



## Earth-Centered Religions

Reverend Annie Foerster  
First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati  
536 Linton Street  
Cincinnati, Ohio 45219  
513.281.1564  
April 3, 2011

### **INTRODUCTION:** *Earth-Centered Traditions*

Sixteen years ago, the delegates at the General Assembly in Spokane, Washington, voted to add to our denominational principles a sixth source from which we draw our living tradition. This is the piece they added: *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.*

We could spend a life-time studying the implications of this statement and the *many* sources of wisdom we might discover from those people, ancient and modern, who practice a spirituality centered on their experience with the earth and the whole of nature. Although we have only one hour today, I would like to begin that study, looking at both the spiritual wisdom of the Native Americans who preceded the European immigration of the fifteenth century, and the ancient pagan religions that preceded the emergence of Christianity. Both of these groups were sublimated by, and taken into the belief systems that followed them. The selections I share with you this morning are composites of many traditions and beliefs, but they have a common point of view that is important to our own history and traditions. They have lost much of their original power as distinct faith systems, but not their power to inform our own beliefs and transform way of seeing.

In many places there is a resurgence and rebirth of the old faiths today. But much of their original expression has been lost through the carelessness of bigotry, genocide, and oppression. What we experience is a re-creation, based on the underlying world views and resultant philosophies. These we can use to deepen our own spiritual understanding, and, perhaps, to find new ways to heal what has been wounded in our own lives and in our ecosystems on this planet.

In the introduction to the collected volume *Earth Poems*, editor Ivo Mosely writes: *End of the twentieth century, the world: rivers stinking of effluent, poison wastes diffuse in the air, the rain itself become poison.*

*Trees dying, the soil a sterile holding bank for chemicals; cities, like giant cankers thriving, their millions mostly poor and hungry, their tendrils stretching to the far corners of the earth, draining the land of life*

*In the midst of all this, it's hard to feel good about being human. The bright visions of our ancestors have turned to dust or worse in our hands. The question is not, Is nature worth preserving? but Is humanity worth preserving?*

And, of course, the answer is *Yes*. The following poem is one of the ways that *yes* is answered in his book.

*The Reign of Love*, Boethius [475-524]

The world, with steady trust  
Changes in regular seasons.  
Seeds that struggles out of earth  
Keep to predetermined bounds.  
Daily the golden sun  
Leads with his chariot the rosy dawn,  
And nightly the evening star  
Leads out the moon to rule the sky.  
The greedy surging sea  
Is kept to certain limits  
Lest our uncertain world  
Be swamped within its flood.

The sequence of these things is tied—  
Seas ruled, lands overseen—  
By Love, which rules the heavens.  
Should Love let go the reins  
All things which now are linked  
Would move straightway to war;  
Things which are beautiful and live in trust  
Would fight, and tear apart the scheme of things.

Love, in sacred treaty,  
Holds peoples fast in friendship;  
Love, in sacred marriage,  
Binds lovers fast in innocence;  
Love makes laws also for those  
Who wish to stay faithful in friendship.  
O happy humankind,  
If Love, by which the heavens are ruled,  
Could rule your minds, too!

## **HOMILY**

*Earth-Centered Traditions—Ancient Europe*

Even in our relatively enlightened times, one euphemism for pregnancy is still *A*confinement. It wasn't that many years ago, just before the turn of this century in Victorian Europe and America, when pregnant women were confined to their homes lest curious neighbors know their condition and speculate what they might have been doing to get that way. In pre-Civil War days, hoop-skirted women raised their hoops from their hems to their hips in an effort to hide their condition as long as they could.

As contrast to the Victorians, consider the people, for example, who created the pregnant goddess figures of the pre-Christian millennia and look at the difference in their spiritual values. Some of these artifacts date back 20,000 years or more before the common era, and their creation continued up until about 2000 years ago, when they were destroyed, or replaced with the images of a new faith.

