

From the Order of Worship  
Kathy Swink and Linda Whyte-Burrell  
March 22, 2009

Opening Words:

East: We look to the East, the dawning of the Spring, and new life. We listen to the music of the newly hatched insects and the birds as they sing to celebrate the beautiful new Spring.

South: We look to the South, from where the Sun rises as it begins to warm the Earth. The fire energy of the sun and lightning wakes us up as the Earth is awakening.

West: We look to the West, the direction of water and emotion. At this time the tide pulls our passions, our bodies, love flows into us, everything is flowing with new life.

North: We look to the North, the direction associated with the Earth which is greening and awakening. The fields are blessed as seeds sprout, buds burst forth, flowers smile and open.

Meditation:

“The equinox is the time of spring’s return; the joyful time, the seed time, when life bursts forth from the earth and chains of winter are broken. Light and dark are equal: it is a time of balance, when all the elements within us (yearn to) be brought into a new harmony.” Take a moment to allow your elements to find a balance.

## “Celebration of the Spring Equinox”

A Sermon by Kathy Swink

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After a tough winter, we celebrate the Spring Equinox with joy! Today in our celebration, we will look at ancient Earth-based or pagan practices as we connect with our Mother Earth.

As you probably know, the vernal or Spring Equinox is the halfway point between the winter and summer solstices. Dusk and dawn are aligned in harmony so the light and dark of the day are equal. Spiritually, it is also the mid-point between the inwardness of winter and the outer energy of summer. For many of us, with the beauty of the season comes a fierce love of the Earth and new vows to help protect what sacred beauties we have. We know that we can always begin again in spring, and each time we are older and wiser. The equinox has been celebrated by people for millennia.

And, don't you just love the Springtime? It's such an amazing, miraculous and life-affirming process and experience! I think nearly all of us respond like a sprouting seed as we feel the warming earth and want to sink our hands and toes into the soil and turn our faces up towards the sun. That's why I can relate to the Gaia concept – Gaia is a Mother Earth goddess from ancient Greece who is the embodiment of everything in and on the Earth. That is, not only are the soil and mountains and oceans parts of Gaia, but also all the energy, plants, water, air, and animals including humans. So we are all part of the one divine living organism that is known as Gaia. Each of us has our role to play as part of this life, just as each cell in our body has a role to play in the functioning of our whole selves. Unlike the cells in our bodies, however, we have conscious choices about the effects we may have on the world. I strongly believe that singing “our song of grateful praise” is one of the best things we can do for Gaia and thus for our interdependent selves.

Gaia is one of the many examples of earth-based spiritual beliefs that have existed from earliest human experience. Earth-based spirituality can be called paganism or Wicca or the Old Religion. Despite common misconceptions, those of us who have become familiar with it, know that paganism is actually a very beautiful and positive approach to spirituality.

While those of us brought up in a Christian religion may balk at the word pagan, let me explain its origins.

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Paganism is the oldest religion on Earth which is why you find common elements throughout the world. Paganism is the basic reverence for life, honoring the cycles of nature, usually embodied in a Goddess who has many aspects such as maiden, mother, and crone. Whether you look at the practices of Native Americans, Australian aborigines, the archaeological findings of early Europeans, Asians, Egyptians or Africans you find some common threads: all honored the seasons and cycles of life as well as the directions of the winds and the basic elements of earth, air, fire and water. These are the things that are essential for all life as we know it – this is what unites us with the Earth and all living things. This is the heart of paganism.

The other point of misunderstanding with paganism is the notion of many gods and goddesses. The way I look at it, each of the gods or goddesses are examples of different aspects of the Divine, similar to the Christian ideas of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the angels, and the saints. However, in paganism there is also the connection to the divine nature within each living thing – we are all aspects of the many-faceted Divine Spirit.

