

Pagan Pride Sunday Message: Many Paths to the Heretic Heart

Guests, friends, UUs, Pagans- Heretics of many paths- I am so delighted to see you all here to celebrate the Autumn Equinox, to stamp out hunger, to celebrate Pagan Pride and to broaden our religious literacy. For some of you it has taken a leap of courage to walk into this Fellowship, due to religious trauma caused by the faith of the overculture. I thank you for your bravery! For others, you are here with an open heart to learn more about the New Religious Movement that is Paganism and to enter into honest dialog with our Pagan community. I thank you for your loving curiosity! Unitarian Universalism is an inclusive faith and the most inclusive definition of Pagan is any unsaved person. I think that applies to most, if not all of us here today. I've been a member of this congregation since about 1998 and it is Paganism that led me here. Attending Salisbury University in the 90s I began looking for a faith that did not send my atheist friends to hell. I was also raised by avid birders and environmentalists. You could say that my first church was attending Audubon Society meetings with my parents. My spiritual and academic focus on the earth put me into contact with other earth revering young adults at SU and a copy of Scott Cunningham's *Wicca for the Solitary Practitioner* soon found its way into my hands. I began to research Wiccan organizations, using this new technology called the world wide web and what I found is that in many places, Wiccans held gatherings at Unitarian Universalist churches. While I couldn't find any local Pagan organizations here, I did find the UUFS and I've stuck with it ever since. I practiced Wicca from the age of 18 to 34 all while attending the UUFS and today I identify as an AtheoPagan Unitarian Universalist, while my practice remains Wiccan inspired, my beliefs have significantly diverged. Since my youthful exploration of religion, Paganism has grown into distinct branches: Syncretic Paganism, Reconstructionist Paganism, and Revivalist Paganism. These branches encompass a variety of identities, including Heathen, Druid, Witch and Wiccan. Syncretic refers to the practice of associating deities of different cultures into one and was practiced by the ancient Romans as they colonized Celtic Britain, much of Europe, and Egypt. Today, syncretism is an important feature of Wicca which often worships a Great Goddess and God. Reconstructionism rejects the idea that some deities are "equivalent" and strives for a more historically accurate and culturally distinct religious movement. The most popular reconstructionist faiths in the US are Norse and Celtic Reconstructionism. In fact, Norse practitioners prefer the term "Heathen" to "Pagan" as it has a Germanic word origin, where Pagan comes to us from Latin. Another Pagan faith, Druidry can include both syncretic and reconstructionist practitioners but it can also show us a middle path as some Druid churches teach a "revivalist" path between the two, learning from history, understanding that their faith is a modern one, while striving to avoid pseudohistory. Non Wiccan Witches are another identity that deserves mention as there are many who practice magic, but not as part of a religion, and without some of the ethical boundaries Wicca teaches. Wiccan, Druid and

Heathen are the Pagan identities I wish to elaborate on today with the goal of religious literacy and camaraderie with this family of earth based faiths.

Syncretic Paganism: Wicca

Wicca is by far the most prevalent form of Paganism in the US, but it comes to us via Gerald Gardner, born in the UK in 1884. He was influenced by both the Spiritualist movement, Freemasonry, and Rosicrucianism, and a lifelong pursuit of anthropology, archeology, folklore and travel, having lived and worked in Malaya. Of note, he attended several lectures at King's College London in 1932 on the theory of a prehistoric cult of the Mother Goddess. Another academic influence was Egyptologist Dr. Margaret Murray, whose Witch Cult Hypothesis proposed that the witch trials found all across Europe were an attempt to extinguish a surviving witch cult that worshiped a horned God that Christian oppressors associated with their Devil. This anti-pagan propaganda from the faith of the overculture is still active today and results in much religious discrimination. Gardner became doubtful of the Rosicrucian Theatrical group in 1939 when a leader predicted that there would be no war, however, the following day Britain declared war on Germany. This led Gardner to form a new group he called the New Forest Coven and brought with him some members of the Rosicrucian Theater. Whether this coven was an extant example of a pre-Christian witch cult or not, Wicca was born and it flourished. Gardner began to publish books, with the help of Doreen Valiente who joined the New Forest Coven in the 1950s. New initiates were taught their ways and customs leading to new covens and even new sects, called "traditions". Wicca is a syncretic pagan faith, integrating different deities, celebrating a duotheistic God and Goddess, a divine couple representing light and the dark, feminine and masculine, as natural forces, but not associated with good and evil. Individuals often choose, or are chosen by, one particular deity to be their patron or matron deity. There are eight solar holidays collectively called "The Wheel of the Year" consisting of Equinoxes, Solstices, and 4 "cross quarter" celebrations, mainly from Celtic and Irish holidays, like Beltane on May first, and Samhain, on October 31st. These holidays connect Wiccans with the changing of the seasons reflected in nature. Wiccans living in the Southern Hemisphere celebrate the Wheel of the Year in reverse order, to reflect how their seasons turn. Wiccans also celebrate a lunar cycle, worshiping on various moon phases, which reflect the life cycle of the Goddess, as Maiden: new moon, Mother: full moon, and Crone: dark moon. Wiccans honor the Ancestors both in the form of their passed relatives, in the form of cultural heroes, and as passed Wiccan elders, sometimes referred to as "The Mighty Dead". Most Wiccans believe in a form of reincarnation bringing us back into earthly existence, which corresponds with an invested interest in the health of our planet. The Wiccan Rede, or advice, is a common statement of ethics which says "and ye harm none, do what ye will" and some traditions say that what we do will come back to us three times, though I've also heard it stated that our lessons will come back to us as often as it takes to learn them. The practice of magic or spells is often moderated by this belief in karma, but in