The cultures that created the pregnant goddesses were agricultural. The fertility that people saw in women was the same fertility they saw in the earth that fed them, housed them, and gave them resources for their crafts and their arts. Is it any wonder that they described the earth as a mother—a mother who feeds her young from her own body. They were, in their own world view, the earth's children.

This art of which I speak, this sensual representation of the earthy female, created along with figures of men aroused and ready for mating, were not sex symbols in the twenty-first-century sense. There was no sense of obscenity, nor was their purpose to titillate. They were symbols for potency, abundance, perpetuity and preservation; for standing strong in the face of ever-present death and destruction.

The people who made this sacred art were people of hope and optimism. Because they believed in the abundance of the earth, they kept in right relationship to this, their mother. When she denied them their crops or other resources, they would look to themselves to see what was lacking in the relationship. And because they did not deal their lives out of a philosophy of scarcity, they were able to share material things with one another and share power as well.

We need only contrast the prevailing attitudes and values of these earlier cultures with our own—such as the attitudes I have already described about pregnancy, to see how the underlying philosophies translate into everyday living. First as to the nature of the deity: If earth is the mother of us all, we would be in partnership with her to continue the work of creation. The earth was not the enemy; neither was nature. In the Hebrew version of creation, Jehovah made the earth and then took a blob of it to create the first human beings. We cannot be in partnership with Jehovah, but are beholden to him as creator and fearful of him for doling out our allowance. As the potter can destroy his pot if he does not like it, so can and does the Hebrew God destroy his creations if he is unhappy with them. In these stories, Jehovah gives man dominion over all the rest of creation, and people can emulate that destructive nature they see in their god and believe they can destroy as they will—destroy the earth and one another. By comparing these two kinds of stories, we can see very different attitudes, philosophies and theologies emerging.

In a society where the earth and all material creation are the model for living, reality and value are found in the material world—this world. The gifts of life are found and appreciated now. When the creation of the world comes from outside it, then reality and value are found outside, as well—in a spiritual or future world. The gifts of life are promised in a future world.

In an earth-centered tradition, death is part of life; in the heaven-centered tradition, death is the entry to the spiritual existence. In the former, healing is the basis of power; in the latter, sacrifice and war are the seats of power. Destruction is both a threat and a way of life. It all starts with the story.

To pay attention to nature is the way to knowledge in the earth-centered tradition. Our culture is one that is bound to study nature only to conquer her, rather than to celebrate her mysteries and miracles. We do not encourage the rain with prayer; instead, we dump chemicals in the clouds to make them weep. We do not gather the bounty of nature as it falls; instead, we cut it down in mid-life for our own use.

We have much to learn from these ancient traditions. We can learn it by ritual, as we did when we closed our eyes to discover the four sacred things within our selves; we can learn by doing. Or we can learn *about* it, once removed, from the pages of a book or the words of a speaker and never have to

change our values. But then we would continue to live at war with the earth and all creation.

## CHINOOK BLESSING

We call upon the earth, our planet home, with its beautiful depths and soaring heights, its vitality and abundance of life, and together we ask that it teach us, and show us the way.

*We call upon the mountains, the high green valleys and meadows filled with wild flowers, the snows that never melt, the summits of intense silence, and we ask that they teach us, and show us the way.*

We call upon the waters that rim the earth, horizon to horizon, that flow in our rivers and streams, that fall upon our gardens and fields, and we ask that they teach us, and show us the way.

*We call upon the land which grows our food, the nurturing soil, the fertile fields, the abundant gardens and orchards, and we ask that they teach us, and show us the way.*

We call upon the forests, the great trees reaching strongly to the sky with earth in their roots and heavens in their branches, the fir and the pine and the cedar, and we ask them to teach us, and show us the way.

*We call upon the creatures of the fields and forests and the seas, our brothers and sisters the wolves and deer, the eagle and dove, the great whales and the dolphin, the beautiful Orca and salmon who share our home, and we ask them to teach us, and show us the way.*

We call upon all those who have lived on this earth, our ancestors and our friends, who dreamed the best for future generations, and upon whose lives our lives are built, and with thanksgiving, we call upon them to teach us, and show us the way.

