

Metaphysical Reflections

As the Wheel of the Year Turns; Balancing the Worlds of Nature and Spirit

Good morning. It is nice seeing several long time friends here today. And to new members and guests, I say, “Welcome, I’m glad to meet you.”

When Shirl asked me a few weeks ago if I would be interested in being the speaker for this Sunday I was conflicted. I didn’t have any topic at hand that I thought offered fresh insight to the equinoxes and solstices in general or the spring equinox in particular. My hesitation and trepidation notwithstanding, I said yes ... Shirl had set the hook.

So let me start with a bit about my history with this congregation. I’ll describe how that experience ultimately led to my discovery of Wicca. I’ll explain my understanding of why Wiccans came to create and celebrate their religious holidays and, finally, I’ll talk about the intrinsic balance as I see it between the worlds of nature and spirit.

To begin, let me share some background to set the stage. Those of you who’ve known me for awhile, know that in addition to being a Unitarian Universalist, I am also a neo-pagan – more specifically, a Wiccan. I am a member of an eclectic coven located in Old Bridge, in Middlesex County. Like UUOCC, Hands of Change is a Federally recognized, tax deductible religious organization.

And for those of you who have also heard how I came to find my way onto that path I ask your indulgence for a few more moments as I explain to the rest how my membership in ***this*** congregation played a decisive role in setting me on *that course*.

I attended several different Methodist and Congregationalist churches as a youth growing up in Maryland. However, by the time I was a senior in high school I was no longer a regular church-goer. And well before I had finished my Navy enlistment *after* high school I was done with organized religion. There had been no ground-shaking revelation; simply a loss of belief in the church dogma, resentment of the hypocrisy of church leaders and members, the reliance on the concept of the one, true god, the concept and shame associated with so-called sinful behavior that caused no harm other than the affront to God's expectation of self-sacrifice and expiation on the promise of eternal salvation and joy in heaven. And for the matter of that, what did heaven even promise? Were we to spend eternity as we were when we died, whether it be in the prime of life, as a new born or young child, or as a frail, perhaps senile, adult? None of it made sense to me and I shut it out of my life for the next 30 years – I considered myself agnostic.

My life changed irrevocably on August 7, 1990, for that was the day our oldest son, Michael died. Within two weeks, my wife Billie and I sought comfort and understanding from The Compassionate Friends, an international, non-denominational organization for bereaved parents with a chapter in Toms River. Through reading and listening to the experiences of other bereaved parents I began to have a sense that *indeed there was* a spiritual element within me and I began to reconsider my agnosticism.

I had visitations from Michael, which gave me comfort and eased my grief. Months, then years passed. I wondered about finding a community with which to explore my newfound spirituality, but had no interest in returning to the religion of my youth as there was ample evidence throughout society and in the news that the hypocrisy and cant that had

turned me away to begin with were still entrenched within highly organized religion.

And now eight years have passed and it's October 1998. That's the month I attended a musical concert at the UU church in Washington's Crossing. I'd heard of Unitarians along the way; they sang folks songs in Sunday services and were known for being liberal and non-traditional, but as far as I was concerned they were Protestant Christians and therefore to be avoided. And when did Unitarians become Unitarian Universalists anyway, and what was that all about?

My mind began to open to the possibility that there was more to learn about UUs however, when, during the concert intermission I came across a UU brochure titled, *Why Unitarian Universalists Welcome Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, Transgenders, and Transexuals?* What in the world was that all about? I took the brochure home with me and as I reflected on this seemingly radical concept, I was completely overwhelmed by the notion that a National Christian Church (or so I then still thought it to be) would intentionally welcome groups of people that other mainstream churches considered sinners, pariahs who could only be accepted on very limited terms, and with the expectation that their personal lives were to be kept in the shadows.

So a couple of weeks later I sought out the UUOCC and thanks to the help of Shirl, manning the church phone from her home, I found myself on Route 9 in Lanoka Harbor, turning in at the sign for Murray Grove, a sign I had driven by countless times, wondering each time, what was Murray Grove? Must be historical with that weathered sign out there.

I had found the Unitarian Universalist Ocean County Congregation, and I later came to learn of the historical and spiritual significance of

Murray Grove. That Sunday morning long ago I learned that UUs neither preach nor practice religious dogma, nor follow any credo; rather UUs espouse to adhere to seven principles – each one of which I readily acknowledged as consistent with my instinctual beliefs and practices. I quickly became a member of the congregation and have been now for over 20 years.

