

**SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM: WICCA AND EARTH CENTERED RELIGION**  
**A sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist**  
**On March 21, 2010**  
**By the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia**

***Readings***

*Margot Adler is famous for two things -- for being a reporter on National Public Radio and for writing the germinal work -- *Drawing Down the Moon, a history of paganism*. She is also a Unitarian Universalist. In November of 2009 she was interviewed by Jason Pitzil-Waters on the Wild Hunt Blog, a blog for earth-centered and Pagan Religious exploration.*

The interviewer asked: Where do you see yourself within the world of modern Paganism? How has that conception changed since 1979? As one of the most "famous" modern Pagans, what role do you envision for yourself in the years to come?

Adler answered: Heavens! I don't have a clue! I hope to keep a bit of humor and humility, and tell people that this is a hugely important movement for changing the world and ourselves but that doesn't mean we should take ourselves overly seriously. I think some of the things I emphasize in speeches, that the sacred is in the here and now, that you don't have to die to "get the good stuff," that everyone's ancestors way, way back were Pagan, and that every person in the U.S. had their ancient traditions torn from them, whether through slavery, colonialism or by assimilation, and that it is possible to combine ecstasy and rationality, body and mind, and that reality is like a jewel, more paths mean a richer deeper reality, those are the kinds of things I have always emphasized and continue to. Other than that, I am still a minstrel, singing, chanting, doing ritual and believing in the polytheistic vision, and being involved in less magic and more earth reverence.

*These are the words of Starhawk from *Dreaming the Dark*, published by Beacon Press in 1982*

There are many names for power from within, none of them entirely satisfying. It can be called spirit -- but that name implies that it is separate from matter, and that false split... is the foundation of the institutions of domination...IT could be called God -- but the God of Patriarchal religion has been the ultimate source and repository of power-over. I have called it immanence, a term that is truthful but somewhat cold and intellectual. And I have called it Goddess, because the ancient images, symbols and myths of the Goddess as birth-giver, weaver, earth and growing plant, wind and ocean, flame, web, moon and milk, all speak to me of the powers of connectedness, sustenance, creation, and healing.

The word Goddess makes many people who would define themselves as "political" uneasy. It implies religion, secularism, and can be mistaken for the worship of an external being. "Goddess" also makes many people who would define themselves as "spiritual" or "religious" uneasy; it smacks of paganism, of blood, of darkness, and sexuality, of lower powers.

Yet power from within is the power of the low, the dark, the earth; the power that rises from our blood, and our lives, and our passionate desire for each other's living flesh. And the political issues of our times are also issues of spirit, conflicts between paradigms or underlying principles. If we are to survive, the question becomes: how do we overthrow, not those presently in power, but the principle of power-over? How do we shape a society based on the principle of power from within?

A change in paradigms, in consciousness always makes us uneasy. Whenever we feel the slightly fearful, slightly embarrassed sensation that words like Goddess produce, we can be sure that we are on the track of a deep change in the structure as well as the content of our thinking.

## **SERMON**

This sermon is, in some ways, a sequel to the memorial sermon I preached two weeks ago on Mary Daly, the philosopher and radical feminist who died at age 81 in January. It is also another installment in the series on spiritual activism -- because I want us to share some understanding -- beyond Christianity and Judaism -- about the ways in which various religious traditions inform and inspire the desire to work for social justice -- oh -- don't be afraid of that phrase. Glen Beck can try to stir up a passion for injustice by making the idea of social justice frightening -- but we can only keep room for justice by speaking it aloud as well as working for it. Words are powerful and yet, we cannot be afraid of words -- because as soon as we are afraid of them we have fallen under a powerful spell.