my opinion the greater lesson is one of expecting and being resilient in the face of change, while embracing our power to affect change in our own lives and our own societies. Wicca and witchcraft teach us to hone our will, distilling it into a statement of intent, to imagine a future where that intent is successful, to ritually enact that intent as a magical working and then to do the mundane work needed to manifest that goal. Whether or not you take supernatural magic as real, if we can not imagine the future we want, how can we create it? Scholars today describe the theory that the witch trials victims represent a persecuted witch or fertility cult as pseudohistory, however Gardner believed Wicca was a true revival of a surviving Pagan Witchcraft practice based on (at the time) popular archeological and anthropological theories of a prehistoric fertility cult worshiping Goddess and a Horned God. That said, I prefer to see the Wiccan God and Goddess, not as illegitimate, but as new gods for a modern age where our disconnect from the Earth that sustains us has led us into anthropogenic climate change, extinctions, and not one but five garbage patches of plastic in our oceans. The Great Goddess is also a representation of female power and has helped many women to choose a life where we are not complicit in our own misogynistic oppression, as we strive to end sexism in society at large. As Witches we are reminded of the Inquisitions that burned 40 to 60 thousands women all over Europe. In the news just this weekend was the cruel murder of Olympic marathon runner Rebecca Cheptegei of Uganda who was burned to death by her ex boyfriend. When we consider the fossil fuels we burn every day all over the world, it can also be argued that the Goddess, Mother Earth herself is also a victim of misogyny. Clearly there is more work to do here and quite literally our own survival depends on it.

Revivalist: Druidry

Druidry is another Pagan path, based on the ancient Celtic priestly class of learned medical practitioners, politicians, lorekeepers, and judges of the iron age. The first Druid organizations of the 1700s were more cultural and fraternal, with charitable goals. During the Celtic Revival, beginning the the 19th century, a romanticized emphasis on Celtic art, and Welsh and Irish literature led to the creation of religious NeoDruid organizations again styled after Freemasonry. The two most active Druid churches in the US are the OBOD and the ADF. The Order of Bards Ovates and Druids, is a UK organization founded in 1964 and focuses on the Celtic culture and pantheon. The ADF, Ár nDraíocht Féin is a North American church that focuses more broadly on Indo-European cultures, including Celtic and Norse cultures, Slavic, Baltic, Greek, Roman, Persian, and Vedic. Theologies and opinions on historical continuity vary, but in essence Druids hold a reverence for the divinity of nature. A common symbol Druids use is the Awen, three beams of light spreading out. It is interpreted to be a flowing spirit that brings divine inspiration and comes from the Welsh word for inspiration and is often chanted in ceremonies. Local Druid circles are called groves, while larger organizations are called Orders, led by a Chief or Arch Druid. Druids also celebrate the

Wheel of the Year, with different names for the holidays, typically in Welsh or Irish. Participating in Druidry, Unitarian Universalism and CUUPs you will find John Beckett, a blogger at the Patheos website, and leader of the Denton Texas CUUPs chapter. In our own CUUPs chapter there are Druid identified Pagans, working on online correspondence classes. Most of these Pagan churches are not exclusionary, welcoming members who have multiple membership and training from a variety of paths, including the UU.