Two years pass, and for the October 31, 2000 service a former member presented a Sunday program on Earth-centered spirituality. She was a self-proclaimed pagan – a Witch. I listened with interest about the beliefs the ancients held, such as that all life and nature was derived from four elements: Air, Fire, Water, and Earth. Emrys (that was her Craft name) talked about how the ancients made spiritual connections between the elements and the four directions – East, South, West, and North.

And of all the things she shared about Wicca that morning, the most significant (to me, at least) was her description of how and explanation of why Wiccans – her name for the type of paganism she followed – celebrated the divine feminine. They did so in the form of goddesses, and they celebrated the masculine spirit as well, as manifested in a variety of gods. **But** – and this was paramount – the goddess, as the bearer of life, was to be considered before the god.

Finally, I became conscious of the most important reason I had turned away from the religion of my parents. As I matured, I had *sensed* the issue without clearly recognizing it for what it was ... Christianity, Judaism, Islam ... all were steeped in misogyny. The world's major religions – book religions Wiccans call them – were willing to consign half of humankind to second class status because of their gender.

Wiccans believe in the divine, just as Christians, Jews, and Muslims do; they typically refer to it as Spirit. From a Wiccan's perspective, Spirit embraces and celebrates the feminine aspect of humankind as much as the masculine, in fact, more so. As important as the feminine aspect is, however, it does not exist to the detriment of the masculine, for neither exists without the other; thus both are celebrated fully and in harmony.

Not long after that service in 2000, the UUOCC sponsored the Earth-centered Book Discussion Group. It was different from other church groups in that it was not limited to UU members ... other interested seekers in the local area were welcomed to join and some became members of the congregation for a time. That group morphed into the Earth-centered Spirituality Group within a couple of years and, instead of being centered on book discussions, the monthly meetings became focused on spiritual events and programs. My membership in that group led to my meeting and becoming long-time friends with Marysa and Sandy, two friends of the congregation who presented celebratory services here for the Wiccan religious holidays last year.

Over time my Earth-centered spirituality came to fall in line with Wiccan practices and I learned about the religious holidays that Wiccans and many other neo-pagan groups celebrate – the Sabbats. There are eight of them – the four “Lesser” Sabbats are the equinoxes and solstices. These are known as solar holidays, for the obvious reason that they align with the two times every year the day is as long as the night, and the days with the longest and shortest nights. Days that are marked with astronomical precision calculated on the Earth's location within its annual orbit around the Sun.

The four “Greater” Sabbats,” which are less well-known to non-pagans, are referred to as cross quarter days, also known as fire festivals. The fire festivals are marked by the dates on the calendar that fall at the midpoint between two successive solar holidays. To understand why *cross quarter days*, one has to first understand the concept of quarter days.

As early as the Middle Ages the equinoxes and solstices came to be associated with the four times a year when rents would be collected, new servants hired, and legal matters resolved. Rather than falling precisely on the solar holidays, however, the powers to be decided that these quarterly events would become fixed on widely recognized religious holidays that occurred in close proximity to the solar holidays rather than on the day of the solar event itself, thereby aligning the recurring administrative functions with a recurring religious event rather than a natural recurrence -- Lady Day (or Asuncion Day) is close to the Spring Equinox; Midsummer, close to the Summer Solstice ... (Midsummer was also known as the Feast of Saint John the Baptist); Michelmas (or the Feast of the Archangels) followed close upon the Vernal Equinox; and Christmas, of course, falls just a few days after the Winter Solstice. On the Wheel of the Year those solar holidays are identified as Ostara, Litha, Mabon, and Yule and for Wiccans, they fall unvaryingly on the day of the solar event, not any Christian or other religious holiday.

At some point in history pagans established cross quarter days on the calendar as a means to identify the beginning of each of the seasons, as they cyclically return, year after year. They didn't mark the solar holidays as the onset of each successive season as our modern society does; instead, for them (and today's Wiccans) the solar holiday marks the mid-point for the season in which it falls. February 1 is celebrated as Imbolc; it marks the first

stirrings of Spring. May 1 is celebrated as Beltaine, a true fire festival is ever there was one. It is the beginning of Summer.

August 1 is Lammas, the first day of Fall; and Samhain, October 31, marks the beginning of Winter and is recognized as the beginning of the Wiccan New Year.

