

## **KEY CONCERN: EARTH-BASED SPIRITUALITY AND UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST PRINCIPLES**

As the philosophical basis of the expansive and open tradition of Unitarian Universalism seeks to respond to changing needs and approaches to ethics and religion, questions concerning the appropriate place Earth-based spirituality deserves within the walls of Unitarian Universalist institutions continues to be raised. Following is a brief look at the historical expressions that honor the Earth which Unitarian Universalists have tended to embrace, as well as a refocusing on the values Unitarian Universalists have frequently articulated.

### **PHILOSOPHICAL EXPRESSIONS OF THE PAST**

Unitarian Universalism has strong historical ties to an appreciation of the rhythms of nature. Reverend David Johnson, in his essay "Doorways of the Spirit" appearing in the Perspectives: Personal Views section of this SOURCEBOOK, presents us with many historical ties between Unitarian Universalism and Earth-based multicultural woman-honoring spiritualities. During the nineteenth century, Transcendentalism, a philosophy that later was embraced by many Unitarian Universalists, was articulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Henry Thoreau, and others, who championed the view that the "ordinary course of nature was endowed with divine significance." Numerous Universalists, many of whom were women, praised the spiritual quality of nature and honored the feminine divine. Reverend David Johnson tells us our 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."

### **UU VALUES AND THE FUTURE**

The Unitarian Universalist Purpose and Principles proclaim respect for the interconnected web of all existence of which we are all a part. This element of our covenant has inspired numerous declarations as well as provided the centerpiece for both worship and reflection. As the world becomes even more complex and the importance of learning how to honor and benefit from diversity — both human and interspecies — seems to be the only possibility for continued survival of the planet, the urgency of prophetic witness presses even more firmly upon us. As we continue to undertake the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, the Earth-centered traditions that also value equity for all persons — regardless of ethnicity, race, gender or sexual preference — while respecting for the interdependent web of all existence promise to be an important source of future inspiration.

**UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST PRINCIPLES**

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The living tradition we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
- 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.
- Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

## **MULTICULTURAL EARTH-BASED SPIRITUALITIES AND UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST PRINCIPLES<sup>1</sup>**

*Contemporary Unitarian Universalism, as projected in this Covenant of Member Congregations, shows respect for beliefs and practices that are also common to many Earth-based traditions. The following commentary relates each of the segments of the Principles to values exhibited in many Earth-based traditions as well as offers perspectives on what an appropriate reaction to Earth-centered traditions might be, given these Principles.<sup>2</sup>*

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

*The inherent worth and dignity of every person;*

Many Earth-based traditions, because they respect all life, also exhibit an inherent respect for the worth and dignity of every person. In order to respect the worth and dignity of **every person**, it is important to hear what others feel and think who have experiences that perhaps vary from our own. Only by taking time to become aware of varied religious traditions, including rich Earth-based spiritualities and woman-honoring traditions around the globe, can we truly begin to know what affirming and promoting the "inherent worth and dignity of **every person**" really means. Many Earth-based traditions honor both women and men equally.

Including aspects of some of these woman-honoring traditions in our community life is also key to ensuring the dignity of women who have so long been deprecated in most dominant cultures.

*Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;*

Many Earth-based spiritualities advocate participating in society to promote justice even though, at times, it is difficult to accept the behavior of others. Compassion is a quality that is nurtured in many Earth-centered traditions. Returning to the larger community and working to communicate truths learned while undertaking personal development, which often includes advocating for justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, is also an important aspect of an Earth-based spiritual journey.

*Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;*

Accepting that Earth-based spiritual journeys are multi-dimensional with both an inner and outer nature is a key to developing tolerance for those who value Earth-centered traditions. This acceptance will encourage the spiritual growth of some members of our congregations who find

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<sup>1</sup>UU Principles are printed in *italic* type; remarks relating to Earth-based spiritualities are printed in roman.

<sup>2</sup>The Purposes and Principles were adopted in 1985 after an extensive, participatory process was undertaken throughout the Association. The original impetus for this process grew out of a Feminist Spirituality Convocation held in the early 1980s where the need to craft a document more reflective of contemporary Unitarian Universalism was perceived and articulated. This process included extensive discussions at the local level with the hope these Principles would be more inclusive and reflective of a broad perspective.

## Key Concerns: Earth-based Spirituality and UU Principles

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respectful involvement with Earth-based traditions essential to their spiritual development. Acceptance is also a tenet of many Earth-based spiritualities.

*A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;*

Exploration of a variety of cultural traditions, if done with respect, can be a vital component of a responsible search for truth and meaning. Earth-based spiritualities are concerned with personal truth and meaning. Actions undertaken to explore these truths and search for meaning are best done in an atmosphere of freedom, without attachment to a particular outcome. Rather, the primary concern is for action with integrity.

*The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;*

Respect for individuals who hold Earth-based spiritual beliefs will strengthen the democratic process of our congregations by encouraging full participation of all members as well as promote full participation in the larger society.

*The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;*

To accept indigenous, Earth-based and woman-honoring traditions as legitimate expressions of spiritual and religious belief is to support the goal of a tolerant world community which strengthens the values of peace, liberty and justice for all.

*Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

Central to Earth-based spiritual traditions is an appreciation for the cyclical process of life, death, and rebirth, both in the physical and metaphorical sense. All forms of life are seen as part of a web of existence sometimes called "All My Relations."

The living tradition we share draws from many sources:

*Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;*

Direct experience of the sacred, sometimes called intuition, is given great value in Earth-centered traditions. The openness created by embracing intuition provides personal insight into the wonder of creation. Spiritual knowledge is believed to be a key to developing a fearlessness which acts as a continual renewal of the spirit.

*Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;*

Prophetic words and deeds are often spoken and performed by those who practice Earth-based spiritualities around the globe, many of whom are women. In order to represent all of our sources of wisdom, it is important to begin to incorporate these words and describe these deeds in our collective worship.

## Key Concerns: Earth-based Spirituality and UU Principles

*Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;*

As Earth-based traditions are gaining more recognition, the category of world's religions must be expanded to include these spiritual traditions with ancient roots and modern practices. Living by a spiritual and ethical code is an essential tenet of many Earth-based traditions since Earth-based spiritualities usually make no distinction between the sacred and secular worlds. Experiencing Earth-based traditions can aid understanding about how to lead a more holistic life that allows fuller expression of our ethical and spiritual beliefs.

The following sources are named in the UU Purposes and Principles:

*Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;*

*Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;*

*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.*

*Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.*

As we grow in our understanding of the values of multicultural exchanges and varied spiritual explorations that embrace a wide variety of approaches, our faith will be even more enriched, inclusive and ennobled. With the expansion of religious pluralism within the walls of our churches, fellowships, and societies to include Earth-centered traditions, we will be modeling a diversity that is unfolding in the world, thus impacting the future of the Unitarian Universalist Association and the larger community of which we are a part.