

Unitarian Universalism, Earth-based Spirituality, and the Sixth Source

Keynote Address by Elizabeth Fisher
Pacific Southwest District Annual Meeting
deBenneville Pines, California, May, 1997

The living tradition we share draws from many sources: (Sixth Source) 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.

from the Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association

Note: This presentation was opened by the honoring of the four directions to focus our conscious awareness on the dimensions of the natural world in which we live. By honoring the directions, we also draw attention to the earthly components that create and sustain the rich possibilities within each of us.

It is a pleasure to be here today addressing your District on this important issue of Earth-based Spirituality and its relationship to Unitarian Universalism.

When considering this most important question, I asked myself “who are we” who have taken this rather bold step for a rational, main-stream ethically-based tradition. A few basic facts helped me to center myself in relation to this question. As an association of independent congregations we proclaim both our individual rights of conscious and our local polity. We do, however, through our weekly gatherings and lively on-going dialogues, also clearly honor our commitment to a profound relational ethos. We, as congregations are in local, district and continental association because we find growth as individuals *within* religious communities as well as by personal reflection.

With this in mind, one of our most important actions as a continental association, done in 1985, has been to agree upon seven principles we covenant to affirm and promote as well as declaring five inspirational sources of those principles. As most of us already know, in 1995, after several years of education and process, we added a sixth source to these principles which names *Earth-centered traditions*. These principles and their sources form the core of what we collectively have agreed to uphold. By including earth-centered traditions we are both claiming them and embracing them.

So that’s the act...now lets consider what it means for us as individuals and collective bodies. What are the implications, challenges and possibilities within this recent declaration?

For me Unitarian Universalism is about *value clarification* and providing inspiration that can help each of us make those decisions that provide fulfilling spiritual journeys. Our Principles summarize those values and inspirations. So what are some of the key spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions? Here are three that are especially meaningful to me:

1. Spirit is a dynamic essence -- present in all that exists.
2. All individuals can come to know spirit through direct experience, not dogma or dictates.
3. Natural processes teach the ways of the Spirit.

What **ethical** implications can be drawn from the Sixth Source? I offer these three which I have found especially important:

1. We are called upon to value all elements and beings in the natural world and their interconnection.
2. Spiritual social equality exists among humans - male/female, and among all races and classes and should be consciously fostered.
3. Nature is revered as a *home* rather than as an adversary.

For me these teachings and ethical implications closely parallel our agreed upon principles. Upon reflection, I am willing to call this a profound compatibility. These teachings, which draw from the wisdom of indigenous people and World Religions around the globe, expand our ways of knowing what we honor, respect and hold sacred. There is, therefore, significant value to them for Unitarian Universalists. Most of us agree, we have given ourselves a great gift by becoming more aware of these traditions by adding the Sixth Source.

*But, are earth-centered traditions truly ours?
Do we have a right to claim them?*

To answer these questions requires defining what we collectively mean by *source* and *living tradition*.

Source implies there is something about what is being expressed that has been a part of our religion for at least some significant period of time.

Living tradition

- acknowledges that we recognize new sources over time, and that
- we reinterpret through lenses of contemporary circumstances

Let's consider this. All three of these interpretations are true:

- we have historical roots that support our embrace of earth-centered sources
- we are recognizing new sources
- we are reinterpreting to fit contemporary circumstances

First, our historical roots

I believe both Unitarianism and Universalism reflected strong Earth-based appreciation during the last century when theological discourse was often the focus of our communities. I want to offer a few brief statements from and facts about well-known spokespeople who talked about quality of spirit.

William Ellery Channing - one of our most famous ministers who spoke (preached) in the early 1800s about the human being's ability to develop the divinity within her or himself creating a link to a broader based acceptance of spirit as dynamic essence.

Ralph Waldo Emerson - a Unitarian minister who left our denomination partially because of the controversy around some of the ideas we speak of today. "Spirit does not act upon us from without but through us." Numerous implications flowed from this perspective during his years of philosophizing. Many were about Nature as spiritual teacher.

Margaret Fuller was raised in a social milieu heavily influenced by Channing. She went on to become a dynamic member of the Transcendental movement along with American literary giants - Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. She developed the social implications of these philosophies, particularly the full equality of women and men.

Our history of acceptance of these ideas called Transcendentalism has been contentious. There was a grave split in our denomination over what was called the "Transcendental Controversy." None the less, these thinkers and writers continue to appear in sermons, curricula, even as names of rooms in our churches – signaling our obvious desire to claim on-going connection with this philosophical perspective. It is my feeling that the Sixth Source, in part, is a form of *reconciliation* between our traditions as we practice it and our desire to fully acknowledge the earth-centered influence in our history.

Universalism also contains evidence of earth-centered, nature honoring context. Many hymns reflect a connection with nature. Numerous Universalists praised the spiritual quality of nature. Universalist history began at the dawn of the eighteenth century with a tiny ascetic community gathered awaiting the divine Sophia, the "woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and the twelve stars on her forehead." All the more reason for the Sixth Source.

Second, we are acknowledging new sources that are vast, rich and varied.

- Native Americans
- Multicultural earth-based traditions
- World religions that contain earth-centered, earth-honoring elements

I believe these sources were present ever since Transcendentalists exerted their moral and literary influence in the first half of the 18th century. Now we are more and more overtly beginning to engage these traditions expanding our worship and celebrations to reflect their influence. Story, dance visual images and chant are major tools of earth-centered spiritual instruction which are being rewoven into our UU culture and religious life. Earth-based spirituality is partially responsible for this.

I want to take time to share such a teaching.

