

edited by B. T. Newberg



# YEAR ONE

A Year of Humanistic Paganism

## **Year One: A Year of Humanistic Paganism**

Edited by B. T. Newberg

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[www.HumanisticPaganism.com](http://www.HumanisticPaganism.com)

# PRAISE FOR HUMANISTIC PAGANISM

"My beliefs, which I once thought were amorphous yet too complex, have been so succinctly explained, it's as if someone shuffled through the jumble in my head, cut out the static, and added ideal bullet points." - Britt

"Finally, I have a name! ... your site more than anything else gives me hope that the term "Pagan" can be reconciled with humanistic values. ... I was on the verge of abandoning the term Pagan altogether because of the associations with supernaturalism, until I found [this] site and this group. Thanks!" - John

"Listening [on the *Encounters in nature* podcast] to three intelligent guys with similar opinions makes me feel better about seeking this path more on my own."  
- Aron

"I would like to send a huge thank you for the podcast and the website." - Kelly

"Really good stuff here." - Lynn

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# INTRODUCTION



PHOTO: ORIGINAL BY B. T. NEWBERG WITH TYPHOEUS & ZEUS, CHALCIDIAN BLACK FIGURE VASE, c 540 BCE

Ever wanted spirituality without all the supernatural hocus pocus? That's what Humanistic Paganism (HP) aspires to be.

HP is both a community website ([www.HumanisticPaganism.com](http://www.HumanisticPaganism.com)) and a way of life. It bills itself as "a naturalistic marriage of science and mythology."

The multiple pieces in this introduction set out the overall aim and direction of HP. *Nine months* gives the backstory behind HP as well as its mission. *A rain dance for spirituality today* moves HP into the realm of myth, articulating its unique vision through the story of Persephone. *How to use this ebook* is just what its title suggests - a practical guide to navigating this work. Finally, the article *Neither religious nor secular* rounds out the introduction by carving out the liminal, in-between spaces where naturalistic spirituality thrives.

If you're new to HP and naturalistic spirituality, we hope this ebook will be a primer. If you're an HP veteran, you'll get to see our articles in a new light and explore exclusive new material as well.

Welcome to Humanistic Paganism.

# NINE MONTHS: THE STORY OF HP AND ITS

## MISSION

by B. T. Newberg

Nine months is the gestation period from conception to birth. It's also how long the project of Humanistic Paganism (HP) has been developing. That's not long, but in nine months it's gone from a platform for one man's personal explorations to a burgeoning spiritual community.

Now, its moment of birth is immanent.

Roughly nine months ago, I was a struggling student teacher in desperate need of an authentic spirituality. It needed to provide meaning - a source of inspiration and a sense of personal wholeness. But it also needed to be plausible.

Since high school I had been exploring religion after religion in search of something both personally meaningful and consistent with modern scientific understanding. I went from Lutheranism to Agnosticism, then Buddhism, Contemporary Paganism, and finally Secular Humanism. Yet none of these could ultimately provide what I was seeking.

There were others out there like me - there *had* to be. I just needed to find them.

That's how the Humanistic Paganism website was conceived. It started out as a way for me to organize my feelings, and put them out there in the world. Soon, others traversing similar paths began to appear. In a few short months, HP opened its digital doors to submissions. Authors began to submit their own contemplations, and with that emerged a community. Now, nine months later,



over a dozen authors have published works and many more have contributed to lively discussions in the comments.

Yet the community goes far beyond us, as well. There are those interested in naturalistic spirituality in virtually all of the world's major religions as well as outside them. We may not always have a good name for ourselves, we may not easily find each other, and we may not be understood by our fellow religionists. Yet we exist, and we are numerous.

HP exists to bring us together.

The mission of Humanistic Paganism is to amplify the voices of those interested in naturalistic spirituality. Specifically, it has four broad goals:

- to share reflection on beliefs and practices
- to aid connection with others of like mind
- to develop and debate a naturalistic way of being-in-the-world
- to educate the general public about naturalistic spirituality

With these goals in mind, HP endeavors on an all-volunteer basis to bring to term a birth long overdue. It is the birth of a spirituality fit for the 21st century.

This project does not have just one mother. A whole community is giving birth to it. At the same time, it cannot be born without one person: the individual. It is up to each person to embrace the challenge of crafting naturalistic spirituality. In an age that's outgrown dogma, no one can decree for another what to believe. That means it falls on ourselves to take responsibility for our own beliefs.

Humanistic Paganism is not a religion, nor does it aim to be. It is a spiritual orientation, a matrix within which religions may be born. It is not a mother, but perhaps it may aspire to the role of midwife, helping to coax forth what is

already being born.

Ultimately, it is up to each of us to have the courage and wherewithal to give birth to our own spirituality.

# RAIN DANCE: A VISION FOR HP

*God is dead*, said Nietzsche. We've all heard that. What we may not have heard is that the Greeks said the same thing more than 2500 years ago, except for them it was not God but the goddess Persephone, and she did not stay dead.

## **The death and rebirth of Persephone**

In a seasonal drama of death and rebirth, Persephone spent the barren season of the year in the underworld with her abductor-husband Hades. During that time, nothing would grow. The earth dried and cracked. The world itself felt dead, like Nietzsche's God.

Not till the end of the barren season did life return. Crowds of Greeks, gathered for the Eleusinian Mysteries, cried to sky and earth, *Hye! Kye!*, or "Rain! Conceive!" They called the sky to rain down upon the earth, and the earth to conceive new life by these waters.

That's what we need today in response to Nietzsche's gloomy words. To bring back the sense of life, we need a *rain dance*.

Yet it can't be some dusty jig from the shelves of historians. Nor can it be an awkward bop invented yesterday. Our rain dance must be rooted in the past, but a dance for today.

That requires consideration of today's unique barren season, which turns upon meaningfulness and plausibility.

## **Meaningfulness and Plausibility**

There are many in the world today who find the old metaphysical claims of traditional religions implausible. Even in the ancient world there were already those who doubted, but the problem has been exasperated beyond measure by the modern age of science and discovery. Supernatural realities are simply no longer tenable for large swaths of the population. The progress of modern science, freedom to choose one's own beliefs, and democratization of access to information by the Internet have all contributed to increasing criticism of traditional religious doctrines.

When a religion is no longer plausible, it is no longer meaningful either. It's power dries up like a field in drought. It no longer moves the heart when it can no longer move the mind. The barren season begins.

Some have sought to redress this by doing away with religion altogether. Philosophes of the Enlightenment dreamt of a day when religion would fade in the light of science's dawn. That has not happened. We do enjoy freedom of belief, and there is a thriving movement of Secular Humanists openly living lives good without God. Yet religion today is strong and getting stronger, especially in America and the developing world. Science has made greater leaps and bounds than Enlightenment philosophes could have imagined, yet it was not religion but their dream which faded. Religion is actually enjoying a resurgence. Maybe it is because it provides something, a sense of personal meaning perhaps, that movements like Secular Humanism struggle to evoke. Until such movements find a way to do so in an entirely secular context, religion is not going away anytime soon. Thus, doing away with religion does not appear to be a feasible way to recover meaningfulness and plausibility, and end the barren season.

Others have sought to redress the problem by a re-enchantment of the world. Seeing that science has contributed to a sense of the world as mundane,

mechanical, and manageable, no longer alive with potential, they have raised a cry of protest. Despite the wonders of modern science, something has been lost. To regain a sense of inherent potentiality in the world, some have revived old stories and practices long forgotten. Contemporary Pagans are among these folk. Returning to the polytheistic myths and practices of pre-Christian Europe and other areas, they are crafting religions in which nature erupts with life and vitality. Some are even doing this in a naturalistic vein consistent with modern science. By and large, however, the movement has concerned itself with magic and quasi-supernaturalism. These practices may be minimally reconciled with science, posing magic as an undiscovered science that will eventually be confirmed by quantum physics or some other field. Yet there does not seem to be a concerted effort to verify the efficacy of magic by rigorous experimentation. In an absence of such serious effort, the idea of the undiscovered science starts to look like a smokescreen for faith-based supernaturalism. Thus, like many religions before, the movement encounters the obstacle of plausibility. Our fields remain dry; the rain does not come.

Neither Secular Humanists nor the majority of Contemporary Pagans manage at present to provide both meaningfulness and plausibility for those in search of naturalistic spirituality.

Certainly some must find these movements meaningful and plausible, else they would not be so large. Yet there are vast droves today who do not.

HP is specifically for those who do *not* find them meaningful and plausible, who are not content to wait faithfully for a secular substitute for religion, or for magic to be reconciled with science. HP is for those who long for a way of life that is both fully scientific and fully spiritual. HP is for those who are willing to question cherished beliefs and practices, and understand them in a new way in light of experimental evidence. Those willing to sacrifice the status quo on the



altar of truth, thereby joining in a cry of *Hye! Kye!* to bring back life to the world, are the ones who will find HP their own.

### **Today's rain dance**

What is needed today is a spirituality consistent with modern science. It must leave behind unverifiable claims of the supernatural. It must open itself to a vision of the universe bound together by natural laws - laws revealed not by some privileged sage or prophet, but gradually through a progressive process of discovery.

Moreover, that process of discovery must utilize the best possible methods. It is not enough for a religion to show itself minimally compatible with science; it must go further and embrace the very spirit of science - the spirit of discovery through investigation and critique. It must allow for new discoveries that overturn old beliefs, hence nothing can be dogma or doctrine. It must be willing to continually reinterpret its core ideas and practices in light of the latest evidence.

At the same time, science alone is not enough. The empirical and the rational are excellent guides, but they are only functional in the company of a third: feeling. To achieve meaningfulness, spirituality must appeal to our whole selves - head, heart, and gut. The kind of meaningfulness of which I speak - inspiration, personal wholeness, and a sense of being right with the world - demands enlisting the emotions. Science is not particularly suited to that. Its method of investigation specifically requires a dispassionate observer, so as to reduce bias as much as possible. Even though scientists can be passionate people, and the wonders revealed by science may excite, science itself is not particularly well-known for arousing passion. That talent belongs rather to its sister: art.

Art is the means by which humans come to know themselves on a more holistic level. It appeals at once to head, heart, and gut. It is also the specialty of religion.

Though religion's traditional claims about the nature of the universe are no longer plausible, it's artistic imagery remains compelling. Thousands of years of development have honed the art of religious metaphor to captivate just so. It provides, like a symbiotic organism, for our inborn need for meaning. In return, we provide for its continuance by eternally retelling its stories. Perhaps religion is not the only source that can offer what we need, but suffice to say it is good at doing its job - so long as its offerings are also plausible.

So, it strikes me as clear that what we need today is a meaningful and plausible marriage of science and religion. The former helps us understand the nature of our world, while the latter cultivates the sense of meaning we need to feel at home in that world. To make this marriage work, we must sacrifice all supernaturalism and quasi-supernaturalism. In its place, we must open to the spirit of discovery through investigation and critique. We must look afresh at our spiritual beliefs and practices, and we must find a creative new interpretation fit for the 21st century.

This is our rain dance. This is our call for the sky to shower down and the earth to conceive. The articles in this volume each, in their own way, cry the ancient cry of *Hye! Kye!*

Clouds are gathering. There's an electrostatic charge in the air. It's that distinct feeling that precedes the first droplets of rain.

Into our barren field stumbles a ragged soothsayer. It's Nietzsche mumbling, "God is dead, God is dead."

"No," we respond. "She lives..."

"...but perhaps *not as we once thought.*"

# HOW TO USE THIS EBOOK

This ebook organizes all the work that's been published on HP in its first year into one coherent presentation.

While a chronological arrangement in order of publication date makes intuitive sense, the reader can obtain that by simply browsing the website [here](#). Meanwhile, this book endeavors to reorganize the pieces into new and revealing patterns.

To that end, a dynamic arrangement has been employed. You can choose from multiple tables of contents that arrange the works in different ways via anchor links. Each of four tables presents the articles in a fresh light.

First, the *Topical Table of Contents* arranges pieces in a graduated fashion, starting with the basics and continuing on to advanced reflections arranged by general topic. This is the way the articles are arranged by default, if you just page through the book without the tables, and the topical table comes at the front of the book. Those new to HP may find this the friendliest route through the book.

The remaining three tables are placed at the end of the book, and may provide more interesting routes for those already familiar with HP and its works.

Second, the *Critical Questions Table of Contents* organizes in response to key questions that have been raised by critics. Our challengers are our best allies, showing us what we need to work on in the future. Considering our work in relation to their critiques should prove enlightening.

Third, the *Fourfold Path Table of Contents* presents the works for their relevance to

the four key points on HP's path.

Finally, the *Four Elements Table of Contents* offers a contemplative approach. Articles are presented according to their correspondence to the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water. Drawing on common Neopagan correspondences, each piece may be contemplated for what it reveals about these symbolic dimensions of our natural world.

In each table, pieces are presented in one category only, though many if not most are relevant to multiple categories. Readers are invited to disagree, reflecting on what each piece contributes beyond its category as well as to the whole.

The works in this ebook are all self-contained, but many bonus features are enabled by connecting to the Internet. Clicking on article titles and other links will transport you directly to the original article, complete with all its pictures and comments. Thus, the greatest use can be made of this book while connected to the net.

That's it for the practicalities of the book; the rest should be fairly self-explanatory. Next, this introduction concludes with an early article from HP, which traverses the liminal ground covered by HP.



# NEITHER RELIGIOUS NOR SECULAR: A HOME FOR THOSE WITH NONE

BY B. T. NEWBERG

06.12.2011



ODYSSEUS FOUND HIMSELF BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS, LIKE SO MANY TODAY WHO MUST NAVIGATE BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE.

IMAGE: ODYSSEUS VOR SCILLA UND CHARYBDIS, BY JOHANN HEINRICH FÜSSL

Do you find yourself between worlds, neither religious nor secular? Do you feel without a home? It can be frustrating for those with a naturalistic view of the universe, but an inclination to spiritual metaphor and growth. There aren't many high-profile traditions espousing such a path. Many of us end up feeling lost in the cracks between the religious and the secular.

Our culture hasn't yet developed secular words adequate to describe the magnificence of life. Perhaps that's why many of us still feel called to terms like "gods" and "spirit", though we don't mean guys in the sky or ghosts in the machine. What we express by these words is a certain reverence toward existence, a reverence we can only describe as *spiritual*.

Yet that reverence is easily misunderstood.

### **Between Scylla and Charybdis**

The ultimate "rock and a hard place" metaphor comes from Homer's Odyssey, where the crew of Odysseus' ship has to navigate the narrow straits between two sea monsters called Scylla and Charybdis. That's the situation in which many of us find ourselves today. Tossed between hardcore religionists on the one side and fervent secularists on the other, we struggle to navigate a way home.

Since starting this blog, I've met many who identify with Humanistic Paganism. I've also met those who look on it with bewilderment bordering on disgust. A Facebook conversation sparked by HP saw this comment from a Neopagan Druid:

*"Why bother with a ritual to a deity if you think it's fake? Wouldn't that be a waste of time? I personally don't care what other people believe or not, but the whole 'just do it even if there is nothing behind it' way of thinking just seems stupid to me. ... If their*

*actions or words are empty, I'd rather they shut up and stay home frankly."*

While this comment grossly misconstrues the spirit of HP ritual, it is a common reaction. Many assume that spiritual practices without literal belief in deities must be "empty", and shake their heads in amazement.

Others get possessive. For example, a few years ago a Hellenic polytheist wrote that if I did not believe in the literal existence of the Greek gods, I should not use their names, because there are those who *do* believe in them. Apparently they own the copyright to Greek mythology! I do understand what she was saying – we should not treat flippantly what others take seriously. But HP takes mythology seriously too, just in a different way.

Meanwhile, Pagans are not the only ones who look askance at HP. I recently attended a Humanist event where I introduced myself as a "spiritual humanist." That single word *spiritual* was enough to send the event leader off into a long and defensive aside about how she is uncomfortable with that term. Others at the event seemed to assume without question that "Humanism" meant Secular Humanism, even though that is only one branch, and a recently invented one at that. No one was rude, but I went away feeling like I had not found a welcoming community.

### **Resistance is to be expected**

I don't blame any of the people mentioned above for their comments. Humanistic Paganism *is* confusing. The same goes for Spiritual Humanism or Religious Naturalism or Enchanted Agnosticism or whatever moniker you choose. These are counter-intuitive terms that provoke a double-take. Dare to call yourself one of these, and you *will* have your beliefs questioned.

But that is no reason to keep quiet. One of the reasons for misunderstanding is simple lack of visibility. Humanistic Pagans and others of similar persuasion need to put themselves out there. That is one reason this blog exists. It's not just a place to articulate ideas, it's a forum to educate the community.

If you're wondering how a ritual could possibly work without literal belief in gods, this is what you should be reading. If you think spirituality can't possibly have something to offer the naturalist, again this is the blog for you. Whether you come to agree with the ideas here or radically oppose them, at least you'll understand what it's all about. Ignorance is the enemy. Difference is beautiful.

### **There are open-minded people too**

All this talk about resistance might give the impression of being under siege. Actually, it couldn't be further from the truth. Although there are those who attack and ridicule, the vast majority I've met in both Pagan and Humanist camps are open-minded. In the Facebook conversation quoted above, several theists stood up in defense of HP. The person quoted actually found herself shouted down. Likewise, at the Humanist event there were those who were interested in Buddhist meditation, church-like organizational models, and other connections to spiritual traditions. Suffice to say the open-minded folks usually outweigh the closed-minded, even though the latter tend to leave a bigger impression.

### **A home for those with none**

For those neither religious nor secular, attempting to navigate between Scylla and Charybdis, Humanistic Paganism is a beacon fire. It's a safe harbor where that counter-intuitive viewpoint, which may provoke questions and resistance, can be openly explored. It's a port town where those from diverse backgrounds

can exchange ideas and learn about their differences. Lastly, for some, it's a home.

But Humanistic Paganism is not yet a group, nor a tradition. That may emerge in time, but if so it must happen organically. One person cannot start a tradition; others must come together to create it. Or create something else, something better.

Until then, those sympathetic to HP can find fellowship in a number of groups that are similar in spirit. Perhaps the closest analogy can be found in the Yahoo group [Naturalistic Paganism](#). Two other close kin are the [World Pantheist Movement](#) and [Universal Pantheist Society](#). Further community might be found in the [Druidic Order of Naturalists](#) or the forums of [Spiritual Humanism](#). For still more, see the [Resources](#) page. Continue to check back as I'm finding more and more each day.

Are there other communities you love, communities in the borderlands between the religious and secular? Please share them in the comments section.

Or share your experience: What is *your* story of navigating between the religious and the secular, between Scylla and Charybdis?