*And lastly, we call upon all that we hold most sacred, the presence and power of the Great Spirit of love and truth which flows through all the universe, to be with us to teach us, and show us the way.*

## HOMILY

### *Earth-Centered Traditions—Native American*

While many Native American tribes refer to Mother Earth and Grandfather Sky, their prevailing metaphor for life is the sacred hoop, a circle that includes all creation, both physical and metaphysical. Within this circle everything is alive and connected—trees, rocks, wind, stars, animals, humans, the visible and the invisible. There is no clear division between animate and inanimate entities, as in Western thought. The Native American concept is more like the yin and yang of Eastern philosophy, offering a world in balance.

Except we all know that the world sometimes gets out of balance. Disaster, evil, illness, all comprise a danger to the sacred circle. The Native Americans used ritual and ceremony to put the balance back into the world; to heal it and to celebrate it. In the Navajo culture, for example, the relationship with the world of the spirit is an individual relationship. When disharmony exists, illness and misfortune will prevail. Again, as in the pre-Christian culture, the fault is with the individual. The medicine men who facilitate the healing of the Navajos are singers. After a consultation to determine what action created the disharmony, a singer of that particular condition is called. The songs, like prayers, invoke the powers of the universe to help return the individual to harmony, like the harmony in a properly sung tune.

The Lakota, usually using the smoking of a pipe to include everyone in ceremonial participation, use these words to end their rituals: *Mi tau oyasin*: AWe are all related. This belief in the interdependence of all people is the basis, as well, for the ritual of creating blood brothers and blood sisters, which strengthens the relationship that already exists. The family, the tribe, the nation and the cosmos are seen as more important entities than the individual.

The Lakota, a plains Indian tribe, see themselves as an integral part of a large ecosystem. With this attitude, or because of it, they were able to sustain themselves wholly from the bounty of the plains. Nothing is wasted. In the old days, after a buffalo was killed for meat, the hides were used to make leather garments, the wool for weaving, and the ribs were the building materials for children's sleds. Likewise, birds were not slain to make the head dresses we associate with the plains Indians. The feathers were gathered from fallen birds or those killed to feed the people. Birds are considered messengers from the spirits who dwell in the air and their feathers carry great meaning, beyond that of being objects of decoration.

Unlike Western religions, Native American theology has no organized priesthoods, nor fixed places of worship. While harvest ceremonies and other important annual occasions are repeated annually, there is no set calendar of ceremonial events. When one lives in harmony with the whole world, worship is a part of everyday life. Wonder and gratitude are as much a part of the day as, say, eating breakfast. *The sunbeams stream forward, dawn bouys, with shimmering shoes of yellow*, say the words of an Apache song. *When you arise in the morning, give thanks for the morning light, for your life and strength*, taught Tecumseh. *Give thanks for your food and the joy of living. If you see no reason for giving thanks, the fault lies in yourself.*

When all things are part of a whole—part of the sacred hoop of life—different attitudes prevail than those upheld in the individualistic society where human beings have dominion over everything else. The thought of owning and selling the land were never part of the Native American's concept. The earth—the land—were gifts of nature that belong to all. Because of the sacred hoop of life, we are connected to one another, even to the generations past and the generations yet to be born. Important decisions are made on the basis of how they might affect the next seven generations. Because life is the teacher, we need only look around us for our lesson: *It is written on the arched sky, It looks out from every star. It is spread out like a legible language upon the broad face of an unsleeping ocean. It is the poetry of Nature. It is that which uplifts the spirit within us.*

The spirit within us. That, too, is part of the sacred hoop. It needs nourishing. It needs healing from time to time. It needs our attention. On this glorious day that is given to us as a gift, let us consider the wisdom that is part of our tradition from the spiritual traditions of Earth-centered faiths, let us remember our covenant with one another and with ourselves:

*Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision.*