

## Cast the Circle Wide

preached by the Rev. Colin Bossen at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland, June 5, 2011

One of my earliest memories of my childhood congregation, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing, is of dancing the Maypole. I could not have been more than five at the time. But I remember walking out to the field across the congregation's building, picking up a bright ribbon, and listening to a friendly adult instruct me to walk in a circle around the pole with perhaps a dozen other children. Each of us had a ribbon, six were told to walk clockwise and six were told to walk counterclockwise. Each time we passed one of our compatriots we wove our ribbons together. Within a few minutes the Maypole's dozen strands of orange, yellow, green, purple, red and blue, were intertwined and our dance was done.

It is fitting that the Maypole dance is one of my earliest memories of congregational life. The first minister of my childhood was the Rev. Denise Tracy. The Rev. Tracy was active in the Women in Religion movement and, as I remember, imbued the congregation with feminist theology and a tint of neo-paganism. Not that I had the language to describe such things at the time. What I knew was that the minister of my congregation was a woman and that occasionally on Sunday morning the children in the religious education program would be called upon to participate in a ritual.

The Women in Religion movement of which the Rev. Tracy was a part of was an attempt by Unitarian Universalists, primarily Unitarian Universalist women, to transform religion from a force that is oppressive of women to one that is liberating. It has its roots in the sixties and seventies feminist movement. It gained power within our religious association in the late seventies with the passage of 1977 Women and Religion Business Resolution at the Unitarian Universalist Association's General Assembly. This resolution called "upon all Unitarian Universalists to examine... their own religious beliefs and the extent to which these beliefs influence sex-role stereotypes... to: (a) put traditional assumptions and language in perspective, and (b) avoid sexist assumptions and language in the future."

The resolution was a watershed. Before its passage less than 5% of Unitarian Universalist ministers were women. Today, thirty years afterwards, more than 50% are. Just as strikingly the resolution provoked Unitarian Universalists to carefully examine our liturgy (how we do worship), hymnology (what we sing during worship) and preaching (what we say during worship). As a result of this examination, the hymnbooks we use today are different than the ones used in the fifties and sixties. Today's hymnbooks have little reference to a male deity and are generally expunged of sexist language.

Another early memory of congregational life stands out in stark contrast to the Maypole. I speak of course of coffee hour. Coffee hour, as I remember it, was dominated by the humanist set. They liked to debate. And talk. And debate. Over bad coffee and worse pastries, I remember them debating a lot, and debating almost everything--God, politics, congregational life, coffee... As child I remember being somewhat afraid of them. They were not mean, per-say, but they could ask a lot of questions and, if they did not like your answers, back you into a rhetorical corner.

These two memories reflect the two major theological currents within my childhood congregation and much of late twentieth century Midwestern Unitarian Universalism: humanism and neo-paganism. Today, in our final series on the world's religions, we will explore both, briefly, and examine their relationship to contemporary Unitarian Universalism.

Humanism and neo-paganism are, at first blush, quite different. The stereotypical humanist calls for the use of reason in religion, rejects supernaturalism as absurd and questions traditional forms of religion. Neo-pagans often call themselves witches, worship various pantheons of deities and practice magic. The two seem quite different. But I will suggest that they have more in common than first might appear. Let us consider each in turn.

As a religious current, humanism, technically the humanism that many Unitarian Universalists adhere to is religious humanism, dates to the early part of the 20th century. It was propagated by the Midwestern Unitarian ministers Charles Potter, John Dietrich and Curtis Reese, and partially codified in the three Humanist Manifestos, the first of which was written in 1933 and the third of which was published only in 2003.

Though the language is somewhat dated, the first Humanist Manifesto is remarkable document in developing a case for religion without God. In fifteen short theses it rejects the basic assertions of the Abrahamic religious traditions arguing that "the universe... [is] self-existing and not created" and "that man is part of nature and that he has emerged as the result of a continuous process." It also rejects dualism, the belief that the mind and body are two separate things, and asserts that there is no separate soul that might continue after death. The first manifesto closes with a call for some form of socialism, with the fourteenth of the fifteen theses asserting: "The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good. Humanists demand a shared life in a shared world."

Humanism strives to be engaged with the findings of the latest science and what it reveals about reality. One of the tenets of religious humanism is that science provides the most accurate description of the world. At the same time it celebrates its ancient roots. Charles Potter claimed that "It is from the Greek Humanists... and through the Renaissance, that modern western Humanism derives." And in some sense, the early 20th century religious humanists felt that they were striving to recover a mode of thought and spirituality that had been lost with the advent of Christianity and monotheism in Western culture.

Let us turn now to neo-paganism. Neo-paganism, as it appears in most Unitarian Universalist circles, largely dates to the seventies and eighties. The neo-pagan movement has earlier antecedents, indeed most neo-pagans claim to be recovering lost religious traditions rather than creating new ones, but its well-known practitioners only gained prominence within the last few decades.