**25 comments**



# PART I: BASICS

## A. THE FOURFOLD PATH

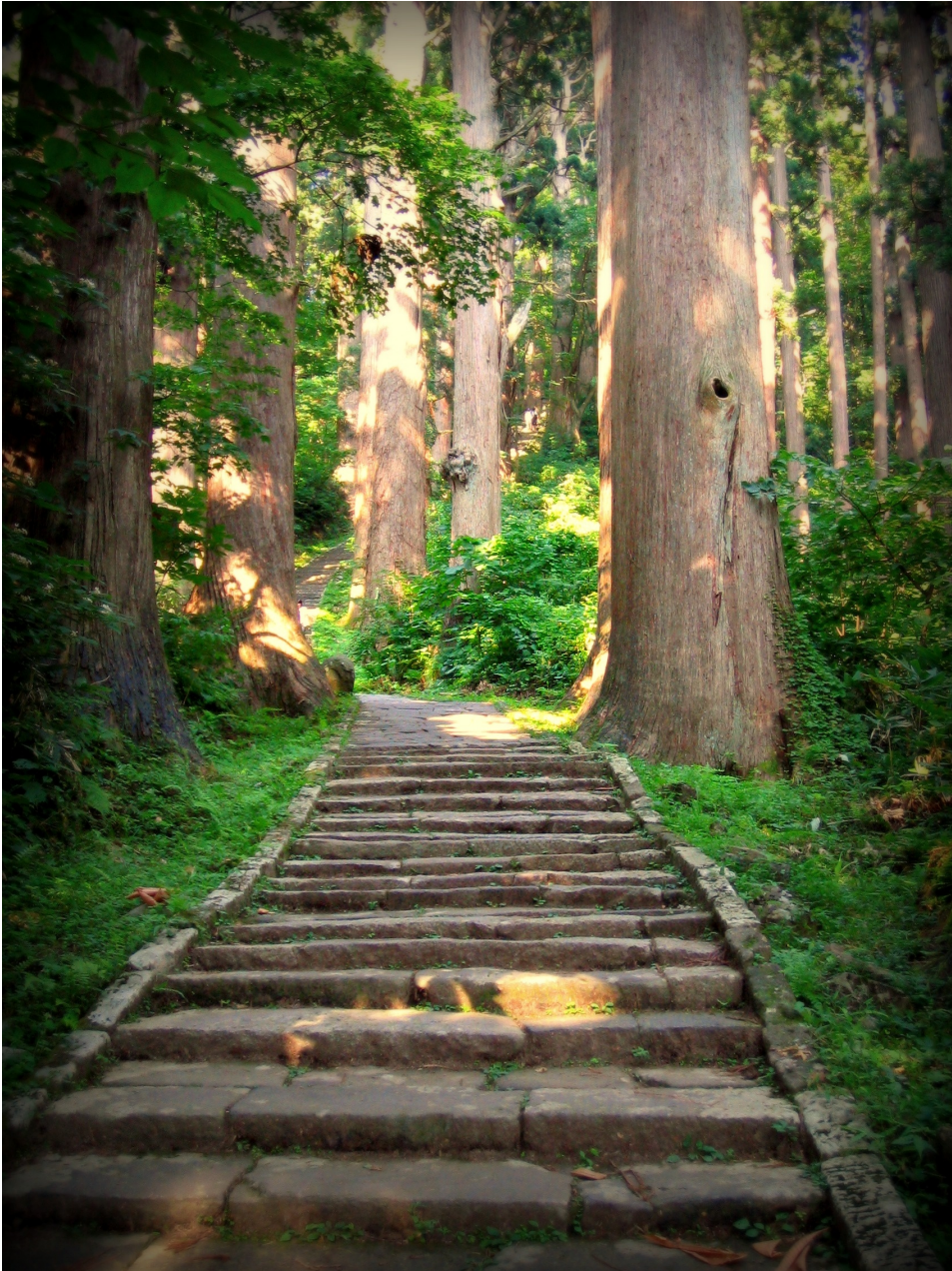


PHOTO BY B. T. NEWBERG

The basic framework defining the contours of HP is the Fourfold Path. This is a simple statement of what we're after and how we're going about doing it. It is not intended as doctrine or dogma, and no one is obligated to follow it. Paths falling outside these boundaries are valid and valuable; they're just not HP.

The four points of the Fourfold Path, introduced by B. T. Newberg and extended by C Luke Mula, provide structure within a widely roving range of spiritual explorations.

# WHAT IS HUMANISTIC PAGANISM?

BY B. T. NEWBERG

05.06.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHAT DO WE MEAN?

FOURFOLD PATH: ALL

ELEMENT: AIR

Humanistic Paganism is a naturalistic\* way of life rooted in nature, myth, and wonder. It accepts modern science as the best way to access knowledge about our world, and myth as a particularly useful means of enriching and deepening experience. The yield is a life filled with wonder.

Humanistic Paganism is a hybridization of Humanism and Paganism.

Humanism is a life-stance which asserts the power and responsibility of humans to meet challenges without recourse to supernatural aid, while Paganism is a group of religions rooted in Pre-Christian European traditions.[1] These two cross-fertilize to produce a powerful way of life grounded in modern science and enriched with mythic texture.

## **Why Humanism?**

For many in the 21st century, the metaphysical claims of most major faith traditions are no longer tenable. Modern science has revealed an orderly universe that is beautiful and complete in and of itself, requiring no divine being(s) to set it in motion or maintain it. Yet the modern era has also shown us the darkest faces of man, with some of history's bloodiest wars and most contemptible offenses against humankind. What we need now is a way of being-in-the-world that fully embraces the advances of modern science while also affirming the dire need for ethics and responsibility. Humanism is such a way.

Humanism goes beyond atheism, agnosticism, skepticism, and other similar philosophies by introducing an ethical element. Not only must we invoke no deity to solve our problems, but also we must actively acknowledge our responsibility to solve these problems. Responsibility is a necessity if we hope to prosper as individuals and as a species on this planet.

## **Why Paganism?**

A rich tradition lies in our past. While the Pre-Christian religions of Europe have been largely dormant for many centuries, we are still rooted in a fertile field of Pagan culture, tradition, and symbolic imagery. The Pagan traditions of our past, embedded in modern Western culture through myth, metaphor, art, music, and other modes of symbolic expression, still speak to many of us in the 21st century. They form a bedrock of identity and an aquifer of emotive experience. Pagan myths and rituals offer shared forms and structures enabling the expression of certain human experiences that cannot be fully expressed in any other way. This expression is vital to human fulfillment, as vital as scientific understanding and ethical action.

Paganism is uniquely suited to fulfilling our human needs at this time in history. We have learned from centuries of tragedy the danger of promulgating singular dogmas of Truth with a capital “T”, and today’s global village demands that we learn to live peaceably with differences of culture, gender, race, politics, and so forth. The Abrahamic religions which have dominated the globe, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, focus on single Truths; meanwhile Paganism offers a vision of diversity, with multiple deities, genders, perspectives, and versions of myths. At the same time, Paganism also grants value to the natural world, which some Abrahamic religions undervalue or even devalue. For these reasons, the time is right for a resurgence of Pagan forms of being-in-the-world.

[2]

## **Why these two together?**

Humanism began in Pagan contexts. In Europe, Humanism flowered especially in the budding arts and philosophies of Classical Greece.<sup>[3]</sup> It declined throughout the Christian period but enjoyed regrowth during the Renaissance, a time which also saw a renewal of Pagan imagery. Today, Humanism is once again growing at the same time that Paganism is putting out new shoots and buds. There seems to be something mutually nourishing about the two.

Humanism and Paganism are complementary. While Humanism is well-adapted to address the latest intellectual and social issues, it lacks the kind of deep symbolic texture conducive to psychological fulfillment. Paganism is positioned to fill that void, providing a field of symbolic imagery in which the modern individual can feel rooted and nourished. Meanwhile, Paganism by itself is prone to superstition and factiousness. Humanism, which embraces a vision of knowledge rooted in the five senses and verified through the scientific method, offers empirical inquiry as a means to sift the wheat from the chaff, as well as to mediate the varieties of Paganism without eradicating their differences. Together, Humanism and Paganism keep in check and mutually nourish each other. Humanism keeps Paganism true to the empirical world around us, while Paganism enriches Humanism with deep symbolic imagery.

## **Where does this path lead?**

A life grounded in Humanistic Paganism can take a remarkable variety of forms. For some, Paganism may provide a meaningful backdrop for otherwise secular Humanist activities. Others may foreground Paganism as a primary spiritual endeavor, informed by the empirical methods of Humanism. Most will find a balance somewhere in-between. Amidst such robust diversity, what is held in

common? Four elements unite Humanistic Pagans: exploration of the Five +1, relationship with mythology, responsible action, and a sense of wonder.

*Exploration of the "Five +1": five senses, plus an introspective sense*

First of all, the life of Humanistic Paganism is grounded in the five empirical senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. These are the faculties by which we experiment with and learn about our world, and modern science is founded upon information revealed through them via empirical observation. Yet an important source of information is missing: introspection. Our minds are also aware of sensations of emotions, thoughts, and mental imagery. It is expedient, for reasons to be explained shortly, to conceive of this awareness as a semi-empirical faculty of sensation. This is not to posit a psychic, magical, revelatory, or prophetic “sixth sense”; on the contrary, the introspective sense is natural, materialistic, and thoroughly familiar to all of us. We simply don’t usually think of it as a sense. But something is gained by conceiving of it as such – namely, the power to stand back and observe the contents of our minds. We spend so much time completely identified with our thoughts and emotions that it rarely occurs to us to observe them as such. Yet doing so is a powerful means of growing in self-knowledge. It is also the method which enables exploration of traditionally theistic practices from a naturalistic point of view. Meditation, prayer, ritual, and so forth can be approached as practices with observable effects upon the mind. Introspection allows observation of these effects. Thinking of it as a faculty of sensation allows one to observe mental phenomena without getting lost in them.

Of course, this process is not entirely empirical. While all perception is subject to influence by unconscious prejudices and biases, mental phenomena are particularly susceptible. Furthermore, it is difficult if not impossible to subject interior sensations to peer review, which is a key element of the scientific method. For these reasons, the introspective sense is called “semi-empirical”, while “empirical” is reserved for the five external faculties of sight, sound, smell,

taste, and touch.

The sum total of senses available to us are the “Five +1.” This term avoids confusion with the paranormal connotations of “sixth sense.” The Five +1 are the natural, ordinary, and familiar powers by which all human beings learn about their world and themselves.

All inferences we need make about the world and how we ought to live can be traced back to these six sources of empirical and semi-empirical data shared equally by all humans. Those things neither confirmed nor disconfirmed by reference to the five senses are simply placed in the category “unknown.” For example, metaphysical claims not subject to verification via the Five +1, such as the existence of divine beings or authority of revealed texts, are unknowns. The introspective experiences of others are also appropriately labeled unknown, even if one’s own such experiences are knowable. As a result of this method, Humanistic Paganism is equally accessible to all. There is no dependence on individuals, texts, or initiations privileged with special authority; every Humanistic Pagan can investigate truth-claims for him or herself. Furthermore, truths once found can be shared with others without special pleading; they can be demonstrated through simple empirical verification. This allows the development of a common body of knowledge and experience shared by all, accessible to all, and uniting all. Humanistic Pagans thus devote themselves to the contemplation of the Five +1 and the study of knowledge deriving from them.

### *Relationship with mythology*

Second, the Humanistic Pagan cultivates a relationship with a mythology, a set of cultural symbols drawn from Pagan tradition. There is no need to posit the real, independent existence of deities or the historicity of mythic events; instead, these may be treated as shared cultural forms and structures uniquely capable of



expressing certain facets of human experience.[4] In this way, the individual opens to a deeper, more comprehensive field of expression than is communicable by purely rational, scientific reasoning.[5] Relationship with a mythology may take some active attunement. This can be accomplished through researching a Pagan culture, meditating on its symbols, sharing its myths with others, and participating in rituals designed to inspire. The net effect of such effort is not only familiarity with Pagan mythology but also self-development, as the psychological nature of the work can unleash new levels of self-awareness and understanding. Humanistic Pagans thus devote themselves to mythological development. In this way, they embrace not only the science but also the art of life.

#### *Responsible action*

Third, Humanistic Pagans accept responsibility for their actions. Our impact on the world is more visible than ever in this age of globalization and environmental crisis. The mere act of living has consequences for society and nature, and the way we choose to live can help or hinder. Accepting responsibility involves two affirmations: first, that we cause many if not most of our problems, in whole or in part; and second, that we are capable of solving our problems. We have no need of divine or supernatural aid; the power is ours. Thus, Humanistic Pagans devote themselves to meeting the challenges of life with positive action.

#### *A sense of wonder*

Finally, the life of the Humanistic Pagan is marked by a sense of wonder. The mysteries of the natural world, from human psychology to the farthest star, never cease to fascinate. If any aspect of the path truly deserves to be called spiritual, this is it. Wonder is that feeling felt in the presence of natural beauty – beauty which is all the more astounding for having been self-created, free of purpose. Humanistic Pagans sense the sublime majesty of nature, and know that they belong to that very majesty as integral parts of the whole. Wonder is also felt

upon the realization that within that whole we are free to determine our own purpose, free of any interloping deity and free of the threat of what may come after death. Wonder is what is felt when we understand that the present moment is all that is certain, all that we have, and all that we need. The thing that makes life worth living is, at bedrock, wonder. Humanistic Pagans acknowledge that, and nurture their natural sense of connection to nature through wonder.

These four characteristics unite the cornucopia of diverse lifestyles grounded in Humanistic Paganism. Through dedication to the Five +1, mythological development, responsible action, and wonder, Humanistic Pagans embrace a powerful way of being-in-the-world. They take a life-stance rooted in the best aspects of Humanism and Paganism, two traditions that together give birth to a hardy hybrid well-suited to the modern era. They walk a path that is positive, fulfilling, and ultimately life-affirming. That path celebrates human experience, diversity, and the natural world. It makes virtues of human reason, self-development, responsibility, and curiosity. It addresses the intellectual, social, and psychological needs of our time. Through it, one may live a life grounded in modern science, enriched with mythic symbolism, and inspired toward responsible action and wonder. Humanistic Paganism is a path of human fulfillment for the 21st century.

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*\*Editor's note: The original article read "a nontheistic way of life, but this has been changed to naturalistic. Nontheism, indicating a path in which God or gods are not the central concern, is the correct theological term, but it caused confusion. Many thought it meant a complete absence of gods and god-talk. Thus, we now speak in terms of naturalism, which indicates a methodology where all causes are sought within the natural world, not the supernatural. Gods are viewed as natural entities emerging from human psychology and culture.*

[1] "Paganism" can also be used more broadly to mean virtually any non-Abrahamic religion, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Shinto, etc. While the

value of these traditions is acknowledged, it becomes extremely difficult to make any valid generalizations about Paganism at such a broad level. Thus, I restrict myself to European forms. Even within Europe, there is a wide variety of different traditions that should be carefully distinguished. Mixing and matching generally produces superficial results, so the Humanistic Pagan would be well-advised to stick to a single culture with a single pantheon or mythology, such as Norse, Greek, Gaelic, Roman, etc., within any given ritual or meditation.

[2] Indeed, such a resurgence is already underway. For a good primer on the modern Pagan revival see Margot Adler's Drawing Down the Moon, and for a broad account of Paganism from ancient to modern times, see Jones and Pennick's A History of Pagan Europe.

[3] Non-European roots of Humanism are also acknowledged. Confucianism, for example, is a particularly venerable tradition basically Humanistic in outlook. Also, it should be noted that Classical Greek Humanism was significantly different from modern forms of Humanism, as was Renaissance Humanism. All these should be considered historical strata contributing to the overall character of modern Humanism.

[4] While some Pagans today do assert the real, independent existence of deities, many others do not. Both literal and metaphorical interpretations have precedents going back millennia, all the way to Classical times. Thus, Humanistic Pagans should be aware of and sensitive to those who interpret deities literally, but know that neither interpretation has any more claim to the "real" Pagan tradition.

[5] This is not to imply that a life without mythology is necessarily incomplete, only that a life with it opens certain doors, just as an artist's life is certainly enriched in ways not so for those with no interest or inclination to create art. Mythology enriches the lives of those inclined to it.

## **Resources**

ACLU – fighting to preserve freedom of thought

American Humanist Association – a national organization of Humanists  
Center for Spiritual Atheism – project to unify spiritual atheists  
Druidic Order of Naturalists – Celtic-inspired organization of naturalists  
Naturalistic Paganism – Yahoo! Group for naturalistic pagans  
Planet Humanism – blogroll of Humanist and Humanism-related blogs  
Reason and Reverence, by William Murray, at UUWorld.org  
Spiritual Humanism – organization promoting religion based on science and reason, with ordination available  
The Humanist – a magazine of critical inquiry and social concern  
Theoi Greek Mythology – comprehensive and historically accurate encyclopedia of Greek mythology  
World Pantheism Movement – community of naturalistic pantheists with an active Ning.

### **3 comments**

# OF CONSEQUENCE AND WONDER: THE “WHY’S” OF

## HUMANISTIC PAGANISM

BY C LUKE MULA

10.16.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHAT DO WE MEAN?

FOURFOLD PATH: ALL

ELEMENT: AIR

A good deal of discussion goes on here about what Humanistic Paganism is exactly, and how we put it into practice in our lives. These are good and necessary things to talk about, but what I don't see much talk of is why we identify with or adhere to Humanistic Paganism. In other words, what could possibly be rewarding about the types of practices that Humanistic Paganism prescribes? What is the practitioner getting out of it?

I want to look into this question today and discuss some of the implications of the answer. Before we do, though, let's recap the Fourfold Path real quick.

First, there's **Exploration of the Five +1**. This principle is about exploring the world around us with our five senses and the world within us through introspection. Through these we can construct both an empirically-testable understanding of the external world and a semi-empirical, semi-testable understanding of the internal world.

Next, there's **Relationship with Mythology**. This is about identifying with the mythological, becoming intimately familiar with it, and incorporating it into our life development.

Third, there's **Responsible Action**. This is about seeing what problems we as

humans have caused in the world and taking the responsibility to fix those problems, while at the same time being conscious enough to prevent further problems.

Finally, there's **A Sense of Wonder**. This is about never letting the majesty of nature cease to fascinate and inspire us.

Okay, that's simple enough, but do these tell us why we're dedicating ourselves to these principles?

I think that before we look at what we're getting out of HP, we need to look at what we're putting into it. That means understanding what types of actions we are taking when we put HP into practice in our lives.

## **Being and doing**

Looking back to the Fourfold Path, we can see that there are two basic types of practices in Humanistic Paganism.

The first is simply **exploring**. Exploratory practices take an absolute focus on the moment, a forgetting of goals and drives, a simple act of being. These types of practices are about engaging the senses and exploring them to the fullest. They are about experiencing for the sake of the experience, for reveling in the substance of it, and for celebrating the fact that something simply *is*. For an excellent example of this type of practice, check out Thomas Schenk's article on [bicycle meditation](#).

The second type of practice is **making a difference**. This is the practice described by Responsible Action, and it is primarily about making consequential decisions. To fully take part in this element of the Fourfold Path, it isn't enough to see an

issue and do something insignificant about it; instead, we are called to truly make a difference in the world with our actions, to leave this earth and our fellow human beings significantly better than we found them. Here we are presented with the premise of “humans cause most of their own problems,” and we are required to respond to that premise with our very lives, an aspect of Humanistic Paganism I’d like to see talked about more often.

### **Of consequence and wonder**

Now, with those two types of practices in our grasp, can we finally answer the question, “Why Humanistic Paganism?” I believe we can, and I believe that the answer lies in the two different senses of meaning you get from the practices of HP.

The first type of meaningful experience you can get out of Humanistic Paganism is the real **sense of consequence** from making a difference in the world. Seeing tangible consequences manifest as a result of our own personal decisions is an extremely fulfilling and meaningful experience, and it is why humanism in general has been able to become such a widespread movement. Even more, by taking responsible action, we create a story with our lives and forge new mythology with our very existence.

The second type of meaning we can get out of Humanistic Paganism is what is described in the final element of the Fourfold Path: a **sense of wonder**. This sense of wonder is a direct result of exploratory practices, and it only comes about by focusing solely on an experience for the sake of the experience. Through exploration, we can truly feel the wonder of the world; in it, instead of just thinking, we know the universe to be wonderful. The mystery of living consumes our senses, and our life is filled to the brim with meaning, even if but for a moment.

## Putting it into practice

The thing about these two types of action and meaning is that they are mutually exclusive: you cannot fully commit to exploration and in the same instance fully commit to making consequential decisions.<sup>(1)</sup> Because of this, you have three options in putting Humanistic Paganism into practice.

First, you may want to emphasize the consequential aspects of it, and focus on taking responsible action in the world, with exploration playing a supporting role. Through this, you still have more of a sense of wonder than through adhering only to consequential practices, and you can understand your life story in a more poetic form than the consequential by itself would normally allow.

On the other hand, you may want to emphasize the exploratory aspects of Humanistic Paganism. In this approach, making consequential decisions takes a backseat to simply experiencing life. If a problem comes up that needs addressing, you'll address it, but here you don't go out of your way to take responsible action. The sense of wonder is placed first and foremost.

Finally, you may want to fully balance exploration with making a difference. And this is the tricky one. Because exploring and making a difference are fundamentally different types of actions, it is extremely easy to get lost in one and forget about the other. That means that if you really want to balance the two types of actions, you need to develop some practices in order to do so.

And that's what I want to discuss here. So let's jump into it.

