

## **CCUU Covenant Group Session**

### **Nature and Spirituality**

Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist, Palatine, IL

#### **Pre-Meeting Preparation**

At the end of the previous session, or sometime before this session, give to group members the preparation page for this session (attached at the end of this document.)

#### **Preliminaries**

#### **Chalice Lighting and Reading :**

##### **(Participant reads)**

In this time of anticipated spring let us allow ourselves to extend the anticipation -- to value the time of budding before blooming, of seeding before sprouting.

This is a time of revelation: the revealing of that which is eternal, which we see every year, but still need to be reminded to see it in a new way.

There is also the revelation of that which is new. Every spring we encounter something never before seen. It is that very newness which embodies hope and potential for the wholeness which is yet to be.

Let us allow spring to unfold slowly that we may appreciate the true mystery of rebirth and renewal.

*Terasa Cooley*

#### **Check-in.**

#### **Transition Meditation**

Help the group move from check-in preliminaries to silence with directed deep breathing, soft words, music, or by reading the meditation below.

What an unearned blessing

To delight in the calming blue of these walls;

to hear the robin's song again at daybreak;

to feel the warmth in this room and

to enjoy the promise of summer almost upon us.

Each moment of wakefulness has so many gifts

that offer energy and delight.

Yet, too often they seem unavailable  
as the weight of our troubles press down on us.  
The threats to our well being, real or exaggerated,  
feel like mosquitoes in the night looking for a place  
to land.  
Minds become captive to rising flood waters  
forceful, murky, threatening and ominous.

Even in moments of great danger,  
the direction of attention is a choice.  
Fear can dominate the mind  
binding it like a straitjacket.  
Or love can unbind it and open it  
to resource and opportunity.  
The soil of the mind can be watered with kindness.  
The thorns can be removed one by one  
to allow another close enough  
to appreciate the buds ready to flower.

Great possibilities await us  
even if all we can see is the cliff before us.  
The grandeur of life, of which we are a part,  
scatters rainbows in every direction,  
even as the deluge approaches.  
Holding reality and possibility together  
Is the holy hope filled work of humanity

If ... we choose it, again and again, in love.  
*Sam Trumbore*

## **Deep Sharing/Deep Listening**

In a spirit of listening to and supporting each other, we'll be sharing our reflections on our experiences in nature. For your "prethinking," you were asked to think about these questions:

1. What is my relationship with nature?
2. How has nature played a role in my spiritual journey? In my life?
3. Have I had a spiritual experience being out in nature? What was it like?

You don't have to address all these questions, or any of them. Feel free to share only what you're comfortable sharing.

### ***Optional Questions or Activities for Facilitator***

- Did anyone's story remind you of something more you'd like to share about your own journey?
- Did you notice any commonalities in these stories?

### **Check-out**

### **Closing Reading/Extinguishing the Chalice**

#### **Reading:**

Let us go out now into the spring and sun-washed light of the blossoming world. May the inner light of our own being add its bright blessing to the dappled days and enhance the glow of nightfall. Amen.

*Judy Welles*

## Preparation for CCUU Session: Nature and Spirituality

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

This is our 7<sup>th</sup> Principle. As Unitarian Universalists we recognize that we are called by our Principles to live in right relationship with the web of life. Many congregations observe Earth Day, April 22, as we do at Countryside. Across the country, Unitarian Universalists have joined with other people of faith to make personal, congregational, and denominational commitments to support our fragile planet. Our UU theology helps us know that our role is not to exercise dominion or control over the earth but to stand as stewards of the finely balanced system which sustains all life. We watch with anguish as this delicate web is damaged and life itself threatened by changes to our environment caused by our presence. But perhaps there is something deeper, even more profound than the desire to protect the earth. Perhaps there is something deep, unspoken or even unconscious, at the source of the 7<sup>th</sup> principle. Perhaps the 7<sup>th</sup> principle springs from an intuition about our spiritual relationship to nature and our earth.

### Food for Thought

1. What is my relationship with nature?
2. How has nature played a role in my spiritual journey? In my life?
3. Have I had a spiritual experience being out in nature? What was it like?

