



"Witches of America"

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30 October 2016

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Unitarian Universalism is a big tent religion, which draws from many diverse sources.

Our Sixth Source is the “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.”

There are many different Earth-centered traditions, but here on the day before Halloween — known in the Pagan tradition as Samhain (pronounced “sow-in”) — I would like to invite us to reflect in particular on the spiritual path of Paganism.

Since we’re also eight days away from a U.S. Presidential election, allow me to use a political analogy to help explain the ways that different groups understand and react to Paganism. Consider, for example, that **the way Hillary Clinton describes herself, her policies, and her aspirations is starkly different from the way that Donald Trump describes her. The inverse is also true:** Donald would use different words and frameworks to describe himself and his campaign than Hillary would. There are rare cases of people describing their opponents in the *most* charitable terms before attempting to prove them wrong. But far too often, we frame our opponents in the *least* charitable way — or even a misleading, false way — and then knock down that “straw man.”

A similar dynamic is at play with the terms “Christian” and “Pagan.” Many Christians would prefer to *describe themselves* as people who seek to follow **Jesus’s way of love, forgiveness, and mercy.** But some *opponents* of Christianity would prefer to describe Christians from a different perspective, using words like **“hypocritical,” “bigoted against**

homosexuality,” “sheltered,” and “judgmental.”

Similarly, Pagans (from the Latin word *paganus*) used to mean peasants: “A *pagus* was a country district, a *paganus* someone who lived there....” Likewise, the word heathen originally meant someone from the “heath,” who lived in the *country*, not the city. It was not until the rise of Christianity, which occurred particularly in the *cities* of the Roman Empire, that country-dwelling Pagans and heathens (who continued to celebrate their traditional local gods) came to be seen as infidels, idolaters, and heretics. **Before Christianity tried to lump a wide diversity of polytheistic traditions together as “Paganism,” pagans were simply peasants following various local customs and traditions.**

So instead of how others might describe Pagans, I invite you to consider one example from the late Margot Adler — the NPR reporter, Unitarian Universalist, and author of one of the definitive guides to the modern Pagan movement in the U.S. — about **how many modern Pagans today might describe themselves:**

- [They] sense an aliveness and “presence” in nature....
- They share the goal of living in harmony with nature and they tend to view humanity’s “advancement” and separation from nature as the prime source of alienation. They see *ritual* as a tool to end that alienation....
- They gravitate to ancient symbols and ancient myths, to the old polytheistic religions.... They are reclaiming these sources, transforming them....
- They do not regard pleasure as sinful, nor do they conceive of this world as a burden.
- While many of their members lead quite ordinary, and often successful, lives in the “real world,” they are able to detach themselves from many of the trends of the day, maintaining a sense of humor, a gentle anarchism, and a remarkable tolerance for diversity....
- This religious movement...is only partly an “occult” phenomenon [“that which is hidden or beyond the range of ordinary apprehension and understanding”].
- Often it is interwoven with the visionary and artistic tradition, the ecology movement, the feminist movement, and the libertarian tradition. (4-5, 466)

All that being said, because Paganism both historically and today is *decentralized*, it is also the case that if you ask three Pagans about Paganism, you might get two, three, four, or more different opinions — not unlike Unitarian Universalism!

Regarding the number of Pagans in the United States today, one of the most recent estimates I have seen is “**as many as one million people**” ([Mar 12](#)). Related to the growing number of adherents to Earth-centered traditions, last month, here at UUCF, we had 393 people show up for our second annual Pagan Pride Day. The International [Pagan Pride Project](#) seeks to eliminate “prejudice and religious discrimination through education, activism, charity and community.” Our local version included a full-day of workshops, live music, and vendors. Planning is underway for a [**third annual Frederick Pagan Pride Day in September 2017.**](#)

In the meantime, if you are curious to experience the Earth-centered spiritual tradition for yourself, [**our UU Pagan group**](#) has three regular gatherings at which all are welcome. Every third Sunday during the 10:30 a.m. “Middle Hour” between the two services, there is an Earth-centered Spirituality service in the chapel. On each full moon, they host a labyrinth walk. And there is a ritual and potluck meal to celebrate the eight points on the Wheel of the Year, the next of which is Samhain, which will be tonight at 7:00 p.m.

Each year, I make sure to read at least one or more books about each of the [**Six Sources of Unitarian Universalism**](#). And this past year, I was interested to see that [**Alex Mar’s Witches of America had been named one of The New York Times’s Top 100 Books of the Year for 2015.**](#)

Here’s how Mar describes herself:

Raised in Manhattan, I confirm plenty of the stereotypes of a New Yorker: an overeducated liberal, a feminist, a skeptic long suspicious of organized religions, surrounded by friends...who consider agnosticism an uncomfortable level of devotion....I believe in something transcendent, but I’ve yet to meet someone with a convincing label for it. (4)

Her book is a **memoir about her five-year, in-depth journey of exploring modern Paganism**. I appreciated her book, and found it interesting. However, related to the tension we’ve been exploring between how one would describe oneself compared with how others might describe you, there are also some [**heated debates online**](#) about whether Mar’s descriptions of modern

Pagans are fair: some Pagans agree, others disagree.

Personally, I find one of the most compelling parts of Paganism to be the focus on the Wheel of the Year. If you imagine a year as a circle, most of us are familiar with the four major quadrants: Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall. Paganism adds the additional nuance of cross-quarter days, which further divides the year into a total of *eight* turning points:

- In between Winter Solstice and Spring Equinox is **Imbolc**, an invitation to celebrate the lengthening daylight. (This Pagan holiday has been secularized as “Groundhog’s Day.”)
- In between Spring Equinox and Summer Solstice is **Beltane**, most famous for the tradition of dancing around a May Pole. (Beltane has been secularized as “May Day.”)
- In between Summer Solstice and Fall Equinox is **Lammas**. Lammas celebrates the gratitude and abundance of the year’s First Harvest.
- In between Fall Equinox and Winter Solstice, is **Samhain** (also known as All Hallow’s Eve or Halloween), a time, in particular, for remembering your ancestors.

For now, on this day before Samhain, in the silent and musical meditation to follow, I invite you to reflect on what wisdom might there be for us — individually and collectively — from the “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.”