Reconstructionist Paganism: Heathenism

Polytheism is often described as either “soft” or syncretic, or as “hard”, reconstructionist, where Gods of various cultures are not associated with one another. This is another way to refer to reconstructionist Paganism and has a focus on historical accuracy, and the extant literature from that culture describing their form of polytheism. In the US, the most popular Reconstructionist Pagan practice is Heathenry, which sometimes goes by Anglo-Saxon Paganism or Norse Paganism. Many Heathens wear a symbol of Thors hammer to identify themselves. I want to carefully acknowledge that some Heathen organizations promote racism and white supremacy, but not all. The most inclusive Heathen non profit organization is The Troth whose mission is “to educate, train, provide resources for, and otherwise promote the inclusive practice of linguistically Germanic, polytheistic religions.” and expressly states their inclusiveness in this way: “The Troth is open to all who seek to know and to worship the Gods, honor the ancestors, and live by values of the Germanic Heathen traditions, regardless of tradition, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, gender, or family structure.” The Troth provides educational resources, from a self guided online curriculum to clergy training, and advice on the best translations of the Poetic and Prose Edda. Like many reconstructionist Pagans, the practice is more about devotional offerings to their gods, called Blots, than it is about spells and witchcraft. The Heathen Worship Calendar is derived from the Wiccan Wheel of the year, but names have been changed to reflect celebrations mentioned in the Norse Sagas and often celebrated with a Symbel, which takes place after a feast and features toasts, oaths and boasts with much drinking. But what about this Earth Centered emphasis that Heathen implies? According to The Troth, there is little evidence that the ancient Norse directly worshiped the Earth, however it’s suggested that Nerthus, as depicted by bronze age idols may be symbolic of the Earth. The Troth also encourages members to practice gardening and foraging, and to celebrate harvests, while remembering that the Earth has sustained us and their ancestors, while welcoming actions that preserve her. Our CUUPs chapter does include members who identify as Heathens.

Close

Sometimes I wonder how Earth Centered Paganism really is in practice today. Even with the knowledge that Wicca isn’t truly a historically accurate revival of an ancient Earth Goddess worshiping culture, the Earth itself deserves our reverence. The Earth doesn’t require a

gender or a human shape or any other name or title, to be worthy of our devotion. We need a healthy earth and cultural shift embracing sustainability to survive just as our ancestors have done thousands of years ago. I suggest to you today, UU, Pagan or both, to put an image of the earth on your home altar, or focus, which is an alternate term AttheoPagans use. Practice gratitude to the earth perhaps in the form of affirmations. Spend time in the healing beauty of nature as a spiritual practice. Check out Forest Bathing. Explore rituals that create an awareness of the sacred. Take steps to reduce your impact on the earth. Advocate to our representatives for environmental policies. If we are Pagans and Heathen, that is unsaved people of the countryside, let us embrace that with our words and deeds. Historical accuracy is not required.

Another observation I made while researching Paganism more broadly in preparation for this Pagan Pride event, I find it interesting that, unlike GLBT+ Pride, Pagans have no uniting flag, which suggests to me that there is much work to do in cultivating a true Pagan community. Polytheists, whether witchy, Wiccan, soft or hard, syncretic, reconstructionist, or revivalist, should consider taking a page from Unitarian Universalism to realize that we don't have to have identical beliefs to worship together or even to work together on common goals. One advantage that the Covenant of UU Pagans has to offer the greater Pagan community is a denomination-free, inclusive and welcoming organization of local chapters hosted by UU congregations that can function as a neutral place to build that community. CUUPs chapters, not covens, are forbidden to participate in initiatory practices and can be a kind of "Third Option" for Pagan seekers whose only local options are a solitary practice. And like the UU, outside of CUUPs participants are free to join any other tradition, congregation, or sect that inspires you. But how did the UU come to include Pagans in the first place?

According to the Covenant of UU Pagans website, it was at the 1980 UU Continental Feminist Theology Convocation that the first UU and Pagan worship service took place hosted by the Continental Women and Religion Committee where they discussed the Goddess, had a workshop on Witchcraft, and watched a film about Z. Budapest, an early feminist Wiccan and colleague of Starhawk. In 1985 at the UUA General Assembly UU Pagans began to organize a UU Pagan network. At the 1987 UUA General Assembly, Beacon Press sponsored a keynote speech by Margo Adler, of NPR fame and author of "Drawing Down the Moon" which introduced more UUs to the Pagan New Religious Movement. CUUPS was ratified as an UU Independent Affiliate at the 1988 UUA GA with the purpose of: "Networking of Pagan-identified UUs, outreach to the larger Pagan community, and Pagan education and liturgical opportunities within UU congregations." Since then Pagan songs and two readings by Starhawk have been included in our hymnal. In our "Sources of Our Living Tradition" you will find the sixth states: "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". Today, a quick search on youtube will bring you many videos of UU

Pagans having rituals in celebration of Pagan deities and holidays in UU congregations all across the US and Canada. Here at the UUFS, our first CUUPs chapter was led by the late Dotti Yeatman, revived by Michael Russel in 2022, and currently facilitated by myself with indispensable participation and inspiration from all our members. It is truly a blessing to be in community with all of you throughout the year, which provides unique opportunities to learn and grow from each other as we practice our ritual craft and devotion to the earth and or the Gods. I also give thanks to the UUFS and members of our host congregation, for without, we would not have a foundation for our CUUPs community. I am Proud to be both a Pagan and a UU and I hope this message today will promote tolerance and acceptance both of the UU and Paganism.