

Wisdom of Earth-Centered Traditions

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READING: from "Finding the Native Within" by Adele Getty
(appearing in *In Context*, Summer 1983)

I believe we have reached a time in history where we must begin to inhabit our place. For too long we have not had a sense of place inside our psyches. We have been a nation of displaced people, recent arrivals of at most a mere 400 years. We find ourselves caught in a double bind concerning our cultural identity. We are of European or African or Asian heritage, but we are no longer Europeans or Africans or Asians. We have been born in America but we do not conceptualize ourselves as *native* Americans. Is our cultural heritage with the Greek gods and goddesses, the Celts, the Druids? Do we take up the ways of the American Indians? Or do we go farther afield and take up the ways of Hindus, etc.

I have a sense that this unclarity regarding where we are from is deeply connected to the destructive effect we have had upon our environment . . . No sane being would destroy their own homeland. Perhaps it is this sense of just passing through, the frontier mentality, that allows us to obliterate cultures and life forms, large and small.

If we are to begin to develop a "sense of place" it must start in our own psyche and work outwards toward our family, our home, our community, our town, our state, our country, our planet. A child can not learn to walk until it has learned to crawl and we are like babies relearning the magic of the Earth. We must learn to inhabit our place, discover its history, make contact with our neighbors, go sit with the land and open to its mystery.

Perhaps one of the greatest revolutions that has occurred over the last [forty] years took place inside ourselves when we witnessed the planet Earth as viewed from outer space. The beautiful blue orb suspended in space created a sense of our own fragility and dependence on one another as one planet. We recognized the Earth as quite possibly a living sentient organism of which we are but a part. . .

I feel we have been learning to walk, but now we are up on our feet *and the direction we will move in is up to us*. We must take responsibility for who we are and what we will become. This can seem like a tremendous burden, but it may well be the greatest opportunity we have ever been presented with. As people return to their own center and refuse to give their power away to institutions, ideologies, or charismatic leaders and teachers, strength will come and answers will manifest. This self-empowerment when combined with a connection to the Earth is a powerful alliance.

When people begin to relate to the land in a sacred way, the land begins to respond. An exchange takes place between our spirits that is undeniable. People experience healing and teaching coming from the land and in turn heal and teach. . .

[One] danger [I see] is that we will imagine that reconnecting with the Earth means regressing back to a primitive mode of action. Quite to the contrary, what is demanded of us now is that we move ahead into the future and find those ways of being native that are truly our own. To discover the North American vision means we must acknowledge that we are visionary beings right at this moment. We must learn to be impeccable in all that we do. It's as if there is a memory of something so sweet from so

long ago and it is calling us to come forth and dream it awake. Collectively the vision is being woven into the fabric of our lives. It is emerging through our lifestyles and the visions we share with one another.

Sermon

Next Tuesday is election day, and I encourage you all to get out and participate in that exercise in democracy. Tuesday is also Earth Day, a global observance celebrated each year on April 22. The first Earth Day occurred thirty-eight years ago in 1970, as twenty million Americans took to the streets, parks, and auditoriums to demonstrate for a healthy, sustainable environment.

In honor of Earth Day, and continuing our ongoing exploration of other religious traditions and the wisdom we draw from them, today we consider the wisdom contained in 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 fact, earth-centered spirituality goes way back. Many of the earliest known creation myths involved either Mother Earth, or Father Sky, or both. In Polynesian, Egyptian, Yoruba, Yuma, and Greek mythology, among others, the universe evolves from a union of the opposite qualities of sky and earth, the heights of thought and the depths of matter.

Through the millennia, earth-centered traditions have ranged from simple to complex, from tribal to universal. But always they have tapped the same awesome power – the power of creation. Man, woman, fire, food, sun, rain, stars, thunder, lightning, floods, volcanoes – all inspired fear, awe, and worship. Even in an age of science, reductionism, and rational explanation, there is something about the direct experience of nature that defies rational analysis. That’s not to say that such experiences are irrational – rather they are transrational, tapping into aspects of ultimate reality that are beyond our cognitive grasp and understanding.

“Earth-centered traditions” was not added to the list of officially recognized sources of our Living Tradition of Unitarian Universalism until the General Assembly of 1995. That’s ten years after recognition of the other five sources. However, the influence of earth-centered traditions on Unitarianism has been around at least since the time of the nineteenth-century Transcendentalists – people like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau.

