**“Fount of Nature”**

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Raleigh

Raise your hand if you…

* Took a few moments out of your day on Monday to enjoy the eclipse
* Traveled to the path of totality
* Stayed here in the Triangle
* Watched the eclipse through eclipse glasses
* Watched the eclipse through a pinhole projector or colander

We all have our eclipse stories, and I’ve got mine too. Mondays are my day off, but I knew I would be preaching today on living in harmony with the rhythms of nature. One such rhythm was unfolding around me and I was eager to write about the eclipse. Sometimes it is hard to resist when the Spirit says, “Write!”

But it was my day off, and I try to remind the Spirit on my day off that I still need to do things other than work sometimes if I am to remain happy and healthy. I told the Spirit and myself that I needed to stay far, far away from the keyboard and instead go outside and actually experience the eclipse.

So out I went. I was not in the path of totality and lacked eclipse glasses, but the experience was still amazing. I watched as an eerie dimness settled over the midday world. I saw miniature eclipses in leafy shadows cast by trees and bushes. I listened as birds stopped singing and crickets started chirruping in the middle of the day. I felt the hot, humid air cool around me. I felt tears well up as a sense of cosmic alignment swept over me. I felt myself falling into harmony with a powerful rhythm of nature.

And then the moment passed.

But the moment did not pass on social media, where something beautiful was happening: People were sharing stories. Stories of the eclipse itself, yes, but also stories about connecting with other people during the eclipse. People described neighbors and total strangers sharing eclipse glasses. They described people helping one another experience and make sense of this wonderful event together.

In the streets and on social media, people gathered to share the amazing experience of the eclipse and to make meaning together. Meaning is always collectively made, you see.

It was beautiful. Powerful. Tear-inducing. Magickal.

During the eclipse, we participated in something that human beings have been doing for generations: We paused for a moment in our busy lives. We bore witness to the rhythms of nature. We reflected together upon how our lives connect to those rhythms.

The eclipse reminded some people that we are a part of nature. They reflected on the fact that we are just one small part of a vast and awesome universe. They talked about how we need to live with humility in oneness with the earth.

The eclipse reminded other people of the need to interrupt everyday rhythms of life at times. They reflected on the need to change our habitual ways of thinking and doing. They talked of throwing wrenches in the gears of oppressive systems. They talked of resisting the drive to be ever more productive in their jobs. They talked of disrupting constant activity and taking some time to rest.

Ancient cultures may have viewed eclipses as alarming disruptions of the natural order. Day after day the sun rose and then set, and the moon rose and then set, without fail. Until one day the sun disappeared in the middle of the day and night reigned for a few minutes. Had the sun been captured? Swallowed? Eaten? Was it coming back?

Today we know a thing or two about what eclipses are and why they happen. We understand them to be a normal part of the rhythms of nature rather than a disruption of those rhythms.

And yet wisdom is not scientific. It is much deeper than that. In West Africa, the Batammaliba people tell a beautiful story with deep, deep wisdom. In the story, the sun and the moon are at war with one another. On the ground below, the people look up at the sky and witness the battle as a great eclipse. And so, whenever the sun and moon are fighting in the heavens, the people take the moment to pause. They pause and remind themselves of the need to seek peace and reconciliation with one another.

Indigenous cultures are not the only ones to turn to nature to make meaning and seek wisdom about how to live good lives. We Unitarian Universalists also do so. We honor “earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature”. Much of our inspiration comes from modern pagan spirituality.

The word “pagan” comes from the Latin word “paganus”, which meant “country-dweller”. Pagans are people who turn to the natural world as their primary source of meaning, guidance and spiritual nurture.

The sun is a powerful symbol in modern paganism. Its brilliant, life-giving, and sometimes harsh light and heat are symbols of masculine energy. The sun represents all the active energies of daily living: vitality, passion, and sometimes even productivity. Its power keeps things moving, growing, changing, and seeking.

An eclipse, then, can represent a disruption of that power. Not an end to that power, but a sudden break that opens up space for other kinds of power to manifest. Other kinds of power like serenity instead of vitality and rest instead of productivity. Some modern pagan communities associate these energies with the moon and with feminine power.

Unitarian Universalists have been turning to nature as a primary source of religious wisdom for over 150 years. In the 19th century, Transcendentalists among us encouraged us to seek direct experience of the divine in nature. In the 20th century, Humanists among us reminded us that we are a part of nature, not above it, and should act accordingly.

But interest in Paganism really took off among us in the 1970s. A sudden burst of feminine energy disrupted centuries of emphasis on more masculine images of the divine. Those masculine images had often been good, beautiful, vital, powerful, like the life-giving light of the sun, but they were also incomplete. They only represented part of the picture, part of the possibility of what the divine could be like.

In the 1970s Unitarian Universalist women expressed unhappiness with the exclusively masculine language used in our faith tradition. A group of women brought forth a "Women in Religion" resolution, calling on our faith community to examine the language we used to talk about ourselves. They were tired of language about "brotherhood" and "mankind" in our statements about who we are. They were tired too of masculine pronouns for God in our hymns and other religious literature.