Today's sermon is about the nature of spells and witchcraft -- things unlikely to be brought up in many churches this morning -- and even less in a positive light. When you hear those words you may experience the unease that Starhawk spoke of earlier -- when she said "when we feel the slightly fearful, slightly embarrassed sensation that [certain] words produce." If you can follow through whatever discomfort you may be feeling in this moment you may -- you will likely find yourself in a new place of expanded thinking. In our sources we claim 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. When we say that we claim those teachings -- we mean that we look into them as into all others -- with a respectful and yet critical eye, seeking life-affirming insights. When talking about witchcraft -- it's not uncommon to cringe -- at least inwardly. In part we cringe because as modern thinkers we're skeptics about such things. We love Harry Potter and Hermione Granger and we assume that they are delightful fictions and that there's no such magic on earth. It's the stuff of fairy tales. In part, we cringe because the words "witch" and "witchcraft" have accumulated terrible associations over the centuries. In the Bible there are a small number of warnings against witchcraft -- often translated in Christian Scriptures as sorcery. The notion that you must not suffer a witch to live came directly from Deuteronomy. So we, in the west, began to feel the hair stand up on our necks about witchcraft millennia ago. Then in the 13<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> centuries there were witch trials and killings that left between 50,000 and 100,000 people dead. It left most folks edgy about witchcraft -- which seemed to end badly for the accused.

The fact that there are references in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures to witches and sorcery means that such an idea has long been with us. In a scholarly article by Rabbi Meir Bar-Ilan, professor of Jewish History at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat-Gan, Israel, witchcraft was traced to a commonly held art of men in early Jewish history -- at least three centuries before the common era. But it had been practiced by women as well. And what constituted Witchcraft was whatever appeared to be an action outside the known laws of nature -- so, by those standards, the ability to bring down a fever with a good poultice of herbs, the ability heal sores, bring someone out of a faint, or to change the color of water with an unseen substance would be magic. The ability to write and even more to read would be akin to magic. In fact, Hebrew itself, with letters and roots of words with spiritual meanings -- seems like it was shaped in a time when words themselves -- especially the written word might have seemed like a spell with which you conjure up the things itself. Abracadabra is Hebrew for I create what I speak.

Modern Kabbalist Rabbi Ariel Bar Tzadok wrote: "Do not underestimate your own power of speech. Indeed, our speech creates many things. It can create joy or it can create anger. What we say can start a war or avoid one. Speech and words, whether in spoken or written form are the most powerful weapons in the world. Indeed, even the magical word "Abracadabra" reveals this lesson." Tzadok points out that our words can create or destroy worlds. Though I can't be 100% confident that this was the belief in ancient Judea, it makes sense to me. Anyhow, Professor Ben-Ilan wrote about the period leading up to the creation of the rabbinical tradition when the scriptures were written that condemned witchcraft -- apparently this was directed at witchcraft by women not by men. Gradually, the seemingly supernatural acts performed by men began to be called miracles, while those performed by women were called sorcery and condemned. Later, as Christianity rose and became an organized religion throughout Europe, it was most often learned and followed in the cities. Out in the country -- beyond the walls, on the heaths, the people continued to follow old, indigenous religions. Originally the word Pagan came from the word Paganus -- for civilian -- the troops of the Roman Empire, after the time of Constantine, were called Miles Christi, soldiers of Christ. Eventually the word pagan was used to describe anyone outside the city and

then extended to any outsider. It then evolved to refer to anyone who wasn't a Christian. Outside the cities folk still held to belief in the sacredness of nature -- after all -- they lived in it. They practiced rituals, ages old, largely intended to bring themselves into communion with nature -- into a relationship that could ensure survival and helped make sense of human life in the larger cycle of seasons and of life and death -- seen everywhere in nature.

Although the church did target people who were considered heretics and began trials of witches, the majority of trials were conducted by secular courts. Of course, their definition of witch wasn't of a person who revered nature but of someone who violated the laws of God and nature and, thus, must put to death. It was a convenient way to kill or exile women who were learned, who could cure ailments that the doctors of the time couldn't seem to -- with their leeches and bloodletting. And, as panic over the plague rose it was often these women who were put to death. That there were actual witches with pointy hats who actually flew on broomsticks seems farfetched -- but somehow more than 50,000 women were convicted of this and killed.

The plight of these women and of the women condemned by the Jewish Community highlights something important -- it was reverence for women that was a real threat -- a reverence that would hold a woman as of equal value to a man -- was, perhaps, a threat to the story of creation told in the Bible in which woman is born of man -- when all these heathen creation stories -- as well as every birth -- tell of life coming through woman.