For the Transcendentalists, there were two major sources of religious knowledge – direct experience of the divine, and the world of nature. Just read *Walden* if you want to understand the importance of nature in shaping the theological vision of the Transcendentalists. Nature was a more direct revelation of the divine than anything anyone could ever write, no matter how inspired they were. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The earth laughs in flowers.”

Despite the Transcendentalists’ honoring and affirming of earth and nature, it was more recent Unitarian Universalist history that brought recognition of this spiritual source. In particular it was the rise of Paganism within Unitarian Universalism over the past twenty-five years or so. Paganism here refers to a whole range of goddess-based and earth-centered spiritual paths. The earliest known organized UU Pagan worship was at the 1980 UU Continental Feminist Theology Convocation in East Lansing, Michigan, sponsored by the Continental Women in Religion Committee. One feature of that

Convocation was the first Water Communion, similar to what we and many congregations use to celebrate the start of a new church year.

The first known UU Pagan organizing effort was at the 1985 General Assembly, which led to the creation of CUUPS, the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans. That group was accepted as an Independent Affiliate of the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1988. CUUPS now has chapters in about seventy congregations across the continent. Their purpose is to provide a community focus for earth-centered Unitarian Universalists in the host congregation; an earth-centered resource for that congregation; and a gateway to Unitarian Universalism for the larger Pagan community.

And so, for those whose spirituality is primarily and explicitly earth-centered or Pagan, there is a place in Unitarian Universalism. Just as there is a place for those who identify primarily as Humanist, or Christian, or Buddhist. But the contribution of earth-centered spirituality to our tradition goes beyond that – beyond simply providing a home for a religious minority.

For me, one of the primary contributions is the affirmation of a local context in which to embed our lives. We are not only on the earth, but are also of the earth. We are made of the same stuff as all that surrounds us. Finding ourselves amidst all of our companions of creation, and measuring our own rhythms against the rhythms of nature all about us, we can find a sense of time and place. And we can find in our earthly surroundings the sources of sacredness, of holiness.

Our sense of being located in time grows out of our experience of the rhythms of life and nature. We find ourselves not only observers, but also participants in the music of the spheres. Ernesto Cardenal writes:

The music of the spheres.
A harmonious universe – like a harp.
Its rhythms are the equal, repeated seasons. The beating of the heart.
Day/night. The going and returning of migratory birds.
The cycles of stars and corn.
The mimosa that unfolds by day and folds up again at night.
Rhythms of moon and tide. One single rhythm in planets,
Atoms, sea,
And apples that ripen and fall, and in the mind of Newton.
Melody, accord, arpeggios the harp of the universe.
Unity behind apparent multiplicity.
That is the music.

Earth-centered traditions teach us that life is essentially cyclical, not linear. This reminds me that the journey of my life through time is not a simple linear path that starts at birth and moves inexorably forward in a straight line until it reaches its end at death. My individual life does have a beginning and, presumably, an end. But in between those two bookends, there are many twists and turns and, yes, cycles.

The built-in cycles and rhythms of nature provide the beat for my march through life. The revolving of the earth gives me a new beginning every twenty-four hours. The orbiting of the earth around the sun gives me a new year, a new set of seasons, every 365 days. And if I pay attention, there are many more rhythmic components of that music of

the spheres to which I dance my way through life. Day/night, high tide/low tide, full moon/new moon, seed/plant/fruit/seed. Round and round we go.

I have, in the past, described my spiritual journey as a spiral, circling around repeatedly through the same territories, but at ever new levels of experience and understanding. I often return to T. S. Eliot's words, that "the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

And where is that place? Right here on planet earth. It is here in our earthly home that we find sacred, holy ground. And we not only find sacred ground; we also make sacred ground. My colleague Rebecca Edmiston-Lange, in one of her calls to worship, writes: "Come in. Come into this place which we make holy by our presence... Come into this place where we can touch and be touched, heal and be healed, forgive and be forgiven... Come into this place. Together we make it a holy place."

This is the basis for that "sense of place" that Adele Getty spoke of in our reading this morning. It's not so much a theological position as it is an attitude, a general orientation that seeks to find our rightful place, not above the world, but as an integral part of it.