### Meditation Reading

Drops of God

God, God is water sleeping  
in high-piled clouds.

She is gentle drink of rain,  
pooling lake, rounding pond,  
angry flooding river.

She is frothy horse-maned geyser.

She is glacier on mountains and polar ice cap,  
and breath-taking crystalline ideas of snowflakes.

She is frost-dance on trees.

And we, we are drops of God,

her tears of joy or sorrow,

ice crystals

and raindrops

in the ocean of her.

God, God is air wallowing  
all about us,  
She is thin blue atmosphere embracing  
our planet, gentle breeze.  
She is wind and fiercesome gale  
centrifugal force of tornado and hurricane,  
flurry of duststorm.  
She is breath, spirit, life.  
She is thought, intellect, vision and voice.  
And we, we are breaths of God,  
steady and soft,  
changeable and destructive.  
We are her laughter and her sighs,  
atomic movements,  
(sardines schooling)  
in the firmament of her.  
God, God is fire burning,  
day and night.  
She is sting of passion,  
blinking candle,  
heat that cooks our food.  
She is fury forest fire  
and flow of lava which destroys and creates, transforms.  
She is home fire and house fire.  
She is giving light of sun and  
solemn mirror-face of moon,  
and tiny hopes of stars.  
And we, we are little licking flames  
flickering in her heart,  
in the conflagratory furnace of her.  
God, God is power of earth,  
in and under us.  
She is steady, staying,  
fertile loam, body, matter, tree.  
She is crumbling limestone and shifting sand,  
multi-colored marble.  
She is rugged boulder and water-smoothed agate,  
she is gold and diamond, gemstone.  
She is tectonic plates and their motion,  
mountains rising over us,  
rumble-snap of earthquake,  
tantrum of volcano.  
She is turning of our day,

root of being.  
And we, we are pebbles  
and sand grains,  
and tiny landmarks,  
in the endless terrain of her.  
God, God is journal of time marching  
through eternity.  
She is waking of seasons, phases of moon,  
movements of stars.  
She is grandmother, mother, daughter.  
She is transcending spiral of ages  
whose every turn encompasses the rest,  
history a mere babe balanced on her hip.  
She is spinning of universes  
and ancestress of infinence.  
She is memory, she is presence, she is dream.  
And we, we are brief instants,  
intersections, nanoseconds,  
flashing gold-hoped moments in the eons of her.  
God, God is.  
And we, we are.  
*Tess Baumberger*

### **Additional (Optional) Reading**

Vibrant, Juicy, Contemporary: or, Why I Am a UU Pagan  
by Margot Adler

When I was five, I asked my father what religion we were. An atheist from a nominally Jewish background, he told me, "We believe in the brotherhood of man." Now, this did not cut it for a five-year-old, particularly when my best friend got to put on her white dress and have holy communion. Feeling she was getting a much better deal, I demanded that my father start to read me the Bible. And I wanted to be a Catholic.

Meanwhile, my mother was also saying, "You're Jewish," and my father was saying, "No, we're not." So I come from a background of religious confusion and even conflict. My father, although Jewish, had actually been brought up in a Lutheran household. He had never been circumcised, and he celebrated Christmas--a tradition my family continued.

Then two things happened that really affected me spiritually. First, when I was ten years old, our entire class went out very early on May 1 to the country house of our teacher's sister. We had learned all these medieval May Day carols, and as the sun rose, we started singing them and picking flowers. We took armfuls of flowers back to New

York and threw them around the school, singing the medieval May Day carols. Then we danced around the maypole. And I became a ritual junkie for life.

Then we studied ancient Greece for the entire seventh grade. This was in 1957, and there weren't a lot of powerful images of women in the society to help young girls think about who and what they wanted to be. But I was reading about Artemis and Athena, these incredible Greek goddesses. I decided way down deep I didn't want to worship them, I wanted to be them. They were the most powerful images of confidence and inner strength I had seen in the society I was growing up in.