Wiccans consider Samhain to be the most significant, solemn Sabbat; it is the time of year when the veil between the mundane world and the world of spirit is the thinnest; the time when we are best able to commune with our ancestors. We particularly recall those friends and family who passed to the astral realm the previous year, remembering them with a place at the table for our silent supper.

And, with Samhain, Winter begins, and the turning of the Wheel continues.

Three month later Imbolc arrives with the very first stirrings of Spring. The hardiest flowers begin poking through the frozen ground and the ewes are lambing. People greet the coming of Spring with household cleaning.

The Wheel has turned another three months and Beltaine is upon the land in the Northern Hemisphere. Spring has fulfilled its promise and Summer is about to unfold. Stirrings that lay quiet for months take the forefront. Cattle are driven between bonfires to ensure fertility and maids and lads leap the balefires to achieve the same, human effect. In every village the young and old celebrate the holiday with dancing around the Maypole.

Too soon (for Summer is ending and Fall is upon the land), the crops that were sown at Beltaine have ripened and Lammas, the first harvest, has arrived. Celebrated on August 1, the holiday abounds with feasts and

revelry; in more modern times it became associated with with huge agricultural fairs.

A second harvest is marked at Mabon, the Fall Equinox, and the season ends with the third harvest at Samhain. Animals that can't be overwintered are slaughtered, their provenance preserved for the lean days of winter. And thus another turn of the Wheel is completed.

The Greater Sabbats mark and celebrate the experiences of humans on Earth, monitored and remembered year in and year out by association with their placement between the quarterly solar markers on the calendar. For me, another way of looking at the difference between the quarter days and the cross quarter days is that the Lesser Sabbats exist to mark humankind's recognition of the Earth's relationship with the Sun; the Greater Sabbats were created to celebrate humankind's recurring behaviors over the course of each year in response Earth's annual orbit around the Sun, year after year, after year, for centuries, for ages, for millennia, for the millions of years before humankind existed; for whatever time it has been since a swirling mass of gases coalesced, cooled, solidified, and fell into orbit as the third planet from the Sun.

So, what's to be said as regards the balance between the world nature and the world of spirit? Do they exist as separate planes of existence, or are they inextricably entwined? Does the world of spirit even exist?

At first the answer to these questions wasn't obvious to me. My early training had taught me that Wiccans believe in Spirit (some would equate that with a belief in God or a divinity of some type) but I was still left with the question, how to explain to non-Wiccans the concept of a spirituality that was Earth-centric? Didn't my understanding of Earth and the natural

world (including the astronomical world) preclude the concept of spirituality?

For me, the answer, finally, seems to depend on whether or not one believes there is more than one level (or plane) of existence. I think we agree that we live, we exist, in the physical world of Nature, i.e., on a or the physical plane. But Wiccans believe that there are altogether seven realms of existence, six of which exist at a higher level than the physical plane that we experience throughout our daily lives. For the record, many other spiritual and religious peoples believe in realms or planes of existence in addition to the physical, though the concepts and numbers of planes vary.

For Wiccans, however, next above the physical plane is the [astral plane](#), where consciousness goes after physical death. According to [occult](#) philosophy humans possess [astral bodies](#) as well as physical ones. Medieval, oriental, and [esoteric](#) philosophies and [mystery religions](#) have all postulated the existence of the astral world.

The planes continue to ascend until the highest level is reached, the etheric plane. It is at this level where the Akashic records can be found. Theosophists and many Wiccans believe the Akashic records are a compendium of all human events, thoughts, words, emotions, and intent ever to have occurred in the past, present, or future. To my mind, the concept of the Akashic records are at least as credible as the concept of spending eternity (and again, just how long is eternity?), *the Akashic records are at least as credible as the concept of spending eternity* in Heaven or Hell. It seems to me that for Whomever or Whatever created our wondrous universe (the known limits of which continue to expand with each new foray into the far reaches of space) the concept of keeping a record seems simpler (and by simpler, it follows, more likely) than

providing a place and the means for eternal pleasure or torment for everyone who ever lived or is yet to live. And do our pets go with us, as some would say? Who's going to feed them for eternity?

For me, I can count on the Earth to keep me grounded when I call on her to do so. When I need to call upon Spirit for help with personal problems or to find the energy to overcome obstacles, the energy I need is not limited to my immediate, physical world, it is not limited by the stars, it is only limited by my intentions and will, the Spirit that arises within me and that will continue after this incarnation has ended.

But hey, that's just me. I respect the right for each of you to have your own thoughts and expectations regarding eternity.

Thank you.