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CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Speaking the Mystery

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30 October 2016

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I teach the weekly yoga class here, facilitate the monthly labyrinth walks and I am the co chair of the Frederick chapter of the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans. Frederick CUUPS is an organization dedicated to networking Pagan-identified Unitarian Universalists, educating people about Paganism, promoting interfaith dialogue, developing Pagan liturgies and theologies, and supporting Pagan-identified UU religious professionals. That's all longhand for saying that if you like to hug trees and howl at the moon, we might have some things in common.

When I was a little girl, I used to lie in my yard with one ear pressed to the earth. I was listening to a song. It sounded like a choir of thousands all singing in harmony. Every now and then, one particular voice would rise above the others, then descend again back into that tapestry of sound. Constantly evolving and changing, but always part of a greater progression held by all the other voices.

I'm not sure what I thought the music was. One of the beautiful things about children is that they are generally less inclined to take apart mystical experiences, and can instead just accept things that aren't easily explained. So, to me, there was a song inside the earth. And if you listened, you could hear it.

When I think about how that listening child came to stand here as the agricultural year winds down and pointed hats and cloaks are once again de rigueur, that song is the first thing that comes to mind.

Paganism is built around mystery. The deepest secrets of the different Traditions of Paganism are referred to as *Mysteries*. Almost every Pagan I've met stumbled into this path because of an experience that doesn't fit any of the neat little boxes we like to put things into.

I am 'out' as a Pagan, which means that I comfortably self-identify as a member of an Earth Centered belief system. If the topic comes up, even amongst strangers, I will own my beliefs. What that tends to translate to is that about 15 minutes after someone has found out that I'm a witch, they tell me about the time they saw a ghost. Or the time they got a tarot reading and everything came true. Or the time they saw dancing lights in the woods. And I find myself saying the same words every time:

You are not crazy.

This world, this incredible experience of life that we are sharing is far wilder and more wonderful than we are willing to let it be. It's easier if you can fit things into boxes. Life is less scary if you can explain everything that happens, either with protons and neutrons or religious scripture. It gives us an illusion of safety, of predictability.

But sometimes things happen that are outside the known systems of organization.

So then what? Where do you go? Who do you tell?

Those direct interactions with one of the mysteries of life change our perspective. Unfortunately in this culture, what most people experience is anxiety simply because

there isn't a good box to put a mystical experience inside. So we suppress those words we long to speak. We learn to leave out some of our most authentic and life-changing experiences because we lack a structure to explore them, and because we fear being ridiculed.

I was lucky. I grew up in a nominally Christian household - I was baptized, and we went to Christmas and Easter services. But I come from a line of engineers. Very rational, sensible people, who spent their lives in fields dominated by the use of reason. I would describe the actual religious leanings of my family as stealth atheism.

What that meant in a practical sense is that I was raised philosophically free. Unencumbered with a dogmatic belief system of any kind. And I had parents who chose not to crush what could be seen as flights of fancy. Instead, they just let me explore, learn and process in a way that was natural to me.

So I lay in the yard and listened to the earth. I spent hours sitting in the tree in my front yard with one cheek pressed against the trunk, talking to the spirit inside it. I played in the stream nearby, clearing rocks out of the way so the water could flow better, and decorating the banks with shiny stones pressed into the earth, talking all the while with the spirit of water that dwelled in that place.

I sang to the trees and made friends with the houseplants in my home. I always loved decorating for Christmas because it meant that the trees at my house got to wear beautiful sparkling ballgowns of light and ribbon.

These were my friends as a child.

I was always eccentric within the context of my peer group, so I gravitated toward other unusual kids. The readers and dreamers, the rebels and artists, musicians and lunatics. When I was 15, a friend of mine lent me a copy of a book on Paganism. Reading it was like seeing the sunrise for the very first time.

Finally, someone else got it. The world was neither composed solely of scientific laws in action, nor did it obey the directive of a particular religious text. Instead, life is bigger. Sentience and Spirit are wider reaching than the textbooks say. Divine connection takes many forms, perhaps as many as there are people to experience that closeness. And at the center of it all? The Mystery. The precious fluid that fills the philosophical containers we build for it. Some people can experience divine grace and connection inside a church. For the first time, I found out I wasn't wrong or crazy because my mystical experiences happened outside that particular box.

So I became Pagan. I don't remember telling my parents, most likely because the conversation was uneventful. As a teenager I began building my practice with some friends in high school. I enlisted in the Marine Corps after graduation. The acceptance of my personal take on life, the universe and everything at home meant that it didn't occur to me to go into the 'broom closet,' as some Pagans say. So, I had Wicca on my dog tags. Through the military Pagan network and listings for spiritual groups where I was stationed in Okinawa, I found others like me. We wore camouflage utilities during the day and found our way to empty beaches at night, to stand in a circle and connect to that greater Mystery.

And everywhere I went, the song of the Earth went with me. I've traveled a lot, met so many wonderful people, and had so many incredible experiences that stray out of the territory of the rational or predictable. But instead of running in fear from something I do not understand, I take a deep breath, lean in, and expand the mystery I carry in my heart a little bit more. I learn as I go.

I do not think that Paganism will ever be one of the big three world religions. Nor do I think it should be. It's a challenging path and not for everyone. Since we don't have easy boxes to file things into, we often find ourselves with as many questions as answers. Fascinating, beautiful questions that we are free to ask, explore and be. We learn to sit with the Mystery. To experience and grow even if it means that what

we encounter can't be put into words. We balance our mundane lives and responsibilities against the tapestry of the *Mystery* - the knowledge that there is so much more.

So if you've seen a ghost, had a psychic experience, felt transcendental connection in the oddest of places, I can tell you right now that you are not crazy. That's the *Mystery*, knocking at your door. I won't tell you what to do with that knowledge, but I can tell you this: you're not alone. And the Earth Service meets the third Sunday of the month.