Feminists of all genders, but especially women, also began exploring Goddess spirituality. Interest in earth-centered and pagan spiritualities spread throughout the Association. During the 80s, Unitarian Universalists began to offer pagan worship and celebrate Water Communion.

Today many Unitarian Universalist congregations celebrate Water Communion every year in the Fall. We will be celebrating our own Water Communion and Ingathering service here next week, so please remember to collect a little water from a place that is meaningful to you and bring it with you to worship next Sunday!

Although we adopted the 7 Principles in 1984, with their statement calling upon us to respect nature as a great “interdependent web of all being of which we are a part”, we did not yet affirm earth-centered traditions as part of our faith. We had pagans among us and were exploring pagan spirituality, but we were not yet ready to embrace pagans as pagans had embraced us.

That brings me to 1985, and another important development in our faith: my birth. Just kidding. But my own family history parallels our Unitarian Universalist history with Paganism rather well.

Every year our congregations gather together in a General Assembly to vote on matters of importance to our faith. In the summer of 1985, just a few months before I was born, a small group of pagans met together at General Assembly and started to organize with the intention of forming a group for Unitarian Universalist pagans. This group became the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans, or CUUPs. We have a CUUPS chapter here in our congregation, called the Fellowship of the Oak.

As Unitarian Univeralists were beginning to explore Paganism, my Pagan mother was beginning to explore Unitarian Universalism. She had heard that our congregations were safe, open-minded places where Pagans were welcome. You have to understand that this was before we adopted our 6th Source affirming earth-centered traditions. We didn't yet have an explicit statement of welcome. Yet welcome Pagans were.

And so my Mom began attending a Unitarian Universalist congregation. There, she participated in a women’s group that met monthly to explore earth-centered spirituality. She stepped away for a few years when I was born, and then when I was five she took me to church for the first time in Park City, Utah.

I don’t think the Park City church still exists, which is real shame. At the time we were attending, the Park City Unitarian Universalists were a tiny little congregation who didn’t even have a building yet to meet in. And so they were having worship outdoors at different locations each week.

Worshipping outside felt very appropriate to my Pagan mother. And so she brought me to my very first Unitarian Universalist worship service. The service was outdoors and ended with a ride in a hot air balloon owned by one of the members.

I don’t remember anything at all about the worship service itself. But I sure do remember that balloon! I remember my terror and awe as I found myself floating above the earth in a giant ball of hot air, lifted way up high to peer, in a fleeting moment of courage, past the rim of the big basket down at all the land stretched out below. It was scary. It was exhilarating. It was my first experience of Unitarian Universalism.

When we moved back to Arizona, services at the Chandler congregation we attended were quite a bit less thrilling. But that was alright. We had found our church home.

As my family embraced Unitarian Universalism, soon Unitarian Universalism embraced us as well. In 1995, Unitarian Universalists adopted our 6th Source. In doing so, we affirmed earth-centered traditions as an important influence upon and authentic expression of our faith. I was only 10 then and have only vague memories of that time. But I remember how wonderful it felt to know that Unitarian Universalists considered my pagan family Unitarian Universalist, too. It was only natural then that I chose to become a member of my Unitarian Universalist home congregation as a young adult.

This faith tradition embraced my family. Embraced me. And so I embraced it right back. I first felt my call to ministry in that church in Chandler, and eventually followed that call here to you, today.

So, you see, I would not be here with you now, serving as one of your ministers, if a bunch of women in the 70s and 80s, some of them pagans, had not disrupted business as usual in our faith. I would not be here if women had not urged our Association to examine the gendered, masculine language of our hymns and statements about who we are. I would not be here if they had not eclipsed patriarchy by saying “hey, we’re here!” and interjecting a little feminine lunar power into the once sun-dominated world of Unitarian Universalism, including Pagan rituals and theology.

Today, my roots still stretch deep, deep down into the earth, drawing sustenance from the life-giving spiritual waters of our 6th Source. But I no longer identify exclusively as Pagan. I simply identify as Unitarian Universalist. All 6 of our Sources are meaningful. None ultimately eclipse the others.

And yet it is important to have eclipse-moments in our personal lives and in our faith community. Monday’s eclipse disrupted the daily grind and gave people a time of rest and renewal, joy and awe. And eclipse-moments in our faith help enrich and deepen Unitarian Universalism by disrupting business as usual. Without disruptions to the established religious order, we would never have adopted any of our 6 Sources.

Because of those eclipse moments, Unitarian Universalists today embrace the spiritual wisdom that comes from nature and earth-centered traditions, from our direct experiences, from prophetic words and deeds, from world religions, from Jewish and Christian teachings, and from science and reason. The living waters that nourish and sustain our faith include wonder, prophecy, wisdom, love, reason and nature. They are here for us, flowing through our faith and through this community. Let us rest in them for healing. Let us look to them for insight. Let us drink of them for spiritual sustenance. And may they guide us toward transformation, day and night, now and always.