We know from archaeology that the reverence for Mother Earth or the Great Mother Goddess dates back as far as 35,000 years ago. Apparently, these societies were peaceful and egalitarian as they prospered in communion with each other and the natural cycles of life. The very oldest examples of writing ever found are poetic stories of the Great Goddess, known in Sumeria as Inanna. In these Goddess cultures women were honored for their ability to bring forth life and at the same time, men were also honored as equally necessary and important parts of life.

Unfortunately, around 2400 BC some raiding hordes invaded the Middle East from the North and conquered the peace-loving Goddess cultures. They brought with them violence, tools of war, patriarchy and a vengeful male god. Since the peaceful peoples had no experience with war, they were easily overrun. These warring armies spread their domination and beliefs throughout Europe, Asia and northern Africa. Women lost their status, respect and value, as did all of nature. The Earth and everything associated with it became a commodity to use and control rather than the focus of reverence.

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But the conquered peoples still remembered their ancestors, and the rituals they had used to honor the cycles of the seasons as well as to facilitate health and abundance. So they continued these practices whenever they could. As Dona Marie Richards explained it, “When we perform rituals as our ancestors did, we become our ancestors, and so transcend the boundaries of ordinary space and time, and the limitations of separation that they impose. When we call the spirits and they enter our bodies we symbolize in our being the joining of, and therefore communication between, two spheres of the universe: ‘heaven’ and the ‘earth.’”

The words pagan and heathen originally meant people from the countryside or the heath as opposed to people from the villages or cities who had to follow the religion & customs of the ruling powers.

In Early Britain the traditional spring fertility festival, known as Eostre, was to celebrate the Virgin Goddess, rebirth of the Earth, and to make magic for her fruitfulness. The word Easter comes from Eostre this name for the goddess of fertility, and was borrowed by the early Christians to try to bring everyone into a common religion. Eostre was associated with rabbits, red eggs, and hot cross buns – all traditions assumed by the early Christians.

The sense of renewal and the cycles of life are expressed by Fleda Mask Jackson: “In my garden I am reminded of the beauty of life, of its endless power of renewal. A seed grows into a plant, a plant produces a flower, in the flower there are seeds, and these seeds produce a new plant. I have come to believe that this cycle is for human beings as well. While I grieve and mourn for deceased friends, for a mother, for a father, for a sister, I know that they are not gone, but have merely entered a different phase of life.... In my garden, I have a sense of connectedness to the Ancestors. I am bonded to all who have witnessed the power and beauty of a supreme being in the blossom of a morning glory, in the fragrance of a honeysuckle or a rose, and from the silky touch of the leaves of the Formosa tree. My grandmother is here. My mother is here. And most important, God is here.”

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The essence of the Equinox is balance: male/female, light/dark, in breath/out breath, inward energy/outward energy. The cycles continue so that as the seasons change, the cycle of life remains consistent.

So let us rejoice! The winter is past and Spring is here! Gaia is awakening from her long winter's nap. We can see the signs: the buds are swelling on the trees and shrubs, the skunk cabbage is up in the swamps and the daffodils in our gardens, the birds are returning from their migrations, the sun is warmer and the days are longer. This is the season of hope and renewal. Since we are all part of Gaia we are also being renewed. We have broken the bonds of winter and opened ourselves to the new Spring!

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Closing Words:

“O Great Goddess, you have freed yourself from the icy prison of winter. Now is the greening, when the fragrance of flowers drifts on the breeze. This is the beginning. Life renews itself by Your magic, Earth Goddess. The God stretches and rises, eager in His youth, and bursting with the promise of summer.”

North: We thank the Earth Goddess, who has freed our bodies as She is breaking free from the bonds of winter.

West: We thank the Water Goddess, who has freed our emotions, as She teaches us to go with the flow.

South: We thank the Fire Goddess, who has freed our spirits, as She renews our energy and warms us.

East: We thank the Air Goddess, who has freed our minds with Her enlightenment.

Center: We thank the centering power represented by our Chalice. As we extinguish this light may we all carry the flame of peace and love within our hearts as we go out from this place.