First how are you practicing HP? Are you emphasizing one type of practice over the other, or are you balancing them?



And second, if you are balancing the two, what are some concrete examples of how you're doing that?

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(1) For an introduction into why I make this claim, check out [Daniel Kahneman's TED talk](#) on the riddle of memory vs. experience, or look into Ian McGilchrist's book [The Master and His Emissary](#).

**38 comments**

## B. PRACTICE



PHOTO BY ALEX ROBINSON

Each of the pieces in this section deal in one way or another with practical techniques and applications. While there are many more practices (a near infinite list, potentially) available, these give the briefest hint of how practice may play out in a naturalistic context like that of HP.

## WHAT DOES YOUR PRACTICE LOOK LIKE?

BY ELI EFFINGER-WEINTRAUB

08.28.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHY DO IT?

FOURFOLD PATH: RELATIONSHIP WITH MYTHOLOGY

ELEMENT: FIRE

I have both practice and *practice*. I practice the small, daily and seasonal rituals that form the face of pretty much all religions, and I also have more long-term habits that reflect the spine of my personal spiritual beliefs.

### **Practice**

Every morning when I wake up, I say good morning to place. I say:

“Good morning, Cosmos; good morning, Milky Way; good morning, solar system,” and so on down to “good morning, Eli.”

When I get in bed each night, I say my goodnights in reverse.

I say this grace before meals:

“Thank you to the plants and animals whose lives were taken to feed my body; someday, my body will feed your descendants. Thank you to the people who made this food and brought it to me; **may we continue to nourish each other in ways that sustain this beautiful and sacred living planet.**”

I have other small practices throughout the day, mostly tied to mindfulness and intentionality, the bedrocks of my beliefs.

## ***And practice***

Because we started out Wiccan, my wife and I honor the Wiccan Sabbats and Esbats as logical reflections of natural cycles. Our celebrations range from full-out ecstatic ritual, complete with circle-casting, divination, and power raising to simply going for a walk to appreciate what's in bloom, what the weather's like, or what the crazed neighborhood squirrels are up to.

I also try, inasmuch as a black-thumbed urbanite can, to live in balance with the living world around me. I choose local, seasonal, organic foods whenever possible. I compost and recycle. I grow a few food plants. In clement weather, I challenge myself to have as many car-free days as possible – and to expand my definition of “clement weather” to include as many days as possible. I donate my time, money, and energy to organizations whose work aligns with my values.

The place where these two types of practice most overlap for me is in cycling. I recently wrote a whole blog post about the [spiritual aspects of cycling](#). It is **a reflection of my deepest beliefs about the nature of the sacred and my part in it, and a ritual in itself.**

I get all swoony just thinking about it!

*Eli Effinger-Weintraub also talks about her practice of naturalistic spellcraft in a recent interview at [The Secular Buddhist](#).*

*So there you have it. Now, readers, how about your response?*

*What does your practice look like?*

## **35 comments**

## BICYCLE MEDITATION

BY THOMAS SCHENK

09.25.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHY DO IT?

FOURFOLD PATH: EXPLORATION OF THE FIVE +1

ELEMENT: FIRE

I love to wake early on a Sunday morning and go for a bike ride. Unlike the many people who pass me as I plod along, I do not ride for exercise or any other discernible purpose. I have no particular destination, and no timetable. I ride just to explore and look at the world, for though I have been exploring and looking for nearly five decades, I still find the world incredibly interesting and beautiful.

### **In the flow**

I live in a city, and sometimes I ride through industrial areas or train yards, sometimes I ride through residential areas, and sometime I ride in parks or out to the countryside. The distinction between natural and man-made is not of much use to me as I ride along; what's there is there, and what's there is what I am interested in seeing.

On some of these days, **I become unaware of time and unconcerned with distance** as I ride. Hours and miles pass by, and I am absorbed in the sheer joy of exploring the world. But inevitably, at some point this changes, and I start to desire to get home (this usually happens after I start back and hit the inevitable hill, for I live in a high part of town). The moment I want to be home, the entire quality of the experience changes.

In that duration when I am unaware of time and unconcerned with distance, I

am exactly where I want to be. The moment that I want to be somewhere else, I become acutely aware of time and distance. Up to that moment the miles passed effortlessly; after it the miles become an obstacle, and I am keenly aware of the amount of effort required to overcome them. Whereas I had been completely content with where I was, suddenly I'm no longer content.

### **Between cycling and eternity**

The 6<sup>th</sup> Century Zen poet Seng-ts'an wrote:

“Do not like, do not dislike, all will then be clear. Make a hair's-breadth difference, and heaven and earth are set apart.”

The gulf between nirvana and samsara, I suggest, is precisely the gulf between these two experiences of bike riding. To be absolutely fulfilled in what you are doing, so that there is not a hair's-breadth of desire to be anywhere else or doing anything else – that is nirvana. To have that hair's-breadth of desire, or an ocean's width of desire – that is samsara.

The mystics through the ages have spoken of a place beyond the concerns of time and space, and what they are talking about is nothing more than a Sunday morning bike ride. They have spoken of a place of suffering, and what they are talking about is nothing more than the itch to get further on down the road. People through the ages have misunderstood them. They thought this place beyond the concerns of time and space, which they call eternity, must be altogether outside this world.

But instead, it is **to be fully and completely in this world.**

What better place to ride a bike than here and now?

7 comments

## DEITIES AS ROLE MODELS

BY ELI EFFINGER-WEINTRAUB

11.20.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHY DO IT?

FOURFOLD PATH: RELATIONSHIP WITH MYTHOLOGY

ELEMENT: FIRE

For months, I'd been trying to develop a relationship with a sun goddess. One day, I looked at the sun and thought, *Why am I bothering with sun goddesses, when the sun is real and right there?*

In my personal practice, I skip the intermediary and go for the thing, albeit often a highly symbolized "the thing": the sun isn't just a miasma of incandescent plasma; it's a miasma of incandescent plasma with Something to Teach Me about nonjudgmental perception and honest communication.

But deity can have other resonance for me.

### **Deities as role models**

In group ritual and practice, where deities pop up more frequently, I perceive them as über role models of whatever I need to call forth in myself. If I'm having trouble getting my life in order, who better to look to than Apollo, the freakin' god of order? I have within me everything I need to get my act together – or, at least, I have within me the *keys* to getting everything I need to get my act together – but sometimes an external metaphor helps me focus.

### **Embodying the role model**

This is how I handle aspecting, of which we do a goodly amount in the



Reclaiming tradition. Aspecting, like Drawing Down the Moon, allows ritualists to bring the energy of a deity, spirit, ancestor, or concept (like “Power” or “Community”) into themselves. I’ve done it several times over the years, and, yes, even before I openly identified as a naturalist, it felt like talking to imaginary friends. Amazing sensations of presence filled me, yet I felt that that presence came from within me, rather than being a visitation by an external being.

If invoking a deity in ritual provides external focus for my goals, then aspecting calls forth those qualities within myself and makes them larger than life. It’s “fake it till you make it”: if I want to act more compassionately, wearing the infinitely compassionate face of Kwan Yin for an hour or so may go a long way toward evoking and enhancing the compassion within me.

### **Participating in the community**

This view sometimes creates friction between myself and supernaturalistic Pagans who liken aspecting more to an old-school possession experience, or who give gods and goddesses the same weight of reality as their children and the mayor of their town. But I find the approach beneficial in my personal practice, and it allows me to participate more fully in public ritual and appreciate the diversity of practice and belief that Pagan community offers, rather than staying home, closing myself to the possibilities of deific inclusion, and saying, “Oh, god. Gods.”

### **33 comments**

## SYMBOLS IN THE SKY

BY B. T. NEWBERG

10.09.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHY DO IT?

FOURFOLD PATH: RELATIONSHIP WITH MYTHOLOGY

ELEMENT: WATER

I double-checked my suit pocket: yes, the rings were there. Everything was ready. I just had to take the trash out before we left to join our lives together.

Checklists ran through my head as I walked into the alley.

“Woah!”

Something swooped down onto the lamppost, and it wasn’t the typical crow or pigeon.

The speckled breast, the hook-shaped beak, the grasping talons...

“A hawk!”

It wasn’t an everyday sight in the heart of Minneapolis.

The beast shifted its weight from foot to foot, shuffled its feathers.

I noted that hawks were closely related to kites, a bird sacred to my patron goddess, Isis. There were few kites in Minnesota, so if Isis wanted to send a message she might have to use a hawk.

That brought a self-ridiculing smile across my face, as I teased myself for

wanting the sight to have special significance. As if it were meant just for me.

Then another burst of feathers swooped down to land beside the other.

Wow, two hawks. You never see that. They must be mates.

The symbolism was too perfect: on the morning of my wedding day, a bird like the one sacred to my goddess is joined by its mate. What are the odds!

### **Omens above**

The idea that bird sightings can have special significance belongs to an ancient tradition called ornithomancy, a kind of omenry. It was one of the great divinatory arts of the ancient world. Meaning was seen in the flight of birds.

In Homer's Iliad, for example, there is a famous dispute over a bird sighting. Just as the Trojan soldiers attempt to overtake their enemies' rampart, an eagle appears grasping a serpent in its talons. The serpent bites the eagle, causing it to let go and fly off without food for its young. The Trojan Polydamas thinks this means they would not take the rampart, but Hector dismisses it, saying:

"Fight for your country – that is the best, the only omen!" (Iliad, Book XII, 281, trans. Robert Fagles)

So who is right? Polydamas believes there is a special message intended just for them, a message which predicts the future. Hector shrugs it off, confident in our human ability to create our own future.

Polydamas' view was common in ancient Greece. Henri Frankfort believes this was how the natural world appeared to ancient humanity. During the myth-

making, or *mythopoeic* stage of our history, prior to the emergence of philosophy and modern science, significance filled every event. **It was as if nature were talking directly to us.**

Today we see things differently. Natural events are impersonal. There is no special message for us. The bird may have some intention, like finding its next meal, but nothing that concerns us.

So who did I agree with on that morning of my wedding, Polydamas or Hector?

It could have been anyone witnessing those two hawks on the lamppost, or no one at all. It just happened to be me. With Hector, I might put confidence only in myself.

Yet it was the morning of my wedding. The timing was just too perfect. There was an urge in me to find personal meaning in it, like Polydamas. Was that crazy?

### **The sky inside**

What did the Trojans see when they caught sight of the eagle? What did I see when I noticed the two hawks?

When we looked up at those birds, we were actually looking down into ourselves. What we saw was the sky inside.

There is a part of ourselves beyond the reach of conscious direction. It's the part that throws up dream images in the night, and pops ideas into your head during the day. How did you come up with that clever joke you just cracked? What, you don't know, it just came to you? **That's because a great deal of mental**

**functioning is unconscious.**

One of the most significant functions of the unconscious mind is to find meaning. If you had to consciously decode the meaning of every word in your best friend's story, it would take all day. The unconscious does it for you in a flash. So that deeper part of the mind is quite capable of constructing a meaningful message out of sensory input.

Even the input of two birds on a lamppost? Was my unconscious meaning-maker on overdrive that morning, or what?

I don't think so. Rather, it was sending a message to me – that is, to my conscious mind.

Now, my unconscious didn't arrange for the two hawks to land there. But it *did* arrange for me to notice them.

So it was a message after all. And what it was saying was, "Hey – wake up! Get your head in the right mindset. Today is *meaningful* to us."

I was about to get married, and where was my mind? Going over checklists. Is that what I wanted going through my head as I said *I do*? I needed to slow down, take a breath, and recognize the meaning of the day.

The best way to get me to do that, apparently, was to project meaning onto the birds. What would otherwise have been a curiosity became a symbol.

In the same way, the Trojans received messages from their unconscious minds. In the heat of battle, with their lives at stake, they were desperate for meaning. The more skiddish among them, like Polydamas, saw their own fear projected.

Hector, on the other hand, felt no meaning projected onto the bird sighting. Fear was not what his unconscious needed him to see in that moment. Instead, it showed him just what he needed: confidence in his own two hands. Empowered thus, he led the charge that smashed the rampart to pieces.

What my unconscious showed me was also just what I needed. The day was sacred, so I was shown a sacred symbol.

In a flash, my mind went from chatter to silence. And a sense of the sacred filled my being.

I was getting *married*.

### **Symbols in the sky**

There are messages for us in the sky. We see the symbol up there, but it comes from in here.

Bird omenry can be a powerful way to develop a sense of awe and wonder at our world. We need only remember where the message is really coming from: the deepest part of ourselves. **Whenever we look outside for meaning, we also look within.**

The unconscious is greater than us, beyond our conscious control and perception. It is at our very root, and its messages show us who we are. It is where the gods live.

Polydamas thought the gods sent the eagle to them, but perhaps the gods sent them to the eagle. They made them notice what was already there, and project meaning onto it. Each saw what was inside them, whether fear or confidence.

Polydamas' mistake was not so much that he saw meaning in a natural event, but that he thought it could control his destiny. Hector avoided that, knowing full well fate was in his hands.

A sign from within cannot predict the future, but it can influence it through our own actions. If I had not seen those two hawks, perhaps my mind would have been less open, and the ceremony might have gone differently. If Hector had not felt confidence in his bones, instead of fear in the sky, the battle may have been lost.

To create the best outcome, both of us needed to see what was inside us at that very moment.

Divination doesn't tell the future, it tells the present.

And in so doing, it gives you a chance to change the future with your own two hands.

**13 comments**

# TO BUILD A FIRE: THE SPIRITUAL ART OF SOCIALIZATION

BY B. T. NEWBERG

06.05.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: IS IT RESPONSIBLE?

FOURFOLD PATH: RESPONSIBLE ACTION

ELEMENT: EARTH

“You don’t really think that’s going to work do you?” said my dad. I had arranged the twigs, kindling, and birch bark in a tepee, just exactly so, and he came along and tossed newspaper and wood haphazardly all over my precious creation. I could feel irritation rising. “This from the guy who says he’s uncomfortable in the woods,” I shot back. He looked stung. At that moment, I knew the conversation had taken a wrong turn.

We were up in the North Woods of Minnesota for a family event at a lakeside cabin thirty-minutes’ drive from the nearest tar road. My dad, who feels claustrophobic in the forest, had graciously consented to come along at mom’s request. Building the fire in the yard was a job we both volunteered for – a great opportunity for father-son bonding, right? But straight off the bat, the “bonding” was driving us both crazy.

Family bonding is just one example of a larger topic I want to talk about today: socialization. Interacting with others, whether through conversation or shared activities, presents an excellent opportunity for spiritual practice. The art of listening, empathizing, and perspective-taking can be a powerful means of growth. At the same time, it can go wrong.

Each time my father put a new piece of wood on the infant fire, I carefully moved it so it wouldn’t block off the airflow. Meanwhile, I was noting how he had to control everything, had to be the “alpha male” – perhaps especially because he felt uncomfortable in the woods. *Aha, I thought, maybe he’s over-compensating for*



*his lack of confidence in this environment.* But it wasn't just him, it was me too. The more he tried to control the fire, the more I wanted it to be *my* fire. What irritated me most was that his haphazard technique actually seemed to be working. The more he piled on the wood, the more the flame leaped up. At that point, I conceded the battle and went inside the cabin.

What could have been a bonding experience turned out to be just another chore. What could have been a moment of spiritual growth was anything but. What had gone wrong?

### **Turning, *daimons*, and the goddess *Ate***

Existential theologian Martin Buber calls the failure of two individuals to fully engage with each other a *mismeeting*. Inhibited by self-centered preoccupations, they remain isolated individuals. In contrast, if two turn to each other completely, then there may arise between them a presence that is neither the one nor the other, but a genuine meeting. This is the oft-quoted *I-Thou* relationship for which Buber is famous. It is also the bonding that could have happened between my father and I, but didn't.

A meeting requires a double turning: a turning away from self-centered preoccupation and a turning toward the other. What held my dad and I back was the self-centered need to control the fire and whatever it may have represented. Fixated on this need, we failed to see what the *other* needed. A better approach would start by turning away from this preoccupation. This does not mean ignoring one's feelings, but rather seeing them in the big picture. To turn away is to make room for something other than preoccupation.

Of course, turning away from such preoccupation would necessitate being aware of it in the first place. Aye, there's the rub: so often we are unconscious of our

feelings until it's too late. That is why mindfulness of the Five +1 is so important. By paying attention not only to the outer world (through the *Five* senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch) but also to our thoughts and feelings (the +1 of the *Five +1*), we can keep better tabs on our emotional state and thus on our readiness to turn toward the other. If we are not conscious of our emotions, they tend to dominate our behavior.

An internal state or structure that dominates to the exclusion of all others is what existential psychologist Rollo May calls a *daimon*. This term he takes from the ancient Greek word for a spirit, which originally meant any divine being. To be dominated by a *daimon* is thus to be in the grip of a god. Like possession by a spirit, emotion can possess us. This is wonderful when it is a positive emotion, such as joy or compassion. On the other hand, there are less positive emotions. To be possessed by the *daimon* of control is to be temporarily incapable of relinquishing control. My father and I were kept apart by our respective *daimons*.

The way to escape possession is to become aware of it. Once raised to consciousness through mindful awareness, the *daimon* loses possession of us. It flitters off into the shadows from whence it came. Or to put it more precisely, it assumes a balanced, as opposed to dominating, role in our psyche. The balanced state enables normal rational consciousness as well as the ability to look past preoccupations and see the other person.

A *daimon* played a role in one of the most famous mism meetings of Western literature, that of Achilles and King Agamemnon in Homer's *Iliad*. The conflict between the two is finally resolved when the king relinquishes the woman he stole from Achilles. Instead of admitting wrong, however, he explains his actions by claiming his mind was clouded by Ate, the personification of madness, delusion, and infatuation:

Zeus, Fate, and the Fury stalking through the night,  
*they* are the ones who drove that savage madness in my heart,  
that day in assembly when I seized Achilles' prize—  
on my own authority, true, but what could *I* do?  
A god impels all things to their fulfillment (Fagles translation, 19.101-105)

Ate (rendered here as “madness”) is a *daimon* who takes away the wits of men and sends them down a path of reckless impulse. After being cast out of Olympus for causing trouble, she wandered the world, treading on the heads of people rather than on the ground. Agamemnon claims the gods drove her into his heart, and that's why he did what he did to offend. Is this a way of dodging responsibility? Maybe, but I don't think so. The king is actually saving face in a culturally-acceptable context. For him to plead madness is to say he will not do it again, for he would never have done it were it not for that divine influence. In any case, he is turning from his self-centered preoccupation and toward genuine dialogue with Achilles.

The way to counter the power of Ate, according to myth, is by that of the Litae, which personify prayer. The Litae are daughters of Zeus who follow Ate, but being old and lame of foot they are easily outrun by the one they follow. If Ate can be seen as self-centered preoccupation and the Litae as turning away from this and toward dialogue (which is akin to prayer), then the advice agrees with Buber. The spiritual task is to turn from that which consumes us by mindfully cultivating a more balanced state, then turning toward the other in a spirit of genuine communication.

**A meditation on mindfulness of Ate can be found here.**

**To build a fire**

Building relationship is a lot like building a fire. You can't just do it with half a mind, like turning on a light switch. You have to turn to it, and ask yourself what it needs to catch fire and then to flourish. You have to stoke it to keep it going. And when you've done that, you've got more than just a source of warmth. You have a presence, a flickering, burning, wonderful presence. In the case of my father and I, the wood caught fire, but the relationship was sputtering.

Fortunately, that wasn't the only relationship built that weekend. My family and I enjoyed three days of meaningful bonding in the North Woods. The fire-building incident proved the exception rather than the rule. On the last day, we worked together to plant a garden in front of the cabin in memory of Grandma and Granddad, who had both passed on in the last year. Quietly helping out toward a common goal, turned away from self-centeredness and toward each other, we created a presence. The garden was an outward sign of it, but that's not the presence I'm talking about. Rather, it was a presence between us, a palpable sense of communion. Without self-centered preoccupation, without possession by *daimons*, without the troublesome goddess Ate, relationship flourished. It was the *I-Thou* relationship of which Buber spoke. It was the presence of the *Litae*. It was a genuine meeting.