Many indigenous people around the globe have long honored the elements of nature as personal ancestors. In the Hawaiian Islands clans are believed to descend from all forms in the natural world – including the volcano known as *Pele*. Here is how she is described:

She flows in rivers of molten magma to the sea
She animates the steam that seethes below the surface of the land
Her domain extends from volcano summit to ocean floor.
Lava issues quietly from a vent, bubbling out gently in flows and lakes
Pele is known as “She Who Shapes the Sacred Land”

In the 1930s, researchers found that ancient Hawaiians were tribal, peace-loving cultivators of the land, with a strongly developed loyalty to *place*. Surprisingly, these people loved *Pele*, not feared her. They endured her furies and celebrated the drama of her creative energy in the songs and dances of the sacred Hula. In stories about Her, *Pele* is often called *Tutu Pele*. *Tutu* is a word that is applied to grandparents of either sex. The grandparent was also the person most likely to return in dreams as a guiding, supportive figure. *Pele* occupies this role most clearly in tales of her reappearance in the recent past to warn of coming catastrophes, while in many of the traditional stories her position has the moral authority of a respected elder. Native Hawaiians place offerings to *Pele* on the rim of *Hale mau mau* (volcano crater), giving thanks and asking for guidance and protection.

For Islanders who live in volcano country, *Pele* will never be just a story. She’s *real* – solid as lava rock. These residents of *Pele*’s domain realize they are living there on the whim of this goddess, knowing the lava can come anytime. As one resident says, “I think *Pele* is the grand teacher of detachment. We silly humans, we get all these things around us, all our possessions. And we say, this is mine and no one can take it away. But you know, it can be gone in a day.”

This story of a volcano as grandmother speaks of the sacred circle of life, a process of life/death and rebirth. But one that emphasizes dynamic reformulation of a universe we are all a part of rather than being residents of an entity that is destined to wind down and collapse – victim of mechanical entropy. In the case of *Pele*: as She destroys She also *creates* a rich land that will support new life.

Pele is “She Who Shapes the Sacred Land”

To earth-based traditions, nature is not only a placid pastoral reality – which she often can be – but a rhythmic undulating one sending complex and profound instructions. To live in harmony with these is to become a serious student of the “mysteries of the universe.”

Third, we reinterpret through lenses of contemporary circumstances.

How have we reinterpreted as a result of what we collectively experience?

I want to share a 1995 survey¹ of American values.

A whole new population that is more idealistic and globally oriented has emerged in the United States in the last decade. This new population have been called “Cultural Creatives” because “they are the ones who are coming up with most of the new ideas in American culture, operating in the leading edge of cultural change.” Ten years ago there were so few people in this subculture that no one bothered to measure them. Today, the research indicates, there are some 44 million Cultural Creatives in the US, an astonishing growth.

The report emphasizes that studying peoples’ values is a much better way of predicting their behavior (lifestyle, purchasing habits, social concerns, spirituality), than analyzing demographics (age, education, income, racial background, and so on). In defining the beliefs and attitudes of Cultural Creatives, the following shared values are held by at least 60 percent of the group (partial list):

- Neighborhood and Community – affirmation of the need for society to rebuild neighborhoods and communities
- Altruism – helping others, volunteering, wanting to create a better society
- Sense of Nature As Sacred – redwood groves, planetary stewardship, and so on
- Ecological Sustainability – concern for the global environment, for extinction of species, for overpopulation, and a willingness to pay for remedies
- Feminism – equal pay for women, woman as managers/leaders, not confined to traditional roles

¹ Paul H. Ray of the San Francisco consumer research firm American Lives conducted the 1995 survey. The *Integral Culture Survey* was sponsored by the Fetzer Institute and the Institute of Noetic Sciences. Copies of the study can be ordered from 1-800-383-1586 for \$12.95.

- Religious Mysteries – interest in the paranormal, reincarnation, afterlife, meditation
- Self-Actualization – self-discovery, creativity, psychological growth, personal uniqueness

But, Cultural Creatives face a dilemma, the study says: They don't know there are so many others out there who think as they do, and there is no central clearing house where they can encounter each other.

Here's a thought. We already know many UUs are among the 44 million identified in the survey. If we tell people about our Purposes and Principles and actively promote our Sources which include spiritual traditions of interest to these Cultural Creatives, can our churches, societies and fellowships be the places where they encounter one another? Simply, can the rest of the cultural creatives find us?

I want to leave you with three ancient visual images that I sense those of us who are actively journeying with the guidance of earth-based spiritualities are listening to.

LILITH – an ancient Mesopotamian Goddess of the Wild who was the first wife of Adam (of Adam and Eve fame) who demanded to be a full and independent woman equal to Adam. She was banished by God for her insistence on this equality and demonized by male clergy and rabbis for the last 2000 years.

GREEN MAN – A personification of the natural world, an ancient character also known as Jack in the Green, Robin Hood, King of May. The Green Man was often seen as the outlaw in his own land since he stood apart from convention, and was seen as nurturing the earth and celebrating the harvest.

DRAGONFLY – She who is known to make the invisible visible when appropriate through her ability to thread together dispersed aspects of the whole. The dragonfly is the essence of the winds of change, the messages of wisdom and enlightenment, and bearer of communications from the elemental world.

My image for the New Millennium is that Lilith meets the Green Man. They establish a lasting public partnership and Uus, now in touch with Dragonfly wisdom, don't see it as a bit controversial ... Blessed Be.

Elizabeth Fisher has been an active Unitarian Universalist lay leader since 1982. She is a professional writer and editor who has authored two Unitarian Universalist educational curricula. *Rise Up and Call Her Name: A Woman-honoring Journey into Global Earth-based Spiritualities* was published by the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation in 1994. *Gender Justice: Women's Rights are Human Rights* which explores the *Platform for Action* adopted at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women was published by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee in 1996. These curricula are available from these respective organizations located in Boston, Massachusetts.