In some ways, neo-paganism is strikingly different than humanism. It is probably best known for its rituals and use of magic. Indeed where my understanding of humanism is largely academic and intellectual, my grasp of neo-paganism is primarily experiential. When I lived in the San Francisco Bay Area I often attended large public rituals organized by the neo-pagan Reclaiming community, affiliated with the writer Starhawk, and for awhile I even belonged to a coven, a group of pagans who united for common spiritual practiced, loosely tied with that community.

Many of you probably have heard the name Starhawk. She is by far the most influential neo-pagan within Unitarian Universalist circles. Some of her writings are in our grey hymnbook—we use one every year as the call to worship for our Mother’s Day service—and two of her early influential books, “Dreaming in the Dark” and “The Spiral Dance,” were published by the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Beacon Press. I read her work first in my Unitarian Universalist youth group, again in a Unitarian Universalist young adult group and intensely in seminary.

The neo-pagan rituals organized by Reclaiming that I attended usually took place in parks and coincided with the solstices, equinoxes and quarter-days. Quarter-days are the midpoints between an equinox and a solstice. The rituals I remember best from my time in San Francisco were the ones that took place on May Day. Perhaps this is because of my earlier experience with the Maypole. Whatever the reason, I have vivid memories of several hundred, maybe even a couple of thousand, people gathering outside for ritual. The May Day events always had a political tinge to them. The ritual happened alongside performances of the San Francisco Mime Troupe and local folksingers and rock bands with radical politics.

This is not surprising. San Francisco Bay Area neo-paganism is closely tied with leftwing social movements. Starhawk makes no pretense of hiding the connection between her brand of neo-paganism and political radicalism.

Starhawk and other writers from her strand of neo-paganism like Riane Eisler identify humanity’s problems with an estrangement from nature and warped social structure. In Eisler’s classic “The Chalice & the Blade” she identifies human society has having two conflicting social structures. There is what she calls “the dominator model... [which ranks] one half of humanity over the other.” And there is “the partnership model” which has “social relations... primarily based on the principle of linking rather than ranking...”

This form of neo-paganism holds that at some point in distant human history humanity turned away from the partnership model and towards the dominator model. And that is when trouble really began. This turning brought about widespread war and the beginning of the despoiling of the natural environment.

Historically, the partnership model emphasized equal relationships between the genders and saw humanity as part of the broader natural world. In contrast, the dominator model held humanity to be separate from nature and one gender, usually the male one, to be superior than the other—or others if we accept the partnership model’s non-binary definition of gender. The religion of the partnership model was Goddess worship. The religion of the dominator model was patriarchal. It began with the ancient patriarchal pantheons of Sumer and Greece where male deities ruled over their consorts and creation and culminated in patriarchal monotheism.

Eisler goes as far to claim, “all other times of seeming chaos we know of are dwarfed by comparison with what happened at... the evolutionary crossroads in our prehistory when human society was violently transformed” from the partnership model to the dominator model. Today, neo-pagans like Starhawk and Eisler believe, the dominator model continues to run amuck. Unless humanity can make a change and return to the partnership model then we are doomed to destroy

our environment and each other and ultimately experience extinction and the destruction of much of the life on the planet.

This neo-pagan narrative is essentially a narrative of the Fall. Once humanity lived in harmony with itself and with nature. Then something happened, the harmony was ruptured and human civilization began a decline into inequality and violence. This narrative has a twist to it. Humans have the power to reverse it and return to living harmoniously with the Earth.

The way to actualize this return is through the use of magic. Most people tend to think of magic as supernatural. But in Starhawk's view magic is about utilizing the power to change reality that resides within all of us. She defines it as "the art of changing consciousness at will." And notes that "According to that definition, magic encompasses political action which is aimed at changing consciousness and thereby causing change."

Magic can take the form of ritual, for rituals are designed to change consciousness, or it can be more prosaic. As she argues, "A leaflet, a lawsuit, a demonstration, or a strike can change consciousness." The most important thing to understand is that in Starhawk's view magic shapes reality. She claims, "at its heart is a paradox: Consciousness shapes reality; Reality shapes consciousness."

My favorite description of this kind of neo-pagan magic comes from a friend of mine from the Bay Area. He likes to describe magic this way: "I am hungry. I think I want to make a sandwich. I go into the kitchen, take two slices of bread, cut some lettuce, some tomato, a little bit of cheese and maybe part of an avocado. I assemble the ingredients into a sandwich. I eat the sandwich. I am no longer hungry. I have changed my consciousness. That's magic."

With its emphasis on magic and ritual it would seem that neo-paganism has little in common with humanism. But looking carefully at the two theological traditions it becomes apparent that both share several important theological beliefs. And that these beliefs place them well outside the mainstream of Western religion. Indeed, the beliefs are such that they might be considered ruptures with the Western religious tradition.