# TEN YEARS AFTER 9/11: WORLD POLITICS IS AN EXISTENTIAL CONDITION

BY B. T. NEWBERG

09.11.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: IS IT RESPONSIBLE?

FOURFOLD PATH: RESPONSIBLE ACTION

ELEMENT: EARTH

Ten years after 9/11, what place has politics in your spirituality? Are you doing rituals outside your state capitol? Or do you separate politics from your spirituality? Or do you just say to hell with it all?

Please take part in the poll below.

Click to [take the poll.](#)

No doubt a great variety of answers may come of this question. Spirituality strides the gulf of opinion from activist to cynic, and always has.

Yet I wonder if it is genuinely possible anymore to *not* have an opinion. There may have been a time when isolation, whether by mountain ridges or suburban picket fences, blessed us with the luxury of indifference. Recent events make that no longer possible.

The fact of the matter is that today, world politics is an existential condition. Each and every one of us cannot help but confront it sooner or later.

The attacks of September 11th showed the world, especially those of us who thought we were safe in our backyard pools and SUVs, that there is no more

isolation. Like it or not, the dilemmas of world politics are our dilemmas.

It only makes sense, then, that any spiritual path worth its salt must reply to world politics. Whether it be civic duty, civil disobedience, or anarchic unrest, some response is demanded. How will you respond?

To put the question in perspective, we may do well to consider it in the long view of history.

### **Politics and spirit in the ancient world**

There was no one dominant view toward politics in the ancient world. Spiritual traditions ran the gamut from political engagement to studied detachment.

It must be recognized, first of all, that although today we have separation of church and state, in the ancient world there was little or no distinction between the two. The mysteries of Isis developed from rituals for the sole benefit of the Pharaoh, and politicians in Greece and Rome regularly consulted the Oracle of Delphi for advice. So it was not easy to sort obligations to government from those to gods.

Yet that did not mean all were politically engaged. A wide variety of opinions obtained. We could survey a vast span from Druid lawyers to Indian ascetics, but let's just take two examples to illustrate the range: Stoics and Epicureans.

From the death of Alexander the Great till the fall of Rome, two of the most popular spiritual philosophies were Stoicism and Epicureanism. These had radically opposing views on politics. Stoics were deeply involved, Epicureans, detached.

## The Stoic View

The Stoics considered themselves *cosmopolitans*, or citizens of the world. They felt an obligation toward their brethren, and advocated clemency toward slaves. The turbulence of politics was weathered with indifference, and all satisfaction lied in performing with virtue. The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, a personal diary never intended for publication, betrays a thoughtful emperor striving to do his duty amidst the harry of constant war with tribes to the north.

## The Epicurean View

In contrast, the Epicureans felt politics a stormy sea best avoided. The good life minimized suffering and maximized tranquility, and the best way to do that was to steer clear of the unpredictable tides of fortune. Instead, they lived lives of simplicity. Epicurus maintained a garden home outside Athens – not a monastery, but something close to a commune – to which he invited friends for meals of bread, water, and conversation. Within his social circle he was a radical proponent of change, admitting both women and slaves to his school. Yet public politics he studiously avoided.

These opposing poles of involvement and detachment represent the gamut of the ancient world. A ready parallel from China can be seen in the involved Confucian and the detached Taoist. Other ancient traditions can be located somewhere along this spectrum.

## Politics and spirit in the modern world

A similar span can be seen today. There are both Thai forest hermits and engaged Buddhists like Thich Nhat Hanh. Within Neopaganism, there are such dedicated activists as Starhawk as well as those who eschew politics altogether.

There are also anarchic views like this one.

As for Humanism, there has long been a political streak. Humanist Manifestoes I, II, and III lay out broad goals of world peace and prosperity. The American Civil Liberties Union enjoys few greater supporters than Humanists. Yet political office remains largely closed to them. At present, there is only one openly-nontheist politician in the United States Congress. This no doubt leaves many Humanists understandably jaded.

The spectrum from involvement to detachment remains the case even in today's global village. Yet the events of September 11th re-open the question.

### **Spirituality ten years after 9/11**

It is now a decade after nearly 3000 people were killed in the attacks on the World Trade Towers. In the time since, more than 100,000 civilians died in America's war in Iraq, and thousands more in Afghanistan. With the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq, the fall of Osama bin Laden, and the revolutions of the Arab Spring, it may seem that the storm is finally over.

But that is not the case.

The stage is set for the next act in a theater of war. Al Qaeda remains, and U.S. armed forces are now rehearsing for possible action against cells in Yemen and Somalia.

Somalia in particular hits home for me. Standing on my street corner in Minneapolis (nicknamed "Little Mogadishu"), I can see several Somali restaurants. And as a teacher of English as a Second Language, many of my students are Somali. It is more than an idle fear for me that a war in Somalia



could turn the American public against them.

While I've never been an activist *per se*, it's hard to stand by while people you know are under threat. This has led me to raise awareness about admirable Somali figures. There's Hawa Abdi, for example – Somalia's first gynecologist and current leader of a camp of 90,000 refugees. There's her daughter, Deqo Mohammed, who fights against the practice of recruiting child soldiers. And then there's Sada Mire, the country's only remaining archaeologist still braving the chaos.

The American public is now far more educated about Islam than it was ten years ago. One might think this would lead to better interfaith relations, but that may not be the case. Muslims in America are divided on whether all their efforts at education have done any good.

Yet that is not the death knell for peace and understanding. Interfaith efforts have increased, a summit of religious leaders is underway in New York, and a 9/11 Unity Walk is marching in Washington, D.C. The Humanist Chaplaincy at Harvard is holding an interfaith community service event. And many Pagans across the country are no doubt lighting candles at this moment, as in the 9/11 Ritual for Tolerance and Remembrance.

Are these efforts meaningful, or all in vain? Should we engage politics like the Stoics, or intentionally retire from the circus like the Epicureans?

One thing is certain: post-9/11, we're all a lot more aware of the *immediacy* of the problem. No longer can we rock in our chairs at home while wars rage on foreign soil. September Eleventh brought it to our front door. For good or ill, we no longer enjoy the luxury of indifference.

World politics is an existential condition. There is nowhere left to escape it. In the year 2011, no one does not feel its effects, and no one can afford to be ignorant of it. As such, it makes sense that any spiritual worldview must take a stance on world politics. Whether we choose to respond to it with involvement or detachment, a choice is necessary.

And the choice can be strikingly counter-intuitive. Take, for example, Patti Quigley and Susan Retik. These two women, both pregnant, lost their husbands in the 9/11 attacks. Stricken with grief, they decided the best way to make sense of it all was to raise money for war widows in Afghanistan. Rather than seek revenge, they empathized with those facing the same crisis but on the opposing side. How's that for a contemporary answer to world politics?

### **To be or not to be... political**

So, ten years after 9/11, what do *you* say? Do you stand by the Stoics, weathering tribulations with virtue and striving for justice? Or do you take to the Epicurean garden in search of serenity? Or is there a third way?

I would love to hear where you stand.

[10 comments](#)

## C. A RETREAT



PHOTO BY B. T. NEWBERG

One of the first projects after beginning Humanistic Paganism was to put its principles into action. A seven-day home retreat tested whether HP could be put to effective use in daily life.

The following articles follow the retreat day by day, each time elaborating on key principles. For a critical appraisal of the retreat, see [Nontheistic ritual: Is it effective?](#)

# WORDS INTO ACTION: A HUMANISTIC PAGAN RETREAT

BY B. T. NEWBERG

05.08.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHAT DO WE MEAN?

FOURFOLD PATH: RESPONSIBLE ACTION

ELEMENT: FIRE

It is time to put words into action. I am taking the coming week, starting tomorrow, as a seven-day Humanistic Paganism retreat. This comes at a time of great stress in my life, as well as great potential. I hope to recover a sense of calm, become centered, and put into practice the principles of Humanistic Paganism. This will serve as a trial of the validity of this new path. It will also explain the path in greater detail by way of concrete example.

## **Goals**

1. release stress and achieve wellness after an extremely demanding graduate program
2. put principles of Humanistic Paganism into practice

## **Daily Schedule**

Each day will follow the schedule below.

### **Dawn (5:20 am)**

wake at dawn

observe sunrise on veranda at 5:53 am

water libation

yoga

Fire, Ice, and Fog meditation

## **Day**

exercise and time in nature – a different park each day

one good deed each day

Household chores

Exploratory, reflective, or creative free time

Wednesday morning only – therapy

## **Dusk (9:00 pm)**

Observe sunset on veranda at 8:26 pm

cook dinner

social time with my fiancé and/or close friends

journal reflection

water libation

Divination for following day

## **Night**

Deep relaxation meditation

Sleep

You'll notice this schedule dedicates time to socialization. Some may find this peculiar. Many spiritual retreats emphasize the aloneness of the retreatant, temporarily cutting off contact from the social world. I find solitude an important element in the retreat process, and most of my day will be spent alone. However, complete solitude may be contrary to the spirit of Humanistic Paganism, which emphasizes human needs and potential. "Man is a social animal" said Aristotle. Humanistic Paganism does not aim to isolate individuals from that inherent social need. Epicurus valued socialization so much he'd rather not eat than eat alone, and Martin Buber made dialogue the centerpiece of his existential spirituality. Humanistic Paganism does not seek a journey away from the world, but toward it. The Humanistic Pagan functions within the world, including the social world. The goal is not transcendence but resonance. Thus, this experimental retreat grounds experience in socialization each evening.

## Incorporation of the Four-fold Path of Humanistic Paganism

The schedule incorporates all four elements of the Humanistic Pagan path, as shown below:

1. Dedication to the Five +1 – meditation, time in nature, empirical framework of interpretation
2. Relationship with mythology – libation, divination
3. Responsible action – one good deed per day, social time with significant other
4. A sense of wonder – unplanned, spontaneous, but encouraged by time in nature and journal reflection

## Displacements

In addition, I'm undertaking a number of what I will call *displacements*. By this I mean special practices that displace the *status quo*, disrupting the ordinary flow of routine in daily life. Almost all mystical and initiatory religions employ such displacements, but they are typically phrased misleadingly as moral or purificatory injunctions. These function as signals to the mind that something outside the ordinary is afoot, leading to heightened awareness and openness. The displacements I will undertake are presented below.

- waking at dawn
- abstaining from junk food, sweets, coffee, and alcohol
- carrying a token, to be sought and found in nature on the first day; the token will be carried on my person at all times, then cast into the Mississippi River on the last day, signalling release from displacements and completion of the retreat

With any luck, this pattern of goals, scheduled activities, and displacements will produce a significant spiritual experience. I'll be posting each day on my experiences and challenges along the way.

**2 comments**



## RETREAT, DAY ONE: DIVINATION AND RITUAL

BY B. T. NEWBERG

05.09.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHAT DO WE MEAN?

FOURFOLD PATH: RELATIONSHIP WITH MYTHOLOGY

ELEMENT: FIRE

Today is the first day of a seven-day Humanistic Pagan retreat. Each day I'll concentrate on describing one or two key experiences or activities. Today I'll talk about divination and ritual.

### **Divination**

*What do I need to see to make the most of tomorrow?*, I quietly asked while shuffling the deck. Then I turned over a card from the Haindl Tarot. It was the Three of Wands: Virtue.

I find that tarot cards, far from telling the future, tell about the mind. The evocative cards spur a creative process. Associations leap as the mind interprets their meaning, and what results may reveal hitherto hidden thoughts and feelings, or generate new ones. Card selection is random, and each card is rich enough to apply to nearly any situation. The game of divination is essentially an exercise in lateral thinking.

The card that came up this time was the Three of Wands: Virtue. It suggests the power of character. My mind associated it with the virtues of willpower, creativity, and integrity which will help me respond productively to this retreat. With this image swirling in my mind, I went to sleep.

### **Ritual**

I woke at dawn, leaving my fiancé to sleep. Emerging from the bedroom, I went out and took in the pale blue sky from my third-story apartment window. I didn't bother turning on the lights, but went straight to my statue of the goddess Isis.

In Egyptian myth, Isis is the archetypal mother and magician. Her husband Osiris is the murdered king and lord of the dead, and her son Horus, the young heir to the throne. She was identified with Demeter, Artemis, Io, and other goddesses of the Graeco-Roman world. I know her as the Veiled Lady from a dream-like experience in which she appeared as a woman with a white veil covering her face, glowing from within. When a wind lifted the veil, it revealed only more darkness beneath. This image fits an inscription on her temple at Sais, reported by Plutarch: "I am all that is, was, and shall be, and no mortal has yet lifted my veil." Ever since, she has been my goddess, even as I withhold belief in the literal existence of gods. I have always been agnostic, and the dream image further confirmed me in that. After all, it suggests that the unknown is the unknown, and that is that. Try as you might to lift the veil of mystery, but all you shall find is more darkness beneath.

I knelt before the statue of Isis, knowing that she represented a part of me, my highest self, and that to kneel is not to submit but to honor that self. Ritual is connecting with deep parts of oneself or the world through dialogue with mythological forms. By communicating outwardly with the forms, one communicates inwardly with the parts of oneself that project onto those forms. I lit a candle, rang a bell three times, then chanted an Egyptian prayer of awakening I'd learned years before. I find chanting calms me, takes me outside my normal frame of reference, and puts me in touch with a voice deep inside. The Pavlovian associations built up over years of such chanting efficiently recall a contemplative state of mind. Today, it had that same effect. I found myself slipping into a calm, relaxed state of concentration in which words could flow

from the heart. After chanting, I poured a libation of water into a cup before the statue. Libation is a kind of ritual, a form of offering common in Ancient Greek, Roman, and other Mediterranean cultures. It consists of the pouring out of a liquid, such as wine, honey, milk, or water, accompanied by a prayer to a deity, ancestor, or spirit. I spoke words to Isis, requesting that I might see what I need to see this week in order to overcome stress and recover my center. As I asked for wisdom and courage, I could feel the grip of stress loosening.



MY ALTAR TO ISIS.

PHOTO BY B. T. NEWBERG

### **The value of divination and ritual**

That morning I felt clear and open. Perhaps it was the excitement of a new experience. When my fiancé came out and joined me for breakfast, I felt like I was genuinely turned toward her with both body and mind. Later I rode my

bike to Minnehaha Falls, enjoying a strenuous but exhilarating ride. When I arrived, I cleaned up trash around the park for my good deed, and found a modest white stone to serve as the token I will carry for the week. It was a good start to the day. Soon, however, I grew uneasy. I had trouble feeling a connection with nature, and instead felt guilt for taking this time for myself. I'm on vacation, but somehow I still feel like I should be working. Irritation grew as the sunny weather turned gray, and the line for food at the park restaurant grew long. I came home feeling like I wasn't really on retreat anymore. My previous habits of mind had resumed.

Last night's tarot card had pointed at virtue. An association leaped to mind, reminding me that the quality of my retreat experience depends on my attitude, my virtues of character. Will I let myself get irritated and depressed, or will I notice these mental habits and change them for the better? This point was reinforced by the homework assigned by my therapist, a reading on self-talk and mental habits. Last night's tarot card aligned with these very challenges of mind. It all stacked up to communicate an important lesson about attitude.

As I write this, it occurs to me that the lesson, though meaningful and true, is utterly cliché: "your experience is what you make of it." If someone had simply told me that, I would have shrugged it off without a second thought (and probably with a cynical smirk). But instead of being told it, I experienced it. That is the value of divination, in my eyes. Through the powers of association and imagination, wisdom wells up from within. A voice speaks, and the experience is personal and meaningful. Forget fortune-telling – even if divination did have the power to tell the future, it would pale in comparison to the power of unlocking one's inner voices.

The value of ritual is similar. Through the outward form of interacting with divine or spiritual entities, an inner voice is awakened. Perhaps the mind is

hardwired to respond to ritual stimuli; a growing body of cognitive research suggests it does. In any case, it has been my experience that enacting ritual conduces to a contemplative state with therapeutic effects. Sometimes a lesson or insight is learned, other times it is simply a feeling. Either way, it is a valuable human experience.

In the end, it makes little difference whether divination tells the future or ritual contacts real-existing beings. A far more interesting question lies in the psychological effects of divination and ritual. Both offer benefits that help human beings realize their potential. By doing so, they help bring about a better, fuller human being.

#### **6 comments**

## RETREAT, DAY TWO: NATURE AND THE FIVE +1

BY B. T. NEWBERG

05.10.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHAT DO WE MEAN?

FOURFOLD PATH: EXPLORATION OF THE FIVE +1

ELEMENT: EARTH

Click to [watch the video](#).

Today I'll talk about spending time in nature, and exploring the Five +1 (fives senses, plus one introspective sense). Befitting the topic, there's extra sensory stimulation in this post: not only images but a video too (click *play* above).

Last night I drew an omen for today (see Day One for a discussion of naturalistic divination). The card that came up was the Nine of Swords: Cruelty, which in the Haindl Tarot signals either suffering or inflicting oppression.

This morning I awoke at dawn to meditate and soon encountered cruelty of a kind. Whereas yesterday I was aglow with excitement for this retreat, today I felt no such thing. I had to drag myself out of bed. Then, as I knelt before my statue of Isis, I thought to myself *Why am I doing this?* and *This is stupid*. I looked out the window, and it looked so rainy out there. *Oh, great. So much for spending time in nature today*. Pretty soon my fiancé, unable to sleep, got up. Suddenly I was filled with nervousness and embarrassment. I usually do ritual alone, because I feel weird doing spiritual practices around other people who don't share the same beliefs. Even my fiancé, who loves and supports me in this, puts me a little on edge. I couldn't concentrate because half my mind was worried about what she might think seeing me chanting in front of a statue of a goddess that I don't even believe is real (see Day One for why I do nontheistic ritual).

That's when I realized I was inflicting a kind of oppression. It wasn't cruelty toward others, but toward myself. The voice of the self-critic was blaring away in my head. From the moment I got up, it had been one vitriol after another. Catching myself thus, I made a decisive decision to change my thinking.

### **Spending time in nature**

Gazing out at the early morning rain, I decided to make the most of it. I went out on the veranda with my camera and started filming. Quickly I grew absorbed in the work. Lightning forked across the sky, and the camera caught it reflected in a puddle forming on the patio table. A rumble of thunder followed, and all my negative feelings disappeared. I stood entranced by the cool pitter-patter of drops on my head, and the smell of fresh rain. When I finally went inside, I went straight to work mixing the clips into a video meditation, which you can see for yourself above.

I had expected the day's nature experience to be a wash (no pun intended), but instead it turned out profound. All it took was a change of attitude. Spiritual practices seem to have the power to catalyze such changes – but I've already talked about that. Now, I want to talk about the world of our senses: the Five +1.

### **The Five +1**

Nature comes to us through five doors: the eyes, ears, tongue, nose, and skin. By the proper application of these five senses, empirical science has developed detailed knowledge of nearly every aspect of our world. The five senses are the keys that unlock knowledge.

But there is another sense that yields knowledge, self-knowledge. The power of introspection, which enables us to perceive feelings, emotions, thoughts, and



mental images, can be thought of as a kind of sense. We don't normally think of it as such here in the West, although Buddhism made that conceptual leap some 2500 years ago. The power of introspection amounts to an additional faculty of sensation. I'll refrain from calling it a "sixth sense", lest it acquire psychic or magical connotations, and instead call it the "+1" in *Five +1*. What I'm talking about is thoroughly ordinary. The extraordinary thing is that we typically pay it so little attention. Other than surface thoughts and gross feelings like hunger, most mental phenomena slip by unnoticed. Further, what little consideration we do give mental processes is often biased or confabulated (see introspection illusion). Often it takes a practice like therapy to help us realize what's really going on deep down. If, however, we conceive of introspection as a faculty of sense, then we are empowered to look inside and discover a new frontier of nature (yes, nature, for we humans are as much a part of nature as stars or toadstools). Just as there are birdwatchers, we can be *thoughtwatchers*. The value of such activity is self-knowledge.

