



## Sermon

I'd like to thank all of you for the opportunity to be here today to tell you a little bit about what it's like to follow an Earth-based spiritual path in the new millennium. Because regardless of how we see the Divine or how we fashion a connection with that which is greater than ourselves, I think there is no greater challenge in our times than forging a relationship with the natural world and understanding our impact upon all living things. We have to look no farther than the news of the day--oil spills; global warming; overfishing; contamination of our food chain; depletion of natural resources; species extinction--to see that this is a time of great challenge.

I think understanding that challenge, and seeking of a way to heal our disconnection from nature is one of the driving forces behind the popularity of Paganism, and the shift of mainstream religious communities towards a new honoring of this fragile, blue-green orb we call home.

For me, the Pagan path is a way to connect with the earth and her cycles, the divinity that is the ground of all being, and myself. And a way of understanding and honoring the interconnectedness of our Web of Life. But it also is a path that is still widely misunderstood and even vilified. Some Pagans find acceptance in their families and communities. Others are afraid to tell their families, friends because of social acceptance worries; work colleagues, due to fear of discrimination.

My experience as a Post-Dispatch blogger--especially the reaction to a blog posting about a Pagan civil rights case in California--has shown me that there still are many people who believe that Paganism is not a religion. That it's either something that we're just making up as we go along, or that the path is somehow evil or sinister. And that either way, Paganism and Pagans certainly don't deserve the same respect and legal protections that are afforded mainstream religions.

I say "Pagan," in part because it's shorter than "Modern North American Neo-Pagan." And because "Pagan," in its first definition, meant "country dweller." And it is from my country-dwelling grandparents that I first learned to observe the cycles of the earth, the flow from seedtime to harvest and back again, that informs the Pagan liturgical year. And it was in their small, Presbyterian church that I first looked out the windows and wondered why we were worshipping in a building that people made, instead of outside under the trees that God made.

I never got a satisfactory answer to that question. Or to the one about why God talked directly to people in "Bible Times," but hadn't been heard from lately. Were people really "closer to God" in those days? Were we, as modern people, really so much more wicked that God couldn't even bear to light up a bush and say hello?



The official answer was yes, but that never satisfied me. I'd been unchurched for years when I found a book called "Drawing Down the Moon" that introduced me to modern Paganism. I didn't know where to find any Pagans locally; assumed they all were in California. It would be many more years before I met local Pagans and was able to attend public worship services.

Unlike more established religions, we're not listed in the yellow pages. We're like the early Christian church, for example--meeting in people's homes or on other pieces of private property, for the most part. While our roots stretch to the Neolithic, our identity as a modern religious movement is mid 20th century. It was in 1946 or 1947 that Gerald Gardner formed the group that practiced what would become known as Gardnerian Wicca. Britain's Witchcraft Act was still on the books, not repealed until 1951. In its later years, it was mostly used to prosecute mediums thought to be fraudulent. But the fact that the act remained on the books--and that a 74-year-old farmer in Warwickshire was killed by his community members in 1947 who claimed he had put spells on them--show the risk that Gardner took when he pulled together strains of nature philosophy, ceremonial magical societies, and native British folk religion to constitute modern English Wicca.

And even before that, there was at least one circle of what evolved into modern American Paganism meeting. I know, because one of the members of that 1930s Oregon circle taught my teacher. The same ethnic customs and philosophies that Gardner drew upon crossed the pond with the colonists and melded with customs from the German forests, Native Americans, Africans, and Pacific Islanders in a potent Magical brew. The English and American strains together inform the way that modern Pagans practice.

I know that to people accustomed to thinking of religions as something inherited over centuries, this may indeed seem like something people are making up as they go along. And it is true that modern Pagans pick and choose from a buffet of Deities and worship forms. But there is basic agreement on the sacred year, running from seedtime to growth to harvest to a fallow time, and back again, both in nature and in symbolic form in our lives. And on some basic tenets--some of which are on the cards I brought. They are:

You are responsible for the beliefs you choose to adopt.

You are responsible for your own actions and your spiritual and personal development.

You are responsible for deciding who or what the Divine is for you and forming a relationship with it.

Everything contains the spark of consciousness or intelligence.

Everything is sacred.

Each part of the universe can communicate with each other part, and these parts often cooperate for specific ends.

Consciousness survives death.



[From ChristoPaganism: An Inclusive Path, and Paganism: an Introduction to Earth-Centered Traditions, both by Joyce & River Higginbotham. Used with the authors' permission.]

