

Note: This column was selected as a Best of Patheos for circulation to the entire Patheos list! Here I explore the powers of the element Air with examples of its expression in music and writing as well as quickly review the Clean Air Act and how we can support it.

Protecting the air we breathe is a moral as well as a practical imperative for those of us on an earth-honoring spiritual path. When we honor the element Air we also welcome its ability to inspire and heal.

Celebrating Air

By Liz Fisher
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Air is an element that seems to be invisible while it actually connects and supports. Composed of many gases, it is the primary cause of life on Earth, providing the medium and the sustenance that makes both plants and animals survive. We can verify this by observing the dearth of organic life on other planets in our Solar system that lack the mixture that comprises our planet's atmosphere.

Air touches us physically and metaphorically in multiple diverse aspects of our lives. Protecting the air we breathe is a moral as well as a practical imperative for those of us on an earth-honoring spiritual path. When we honor the element Air we also welcome its ability to inspire and heal. Here are a few examples.

The Birch Tree is associated with Air, symbolizing new beginnings, birth, and inception. This vital life force signifies the positive aspects of the process of constant change, driving out old, stale energy to make way for a fresh start.



Music and Singing

Air is connected to sound since without air sound cannot be heard. Music, voice and singing are all deeply dependent on the element Air. Pagan practices enrich their ritual by incorporating chants and songs.

The spiritual dimension of Air is celebrated in the song *Breaths* by the *a cappella* ensemble *Sweet Honey in the Rock*, which has historical connections to the All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington D.C. They evoke the crossing of the boundaries of time and space to connect with those who have lived before us.



From lyrics of *Breaths*:

Listen more often to things than to beings
Listen more often to things than to beings
Tis' the ancestors' breath
When the fire's voice is heard
Tis' the ancestor's breath
In the voice of the waters

Ah -- wsh Ah – wsh

The song goes on to honor the interconnected web of nature.

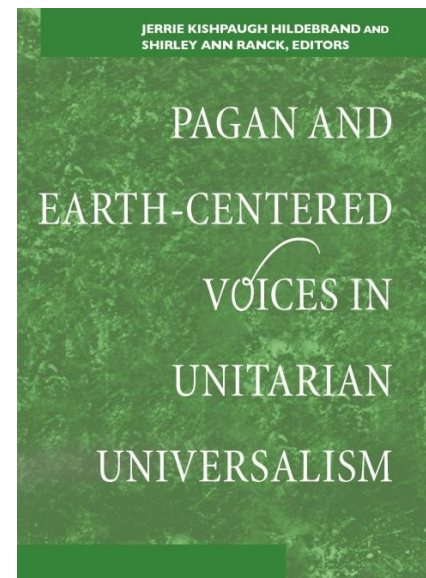
Those who have died have never, never left
The dead are not under the earth
They are in the rustling trees
They are in the groaning woods
They are in the crying grass
They are in the moaning rocks
The dead are not under the earth

Communication and Perception

Intellectual exchanges are associated with the element of Air. Each of us views our shared experiences in unique ways. It is stimulating to read another's well-articulated views, creating a dialogue between reader and writer. I am a big believer in this form of conversation which requires vision and interplay of ideas. Our UU Pagan community has made this a central practice. The CUUPS Nature's Path blog is a vital contribution to this interchange. Reading the variety of columns expands my sense of community.

Another contribution to our collective dialogue is the recently published book pictured here of inspiring essays by 23 authors. Jerrie Hildebrand and Shirley Ann Ranck did a wonderful job of pulling together a wide-ranging set of reflections representative of the CUUPS community. Jerrie's recent column tells her backstory on this experience. (See the resources section below for a direct link to it.)

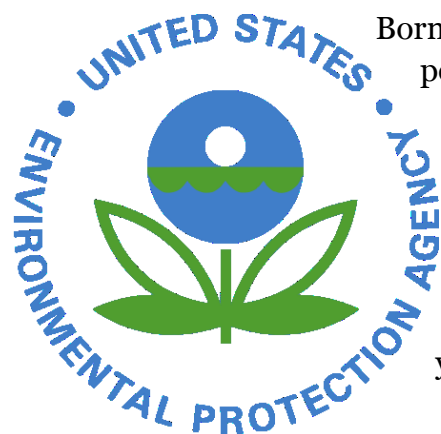
Dipping into this well produced volume anywhere is quite satisfying. These pieces are not just rehashing major principles. Each voice has been carefully edited to bring out the author's personal view. I know because I worked with an editor from Skinner House to sharpen my own essay in this volume entitled *The Creation of Rise Up and Call Her Name*.



Environmental Protection

There is a concrete and justice side to our earth-based spiritual practice which calls for advocacy and education on behalf of air quality. Action is now more imperative than ever.

In order to sustain life, the environment must be relatively free of pollutants that are common in our industrialized world. Today, across many major cities, a hazy brown soup of pollution hangs over the skyline, especially in the warmer months. This is smog, known more specifically as ground-level ozone. Smog is formed when industrial emissions from power plants, factories, cars, and other sources react with heat and sunlight in the atmosphere. Ozone is a corrosive greenhouse gas, and children and the elderly are especially vulnerable, but it can harm healthy adults and animals too.



Born in the wake of elevated concern about environmental pollution, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was established on December 2, 1970 to consolidate into one agency a variety of federal research, monitoring, standard-setting and enforcement activities to ensure environmental protection, including regulating smog. Now the EPA is advocating rolling back air quality regulations that many public health groups feel are not yet strong enough.

Clean Air Act

This federal law, whose basic structure was established in 1970, and then amended in 1977 and 1990, is designed to control air pollution (ozone levels) on a national level. The Clean Air Act has been a major contributor to a healthier planet. It is one of the United States' first and most influential modern environmental laws, and one of the most comprehensive air quality laws in the world.

Yesterday, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 806, legislation known as the Smoggy Skies Act, which would permanently weaken the Clean Air Act and delay important anti-smog protections that took more than a decade to achieve.

Terry McGuire, Earthjustice Senior Legislative Representative said: “The Smoggy Skies Act is more of the same—a handout to big polluters at the expense of public health. Make no mistake: real people, especially children, the elderly and asthmatics would suffer, and even die, if this legislation were enacted.”

People are coming to Washington to tell their stories about how smog has affected their own health to convince legislators that we need to strengthen not roll back the Clean Air Act. Click [Advocacy for Clean Air resources](#) to hear about this effort and what we all can do to support it.

Elements, then, are multi-dimensional. They are woven into every aspect of our lives—physical, social, spiritual. When honoring Air we are also showing appreciation for our visions, our communications and our commitment to advocate for a healthy physical environment.

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Birch Tree Forest in Finland. Image free for commercial use; no attribution required. This image is found at www.pixabay.com/

The Song *Breaths* performed by Sweet Honey in the Rock is included by permission on the *Rise Up & Call Her Name* Music CD and incorporated in a ritual in Session 4. See Sweet Honey in the Rock website: <http://sweethoneyintherock.org/>

Breaths Album Art, 1988, Sweet Honey in the Rock.

Jerrie Hildebrand and Shirley Ranck edited the book *Pagan and Earth-Centered Voices in Unitarian Universalism*. Jerrie's column recounts joyfully the experience.

[Click here to read Jerrie Hildebrand's column on birthing Pagan and Earth-Centered Voices in Unitarian Universalism](#)

To buy this book go to: inSpirit UU Book and Gift Shop

To learn more about what to do to advocate for clean air, Click this link: *Advocacy for Clean Air Resources* (<https://earthjustice.org/advocacy-campaigns/clean-air>)

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