The similarities between humanism and neo-paganism are at least three-fold. First, both reject the idea of a monotheistic patriarchal God. Both are religious traditions beyond God the Father. From Constantine's consolidation of the Roman Empire and the Catholic Church in the 4th century until the advent of religious humanism at the beginning of the 20th century it was not possible to have a religious tradition in the West that was not monotheistic. Those communities that attempted to have such a tradition were systematically persecuted. In reference to this, neo-pagans speak of the burning times in the 13th and 14th centuries when many pagans were killed by the Inquisition.

Second, both religious humanists and neo-pagans make claims to ancient roots. Rather than inventing something new they see themselves as recovering something that was lost. In the neo-pagan case this is the partnership model of society that existed before the dominator model came to the fore. In the humanist case this is the tradition of Greek humanism.

Finally, both humanism and neo-paganism reject claims that our behavior in this life will merit reward or punishment in the next. They hold that we are part of this world, humanity is part of, not

separate from, nature. And that those who claim otherwise, who claim that our true home is in heaven up above, allow for greater repression in this world than would otherwise exist. As Starhawk writes, "Christianity has reconciled workers, slaves, women, and people of color to the position of inferiors by denying value to the conditions of this life and assigning it to some future existence in heaven, where the meek and submissive will be rewarded." Or, to put it in the words of an old labor hymn, "The Preacher and the Slave," that I have heard sung at both humanist and neo-pagan gatherings, "Long haired preachers come out every night / try to tell you what's wrong and what's right / but when asked about something to eat, / try to tell you in voices so sweet, / 'Work and pray, / Live on hay, / You'll get pie in the sky when you die.' (Your line here is: It's a lie)."

Emphasizing the importance of this life over the next--and quite possibly dismissing the next as even probable--leads both neo-pagans and humanists to believe in the human power to change the world for the better. Instead of waiting for some outside force--the Second Coming of Jesus, for instance--to improve the world and human society we are tasked to do so ourselves. And there is good news about this observation. The problems that we face as humans are largely of human making. If the problems were made by humans then they can be solved by humans.

And that third point is a message that we all need to hear today. We live in an age of political and economic upheaval. We face a great ecological crisis. Many scientists are beginning to argue that the climate change brought about by human industrial activity has placed us in the midst of the sixth great extinction. Species are dying out at a shocking rate.

The situation is such that the Unitarian Universalist theologian Rebecca Parker argues that we live in "a postapocalyptic world." In the traditional Christian view the Apocalypse is the coming cataclysm that will destroy earthly evil empires, smite the wicked and bring about Christ's reign of peace upon the earth. As Parker understands it, a postapocalyptic world is simultaneously recovering from violence and living in the midst of it. She describes it thus: "We are living in a postslavery, post-Holocaust, post-Vietnam, post-Hiroshima world. We are living in the aftermath of collective violence that has been severe, massive, and traumatic. The scars from slavery, genocide, and meaningless war mark our bodies. We are living in the midst of rain forest burnings, the rapid death of species, the growing pollution of the air and water, and new mutations of racism and violence."

Our task in such a world is to salvage what we can and seek a new way forward. It is to build a new society from the ashes of the old. That the old has crumbled, is crumbling, around us should be obvious to anyone who has ever walked down Coventry Road into East Cleveland and who has witnessed the continuing assault on our public schools, the underfunding of social services and public infrastructure and the constant, untrue, claim that our society--the richest in human history--is broke and cannot afford education, healthcare and a reasonable standard of living for all of its citizens.

The theological traditions of both religious humanism and neo-paganism offer us insight into how we might build a new world. Religious humanism with its emphasis on reason and the human capacity to solve problems can help us find faith in our ability to address the challenges we face. And it can encourage us to look to science, and trust science, to find out what is wrong with our global ecosystem and what we can do to fix it.

Neo-paganism likewise can teach us to think magically, to think about how we can change our consciousness and in doing so change reality. Such magical thinking is already present with us. Tomorrow some of us will be gathering at the Mason Auditorium on Euclid to commit ourselves to imagining a new Cleveland. As part of the Greater Cleveland Congregations we will come together with representatives of some thirty-five other congregations and community groups in an effort to launch a new organization to improve our region for the better. The launch of the Greater Cleveland Congregations is the result of close to a year's worth of work on the part of people in religious communities throughout the region. We are uniting across class, race and religious lines together with a vision of stronger, healthier, more just and sustainable region. Working together we will make that vision a reality. We will transform consciousnesses. We will commit magic.

Each of us probably has a vision of what a better Cleveland, a better society, a better congregation or a better household might look like. Let us pause for a moment to call that vision forward. Push that vision to the front of your mind. Let it become vivid. Let it stir your heart. Imagine working towards it. Imagine what it would feel like to work towards it with your hands and with your mind. If you can, grasp the hand of those sitting near you. Visions of a better world come to fruition when work together. Now bring forth one word in your mind that encapsulates your vision. Now speak it.

May those visions come true. Blessed Be and Amen.