The association became, thanks to the early church fathers and a good number of early rabbis, that women were the earthen vessels of life -- common as dirt, the feminine principle was the lesser one as it was part of this sexual, earthy, decaying, uncontrollable world whereas the male principle governed reason, order, and spirit. The sacred Feminine went into hiding, as did anyone who believed in it. The celebrations of the seasons and the goddess were sometimes taken over by the church -- such as the naming of the holiday of Easter which came from the celebration of the Vernal Equinox -- the day we celebrate as the first day of spring, known, in wiccan and pagan circles as Ostara. Ostara is the Goddess of movement toward the rising sun -- or easterly. She is that fiery force that reanimates the world after the deaths of winter -- nature's will to regenerate. When the industrial revolution began it seemed as though man had conquered nature at last.

Witchcraft got a boost in the twentieth century when a man named Gerald Gardner claimed to have been initiated by a coven that had carried on the tradition of wicca since ancient times. To be honest -- no one knows if Gardner made this story up but the strength of vision that he had caught on and many people on both sides of the Atlantic became fascinated by the idea of the Goddess and of the rebirth of the feminine principle alike. For women and for men -- this was a rediscovery -- of nature, of their bodies, of the cycle of seasons, of the rebirth of wonder in world slipping under the rails of science and industry. It simmered here fairly quietly until a woman named Margot Adler -- who'd found the writings of Gardner and knew immediately that she worshipped nature as these wiccans did, in 1979 wrote a book that became a classic history of wicca -- *Drawing Down the Moon*, published first by Viking and then by Beacon Press -- our Unitarian Universalist Publishing House. Her scholarship was excellent and her writing accessible. By the mid 1980's the book had found its way into the hands of thousands of women and men and in its pages they saw their own faith reflected. They felt less alone -- they could reclaim the word pagan and be proud of their own inside status. Women and men gathered in circles and gatherings and worshipped the goddess and the god -- and these -- rather than being parallels of familiar Jewish or Christian deities, were partners in the cycle of life -- with the woman -- maiden, mother, and crone, being the source of life. It was a joyful rediscovery of an earlier faith. Loose and largely non-hierarchical, such groups had a hard time becoming established. In Unitarian Universalist Churches they often found shelter from a condemning world. They also ran into opposition as their practices were often so disorganized as to cause problems to the very churches that hosted them. But that's another subject altogether.

For women the experience of gathering and celebrating the goddess was empowering. I feel sure that more than a few of you have had such experiences. I remember standing in a circle in a field in Michigan with around 50 other women and a leader named Z Budapest. We chanted together -- The Earth is a woman and she shall rise. It was a radicalizing moment. I felt as though my body was filled with energy

and goodness -- divinity in every cell. As a skeptic -- the notion of a goddess didn't mean anything substantial any more than a god -- but the idea of the sacred feminine made me feel as though my body were made of light and earth at the same time -- that every cell was blessed and that I could celebrate myself as a woman. Such circles have been a source of strength and healing for numerous women.

Starhawk's book -- the *Spiral Dance* -- came out the same year as *Drawing Down the Moon* and it gave people and women in particular, the tools to reclaim their spiritual strength. It entered into the heart of the women's movement at a time when women needed badly to find sources of strength and joy rather than sheer grit and angry determination. It empowered women to step outside of their circles of familiarity and become politically active on behalf of peace, the earth, and women's bodies. Since these three things had been linked and condemned by history, the chanting, the circling, the fires and singing made each action a spiritual practice as well as a action and witness for social justice. I wasn't in Washington DC on November 17<sup>th</sup> 1980 when around 2000 women gathered at the Pentagon to demonstrate for peace. They wove yarn across the entrances. They used giant female puppets created by the Bread and Puppet Theater to dance ahead of the crowd. They planted gravestones on the lawn, chanted, and mourned for the fallen. In their declaration the roots of wicca were evident. They called: "We want an end to the arms race. No more amazing inventions for death. We understand that all is connected. The earth nourishes us as we with our bodies will eventually feed it. Through us, our mothers connected the human past to the human future."

