds, and these, if vigorous, branch out and over-top on all sides many a feebler branch, so by generation, I believe it has been with the great Tree of Life, which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever branching and beautiful ramifications.

Some of the festivities did not survive and were therefore not transported to the New Land. The puritanical Protestant fathers were deeply offended by the Maypole ceremony with its not-so-subtle sexual connotations and pagan sensibilities. An act of Parliament in 1644 called for
“the removal of Maypoles, heathenish vanity generally abused to superstition and wickedness – and further ordered that all and singular Maypoles that are, or shall be erected shall be taken down and removed by the Church Wardens of the parishes and places where the same be; and that no Maypole shall hereafter be set up erected or suffered to be within this Kingdom of England or Dominion of Wales.”

Eventually however, like all the devotional rites dedicated to the earth goddess that they could not repress, May Day was ultimately claimed by the church as its own. In doing so, the veneration of the Maypole /May tree was left completely intact. The tree simply became the cross.

When the Europeans came to the Western Hemisphere, they brought with them a variety of Catholic, Puritan, and peasant May Day practices. These have interfaced with Midspring festivals of indigenous Americans.

There are connections to ancient May Day celebrations in the North American Indian groups who use the Liberty Tree as a symbol to represent the freedom of the individual to experience the divinity in nature directly. That sounds familiar doesn't it?

The closest we come to celebrating an animistic May Day in modern day America is Arbor Day. Once a year since 1872 on the last weekend in April, schoolchildren Scouts and park rangers plant trees in a conscious effort to green the land. Some UU churches have extended this idea to a “plant ten trees” program usually carried out by the RE program – if every UU church in the US would plant ten trees, the earth would certainly be re greened!

The Jewish festival of Tu-Bi Shevat or the New Year for Trees, celebrates by the eating of the first ripe fruits of the season. Trees are also planted at this time in memory of ancestors.

Whether it be used as a May pole, a bearer of fruit, to provide shade, exhale its oxygen for us to breathe or to simply provide us with beauty, the tree supports and centers our relationship with the earth. In the tree we can see our own best selves. Standing strong. Our foundation dug in solid rock, seeking the deep source of knowledge. Our stance is solid yet supple. Flexible, our outward, upward reach extends, bends always toward the light.

We nourish and provide and shelter and heal. We too manufacture our sustenance from the sun. We share the very breath of life.

We are the tree. The World Family Tree of Humanity. May we grow together to be the Universal Tree of Peace.

And now, let us celebrate the tree even tho it might be pvc pipe, by dancing the Maypole. On May Day people used to cut down young trees and stick them into the ground in the middle of the village to mark the arrival of summer.

Some women who are members of Daughters of Demeter will show us how – we can all have a chance to try if we wish. The pagan celebration of Beltane is the ritual associated with this practice. It goes something like this:

We thank you for the flourishing of new life and for the feast of spring that is the freshness of your presence. Blessed Be!

CLOSING WORDS :

Merry Meet and Merry Part and Merry Meet again
Tree of Hope, keep firm.

We celebrate the fragrant spring air, the soft May breezes that refresh the Earth and her children.

We celebrate the gentle fire of the sun in spring, whose caressing warmth awakens the Earth and her children.

We celebrate the cool, damp spring rains , those sparkling showers that give sustenance to the Earth and her children.

We celebrate the Earth. In the full bloom of Her maidenhood. She gives life to all her children.