And there are many of us, all honoring the divine that is right here, right now, in every one of us and in every living thing, even in the rocks and the fertile black soil itself. How many is difficult to say . . . because most religious identification surveys go by attendance at church buildings like this one. Or by phone surveys--and many pagans would not answer one of those. It's not just my perception--the Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance themselves say that numbers of Pagans in religious phone-based surveys may have an error rate as high as 50 percent because so many Pagans are too concerned about discrimination or danger to respond.

Harvard's Pluralism project estimates there are anywhere from 200,000 to 1 million Pagans in the U.S. today. In the 2009 book "ChristoPaganism: An Inclusive Path," the authors reviewed the 2008 Pew foundation study and extrapolated that there could be between 1.2 and 1.5 million Pagans in the United States--between .4 percent and .5 percent of the population. Compare that to Hindus at .4 percent; Muslims at .6 percent; and Buddhists at .7 percent.

Percentage-wise, those figures are similar to those in Great Britain and Australia. The census forms in those countries have optional boxes to check for religious affiliation; therefore, the stats are reasonably reliable.

I think if those figures were more widely known, it would do a great deal for acceptance of the Pagan path. And it might help in cases like that of McCullum vs. California.

Patrick McCullom is a goldsmith by trade. He's been a volunteer pastor for Pagan inmates in the California prison system for many years. He recently sued the state to be hired as a paid pastor--in part because as a volunteer, he has had difficulties in everything from being permitted to set up worship spaces in the usual Pagan circular configuration to visiting dying parishioners. The state of California is arguing that it only has to provide chaplains in what it calls "first-tier faiths:" Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, and Native American. Anyone else can either make do with something from that menu, or hope that a member of his or her faith is willing to volunteer.

The post that I wrote about that case got more attention than anything else I've ever written. It not only got a lot of comments locally--most of which were supportive, or at least polite--but also went viral on the Web. And it showed me in a very direct and personal way that the darkness of Internet anonymity has allowed ignorance and anti-Pagan bigotry to breed alongside other bigotries.



(I mentioned a few of the more egregious examples during the public address. But I would prefer not to repeat them here; suffice it to say that I found them profoundly upsetting, to the point of their leading to sleep disturbances, tears, and some concern for my personal safety. To see the postings regarding this case: <http://interact.stltoday.com/blogzone/civil-religion/law/2010/01/is-your-faith-about-to-be-demoted/> and <http://interact.stltoday.com/blogzone/civil-religion/obama/2009/12/obama-administration-reps-meet-with-many-faiths-at-pwr/>)

Pagans have won in other court cases--like one in Missouri, in which the Church of Ozark Avalon got a court to recognize that O.A. members perceive all of its acreage sacred space and therefore, of a non-taxable church. Pagan soldiers recently won an almost decade-long court battle for the right to put Pentacles on their tombstones, just as members of other religions use their religious symbols to honor the dead. Pagan chaplains are recognized by the military, and the army chaplain's manual gives tips for working with Wiccan and Pagan soldiers.

As for social acceptance--I don't know any Pagans personally who have faced discrimination, but that may be because most of us just don't talk about it. Which is a shame, both for us and for others, I think. And why?

I think, as I said at the beginning, that we live in a time in which the old ways of relating to each other and the natural world are no longer viable. We can no longer treat the planet like an inexhaustible storehouse. Strain from our industrial lifestyle is starting to show. And I think the mindset that allows us to treat the planet and fellow human beings as "other" stems from a mindset that says that the divine is not here with us, right now, but somewhere "out there" and that as He rules us, we rule the world--that it is here for our pleasure and to do with as we will.

Think how different the dialogue around global warming, pollution, energy conservation, species preservation, child welfare, poverty might be, if we truly believed and acted as though all that lives is holy. As though all that lives has the Divine within, singing the sacred song of creation. That each cup of earth does contain the mystery of the all-expanding universe. And that it is up to each of us to react as intelligent beings, not only endowed by our creator with intelligence, but able to co-create the world in a way that allows it to continue in beauty and health for millennia to come. Imagine a world not created by a God who stepped back from us, but formed from the body and spirit of God Herself, however we are able to perceive Her.

That is the world as Pagans see it. That is the challenge we accept, and the gift we bring to the 21st century.



"Old Roots, New Shoots: Paganism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century "

Kathy Nance

May 23, 2010

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

*Please consider not printing.*

*About this font: Century Gothic can save 30% on ink costs.*

To read my blog postings at Civil Religion: <http://interact.stltoday.com/blogzone/civil-religion/category/nance/>