

## Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula Sunday November 4th 2018

**Homily:** “Make It Wider Still”

My first experience of Unitarian Universalism was in the Earth-Centered Spirituality Circle of First UU in San Diego. I'd been there for a workshop on Voluntary Simplicity and I picked up some literature about the congregation's activities. I saw a description of the Circle and decided to go. While I might not have described myself as a religious seeker at the time, I knew that what I was seeking was Earth-centered spirituality, so it sounded good to me.

The circle consisted of a dozen or so people, and it began and ended with drumming. There was sharing and a meditation and the lighting of candles, and much of what we did tied into the seasons. Though I wasn't a part of it during my time there, the group also organized a big Yule festival near the Winter Solstice, with most of the wider community attending as one of the highlights of the congregation's calendar.

When I moved to Connecticut, and joined the Unitarian Society of Hartford, I found there wasn't anything like I'd been part of in San Diego. Yes, there was the Social Responsibility Committee, which talked about environmental matters, but talking about something isn't the same as experiencing it. So I found a group to organize a couple of seasonal celebrations, adding to the congregations' range of worship opportunities.

I found myself drawn in particular to what are known as the cross-quarter days, which occur between the more well-known solstices and equinoxes. In my opinion, they're really the times when you can best experience the turning of seasons. Yes, the days start getting longer again around December 21st, but you don't really notice that happening until the beginning of February. And September 21st may be the official start of Fall, but let's face it, that's still Summer here. It often doesn't feel like Autumn until Hallowe'en, Samhain, at the end of October.

Here in Newport News, a big part of my deciding to accept your call to ministry at the Fellowship was that EarthRising had been here for more than twenty years, making it the oldest, continually active pagan group in Virginia. And now, EarthRising is thirty-one years old. A congregation with Jefferson Labs scientists and NASA engineers and university professors that also had a thriving group of pagans, and some

of them are the same people? You'd have to work really hard to find a better example of Unitarian Universalism's big tent of theology.

Now for much of the history of our faith, that tent has grown bigger more or less by accident.

The Unitarians claimed that name when they rebelled against a limited understanding of Jesus. But then the Transcendentalists came along and challenged a limited understanding of God. And then the Humanists came along and challenged a limited understanding of humanity. Each time, Unitarianism squirmed and complained about this new expression of our faith, but sooner or later embraced it, and our faith grew wider.

The Universalists, on the other hand, widened their faith intentionally, deciding in the mid-twentieth century to be a more universal religion than the form of Christianity they had practiced until then. And so when Unitarians and the Universalists joined forces in 1961, the result was a religion that had a commitment to inclusion — an imperative to widen the circle — built into its DNA.

The late NPR correspondent and practicing pagan, Margot Adler, noted in her landmark book, *Drawing Down the Moon*, that Unitarian Universalism remains one of the only places where pagans and others practicing Earth-centered spirituality and goddess religion are welcome, where they can, for instance, become credentialed ministers, and where, thanks to the UUA's Beacon Press, their books are published.

Adler noted in particular the three “Women and Religion” resolutions passed by the UUA's General Assembly in the late 1970s, which not only resulted in our Seven Principles but more generally transformed Unitarian Universalism to include feminist and Earth-centering theology. As Bill Schulz observed shortly before becoming UUA president in 1985, these resolutions “laid the basis for a new kind of Unitarian Universalism and there were at least five implications: that religion is to be experienced, as opposed to being understood [merely] in terms of right and wrong beliefs; that the religious experience is personal and found in ordinary experience; that personal religious experience can be shared in community; that creation is a whole [and] human beings are not rulers of even ‘stewards’ of nature, but co-creators with all living things; and that from this kind of spirituality flows a commitment to peace and justice.”

As someone who came to this faith seeking an Earth-centered spirituality, I can't imagine Unitarian Universalism without our Seventh Principle, respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. The fact that we are all in this together is obvious and inescapable, and any idea that we are separate is pure illusion and dangerous delusion.

Each of us is like a drop of rain, apparently experiencing an amazing journey all its own. And yet, that journey is just a tiny portion of the much greater continuum of existence itself. Each drop of rain is part of a grand cycle, born of clouds formed from the evaporation of the ocean, becoming part of streams and rivers, or plants and animals, but ultimately, in some way short or long, returning to the ocean.