Just as the Plowshares Eight had been inspired by the lessons of Jesus the radical teacher, these anti-nuclear activists were inspired and energized by their sense of the wholeness and sacredness of the earth and all life to take action to work for peace. They were out of the ordinary to the reporters who covered them. With their wild webs of yarn -- they embodied life itself -- chaotic and brightly colored, singing and moving. I had such an experience at the Seneca Falls Women's peace Encampment in the summer of 1983. I drove to Seneca Falls from Pittsburgh with two friends. We pitched our tents and camped -- three among the 12,00 women who came from around the world to do non-violent protest of the Cruise and Pershing II missiles housed at the Seneca Depot. We gathered in workshops, made artwork, sang around campfires, ate together and walked down the road to protest peacefully outside the depot gates. This protest was, for many, theologically grounded in a firm belief in this life on this planet and our sisterhood with the earth. It seemed essential to prove that just as the earth had been thought of as a lifeless resource and women had been used as powerless resources -- women could demonstrate life and power and therefore restore our world. New paradigms were born inside each woman as peace and justice were called for in the world. It was spiritual activism -- inward and outward.

Starhawk, a few years after writing *The Spiral Dance*, wrote *Dreaming the Dark*. In it she says that language conveys metaphors and these metaphors shape our thoughts and actions. We speak things into being. She talks again about magic being the ability to change consciousness at will. Once again -- magic turns out not to be about the wand we use that turns the toad into a prince or the prince into a toad -- but that turns a person into their own authentic self. Starhawk's books and writings since *Dreaming the Dark* have all been concerned with political activism grounded in a strong spiritual life -- in her case -- the life of wicca. This notion of magic has had the same power for men as for women. In the 1940's and 50's Harry Hay borrowed from Wicca and reclaimed a word that had been a source of shaming for gay men -- Fairy. As Hay led gatherings of men celebrating freedom, they found a new pride in themselves -- not only as gay men -- but as men free of restrictive roles. There's a lot about Hay I have issues with -- I suppose that's why his biography is called the *Trouble with Harry* -- but he founded the radical faerie movement and empowered generations of men to define themselves. Whether it was a peace March or a gay rights March -- the faeries were there. They toyed with clothing, knowing that it's often our clothing that most rigidly defines us. Like magic, they were able to form for themselves at least for a while, new self-images. The radical faeries bring to demonstrations a powerful fun -- both humor and rebellion. Long skirts with hiking boots, tutus with leather jackets, bearded men in pink dresses with army jackets create a dissonance that is liberating through humor -- through not taking themselves or our cultural expectations seriously. It shifts consciousness to liberate those who speak new languages and can imagine new incarnations -- of themselves and the world. It can be playful, as any rich spirituality is -- in part. But it is also deeply serious and the wielding of great power.

Just as I was finishing this sermon a message popped up on my facebook page from The Huffington Post who reported on a mob that surrounded the capitol building in Washington, DC on Saturday. They shouted down the congress people as they entered the Capitol Building to vote -- screaming words like Faggot and Nigger and even pushing them around.

Mark and I watched The Daily Show on Thursday evening and Jon Stewart did some blistering satire of the Fox News distorter Glen Beck, who had done a program in which he drew meaningless pictures as though they were real pictures of real ideas and showed how Social Justice was fascism and nazism. He warned that if you found yourself visiting a church that had emblazoned anywhere the words Social Justice -- you should run for your life. He drew circles as though the United States was approaching Chinese society more and more every day. He attacked every church that would preach social justice as though it was an evil. He reminded me of an evil magician -- using words to seduce and trick the unwary into believing that kindness was evil and justice was injustice. Stewart was sharp and funny in his critique. It was the only way to respond -- to allow the hard heartedness of Beck to poke through. It was important work -- I appreciated what Stewart was doing. There may be disagreements in our congregation about health care -- or perhaps not so much about health care as about the economics of it. But I don't believe that any of this stems from a sense that some people deserve health care and others do not. Rather I see our disagreements as honest and civil -- based upon weighing risks and having diverse concerns about that. But the lies that have been created to scare people about health care reform are not honest or civil -- they're like evil spells cast to turn good folk into beasts.

But there is other magic. In looking at Wicca, at the earth centered religions, we can see that reverence for our bodies and our world has been a source that has inspired spiritual activism over the years. Starhawk calls out to conjure justice. Whether we use the language of conjuring or of some other tradition it falls to each of us to find the sources of our own strength and our love in order to conjure up a world of compassion, mercy, the affirmation of life, and the possibility of a future. For us each our own ways of naming, for us together in our work of world healing and of service -- let us make our way a path that leads to and shapes that world.  
So mote it be.