



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Entering the Magic Circle of Earth-Based Spirituality,”  
a sermon given by Richard Smyth  
on April 21, 2013

Let me first acknowledge how difficult this week has been for me--and for all of us, living so close to the traumatic events that have been unfolding since the bombings on Patriot's Day. After days like these, our church becomes a real source of refuge, a sacred place where we can seek solace and comfort and try to gain some perspective on what happened and why. It is this sense of this place as a sacred space that I want to focus on today.

Once, while on retreat with the 12-step program Adult Children of Alcoholics, I was deeply affected by a pamphlet that explained that the small room I had rented--a basic cinder-block affair with a small desk and bed, much like a tiny college dorm room and just as ugly--had become a sacred space by virtue of my choosing to be there on a retreat weekend whose purpose was to improve my conscious contact with God as I understand God--my "Higher Power" in the parlance of 12-step programs.

This experience helped me to better understand the concept of the "magic circle" as conceived by Johan Huizinga in his book *Homo Ludens*, a seminal work of theology whose title suggests that we are inherently playful by nature (the root of *ludens* invokes play and games). Huizinga's notion of play extends beyond the games we play for fun, however, as we see in the following quote:

"All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course... The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc. are all in form and function play-grounds, that is, forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."

Huizinga's book is often invoked by game designers; in these instances, the idea of the "magic circle" becomes short-hand for the special place in time and space created by a game. But I invoke Huizinga to help us understand what we are doing here today with our special Earth Service. The idea of our sanctuary as a kind of hallowed "magic circle" that we enter makes immediate sense--a physical space marked off for worship. The magic circle of Earth Day, however, is marked off in time rather than space.

Such temporal demarcation is not unfamiliar to those who practice pagan rituals. The holy days of

the modern Druid calendar, for example, are the stations of the year, which track the movement of the Sun through the wheel of the seasons. Eight ritual days occur approximately every 6-7 weeks, at the time of the solstices and equinoxes (known as the quarter days) and the midpoints between the quarter days (known as cross-quarter days).

Some of you know that I started on the Druid Path last summer, joining an organization called the Ancient Order of Druids in America (or AODA) and embarking on their program of self-study. The AODA sets forth three paths: the Earth Path, which invites us to bring our lives into greater harmony with the Earth by making three specific changes in our behavior that will lighten our footprint; the Moon Path, which invites us to a practice of meditation; and the Sun Path, which invites us to worship on the eight ritual days that I described a moment ago.

While these days mark sacred time, the Druid ritual literally marks out a circle of sacred space in which the ceremony is performed. I have to admit that the ritual practices I have experienced since the summer still feel a bit alien to me. Being "smudged" (that is, having a lit bundle of sage waved around my head and body) and "chimed" (having a resonant bell rung in front of me) before entering the circle; calling on the spirits of the North, South, East, and West to bless the circle; dramatically enacting allegorical scenes of harvest time, or of the sun conquering the darkness, or of spring emerging from the winter, all still feel a bit contrived. But when I think of the concept of the magic circle, it starts to make sense to my inquiring UU mind: there's a theatrical element to all ritual, and a playful element as well, that "comes into play." The literal marking off of a circle out in nature to become the sacred space for a specific amount of time on these special days, when the earth is in a certain position around the sun, makes a great deal of sense when your place of worship can shift throughout the year. And there are parts of the rituals that I like, and recognize--like invoking the four elements of earth, air, water, and fire, or the time during each ritual when we pause and share food and mead (or apple juice), and I always enjoy the invitation to share a poem. As the repetition of doing some of the same things over and over again (the ritualized aspects of the worship) makes them more familiar, I begin to experience the balm that familiar practice can be. When the bell chimes near me, I feel the powerful pulse of the sound with my body, and it has a calming effect, as does the smell of sage as it's wafted around my head. When we all chant the AWEN together, I remember the times when we explored chanting in this very sanctuary, and how incredibly relaxing it was.

Ultimately, it's the invitation to get out of my head--that rational, reflective self I'm encouraged to be by our progressive, liberal religion--that might be the most important aspect of these rituals for me, these moments of creating and entering a magic circle out in the woods. For if we are to have any kind of a chance of surviving on this earth as a species, we must return to a way of being, feeling, and thinking about the Earth that is more in line with indigenous frames of mind like the ones invoked in today's readings. For 40,000 years, such ways of thinking worked in terms of living in greater harmony with the planet. Perhaps it's time to return to the old ways, as poet and buddhist monk Gary Snyder calls them.

So the next time you pray, don't pray to God, but try "talking to the rivers, to the lakes and to the winds, as to our relatives," as John Fire Lame Deer invites us to do. Speak your gratitude directly to the Earth and the Plants and the Wild Beings and the Sun, as Gary Snyder suggests in his version of a Mohawk prayer. And maybe, after we've learned how to see the small circle of a

Druid ritual as a sacred space, we can broaden that magic circle until it becomes so big that it includes everything. So be it, and blessed be.