I mentioned earlier that I caught myself thinking negatively this morning, and turned my attitude around. Spiritual practices like meditation and ritual seem to aid in such introspection. In this case, it was the image of last night's tarot card that helped me see the cruelty I was inflicting on myself. Another particularly helpful practice is spending time in natural environs. Walking along a wooded trail, mountain path, or seashore seems to have the effect of calming and quieting the mind. It is then, when the ordinary surface chatter is muted, that deeper thoughts and feelings can well up from below. Insights may arise, or just a simple sense of peace. Nature outside begins to sync with nature inside as the illusion of separateness dissipates. Wholeness permeates the complete world of the *Five +1*.

### **Responsibility, almost**

After the rain stopped, I took my bike on a long ride out to Wirth Park and Quaking Bog, which are almost in the suburbs. Meandering around the wetlands, I found myself getting off my bike and trudging around off-trail. My senses were heightened as I carefully weaved my way around branches, thorns, and fallen logs. A brilliant red cardinal sang above me, and a wild turkey shot through the bushes. Beneath my feet the ground squished and slogged. I had to weigh each step to make sure I didn't sink into the muck. I felt my thought process slow, and my awareness grow, as I adjusted to the pace.

The wetland was littered with plastic bottles, and I started gathering them up as I went along. I had no idea how I was going to carry them out, as I had no bag with me. I just started making piles, partly for the fun of it. Honestly, I actually enjoy picking up trash. I call it trashmonking, because I have this ridiculous vision of monks walking along meditating and picking up trash. In any case, after gathering plastic bottles for a while I came across some plastic bags and ended up carrying three full shopping bags of bottles out of the wetlands.

Feeling proud of myself, I headed home on my bike. Unfortunately, I was a little too proud, and cruised through a crosswalk without noticing the *don't walk* light. A left-turning car honked and the guy behind him shouted, "Hey, don't you know what 'Don't Walk' means?" So, I was a responsible citizen today – almost.

The value of responsibility is several fold. Not only is it good for others around you, it's also good for you. The Humanist Manifesto III boldly affirms the greatest potential for human fulfillment lies in benefiting others. If you don't buy that, there's the simple fact that people need to live together, so preserving the circle of good will and trust is in your own interest. Environmentally, a similar relationship obtains: sustainable living keeps the planet livable for us and our descendants, so it's in our interest to treat the planet well. Finally, there's the generally pleasant feeling that accompanies doing right by others and the world.

I felt a hedonist's delight today as I was hauling trash out of Wirth Park. And when I messed up at the crosswalk, I curtailed the anger I might have felt at the drivers. Using the power of introspection, I was able to notice my feeling of embarrassment, acknowledge it, and gently observe it fade as I went on with my day.

Today began with a bit of cruelty, but a change of attitude opened me to a rewarding experience of nature – first in the rain, then in the park. By the faculty of introspection I sensed awareness growing within, and a sense of peace pervaded the world of the Five +1.

## **RETREAT, DAY THREE: MEDITATION**

BY B. T. NEWBERG

05.11.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHAT DO WE MEAN?

FOURFOLD PATH: EXPLORATION OF THE FIVE +1

ELEMENT: FIRE

It's the third day of the retreat. In my experience, day three is the make-it-or-break-it day. The initial high has worn off, and the challenges have begun. Temptations to quit cloy at the mind, and your resolve is put to the test. This was true to my experience today. I'll talk a little about that, and then about a very important topic: meditation.

The omen drawn last night from the Haindl Tarot was the Three of Stones: Work. Knowing that day three often brings challenges, I thought to myself, *Now the real work begins.*

### **Meditation I: Deep Relaxation**

The last activity of each evening on the retreat is deep relaxation meditation. I use it to let go of the day and slip into a deep, restful sleep. It is widely recommended by psychologists and spiritualists alike, and is not hard to learn. You simply sit or lie down in a comfortable position, and bring your awareness to each part of your body, relaxing each in turn. Listening to a guided meditation recording can be helpful. Click the link below for an mp3 audio recording.

**[Click for a Guided Meditation in Deep Relaxation – mp3](#)**

(opens in Fileswap)

Deep relaxation is something I've been practicing since high school, yet I found it

difficult during my grad program this last year. I found myself so full of tension from study and work, that I couldn't let it all go. I could only attain a superficial level of relaxation. Only now, during vacation after the end of spring term, am I finally finding myself able to go deeper. I have yet to reach the levels I used to reach, however.

### **Interlude: Ritual and Cognitive Dissonance**

In the morning I awoke at dawn and went to my statue of Isis. As I poured the water libation and chanted, I could feel a reaction inside me against it. Quickly turning my gaze inward, I saw that it manifested as a warm, unpleasant sensation in my solar plexus, and it seemed to resist the idea of performing rituals before a statue. Intrigued, I used imagination to allow the feeling a voice, and it said in a cynical tone, *Seriously? Praying before a statue? Have you lost it completely?* Without responding to the voice, I realized what I was experiencing was cognitive dissonance. This is an uncomfortable feeling caused by entertaining contradictory ideas at the same time. On the one hand, I withhold belief in the literal existence of gods. On the other hand, I perform ritual to mythological gods for its psychological benefits. The conflict between withholding belief and performing ritual was creating cognitive dissonance. Reflecting on this, it occurred to me that this might not be a bad thing. Instead, I could see it as a trigger for questioning. Why, exactly, did this part of me object? Was it genuinely concerned with rational consistency, or was it more worried about what others would think if they saw me? Was it concerned with my well-being, or the opinions of others? As I contemplated these questions, the feeling dissipated rapidly. In its wake was a sense of insight and self-knowledge.

### **Meditation II: Fire, Ice, and Fog**

How often do we find our minds too clogged and cluttered to peer into its

depths? This has been discussed with regard to divination and ritual, two practices which can help get past that surface chatter. The trump card, though, is meditation. Through a combination of relaxation and concentration, meditation is able to focus the light of introspection into a laser.

But there are many different kinds of meditation, so I should be clear about what I'm talking about. One kind, as seen above, is deep relaxation. Another is breath meditation. This is probably what I've found most useful over the eleven or so years that I've been meditating. There are already lots of excellent audio-recorded training talks available online (Gil Fronsdal, Tara Brach, and Mark Nunberg are personal favorites), so I won't introduce breath meditation here. What I do want to introduce is an experimental meditation which I've been developing and exploring during this retreat. It belongs to a third type of meditation, namely visualization.

Visualization is the practice of picturing certain imagery in the mind's eye, imagery which may have desired effects on the mind. For example, you may imagine walking along a seashore, and as a result begin to feel the calm that goes along with such an experience. Neurological research has shown that the same areas of the brain activate when thinking about an action as when actually doing it. In other words, there is no difference in terms of brain activity between skiing down a slope and visualizing it. This gives some idea of the potential that lies in visualization meditation.

The Fire, Ice, and Fog meditation, also called the Three Wells meditation, is a visualization intended to assist introspection of three kinds of mental phenomena: desires and aversions, repressed material, and mood states. There are many more species of mental objects, but these have been singled out for their particular utility in managing emotions in one's daily life. Desires and aversions are visualized as fire, which greedily spreads toward an object (desire)

while at the same time its tongues leap away from it (aversion). Repressed material is represented by blocks of ice encasing what your mind doesn't want you to see. Finally, mood states are seen as mist or fog that body through the air and may obscure your vision. These mental phenomena are neither good nor bad in and of themselves, but their influence can take you in places you'd rather not go if you're not careful. Becoming aware of them breaks the spell of their influence, so that you can live free and fully conscious. That is the intention behind this meditation. A nuanced development of the Fire, Ice, and Fog meditation is available [here](#).

Each morning during this retreat, I've performed the Fire, Ice, and Fog meditation. Three wells are visualized, one filled with fire, another with frigid black water in which blocks of ice float, and a third with wisps of mist. By gazing into these wells, a picture of one's inner state is revealed. The shape of the tongues of flame, for example, may suggest or bring to mind specific desires or aversions which are manifest presently but not necessarily obvious. In this way, ignored or missed thoughts and feelings can be brought into the light of awareness. Once noticed, they can be dealt with fruitfully by observing them, questioning them, and gently letting them be.

Of all the benefits I've ever experienced from meditation, by far the greatest is knowing what you are feeling at the moment you experience it. It sounds simple and automatic, but often we go unaware of our feelings, even intense ones. For example, how many times have you failed to notice yourself getting angry till a friend points it out to you? Or how many times have you walked into a crowd of new faces and not realized your nervousness till your words fumble coming out of your mouth? Awareness of such feelings gives you the opportunity to step back, take a deep breath, and make a conscious decision of how you want to act. Knowledge is power, as the old adage goes (or perhaps we should say, *awareness* is power).

In this retreat, I've become aware of feelings of excitement, joy, nervousness, embarrassment, tiredness, hope and hopelessness, and more through the help of the Fire, Ice, and Fog meditation. I've noticed unhelpful self-critical thoughts and self-aggrandizing preoccupations, as well as positive self-affirming thoughts. I won't go into them all, but there's one that deserves detail. It has to do with the tarot card drawn last night.

The tarot card was the Three of Stones: Work. This morning, as I sat in meditation, I vividly perceived a desire to present my experience in a certain way for this blog. Thoughts of how to present what I was doing so cluttered my mind that I could barely concentrate on what I was actually doing. I realized that I was turning the experience into work. With that discovery, it became easier to refocus on the task at hand, no longer harried by visions of how great it might look on the web. This illustrates how becoming aware of mental phenomena empowers you to take conscious control of how you live each day.

By now, a picture is starting to form of the psychological benefits that are claimed for spiritual practices. Consistently throughout this retreat, divination, ritual, and meditation have dug up important insights that might otherwise have lied buried beneath the mental clutter. If that isn't progress, I don't know what is. This is preliminary evidence that Humanistic Paganism is a valid path capable of helping one fulfill that ancient injunction inscribed above the gate to the Oracle of Delphi: "Know thyself."



## RETREAT, DAY FOUR: PSYCHOLOGY AND MYTHOLOGY

BY B. T. NEWBERG

05.11.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHAT DO WE MEAN?

FOURFOLD PATH: RELATIONSHIP WITH MYTHOLOGY

ELEMENT: WATER



THE SKY PUFFED AND BROODED AT SUNSET LAST NIGHT, RECALLING THE AWFUL GRANDEUR OF ZEUS.

PHOTO BY B. T. NEWBERG, MAY 10, 2011

The sky roiled red last night. Neighbors in my apartment watched in horror as hail rained down on their cars. Afterward, my fiancé discovered the door to the roof had been left open, so we went up and beheld the blood-red sky. Through my mind shot a phrase from ancient Greek, *Zeus uei* – “Zeus is raining.”

Zeus rules the sky and casts the thunderbolt. It was commonplace for the Greeks to say not “it’s raining” but “Zeus is raining.” What is the effect of mythologizing the rain so? What does it do for mental health? And what does it do for me?

## Psychology

For the first time in my life, I find myself in therapy. Over the course of the last year, as I underwent an intensive graduate-level program to get my teachers license in English as a Second Language (ESL), I started to experience poor health. A string of illnesses, from canker sores to strep throat to mono to a strange rash on my left foot that doctors could not diagnose, appeared suspiciously timed to stressful events in the program. Bringing my concerns to the doctor, I was put on medication for generalized anxiety. I had a terrible reaction, though, producing one of the most traumatic weeks of my life. Instead of alleviating anxiety, it actually induced it. I found myself unable to study or work; all I could do to keep it together was watch T.V. while gently rocking myself.

I got off the meds, and that was the end of that. Now I have more time, so I’m trying another option. This morning was my first session of group therapy. It felt weird and uncomfortable having a cohort of strangers fix on me and my issues, even for a few minutes. Nevertheless, some important points were made. I have a tendency to throw myself into tasks heart and soul, whether it’s teaching or this blog, and work tirelessly to create a product of which I can be proud.

Unfortunately, this same process wears my body down due to accumulated stress. Indeed, I have found myself working late into the night to publish these retreat reflections, not unlike how I pushed myself when I was student teaching. Even on vacation, I'm working myself into an early grave.

## Mythology

Psychology has made much of myth in the last century. Freud used it to form his Oedipal theory, as did Jung to inform his theory of the collective unconscious and its archetypes, and Claude Levi-Strauss to discover his "deep structures." Joseph Campbell thought he found a single "monomyth" pervading all mythology, a story told over and over in various iterations of the hero's journey. James Hillman founded his archetypal psychology on polytheism, Rollo May developed the notion of the daimonic from its mythic origins, and Carol Pearson mined myth to construct her model of hero archetypes in the personality. Each in their own way gazed at myth, with its cast of deities and heroes, and saw some deeper meaning or structure. Emerging from this vision, they concluded that the figures of myth are something other or more than they appear to be.

This is part of a tradition of allegorical interpretation going back as far as recorded history, and perhaps farther. Alongside those who took gods and myths literally, there were those who had other ideas. The Stoics of Greece and Rome, for example, proclaimed deities to be metaphors for forces of nature. Some scholars believe myths are the products of early peoples' attempts to explain the natural universe, a pre-intellectual mode of speculation called mythopoeic thinking. The allegorical tradition has a venerable pedigree indeed. However, I can't help but feel that each in their own way has somehow gotten it wrong. Interpreting myth *x* to signify meaning *y* has an air of finality to it that silences other interpretations.

What myths really are, in my opinion, are deeply resonant images to which the human imagination responds by creating meaning. In the act of searching for the “true” meaning, a new meaning is created. Myths are not reservoirs containing meanings waiting to be found; they are creative stimuli midwifing the birth of the new. Each allegorist is startled to see in it something no one else has, and feels compelled to go tell it on the mountain. In truth, however, they are simply participating in an eternal process of meaning-making.

I participate in this process when I contemplate myths, read omens, or talk to gods in ritual. Each time I do so, something new is created that colors experience and situates it within a meaningful aesthetic context. Erich Fromm wrote of two modes of meeting the world: the *reproductive* and the *generative*. The former reproduces what is encountered “out there” as realistically as possible, while the latter brings something to the world from one’s own productive powers. Everyone employs a combination of the two; I happen to be a highly generative person. For me, experience is meaningful by virtue of a symbiosis between sensations from without and creative interpretation from within.

### **Psychology, myth, and me**

Sitting at a picnic table at Elliot Park beneath a leafy canopy, watching parents watch their children play, I contemplated how it is that I manage to overwork myself to the point of illness. The therapist had urged me to “dial back a notch”, to turn down the intensity to a reasonable level. I’ve never thought of myself as an overly-ambitious person or a perfectionist. Certainly I’d never experienced illness as a result prior to this grad program. It is a bit of a mystery as to how I managed to become so over-zealous this past year.

With these questions in mind, I ambled about the park picking up trash. *Do you really think picking up a few plastic bottles makes any difference?*, came a voice in my

head. I responded by asking, *A difference to whom?* It certainly wasn't going to save the world. As for the environment, it's but a drop in the bucket. The park may be a little cleaner, but then again the same amount of trash will keep appearing day after day. The real difference it makes, I concluded, was a difference to me. I feel better for having done it, for supporting the planet in some small way if not saving it on a grand scale, and for being a responsible inhabitant of this earth. Gaia, the earth mother, deserves as much. Cleaning her parks is cleaning myself. To put the outer world in order is to put the inner world in order. It has meaning *for me*.

There goes that generative mode again. Over and above the environmental impact of the activity is the personal impact on meaning. What I bring to the activity is as significant as the activity itself.

It occurred to me, as I circulated the park, that I have two obsessions: one with science, and the other with myth. The former is needed to feel effective, for I am not satisfied to teach and write and create for mere entertainment. I want what I do to have a positive and lasting effect, and for that it is necessary to proceed according to proven, logically-sound, empirically-verified principles. The latter, on the other hand, is needed to feel inspired. As a grad student, I went all-in on the scientific side in order to procure the knowledge necessary to be an effective teacher. Meanwhile, the mythic side steadily grew impatient.

The gods send illness when they feel deprived of the honor they deserve. Apollo, for example, struck the Achaeans with plague after Agamemnon kidnapped one of his priestesses. Perhaps it was my single-minded devotion to work that offended that other side of me, so that it sent me illness. Psychosomatic sicknesses followed as the irrational, creative impulse erupted in protest.

This finally brings me to the Greek phrase that shot through my mind last night during the trembling storm: *Zeus uei*, Zeus is raining. Why did the Greeks mythologize the rain? Why have cultures throughout history turned to mythology to understand experience? And why does the allegorical tradition continue even within modern psychology? I get the feeling that mental health is a balance of inner and outer energies, a harmony of the reproductive and the generative modes. True, many people live full and complete lives without particular need for mythology. But others are more generative, and turn to myth as an aid in meaning-making. The Greeks mythologized the rain to make it their own, to bring it within the fold of their creative understanding. I mythologize my life in the same way. Myth helps meaning body forth through creative acts of interpretation. And this brings wholeness and healing to the psyche.

## **2 comments**

## RETREAT, DAY FIVE: SOCIALIZATION AND DIALOGUE

BY B. T. NEWBERG

05.12.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHAT DO WE MEAN?

FOURFOLD PATH: RESPONSIBLE ACTION

ELEMENT: EARTH

*The world begins to hum.*

That is how I felt today as I cruised along the Midtown Greenway on my bicycle in the midst of an afternoon drizzle. In such rain I could have been huddled with teeth gritted; instead, I felt relaxed and open. It wasn't that I was ecstatic, nor oblivious of the world. I just felt at one with experience. Colors were a bit more vivid and sounds a tad more full. I'd felt it before, on Buddhist retreats and at times when I felt "in the zone." D. T. Suzuki was once asked what it was like to experience *satori*, or enlightenment. He responded, "Just like everyday ordinary experience, but two inches off the ground." Now, I'm not about to compare my experience to enlightenment – whatever that might mean. But it's true that there is a different quality of experience that manifests at times of high spiritual functioning. The world begins to hum.

Today I'm going to talk about socialization. It's a topic of some controversy in retreats, and one I've been looking forward to all week.

### **Socialization**

The typical meditation retreat cuts off socialization, save for others going through the same experience. All the social crutches are taken away, so that nothing remains to keep you from facing yourself. A total break is made from the world of daily routine. There is value in this, to be sure. Yet, it's a double-

edged sword. Although great insight can be gained, one does not learn how to maintain that insight in a social environment. At the end of the retreat, one goes back into the social world and quickly slips back into old habits. If, on the other hand, insight is achieved in a socially integrated context, it may be easier to hold onto it once the retreat ends. That is one reason why socialization is a primary feature of this Humanistic Pagan retreat.

Another reason is that Humanism is concerned with human fulfillment, and social contact is a basic human need. “Man is a social animal” writes Aristotle. Thus, a primary goal of any Humanistic path ought to be orienting the individual toward others. The development of key social skills, such as empathy and perspective-taking, should rank high on the list of objectives. For this reason too, socialization features in this retreat.

This is not entirely without precedent. Although many spiritual teachers have emphasized the essential aloneness of the individual, others have disagreed. Gurdjieff, for example, taught his pupils to seek enlightenment within everyday life. In the Classical world, Epicurus prized conversation at meals; he was famed for saying he would rather not eat than eat alone. Socrates made a life of engaging his contemporaries with questions. Confucius, too, created a way whose basic orientation was toward society. And the Vimalakirti Sutra of Mahayana Buddhism likewise affirmed the possibility of enlightenment for the householder. So, there is a long tradition of socialization within a spiritual context.

I take time in the retreat each evening to be with friends. On Day One, I met with my good friend Drew Jacob, author of RoguePriest.net. He and I share different beliefs but similar orientations to life and living. Drew has unwavering clarity of vision, tempered by a jovial sense of humor (and a booming laugh). But what stands out most is his sincerity. How often do you meet someone who makes



you feel like you're really being seen? Being heard? It's a rare trait.

Other evenings I've spent with my fiancé. She doesn't share my beliefs either, and it is awkward sometimes trying to explain what I'm doing and why. Yet she is ever willing to listen, and even when she doesn't agree she always keeps a sense of humor about it. It's a wonderful personality trait, and one of the reasons I love her.

I mention these traits of Drew and my fiancé because the company you keep is relevant to personal growth. The more you surround yourself with positive people, the more positive you become. The converse is also true – negative friends can drag you down. So, discernment in friends is a key aspect of spiritual socialization.