But by the time I was fourteen, I realized you do not go around worshiping the Greek gods or pretending you are them without ending up in a mental hospital. So I hid this stuff in psychic storage, you might say, and went on with my life.

Then, in 1970, right around the time of the first Earth Day, I started reading the nature writers--Thoreau, Loren Eiseley, Rene Dubos, and Rachel Carson. Although I found myself excited and energized by the ecology movement, my response to these writings was not entirely political. As I read these writers, I was having what I can only describe now as religious feelings. I saw that this literature was about our whole relationship to the universe; it showed that everything was interconnected. It helped me understand my place in the universe in a way I had never understood it before.

Soon after that, I came across two essays that profoundly affected me: "The Religious Roots of Our Environmental Crisis" by Arnold Toynbee and "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" by Lynn White. These two essays said to me--although I'm simplifying greatly here--that there was a problem with the command in Genesis to "be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over the earth." This notion put human beings above nature, thereby giving us license to destroy the earth. The essays also talked about the older Pagan, animistic traditions and their different notions of the divine--that it was present in everything and that everything was alive and vital. I began to think that this older perspective gave one a more sacred sense of the planet and a reluctance to destroy the earth. I thought, "That's what I have always believed." And I started looking for an ecological religion.

I did really silly things. I went to England, and I looked under "Druids" in the telephone directory. Actually, there was a Druid Order, a masonic-type group that would go to Stonehenge and parade around on the solstice in white robes. But they were not exactly what I was looking for.

But slowly I became aware of an entire movement--which, for better or worse, I will call the earth-centered traditions--including anything from indigenous traditions to contemporary Pagan forms, to people who are reviving the goddess spirituality movement, to Wicca, to people who are reviving Nordic religions, to people who are

looking at what their ancestors were involved in 3,000 or 4,000 or 5,000 years ago and trying to create that again in a contemporary form.

Through a fluke I got a book contract, as a result of which I ended up going around the country and finding all sorts of Pagan groups. Of course, Paganism today is a minority religious tradition, and it will probably never be a majority tradition in this country. It doesn't even see itself as being the religion for everyone. Instead, it sees itself as one among many jewels. But it has certain insights that are useful for anyone about living in this world.

Now, it's easy to grow up in the United States and think of religion as what I call the Big Five: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism. Most religions we're familiar with have many similarities. They have, for example, written scripture. They have, for example, prophets--wise men, usually--who've come down to tell humans about how to live their lives. They have rules, and many of them--definitely Christianity and Islam--see themselves as universal religions--that is, as appropriate for all people and places. In fact, certain traditions within Christianity and Islam believe it's a duty to proselytize because their religion is the universal truth, appropriate for everyone. I think we've grown up thinking these characteristics--things like scripture, creed, rules, and prophets--are what makes up a religion.

But the traditions I'm talking about don't have any of these characteristics. They don't have written scripture. They don't have a very well-formed creed. Rather, these religions, which were the religions of our ancestors 40,000 years ago, are based on practice, as opposed to belief. They are based on experience. What do we do to make the crops grow?

How do we commemorate a young son's coming of age? How do we bring healing to our community? What is the custom here? What is appropriate for this occasion? How do we tie ourselves into celestial happenings or the seasons?

These questions are all based on community and seasonal cycles, the doing, the planting, the harvesting and not based on creed or written scripture. Interestingly, Judaism, which is of course a tribal religion at its base, has a lot of those same things. You don't have to believe in God to be a Jew. You're part of a tribe. I was brought up as a completely atheistic Jew, and yet I was still a Jew.

Indigenous religion, like Judaism, is not universal; it's based on place. Native American nations and cultures have their sacred mountains, their sacred spots, just as Jews have the land of Israel. Indigenous traditions don't get involved in proselytizing because they don't assume that other people should be part of their religious tradition. This is a huge notion, because if you don't proselytize, then how can you have a religious war?