In our service last week, we talked about what it means to draw on other traditions. During the Congregational Response, Bob Newnham made an excellent point: something to the effect that looking to the future is more important than looking to the past. Of course it's not a simple either/or. The danger in looking to the past is when we dwell on it, idolize it, put it on a pedestal as if the pinnacle has already been achieved.

The proper use of the past is to learn from it, and to use its lessons to help guide our way into the future. One of my favorite hymns talks about "A freedom that reveres the past, but trusts the dawning future more." Adele Getty, in our reading this morning asserts that "We must take responsibility for who we are and what we will become." And she talks about finding a way of reconnecting with the Earth in a way that does not mean "regressing back to a primitive mode of action," but rather moving "ahead into the future and find[ing] those ways of being native that are truly our own."

I just happened to be reading a book lately that captured this vision of how to proceed very well. It's a Beacon Press book by Freeman House, called *Totem Salmon: Life Lessons from Another Species*. The book recounts a long-term grassroots effort to restore and maintain a sustainable habitat for the depleted salmon populations of the Pacific Northwest.

The author and his associates certainly made use of their twentieth century scientific training and knowledge. But they also sought wisdom and guidance by looking to the earth itself, and to those native peoples who had been in close relationship with the land and the salmon for centuries.

At one point, House writes:

My modern mind wants a formula for progress, step-by-step instructions, codified methodologies. But when I look to the history of the Klamath peoples for clues, it always comes back to the same things. *Pay attention to the landscape. Pay attention to what the animals are saying to you. Look to the long term.*

He then quotes a document produced in 1996 by members of the

Karuk tribe of California:

Close, lifelong observation of nature and the landscape is much admired in the Karuk culture. . . Indian children have early on been placed in a life trajectory which establishes, at the deepest levels of the mind, habits of quiet observation and a sense that they are not necessarily in control of the world around them. . . When people's actions are influenced by keen observation of nature, they are much less likely to attempt to dominate or desire to change natural processes.

This is the kind of traditional wisdom that teaches us, not by offering something brand new that we've never heard of, but by reminding us of lessons that we should have been learning ourselves all along. Reminding us of our place as a part of nature, and of the humility that would serve us well as we attempt to influence or control the world around us.

Freeman House and his compatriots did indeed learn important lessons from the earth itself as they worked to heal some of its wounds. House recounts some of that experience like this:

The watershed was healing itself, and doing so at a rate that our most grandiose ambitions could never come close to emulating. The discovery gentled us as a group, moved us to a humility of purpose for which we could only be grateful. The Earth would heal itself. We could either move away entirely for two hundred years, or we could make the processes of recovery our guide and seek to put our hand in wherever it would effectively move the process along. We were rediscovering that all learning is collaborative and that the collaboration extends beyond humans to the landscape and the many intelligences embedded therein. . .

A primary benefit of any attempt at environmental restoration is that it creates a situation that allows us to begin to learn from the patterns of the wild around us and within us, the patterns which shaped our mental capacities in the first place, shaped the autonomic processes that maintain our daily functioning unbidden.

And so, looking to the earth itself for wisdom, and to those for whom it has been the primary source of spirituality, is more than simply an exercise in romanticism. It is in fact an important part of understanding ourselves and the environment within which we live. It is part of a life-or-death quest for a sustainable way of living as an alternative to some of the destructive habits that we have developed in recent centuries. It is part of developing an attitude of reverence toward our earth, treating it with the respect deserved by a living, breathing organism, which it is. Our life depends on it.

Some who gaze at the famous photograph of earth taken from space experience the sense of the whole planet as a living organism, as an instance of the wonder and

sacredness of life. I'd like to close this morning with a poem that captures that spirit:
"Only a Little Planet" by Lawrence Collins.

The planet you're standing on
Looking out at the stars
Is the earth, the third planet from the sun

And the mildest
And softest
Of the nine. . . .

If you can stop, and let yourself look,
Let your eyes do what they do best
Stop
And let yourself see and see
That everything is doing things
To you
As you do things to everything.

Then you know
That although it is only a little planet
It is hugely beautiful
And surely the finest place in the world
To be.

So watch it, look at it
See what it's like
To walk around on it.

It's small but it's beautiful
It's small but it's fine
Like a rainbow,

Like a bubble.

So may it be.