Over the course of the retreat, I've noticed a change in the way I relate to people. As I sat with my fiancé over breakfast on the morning of Day One, I felt turned toward her, not just in body but also in mind. The mention of “turning” is felicitous, for in another context it constitutes a primary spiritual practice.

### **Dialogue and the Practice of Turning**

After good experiences with socialization the first few days of the retreat, I decided to take it a step further. For deeper insight, I turned to Martin Buber, whose existential spirituality made a religion of conversation. Dialogue, Buber felt, is where we meet God in the eyes of the other.

At one time in his life, he practiced Hasidic mysticism, but an experience changed his mind. After a morning of ecstatic elevation, an unknown young man came to him with a question. Buber, still with half a mind on his morning's reverie, failed to listen with his full being. He writes in his book *Meetings*:

*I conversed attentively and openly with him – only I omitted to guess the questions which he did not put. Later, not long after, I learned from one of his friends – he himself was no longer alive – the essential content of his questions; I learned that he had come to me not casually, but borne by destiny, not for a chat but for a decision.*

After that, Buber gave up mysticism and devoted himself wholly to the art of dialogue. His most famous book, *I and Thou*, is a poetic exposition of spiritual socialization. The crucial discipline in this path is the act of “turning.” By this, Buber means turning away from self-centered preoccupations and toward the other, in body and soul. This, I felt, was the instruction needed to take my socialization to a higher level. For the remainder of the retreat, I resolved to practice the act of turning.

I can think of a time when I definitely did *not* achieve this kind of turning. It was years ago, when I was with a previous girlfriend. During our intimate moments, I would describe her body in poetic phrases. How surprising it was when she asked me to stop. “I feel like a piece of clay,” she said. “A piece of the clay that you’re molding into something I’m not.” That was a revelatory experience for me. People don’t want to be extolled; they want to be seen. Seen for who they really are. To truly be with her, I had to give up all semblances and turn to her completely.

There were plenty of opportunities to do better with my fiancé during the retreat. As she arrived home from work, vented frustrations about her day, or just moved in for a hug, I found myself half-involved. At these moments I deliberately stopped what I was doing or thinking about, and turned to her. Within me I could feel a qualitative change. It actually *felt* different to relate in this way.

I noticed a response in her, too. As I went through the retreat in the apartment we share, she seemed infected by the positive energy – unusually bright, cheerful, and open. I felt her turn to me like few times before. Whether this was a result of the spiritual socialization or just the positive ambiance of the retreat, I cannot say. When I told her how I felt more open and turned toward her, she said she couldn't tell. She can never tell with me; I guess my expression of emotions is subtle (which is an interesting insight in itself, but that's a matter for another time). Nevertheless, there was a new openness swirling between us. During the retreat came one of the most intimate nights of our relationship.

I do not wish to make a guru of Buber – there are certainly aspects of his work to criticize (go [here](#) for a critique from a polytheist viewpoint). Yet, with a little creativity, it can be applied fruitfully to a broad range of spiritual paths ( for example, go [here](#) for an application to ADF Druidry). Humanistic Paganism in particular stands to gain, not the least because Buber himself has been called a humanist. In any case, dialogue, Buberian or otherwise, can be a powerful agent of personal growth.

When this retreat began, I wasn't sure how socialization was going to play out. Would it hinder introspection, by cluttering the mind with chit-chat and social posturing? Would it cause conflict as I engaged with people who did not share my retreat experience? Neither of these have turned out to be a problem. On the contrary, socialization has led me even deeper. And since I have arrived at insight within a social context, perhaps it will not be as difficult to integrate that insight as I return to everyday social activity. Time will tell, but prospects appear hopeful.

### **5 comments**

## RETREAT, DAY SIX: DISPLACEMENTS

BY B. T. NEWBERG

05.13.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHAT DO WE MEAN?

FOURFOLD PATH: RELATIONSHIP WITH MYTHOLOGY

ELEMENT: FIRE



WAKING AT DAWN IS NOT SOMETHING I NORMALLY DO UNLESS I ABSOLUTELY MUST, AND THAT IS WHY IT MADE AN EFFECTIVE PRACTICE.

PHOTO BY B. T. NEWBERG, MAY 13, 2011

The retreat is almost over already – tomorrow is the last day. From the beginning I’ve been carrying a token, a small stone found at Minnehaha Falls. This represents my commitment to the retreat. Tomorrow at noon, at the moment of greatest light, I will throw the stone into the Mississippi River to mark the official end of the retreat.

The token serves as a kind of reinforcement called a *displacement*. That's what I'll be talking about today.

## Displacements

*Buzz, buzz* went the alarm on my phone set to vibrate. It was 5:10 a.m. and I wanted anything but to haul my behind out of bed. My fiancé mumbled an incoherent word as if deep in a dream, then rolled over. Outside, the darkness lifted ever so slightly, as the first hints of morning seeped in through the window. I pulled back the covers and stumbled into the bathroom to brush my teeth.

Waking at dawn is not something I do unless I absolutely must. That is why it was perfect as a *displacement*, or practice which displaces the ordinary flow of the *status quo*. Most retreats and spiritual paths feature something like it – special restrictions or duties undertaken as part of the experience. Some of these are cast in moral terms, others purificatory. Often they are consistent with the lifestyle required of a specialist in the path, such as a monk or priest. For example, Buddhist retreats may hold participants to a number of monk-like [precepts](#), such as abstinence from drinking alcohol, eating after a certain time, or lying on luxurious beds. Ignatian Christian retreats may include total silence as part of the experience. In the ancient world, the Isian Mysteries required a period of sexual abstinence prior to initiation. Such practices typically have important rationales within the worldview of the particular spiritual tradition, and serve to instill values and support progress toward the goal. At the same time, they also serve another function, which usually goes unstated. That function is to signal to the mind that *something out of the ordinary is happening*.

We go through our day so supported by habit and routine that it can be difficult to break out of that flow. It's not enough to tell yourself to change; your whole

being needs to hear the message. For that, you need to engage the language of the subconscious: symbolism. By performing certain symbolic actions or taking on certain signs of commitment, you can communicate a message your subconscious will understand. Wearing special garb, such as a monk's robe, can do the trick, since clothing is so central to identity. Abstaining from a favored activity, such as eating meat or drinking alcohol or coffee, can also be effective.

In my case, I have chosen three major displacements: 1) waking at dawn; 2) abstaining from junk food, sweets, alcohol, and coffee; and 3) carrying a token on my person at all times, to be given up at the end of the retreat. These are effective choices because they are quite contrary to my usual routine. I don't normally wake at dawn. I consume an embarrassing amount of junk food and sweets (cookie dough is my Achilles' heel), and often enjoy coffee during the day and alcohol in the evening. And it is certainly not my habit to go around carrying little fetish-like tokens on me. So, these displacements constitute a significant break from the *status quo*.

An important note should be inserted here: It cannot be emphasized enough that in Humanistic Paganism, displacements imply no moral judgment of these activities. They are simply disruptions of routine that signal the mind to wake up. One may decide to abstain from sex during a retreat, for example, while affirming the positive value of this natural human activity. No comment whatsoever is made as to whether it is good or bad in itself, only that abstinence marks a difference.

### **Displacements and cognitive dissonance**

These practices can support you in times of flagging enthusiasm. When you encounter the desire to give up – which may come to the surface when tempted to “cheat” by ignoring a displacement – you are forced to ask yourself why you

are on retreat in the first place. *Is it really worth it?*, may come the voice. *Would it really matter if I “cheated” just a little?* A moment of reflection is imposed as you decide.

At this moment of decision, there flashes into play the influence of cognitive dissonance, that uncomfortable feeling which accompanies conflicting beliefs. In this case, the conflict is between the belief that you are a rational human being and the belief that what you have chosen to do doesn't matter. If it didn't matter, it would have been irrational to undertake it in the first place. *But I am a rational person, so it must matter*, you tell yourself. Thus, that feeling of discomfort prods you to stay the course. This is a bit of mental sleight-of-hand that keeps us going, not just through retreats but through jobs and relationships too.

If at this point it sounds like lying to yourself to avoid change, you're right – partly. Cognitive dissonance can keep us in negative situations, spurring us to rationalize dead-end pursuits just to maintain our self-image. But I wouldn't sell it short; cognitive dissonance can have positive value too. Employed mindfully and for the right reasons, it can offer precisely the support needed to overcome momentary temptations and continue toward a greater payoff in the future. Displacements, like a commitment not to eat chocolate for the duration of the retreat, serve as stimuli for the fruitful engagement of cognitive dissonance. When that Hershey bar appears before you, you hold back so as not to spoil what you have worked for. In so doing, you are shown something valuable: how far you are willing to go to create change. Your resolve becomes even greater than if you had undertaken no displacements at all. The Hershey bar becomes a symbol of your commitment. And *that* is a message the subconscious can understand.

By the way, the feeling of worthlessness that follows upon failure to uphold a displacement – i.e. if you do eat the chocolate bar after all – is a result of cognitive dissonance too. When you “cheat”, your subconscious understands

that the retreat really isn't worth it, that it really was irrational to undertake it, and that you are a stupid human being for having done so. Hence, the result is low self-worth. Approached mindfully, such an experience can be instructive. You are not really stupid, of course. It was simply a moment of impulse in which you lost sight of the goal. Next time, you will know that the payoff in the end is worth the little stuff in-between. Reasoning thus, self-esteem can be restored at the same time that commitment is reaffirmed.

I had both successes and failures on this retreat. First of all, there was frequent craving for Cheez-its and chocolate, and I really thirsted for a beer in the evenings, but I stayed pretty true to my resolve. My fiancé did call me out on some hot chocolate, though. When I resolved to abstain from sweets I had cookie dough and ice cream in mind, but not hot chocolate. I guess it is a sweet, though. So, pride brought low, I admit a bit of cheating there.

Second, getting up at dawn was rough – I wanted to give up almost every morning. Once I got going, though, it was no big deal. I actually had more energy throughout the day as a result.

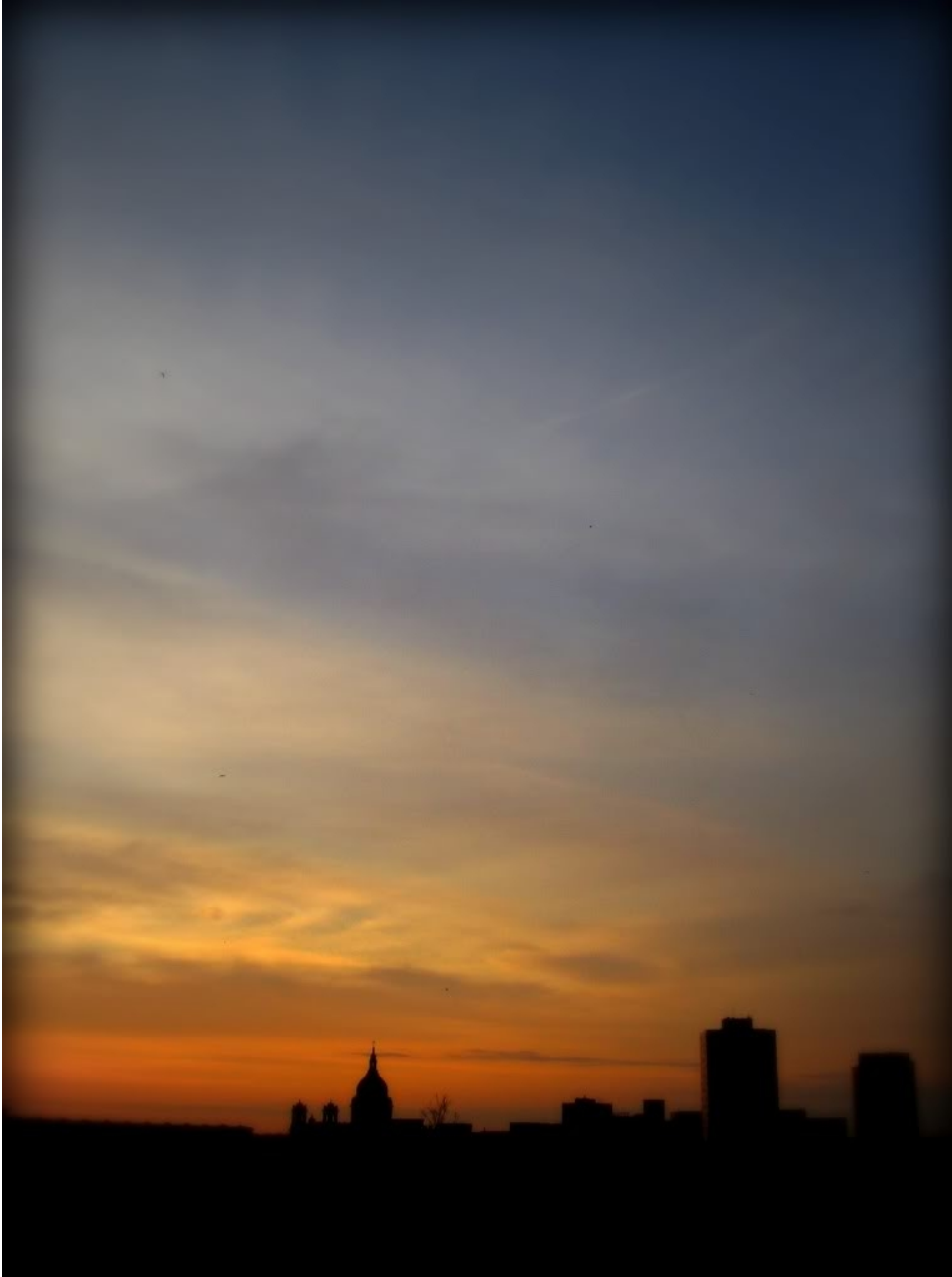
Finally, the token proved interesting. It is a different kind of displacement than the other two, insofar as it imposes nothing to carry it around in my pocket. The temptation, rather, was to forget it was even there. It took a while to figure out how to involve it more in my practice, to make its presence felt throughout the week. Finally, I gave it a role during the observations of sunrise. I would hold it in my hand as I gazed at the sun and said an affirmation: *The night ends, the day begins; it will be a good day if I let it.* Then I would kiss the stone and return it to my pocket. Throughout the day I would thumb it gently, reminding myself it was there. By now the stone feels personal, like a bond has been made. I almost want to keep it now. When I cast it into the river tomorrow to end the retreat, it will be significant. Which is exactly what I'd hoped. Giving up an item to which



I have bonded should invoke enough *pathos* to make an impression on the subconscious. The moment will be memorable and transformational.

Last, before ending this post, I have a final confession. I have been absolutely terrible about observing sunset. It wasn't a displacement specifically, but it's still a significant violation of commitment. Time and again I found myself wrapped up in writing retreat reflections. Even when I started setting an alarm for myself, I would still try to finish up things before going out to see the sunset – and end up forgetting altogether. I guess that says something about how I work. Perhaps my therapist was right; maybe I do need to “dial back” the intensity a bit. This gives me something to work on as I head back into the ordinary flow of non-retreat life.

The overall effect of displacements on the retreat experience has been to remind the mind, constantly, that something out of the ordinary is happening. As a result, I experienced enhanced resolve and heightened awareness. There is no intention of making permanent ethical obligations of them – I do love my Cheez-its and cookie dough, after all. And I can't wait for a beer. But I can say with confidence that the retreat was far more fulfilling for having gone without. It has taught me the strength of resolve that I can bring to bear when needed. It has shown me my commitment. And it made every moment of the retreat stand out as something special.



GAZING AT THE SUNSET, I MARVELED AT THE BEAUTY I SO OFTEN MISS.

PHOTO BY B. T. NEWBERG, MAY 12, 2011

## RETREAT, DAY SEVEN: REFLECTION, VULNERABILITY, AND THE

### GOAL

BY B. T. NEWBERG

05.14.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHAT DO WE MEAN?

FOURFOLD PATH: A SENSE OF WONDER

ELEMENT: WATER

Yesterday was the final day. In the morning I performed the final rituals and meditations, and at noon rode my bicycle in a cool, damp drizzle to the Mississippi River. There, at the moment of greatest light, which was actually indistinguishable from any other moment due to an overcast sky, I tossed my token stone into the river to mark the end of the retreat.

### **Reflection**

Reflection proved one of the most valuable experiences of the retreat. It was instrumental in bringing to the surface a wealth of insight and self-knowledge.

Each day I spent most of the afternoon and much of the evening setting my thoughts and feelings down in writing, generating artwork, and crafting posts of which I could be proud. I am ecstatic about the results – enough material has been generated to keep me thinking for months.

Making the reflections public by posting them on this blog enhanced the experience. Knowing that I would have to give a public account helped me take reflection seriously. I went into greater depth and detail than in the past.

Perhaps it was the threat to my self-image, the vulnerability of putting myself out there publicly, that pushed me to probe deeper.

## Vulnerability

"So how did the retreat go?" asked my friend Drew Jacob, author of [RoguePriest.net](http://RoguePriest.net). I sat in the passenger seat as we cruised along the freeway en route to a friend's house. "Fine," I said. "No complaints."

*No complaints?*, I thought to myself. *Is that all I can say?* It wasn't that I was being modest, or hiding my feelings. But at that moment, the evening after the conclusion of the grand experiment, I felt nothing special. What an underwhelming finish to the experience. Suddenly, I wondered if I had made a mistake. Shouldn't a retreat leave you feeling like a million bucks? Serene and enlightened? On top of the world? I felt the urge to "talk up" the experience in front of my friend, to "sell" it as a success. Instead, I just gazed out the window at the houses whizzing by. Perhaps the whole retreat had been a sham.

I could already feel myself hardening toward the experience. This morning, as I woke for the first morning in seven days that I was not obliged to perform ritual, there was a feeling of vague revulsion as I passed the statue of the goddess Isis. Through my mind flashed an image of myself kneeling and chanting before the statue, then an image where I was not doing anything religious, anything spiritual, anything *weird* like that. Accompanying the second was a sense of being acceptable in the eyes of others. The two contrasting self-images stood side-by-side in uneasy tension.

It was then that I recognized a pattern in myself. Something was happening to the retreat experience that had happened many times before. I was beginning to withdraw from the experience, to dis-identify with it, to alienate myself from it. Why? Because I had allowed myself to become vulnerable. It was a threat to expose myself as a spiritualist. Even though I had done it of my own volition and yearning for self-discovery, there was a part of me that now wanted to put

that behind me. In its place would be nothing but an image of uncontroversial, uncomplicated conformity. Nothing to explain, nothing to defend. Nothing to justify to my fiancé or to my friends, but most of all to myself. Having two conflicting self-images – of Brandon the eccentric spiritualist and Brandon the regular Joe – was producing that peculiar discomfort that psychologists call cognitive dissonance. The rift between the two images was experienced as a wound. And the blade that struck that wound, by laying plain the contradiction, was the retreat. Hence, in a mostly subconscious process, I was already beginning to resent it.

This wasn't the first time this pattern had emerged. For about five years I practiced Buddhism, and for another five a polytheistic form of Paganism. Both of those seem alien to me today; I can no longer identify with them.

But the pattern had also emerged more recently than that, very recently in fact. I realized that I had done the very same thing with my graduate program to get my teachers license in ESL. Over the last twelve months, I had gone through one of the most demanding academic experiences of my life. At one point during student teaching, I was putting in ninety-five hours per week. I had emerged just one week ago shaken and uneasy. I couldn't relax without feeling guilty, and couldn't think about the job search without feeling anxious. A string of psychosomatic illnesses had arisen throughout the program, and showed no signs of stopping. That was the reason I entered therapy, and it was the primary motivation for this retreat. The realization dawned that the grad program, too, had left me wounded. I had taken on a greater challenge than ever before, laying myself vulnerable to failure. And in that moment of vulnerability, my body began to rebel. Stress-induced illnesses revealed the limit of how far I could push myself. Hitherto, I had always been a success at whatever whim dared me to do. There was a sense of infinite potential. But this experience showed me a self that was finite. The two self-images, that of Brandon with infinite potential

and Brandon who can handle no more, collided with each other. The result was cognitive dissonance, a wound, and the urge to flee from the teaching profession. From this perspective, it became clear that my self-image had become totally identified with the program, so that success as a teacher equaled success as a person. A threat to the one was a threat to the other. Teaching itself had become an object of fear.