Another thing I found was that, because these traditions were not universal, were based on oral tradition and not the written word, they were much more metaphorical and theologically more flexible. There would never be a creationism-vs.-science dispute in Paganism. The Pagan point of view would be, "Well, yes, there is that dream reality of my creation myth, and then there's modern science, and well, yeah, they're multiple realities--both are real. But they're different parts of my reality. I can dance around a bonfire at night, and then the next day, I can go to work as a computer programmer." It's a more metaphoric than literal notion of reality, very different from religions that are tied to scripture.

But as I get older, I no longer believe in almost any "either-or." I now believe almost everything is "both-and." Many dichotomies are nonsense when you think deeply about them: male and female, dark and light, material and spiritual. Any mystic knows that. Take Teresa of Avila. She knew that when you wash the dishes, that is part of a spiritual experience. Even the whole notion--here's something I shouldn't say as a good liberal--the whole notion of church-state separation is ridiculous. At least cognitively. Of course, it's important because I wouldn't want to be a non-Christian in a Christian nation, so maybe we have to do it politically. But the idea that religious reality and political reality are separate? Ridiculous!

The same goes for the idea that humor and religion don't mix. If you visit the Kung bushmen, you might see a ceremony in which they're trance-dancing for two days, and then in the middle of the ceremony someone might make a joke with some sexual connotations about the man dancing, and he makes a little comment and then goes right back into his trance--and there's a sense that there's no difference. I once went into a Zen garden in Japan, and suddenly a loud troop of Japanese schoolchildren came romping through, and I thought, "They're ruining my mystical experience, these children!" But then I backtracked and said, "I'm wrong! This, too, is part of sacred reality."

Consistent with the lack of separation between the sacred and profane is the earth-centered traditions' understanding of deity as immanent, in everything. This means that not only is the mind holy but the body is holy, sexuality is holy, everything is a piece, and it's all part of the sacred reality. All this boils down to what I would call an ecological perspective on religion. One-crop economies always fail, and a healthy meadow, a healthy forest always has multiple species living interdependently. It may be heretical and subversive, but I think spiritual reality should be like that--that, again, we're all not supposed to arrive at one answer, that maybe the world could be richer, deeper, more interesting because, in fact, there are many answers and that only if we each seek out our own answers will we be able to chart a path through the dark days that seem to lie ahead.

Another thing attracting me to earth-centered traditions goes back to what I said about my early attraction to the Greek goddesses. So many women are coming to the goddess

spirituality movement. This is happening both outside and inside organized religion, and it's happening in Judaism and Christianity, as well as Paganism.

For example, the United Church of Christ came out with a prayer book a couple of years ago that included words like "O, God, from the womb of your being. . . ." Within Judaism, women are holding "New Moon circles" and doing serious research into the feminine aspect of the divine, the pre-Canaanite goddesses and their roles. In our own Unitarian Universalist Association, there is, of course, the study guide called *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven* that started going around about ten years ago. This look at the ancient goddesses and what they mean has transformed Unitarian Universalism from a heady, sometimes overrationalist group into a group that is more open to exuberant ritual.

Why has this movement taken on such force? Why are there hundreds of books being published on goddess spirituality? Why are so many women finding themselves attracted to it? What is going on here? I think the main reason women are coming to Paganism is that, in many denominations, they've been left out. They've been robbed of their chance for ministry. There are so many frustrated would-be Catholic priests in the goddess spirituality movement, it's amazing.

But the history of the women's spirituality movement goes back to the women's consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and early 1970s. Think about what happened there. In the group I belonged to, we sat in a circle and spoke on a topic that was decided the week before--things like high school, my first menstruation, my mother, sexuality. Ten, twelve women sat around a circle. Each one spoke for, let's say, seven or eight minutes, and no one interrupted--that was very important because twenty-five years ago a woman couldn't sit on a park bench and read a book or sit in a restaurant alone and not be interrupted.

So this was the first time many of these women could actually speak from the inner self without being interrupted. The big idea that came out of the consciousness-raising groups was that the personal was political--that from your personal experience--with high school, your mother, the men in your life--came an understanding of the world and politics.