There it was. The source of my anxiety was unmasked.

#### **4 comments**

## PART II: ADVANCED

## A. PSYCHOLOGY



PHOTO: SUNSET ON WATER, BY VIRTUALLY-SUPINE

Ludwig Feuerbach recognized that religion might function by projecting our inner nature onto the objects of worship (*The Essence of Christianity*, 1841). Since then, some of us have become conscious of these projections, and even intentional in them. Thus, psychology is of no small concern to HP.

The following pieces explore the relationship of psychology to the path. John H. Halstead begins with a thorough examination of the use of Carl Jung's notion of *archetypes* in Contemporary Paganism, and comes to the critical conclusion that we must "re-god" the archetypes, i.e. recover their numinousness. Rhys Chisnall



follows with an exploration of neurotheology, or the study of the intersections between neurology and religion. These two pieces lay foundation stones for understanding spirituality as embodied in human biology.

# THE ARCHETYPES ARE GODS: RE-GODDING THE ARCHETYPES

BY JOHN H. HALSTEAD

09.18.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: IS IT RESPONSIBLE?

FOURFOLD PATH: RELATIONSHIP WITH MYTHOLOGY

ELEMENT: AIR

We Neopagans often say that the gods are archetypes, but rarely do we hear how the archetypes are gods.

In the 1960s, Neopagans grabbed onto Jung's conception of archetypes as a way of making polytheism seem legitimate in the modern world. In the process, however, some Neopagans lost the sense of the gods as numinous.<sup>[1]</sup>

## **Psychologizing the gods**

By psychologizing the gods, we have contributed to the ongoing disenchantment of the world which began with the Enlightenment. We have humanized the gods, but in doing so, we have sometimes lost the sense of the gods *as gods*.

In reaction, many Neopagans in search of communion with the numinous Other have rejected Jungian theory in favor of a radical polytheism which sees the gods as beings existing independent of the human psyche. This presents a challenge to Humanistic or Naturalistic Neopagans who cannot identify with this conception of the divine.

The disenchantment of the modern world is a common topic of Neopagan authors. The phrase "disenchantment of the world", coined by Weber, derives from Friedrich Schiller, who wrote about *die Entgotterung der Natur*, the "de-godding of nature." Neopagan myth and ritual is supposed to be a counter-

movement to this disenchantment, a re-enchantment of the world or a “re-godding” of nature.

However, some of the pre-modern cultural forms which Neopaganism claims to reconstruct may actually be transformed in the process, so much so that the “enchantment” is lost in the translation. For example, Wouter Hanegraaff has argued that “occultist” magic has survived the disenchantment of the Enlightenment by becoming itself disenchanted. Hanegraaff explains how part of process of the disenchantment of magic was its psychologization.

In contemporary Neopaganism, we see the process of psychologization present not only in discussions of magic, but also in explanations of the gods. This often takes the forms of describing the Neopagan gods as Jungian archetypes. In the 1960s and 1970s, as the claims to historical continuity with an ideal Pagan past began to come under attack, Neopagans turned to Jungian psychology as a means for legitimating Neopagan practice. Unfortunately, the Jungian interpretation of Neopagan gods came to be oversimplified as it was popularized.

Neopagans often describe the gods as archetypes, but sometimes we lose the sense of how the archetypes are gods. In other words, **the numinous quality of the archetype is lost.**

The gods may be a part of us, but we must remember that they are also *other* than us, if by “us” we mean our conscious mind or ego-self. It is not without reason that Jung called the archetypes *gods*. He wrote:

“They are the ruling powers, the gods, images of the dominant laws and principles, and of typical, regularly occurring events in the soul’s cycle of experience.”

We experience the archetypes as gods, because they are beyond our conscious control and because they have the power to transform our lives. A true encounter with the gods is not only an experience of re-enchantment (what Rudolf Otto calls *mysterium fascinans*), but also an experience which shakes us to our core (which Otto calls *mysterium tremendum*).

While the gods are part of the human psyche, we should always keep in mind that the Greek term *psyche* is better translated as “soul” than as “mind”. Too often, in discussions of the psychological nature of Neopagan gods, the modifier “just” is inserted immediately preceding the word “psychological”, as in **“So the Neopagan gods are *just* psychological?”**

It is as if to say “So they are figments of your imagination?” Not only is this a profound misunderstanding of Jung’s theory of the psyche, but it contributes to the disenchantment of the Neopagan concept of divinity.

In effect, the Neopagan discourse has *de-godded* the archetype.

### **Re-godding the gods**

This in turn led to a backlash against Jungian theory in Neopaganism. David Waldron writes how, in the 1980s, the Jungian approach to Neopaganism came under fire from a number of sources. Feminists like Naomi Goldenberg criticized Jungianism as being Eurocentric and patriarchal, while queer scholars criticized Jung’s male-female polarization of the psyche. As a consequence, Jungian psychology was gradually displaced as the dominant Neopagan interpretative paradigm.

Since the 1990’s, radical polytheistic theory has entered the foreground of

Neopagan discourse. Neopagans' gods came to be described less as Jungian archetypes and more as literal beings that exist independent of the human psyche. Radical (or "hard") polytheistic discourse in Neopaganism can be seen as a reaction to this disenchantment of the Neopagan gods. It is an attempt, if you will, to put the "god" back into the gods.

The de-godding of the archetype in Neopaganism is a consequence of a fundamental misunderstanding of Jung's theory, namely a confusion of *symbol* with *archetype*. Waldron explains:

"It is one thing to acknowledge that symbols and archetypal images have a deep impact on the human psyche through religious experience. It is a profoundly different thing to believe that one can consciously and arbitrarily create and ascribe meaning to symbols, based upon that which is seen to be suited to consciously designated psychic needs."

One of the most conspicuous examples of this is the practice of "using gods" in Neopagan magic, also sometimes referred to as "plug-and-play" gods.

Jung clearly differentiated between consciously constructed symbols and numinous archetypes. According to Jung, symbols refer to, but are not identical with, the archetypes located deep in the unconscious. While *symbols* have a conscious and known meaning, an *archetype* is always necessarily unknown. Thus, the archetype retains a numinous quality.

The apprehension of an archetype by consciousness is always necessarily partial, never total. **The meaning of the unconscious archetype is inexhaustible.**

The claim that any one symbol exhausts the archetype is the substance of what John Dourley calls "psychic idolatry". If a symbol can be totally explained or

rationalized by the conscious mind, then it ceases to be an archetype. While a symbol may masquerade as an archetype, it actually is a representation of the ego-self and becomes, in Waldron's words, "a collaborator in the suppression of the shadow."

Neo-Jungian James Hillman writes:

"Just as we do not create our dreams, but they *happen* to us, so we do not invent the persons of myth and religion [i.e., the gods]; they, too, happen to us."  
(emphasis Hillman's)

It is no coincidence that historically and cross-culturally, the gods have spoken to mortals in dreams. As Neopagans came to consciously construct and "plug-and-play" their gods, we lost the sense of the gods as something that happens *to* us. It may be said that we overemphasized the immanence of the gods and lost the sense of their transcendence.

### **The modern hubris**

In ancient Greek tragedy, heroes who were guilty of the sin of hubris, disregarding the existential gulf between themselves and the gods, were invariably punished for it. In contemporary Neopaganism, hubris takes the form of conflating the creations of the conscious mind with the numinous aspects of the unconscious.

On the one hand, this modern form of hubris results in the loss of our experience of the gods, a further disenchantment or de-godding of our world. But on the other hand, it invites the retribution of gods, who may be repressed in the unconscious, but will not be ignored. If they are not given their due honor, the gods will make themselves known forcibly and often with disastrous results in

our lives.

In *A History of Ancient Greek Literature*, Gilbert Murray writes:

“Reason is great, but it is not everything. There are in the world things not of reason, but both below and above it; causes of emotion, which we cannot express, which we tend to worship, which we feel, perhaps, to be the precious elements in life. These things are Gods or forms of God: not fabulous immortal men, but ‘Things which Are,’ things utterly non-human and non-moral, which bring man bliss or tear his life to shreds without a break in their own serenity.”

To confuse Murray’s “things not of reason” with the conscious creations of our own mind is hubris, and we do so at our own peril. **The gods may be archetypes, but we must also always remember that *the archetypes are gods*.**

As Neopagan discourse moves increasingly in the direction of radical polytheism, those Humanistic or Naturalistic Neopagans who find this position rationally untenable may find themselves (more) marginalized in the Neopagan community. The pendulum which previously swung to the humanistic extreme by reducing the gods to symbols is now swinging to the other extreme of transcendental theism, denying that the gods are part of the human psyche.

Jung’s theory of archetypes offers us an opportunity to create a golden mean between these two extremes, one which may simultaneously satisfy the humanist or naturalist who sees the gods as products of the human psyche, while also satisfying the mystical longing for contact with a numinous Other which is greater than any creation of our conscious mind.

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[1] By "numinous", I refer to an experience of that which transcends or is other than our conscious ego-selves, but is not necessarily supernatural.

**47 comments**



# PAGANISM AND THE BRAIN

BY RHYS CHISNALL

06.26.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHAT DO WE MEAN?

FOURFOLD PATH: EXPLORATION OF THE FIVE +1

ELEMENT: AIR

Is the brain a necessary condition to having religious and mystical experiences? Is there a biological underpinning to the experiences of deities, spirits as reported by religious people? Is there a connection between the brain and consciousness of the whole as described (metaphorically) by those who have undergone mystical experience? The established science of Neuro-theology, a branch of neurology suggests that there is.

The brain is an amazingly complex organ, containing millions of neuronal connections, the product of eons of evolution by natural selection. It is through the complex interactions of these neurons, with the rest of the body and the environment that consciousness, unconsciousness, cognition, and emotions emerge (Toates, 2007) . Pretty much everything that we experience, everything we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, think and feel is mediated through the brain; so it seems to be the case that religious and mystical experiences are no exceptions.

The neurologist and Zen Buddhist, Dr James Austin, underwent a spontaneous mystical experience while waiting for the tube in the London underground. He claimed that he saw things as they really are: that he had a sense of eternity, the sense of I, and self, had disappeared and that he had been graced with the ultimate nature of everything (Austin as cited in Begley, 2001).

As a neurologist Austin reasoned that the parts of the brain that deal with the orientation of the self in space, separating the self from the rest of the world, had

gone quiet. These functions are located within the parietal lobes at the back of the brain. The amygdala, often cited in connection with religious experience, and is most famous for its flight and fight response also monitors the surroundings for threats had 'closed off'. Also the frontal and temporal lobes, which contain the functions of self-awareness and recognition of time, must have dropped away (Austin, 1999).

All this was corroborated by Dr. Andrew Newberg and Eugene D'Aquili who suggested that these kinds of mystical and religious experiences seem to share common themes across all cultures. They carried out an experiment that involved the scanning of brain activity with a single photon emission computed tomography machine, SPECT for short. Essentially what they did was to scan the brains of meditating Zen Buddhists at the peak of their meditative experience, and compare these with the SPECT scans of Franciscan Nuns at the climax of their prayers.

Although both groups interpret their experiences differently the underlying experience of unity (with God or whatever) is the same. What the SPECT scans show is an increased level of activity in the prefrontal cortex, where, as you would expect the function of attention is located. However there was also a drop off in the parietal lobes; that part of the brain mentioned above which is to do with location of self in space.

Newberg concluded that it was this shutdown in this region of the brain that forces the self to associate with the entirety of the whole. In other words the meditators don't know where they stop and the rest of the universe begins – a familiar experience for those engaged in magical operations (Begley, 2001, Newberg and Aquili, 2001).

Interestingly Newberg argues that certain kinds of practices associated with the

Craft and paganism have a direct effect on the brain. For example, drumming, dancing, invocations, rituals, scourging, sex, chanting, etc, all focus our attention onto one source of stimulation. No doubt these techniques will sound somewhat familiar to those you practice the Craft and other Occult traditions. They can also invoke heightened states of emotions within us, which seems according to Newberg, to be the key to their success.

These techniques can have the effect of stimulating the hippocampus. The hippocampus is located in the medial temporal lobe and amongst other things is associated along with other parts of the brain with maintaining neuronal activity equilibrium. It can put the breaks on neuronal activity, limiting the flow of activity to the parietal lobes and other parts of the brain associated with religious and spiritual experiences (Begley, 2001, Newberg and D'Aquilli, 2001). This again leads to the sense of loss of self and identification with the whole.

More often associated with religious experience is where individuals hear the voice of God, gods and spirits. Does neurology explain George W Bush's assertion that God asked him to invade Iraq? There seems to be some evidence that it did.

The Neurologist Dr, Ramachandran suggests that religious feelings may be caused by naturally occurring activity within the temporal lobes. This is born out to some extent by Michael Persinger's helmet, a strange device that creates an electro-magnetic field around the participant's head so as to stimulate the temporal lobes. The result is that participants experience strange sensations, such as unseen presences; even within arch atheist and psychologist Susan Blackmore when she wore it as reported on a recent Radio 4 programme. This part of the brain is also associated with speech perception.

The Psychologist Richard Bentall suggests that when people hear the voice of

God, they are actually misinterpreting their own inner voice. The Brocca's area of the brain, which is associated with speech production, turns on, and when sensory information is restricted such as in meditation and in the use of other altered states of consciousness techniques, such as prayer, the practitioner may be fooled into thinking that the inner voice has an external source. This is also likely to happen in time of high stress and heightened emotions such as in times of jeopardy (Bentall, 2000).

There is also evidence that the anterior cingulate part of the brain activates when people hear actual sounds in the environment and also when they hallucinate sound, but not while they imagine hearing something. This part of the brain may be responsible for deciding whether a sound is external or not, and if it is appropriately activated it may fool us into believing that our own inner voice comes from an external supernatural source (Begley, 2001).

Does all this mean that mystical and religious experiences are all the result of biology? I would suggest not, though the evidence does suggest that the brain is a necessary condition of spiritual experience, as it is a necessary condition for all aspects of our lives, but it is not a sufficient condition. Our experience of numinous depends not just on our biology, though it underpins it, but also on our complex interactions with our environment, including the enormous complexity of the culture in which we live.

Within our culture we encounter the myths (the metaphors) and the science and philosophy that we use to interpret our experiences, enabling us to weave our personal patterns into the warp and weft of the world. It is a two way process, the metaphor of myth inspires within us spiritual experiences, and we reinterpret them in accordance with these myths thus socially constructing our complex realities.

This may mean that mystical and religious experiences are not mere wishful thinking, but could be rooted within the natural world with potentially life changing consequences. In other words they are genuine experiences that really do matter. As to whether this biological underpinning refutes or confirms the literal existence of supernatural beings, or the literal existence of other levels of reality, that is for you as intelligent people to decide.

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*Essay originally published at [The Witches' Voice](#), Feb. 14, 2010*

**4 comments**

## B. NATURE

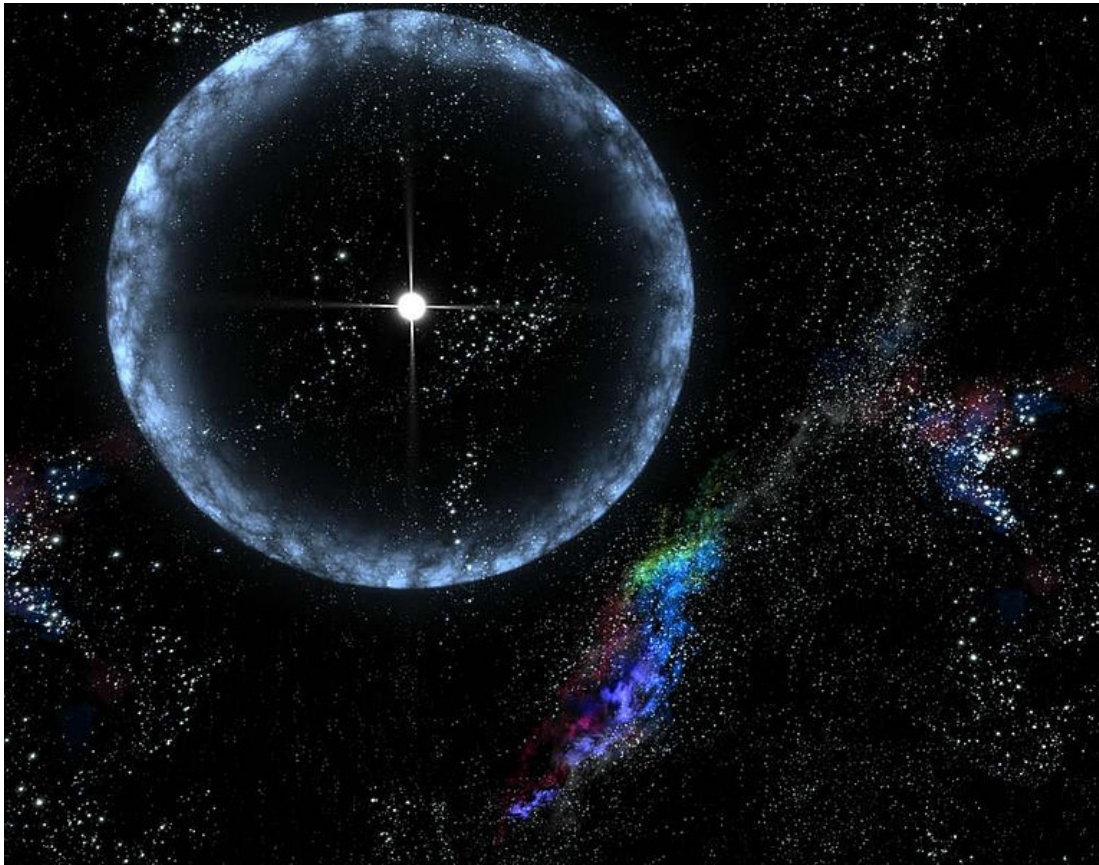


IMAGE: AN ARTIST'S CONCEPT OF THE 2004 OCCURRENCE IN WHICH A NEUTRON STAR UNDERWENT A "STAR QUAKE", CAUSING IT TO FLARE BRIGHTLY, TEMPORARILY BLINDING ALL X-RAY SATELLITES IN ORBIT. IMAGE COURTESY OF NASA

Another chief place naturalists find meaning, beyond human psychology, is in nature. This may be understood as a wider circle, as humans are of course part of nature.

The pieces in this section develop our relationship with nature. Jon Cleland Host leads off with an impassioned vision of the natural universe. Jonathan Blake follows with an analysis of whether it is appropriate to feel grateful to the universe for our existence. Next, Thomas Schenk considers the spiritual aspect of matter in our universe. Finally, Rua Lupa critiques naive attitudes toward nature and encourages environmental activism.

# NATURALISTIC MEANING AND PURPOSE

BY JON CLELAND HOST

11.27.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHY DO IT?

FOURFOLD PATH: A SENSE OF WONDER

ELEMENT: FIRE

Understanding the natural world and how we got here from a naturalistic perspective gives my life incredible meaning and purpose. We are literally made of stars – of stardust, forged in cosmic furnaces, assembled into nanotechnology far beyond what humans can make today!

## **Amazing ancestors**

I marvel at my family tree, which goes back through innumerable life forms, through amazing stories of survival, hope, courage, and parental love. It includes the tiny mammal, surviving through the freezing, year-long darkness after the asteroid impact by eating, and likely hiding in, a frozen dinosaur carcass. It includes the first mother to produce milk, and the first blurry view through a newly evolved eye.

If a depressed child suddenly discovered that she was descended from a long line of Nobel prizewinners, think of how her outlook and actions would instantly change! In the same way, I've grown from a long line of survivors – noble creatures of every sort, who conquered deadly challenges billions of times over. I stand on a mountain of love and success, and without winning a cosmic lottery against unbelievable odds, I wouldn't be here. What other outlook could possibly give my life more meaning?

## **Dawn of a new age**

Through fits and starts, the universe has created in ever more wonderful ways, and it will probably lead to a just and sustainable world. It could happen after centuries of environmental disasters, bloody wars, and untold suffering, or it could happen sooner, through our efforts to build a loving, rational culture focused on this world. It's up to us to choose when we'll get there.