When that point had been made, women started doing other things. They said, "Well, if the personal is political, maybe the personal is spiritual, too," and so women started spiritual groups, where they talked about their dreams in the same way they'd been talking about politics, and they asked: "Why are women always called witches? Why are they always seen as evil?" They looked into the history of midwife persecution and the devaluation of women's wisdom and healing. They said, "Well, maybe because these people were on the outs with society and were independent-minded, they got called witches, but really they were just doing their own things in their own way.

Maybe that's what we are, and maybe if I just say, 'I'm a witch, I 'm a witch, I'm a witch' three times, I'm really a witch and that's all it means." So the first women's witch covens started.

Meanwhile, there was a revival of Paganism that came from people in the folklore movement and people who were researching their own ancestral traditions. It had thousands of followers, which is very small compared to any other religion in America, but it was growing.

It was all in reaction to what I would call our white bread culture. Most of us do come from traditions that are vibrant and juicy. That's for a good reason: our parents, most of them, were immigrants to this country. Many fled oppression. Others were forcibly brought here against their will, in chains. Or they were the native people who were forced into conversion. So, in a sense, we all had earth-based traditions ripped from us. Of course, some of those traditions were fairly oppressive. In my mother's tradition, boys got the 50-cent Hebrew instructor who taught you meaning of the words, and girls got the 25-cent Hebrew instructor who taught you to mouth the syllables. But these traditions, for all their shortcomings, did have a juicy relationship to the earth. They had songs, they had stories, they had lullabies, they had ceremonies, they had dances. Very often, by contrast, the religion we've been brought up in is fairly white bread. You know, you sit there in the pew and some minister or rabbi lectures at you.

So there's a huge religious revival in our country--Christian, Jewish, Pagan, whatever--that's partly due to a hunger for the juice of ecstatic spiritual experience, a hunger for a deeper relationship to the earth, family, community, etcetera. You may search for those roots in many ways. A Christian might look for an ecstatic, evangelical relationship to Christianity, or you may say, "I am Welsh, and my ancestors were Pagans, and I would like to research that and create new ceremonies for that."

So a lot of the Pagan movement today, including a lot of the Wicca movement, is based on going back to our ancestors' traditions or creating them anew--since many of these traditions have been lost. It's an attempt to create a vibrant, juicy contemporary culture based on old sources, on what our ancestors were doing, or at least part of what they were doing, or at least a tiny slice of what they were doing thousands of years ago, but it's also an attempt to bring these traditions into contemporary reality, in ways that are in keeping with democracy and freedom.

Now that I've told you how wonderful these earth-centered traditions are, you may be wondering why I became a Unitarian Universalist. If the Pagan and Goddess traditions were giving me so much, why did I need an official religion, let alone a church! Goddess help us!

To be truthful about it, not everything comes from personal experience and revelation. There are times when gut and heart and intuition are not enough. Remember Freud's

famous saying "Sometimes a cigar is only a cigar?" As I grow older, I realize I'm still very much a child of my skeptical, rationalist upbringing. I'm still very much a materialist. I believe the things of this world and this existence matter, that matter matters, and that the sacred resides in the here and now. I love the fact that Unitarian Universalists have a good many atheists and humanists among them. After all, it's important to have a reality check, to have people who will bring us down to earth and say, "Stop all this intuitive garbage and look at the reality: this is a ceiling, this is a table, this is a floor. And by the way, get out of that trance: look at that homeless guy lying in the street."

I guess I chose UUism because I need to live in balance. I can do all those wonderful, earth-centered spiritual things: sing under the stars, drum for hours, create moving ceremonies for the changes of seasons or the passage of time in the lives of men and women. But I also need to be a worldly, down-to-earth person in a complicated world--someone who believes oppression is real, that tragedies happen, that chaos happens, that not everything is for a purpose. Unitarian Universalism gives me a place to be at home with some of my closest friends: my doubts. Of course, there are many rationalists within the earth-centered community, but somehow I feel more centered in this denomination. And I think, in turn, the Pagan community has brought to UUism the joy of ceremony, and a lot of creative and artistic ability that will leave the denomination with a richer liturgy and a bit more juice and mystery.

Janeane Weprin, Countryside UU, 4/06