We stand at the dawn of a new age, the first time we know of when the universe has become able to reason and plan.

### **Naturalistic purpose**

My family, your family, and all life on earth will live with the consequences tomorrow of the decisions we make today. Seeing my kids, or any kids, reminds me of that.

What could be a greater purpose, and a greater reason to take control of one's life? What could possibly be a stronger moral basis for ethical behavior – a clearer reason to love my neighbor as myself?

Understanding our incredible universe in a naturalistic way makes my ancestors and our future world sources of meaning and purpose.

### **12 comments**



# DO WE OWE GRATITUDE TO THE UNIVERSE?

BY JONATHAN BLAKE

10.30.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: IS IT RESPONSIBLE?

FOURFOLD PATH: A SENSE OF WONDER

ELEMENT: AIR

Gratitude begins with the recognition that something we value or enjoy could have been different. For a practically infinite number of reasons, I might never have been born, ranging from cosmic circumstances like if the Earth had formed a little farther away from or closer to the Sun, to details like if my parents had decided “not tonight.”

Gratitude begins with the ability to imagine the world counterfactually.

## **Just lucky?**

I can easily feel this kind of gratitude when regarding the cosmos. I feel “lucky” that I’m alive, but is that gratitude?

When I think of gratitude, I usually think of it as something more than just feeling lucky. I think of it as warm feelings for someone else for doing something that I value that they didn’t have to do. **They could have done something else, but they didn’t, so I feel grateful to them.**

I feel like I owe them something because it is human nature to try to reciprocate good or ill that comes our way. If nothing else, I give them my feelings of gratitude.

## **Gratitude toward the universe?**

My life exists on a razor's edge. As I mentioned, there are so many reasons why I might never have been born. There are almost as many reasons why I might have died since then. So I feel grateful that I exist at all, but my gratitude is not directed to the universe.

As far as I can tell, the universe is impersonal and therefore indifferent to my existence. The universe hasn't conspired to give me life and sustain it. Life for me and my ancestors has always been a hard fight against an indifferent universe to eek out a living. If anything, I feel like I have everything I value *in spite of* the universe.

Yet I wouldn't have the things I value without the universe.

However unwitting, the universe is the ground in which the beauty of my life has grown. **So I feel grateful *for* the universe, but I don't give any gratitude *to* the universe.**

This is one reason that even though I can see myself as a pantheist, I don't see in myself a perfect reflection of the devotion that theists express to their gods. I feel more awe and fear toward my god than devotion, and yet I still feel gratitude *for* the cosmos.

### **56 responses**

# THE MYSTERY OF BEING

BY THOMAS SCHENK

08.07.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHAT DO WE MEAN?

FOURFOLD PATH: A SENSE OF WONDER

ELEMENT: AIR

In his book, "The Mystery of Being," Gabriel Marcel writes:

"For in speculation and reflection we soar above every possible kind of mechanical operation; we are...in the realm of spirit."

From a naturalistic perspective, this statement must be rejected. From this perspective, the ability to speculate and reflect must arise from some kind of "mechanical" operation, some operation of the brain.

But what can it mean that the ability to reflect is a mechanical operation? The ingredients of reflection include awareness, thought, imagination, and judgment. It is also a purposeful and creative activity; its purpose is to come to a new truth (in some sense of that hard to define word), and if successful it leads to a novel way of seeing some aspect of the world (novel, at least for the being doing the reflection). In the standard dualistic thinking of the Western world, awareness, thought, imagination, judgment, truth, creativity, are all parts of the spirit; Marcel's statement reflects the traditional Western view. The naturalistic view requires here a rejection of the traditional view; and though itself a product of reflection, it offers a rather attenuated notion of reflection.

I wish to suggest that at least part of the problem here comes from a misunderstanding about what words mean and how they come to have meaning. To say that the so-called realm of spirit actually can be reduced to the realm of

mechanism (the realm of matter and force and the regularities that operate in their interactions) is also to say that the realm of matter and force contain within them the potential to give rise to this realm of spirit, with its awareness, thought, imagination, judgment, truth, creativity, and such.

The ideas of science evolved in a dualistic cultural context, where the material and the spiritual were separate domains. To say that the material contains the spiritual is to radically redefine these terms. It seems we are trying to use the words “mechanistic” and “material” in their old sense which excluded spirit, and trying to push a new view of the world into these old containers. We are perhaps caught in the Aristotelian idea that words have an eternal essence; when in fact words themselves change what they mean with new perspectives. And the naturalistic view that the inner world of our experience has a material base, is certainly a new perspective.

Put more concretely, if the first thing we think about when we hear the word “matter” is a rock, then it is hard for us to think of matter as something that can come to awareness and thought. If the first thing is an amino acid, we are a little closer. If the first thing is a photon, we are closer still, for the photon is the particle of light, and “light” is the most pervasive metaphor of the world of spirit. If the first thing we think of is the wave/particle duality of quantum mechanics, we may not have such a hard time at all imagining how matter – which in the quantum view appears already as much an abstraction as a reality, already as ambiguous as any metaphor, already intertwined with the intention of the person studying it – can give rise to a reflective spirit. Indeed, wave/particle duality is a good metaphor for the apparent dualism of spirit/matter. If we reflect on this, it should come as no surprise that matter has turned out to be so much more mysterious than the early materialists imagined. After all, it is this matter that is reflecting on these matters.

From the naturalistic perspective, we know for certain that matter/energy can evolve into a thing that can reflect upon matter/energy and its evolution into a being capable of reflection. From where we currently stand, we cannot eliminate – nor affirm – the possibility that matter/energy is the way it is precisely so that it can evolve into a being that can reflect upon the world. It is questionable whether any words or schema, any model, any theory or paradigm can capture the deep mystery of this fact. But where a religious inspired writer like Marcel and the naturalist can come together, is in recognition that yes indeed, there is “the mystery of being.”

# THE INDIFFERENCE OF NATURE

BY RUA LUPA

07.31.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: IS IT RESPONSIBLE?

FOURFOLD PATH: EXPLORATION OF THE FIVE +1

ELEMENT: EARTH

Pentamera Ardea 23 / 10 B.E. (Friday August 13th / 2010 C.E.)

Nature seems to be perceived as a loving mother who takes care of our every need. Who is waiting and watching to catch us when we fall. Well, I beg to differ. What makes Nature its most wonderful is its indifference. Nature doesn't care about our personal decisions, if we live one moment and die the next. And I like that. Why? Because it means I don't have someone constantly watching me and grading me on my every decision or thought. It means that I am free to do what I please within the boundaries of the Laws of Nature i.e gravity, within the Laws of the society that surrounds you (which can change and has changed through the hard works of dedicated people), and of course the moral compass that is all your own. It means that you are solely responsible for everything that you do, with no one to blame but yourself. You are who you make yourself to be, no one or thing can do that for you, that is the beauty of Nature's indifference.

Being alone in Nature for an extended period of time is one of the best ways to learn this from Nature, as it really does put things in perspective. It makes you realize how vast the world and universe is and how truly utterly small and insignificant you actually are. You begin to feel all the life that surrounds you and know that you are a part of it, not separate or better than it like what civil society teaches, but a part. It makes me feel energized and strong to know that through eras of evolution I am somehow here and a part of this complex network of life. I

know that when I sit with Nature, I am where I am supposed to be, involved and a part of the big picture.

In our civilized world we like to think that humanity owns and possesses everything, nothing is unknown to us, nothing is outside humanity's reach, that the wild spaces are just things to conquer – which you hear all the time when it comes to climbing mountains. The fact is, you can never truly own anything. Possession just means control, and control is just something homo sapiens are utterly good at believing they have. When you really analyze everything you 'own', it is only because you and your society believes that you own it. What makes that mouse in the cupboard less of an owner of that house than you? It may not have bought the thing, but no homo sapiens consulted it about trading with it to have it move out of its residence for you to possess it. We bargain and trade for things between our species all the time. But we never consider bargaining or trading with other creatures, because we think we are superior to them, separate from the ecological system. "How can you bargain with other creatures?" You might ask. I am not really saying that you should bargain the way our society perceives bargaining. I am saying that you should consider the life forms that surround you and are connected to you. And I don't strictly mean spiritual, I mean literal. Where do you get your food? How was your home made? Your clothes? It is all through Nature. There is no denying it, we rely on Nature for all our needs. The problem I am trying to emphasize is that we homo sapiens as a whole, tend to ignore that fact. So no, we shouldn't 'bargain', but we should live in a mutualistic manner with the species we depend upon, and cooperate with the species we naturally compete with. We should relearn how to live with our immediate environment and not just take and take and take until nothing is left for the next generation. That is *speciesscide* – for lack of a better word, and it is because we hold no responsibility for our individual consumption.

Nature also seems to be perceived as something that needs to be taken care of or 'saved', especially with this 'Green Movement' that was seeded in the late 60's. Even if the entire earth were to be nuked, Nature would persist. So really, when we talk about 'saving the planet', we are just talking about our species. And as much as I like to think we are compassionate toward all living things, we are realizing that what affects one species affects every other species connected to it and eventually it connects to us; and that is the root of it. We care because it catches up to us eventually, at least that is how it is now due to the colossal size of our population. Overall, we should take a real look at ourselves and our society and see it for what it really is. Continual consumption and not giving back so that what we consumed returns. Our populations have become too immense to get away with it any more without receiving consequences. Yes, we should change the way we consume and I am very much behind the 'green movement' as an environmentalist/conservationist; we just need to realize that we are, in reality, in it for the species. Because Nature doesn't give a damn.

### **5 comments**



## C. MYTHOLOGY

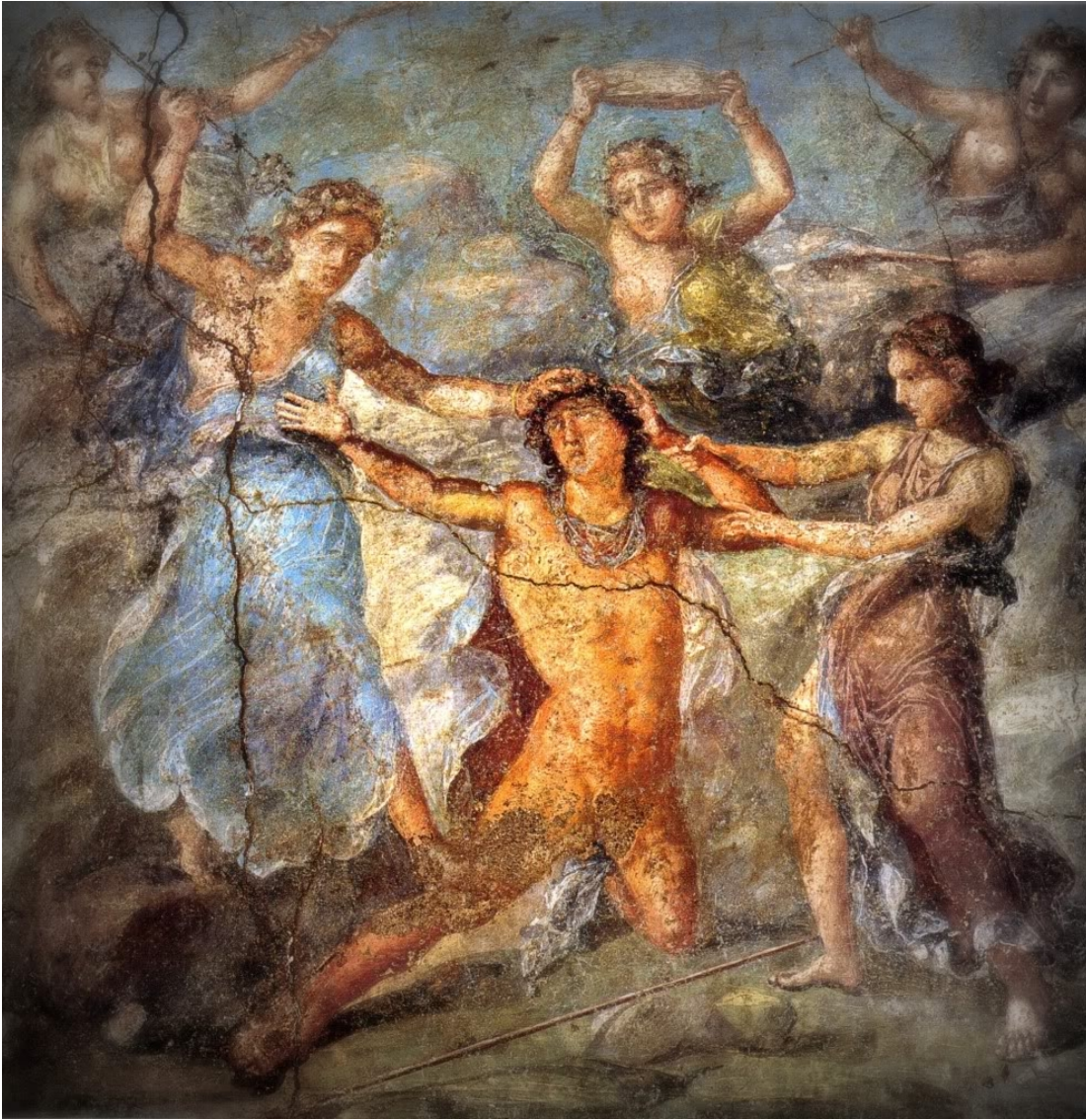


IMAGE: PENTHEUS, HOUSE OF THE VETII, POMPEII

While all Spiritual Humanists and Spiritual Naturalists embrace some form of spirituality, not all embrace mythology and the rituals and meditations that go along with them. Myth is what makes HP stand out among other forms of Spiritual Naturalism. For HP, myth is a vital component.

Maggie Jay Lee leads off this section with an investigation of myth and humanism among the ancient Greeks, with particular focus on the works of Euripides. Then Ryan Spellman tells the story of his development as a naturalist

within the Norse tradition. B. T. Newberg follows with a similar story of his development as a naturalist through the dying-rising myth of Persephone. Next, Thomas Schenk shares an intimate experience of dreaming, waking, and encountering a woman who may be the Goddess. Finally, B. T. Newberg concludes with an affirmation of his goal in all this mythology: not heaven or hell, not rapturous transcendent enlightenment, but adjustment to this world, right here, right now.

# BEING HUMAN WHEN SURROUNDED BY GREEK GODS

BY MAGGIE JAY LEE

07.17.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHY DO IT?

FOURFOLD PATH: RELATIONSHIP WITH MYTHOLOGY

ELEMENT: WATER

The center of the world for the ancient Greeks was Delphi, and at the entrance to the Delphian Temple of Apollo were the words *Gnothi Seauton* (Know Thyself). This according to many scholars was a command to remember that one is human, to remember one's place as a human.<sup>1</sup> In its most basic form, humanism is simply the focus on the human, and the Greeks were certainly focused on this as can be seen in their art, literature, philosophy and also their religion.

Many people see humanism as opposed to traditional religion, and in fact use humanism as a synonym for atheism. Humanism is seen as the rejection and replacement of God with the human, who then becomes the center of interest and the source of values and ethics. The history of humanism is often begun with the ancient Greek philosophers and Sophists, who we are told questioned and rejected the traditional view of the gods. Evidence for the rejection of religion is also collected from epic and dramatic poetry, where the gods are sometimes portrayed in a less than noble light, and even sometimes comically. This is especially true of the works of Euripides.

## **The human in the god**

Euripides is one of the three great tragedians from ancient Athens. He is considered the most "modern" of the three, for questioning the assumptions of his society, for his anti-war stance, and for championing the downtrodden – women, foreigners and slaves. It is often difficult, if not impossible, to discern

what Euripides' own position might have been on the issues he raises, and this is especially true in the realm of religion. Many scholars, particularly from previous generations, have found his portrayal of the gods so negative that they thought he must be making fun of religion, showing people how foolish conventional beliefs were. This may be so, but that is not the only way to read him. I think in many ways he gives an old-fashioned, archaic view of the gods.<sup>2</sup>

Euripides' last and most famous play is the *Bacchae*. In the *Bacchae*, Dionysus returns to the place of his birth, Thebes, to establish his cult, but he is met with resistance from King Pentheus. Pentheus refuses to recognize the divinity of Dionysus and tries to prohibit his worship, this running wild of decent women, wives and mothers. To punish Pentheus for his arrogance, Dionysus has the women of Thebes in their Bacchic madness tear Pentheus limb from limb as if he were a wild beast, after which Agave, Pentheus' own mother, leads a triumphal procession with her son's head on a stake. It is during this procession that Agave comes back to her senses and realizes with horror and disgust what she has done.

What are we to think of this god Dionysus? If one sees the gods as conscious, supernatural people, then the Dionysus of the *Bacchae* can only be seen as the worst monster, for only a monster would force a mother to kill and dismember her child. If one thinks that gods are supposed to be good, to care about and for humans, then one will find much amiss with Euripides' gods. It is clear that many of the ancient Greeks did come to believe the gods were supposed to be perfectly good and just stewards of humanity, and therefore became increasingly uncomfortable with the old myths of amoral gods.

If one defines a god as that which is perfect, perfectly good, perfectly wise, perfectly just, then it seems perfectly clear that there are no such gods, or at least none that take an active interest in us. But these are not the gods of Homer,

Hesiod or Euripides. The gods that they portray are both kind and cruel; they are in fact capricious. This to me seems more realistic, for this is what matches our experience of nature, not just the nature outside ourselves, but also our own nature, our un-chosen instinctual nature. Sometimes the earth is a gentle, pleasant place, with sweet fruits ripe for the taking, and sometimes it is not.

### **The god in the human**

The gods are for me metaphors for nature, or more precisely the names, images and stories are metaphors, allegories and archetypes of our relationship with nature. I see the gods – the names, images, stories – as the poetic encapsulation of our human experience, our relationship with the ineffable forces that shape human life. While this makes the gods *no thing*, it does not make them *nothing*. I see the gods as representing very real, powerful, even dangerous forces. I believe the gods are real. It doesn't matter what we call them or don't call them. They are real and dangerous, and we will contend with them. This for me is the message of the Bacchae.

In the Bacchae, I believe Euripides was warning the men of Athens that to ignore a god like Dionysus can bring disaster. Let us not forget that for a woman, the ancient world was a repressive place. The only time a “respectable” woman may have left her home was to participate in religious rites. The Bacchae was written at a time when attitudes about the gods were changing, and no doubt many patriarchs would have preferred to ignore gods like Dionysus and keep their women at home and in their control. Better by far to be like Cadmus, Pentheus' aged grandfather, and show proper reverence. Cadmus, conscious of his status as a human, accepts straightaway the divinity of Dionysus and goes to join the Bacchic revelry. Human beings can't be in control of everything all the time. Better to show proper reverence for gods like Dionysus, to allow a safe outlet for those forces which if bottled up too tight can be explosive.

The Dionysus of Athens was Dionysus Eleuthereus (The One Who Sets Free). He was the giver of ecstasy, which literally means “standing outside of oneself,” and those activities which cause this – wine, drama, dancing – were under his patronage. There is a time for working hard and a time for letting go. What I like so much about polytheism is how almost every aspect of life on some level participates in the sacred. There seems to be literally a deity for everything. I see the purpose of religion as the cultivation of reverence, the development of right relationship with self, community and the world.<sup>3</sup> It seems to me that we need if not gods, then something like them, to be the focus of this reverence, to encapsulate this “right relationship”.

I can't leave the topic of Euripides without commenting on his play *Heracles*. In this play, Heracles on returning home from his labors is made mad by Hera, who of course does not like Heracles because he is a bastard son of Zeus. In his madness, Heracles kills his wife and children. When Heracles returns to sanity and sees the carnage of his family, he is devastated to say the least. In the traditional tale, Heracles, a mortal son of god, is made fully divine, but in this story he is made fully human. No god comes to save Heracles; instead it is the love of his father and especially the friendship of Theseus which redeems him.

### **Know thyself**

Euripides' *Heracles* brings us back to the place of the human. I think cultivating respect and reverence for nature, both the nature outside and inside ourselves, is very important, but in the end it is not the place of nature, of the gods, to save us, to give our lives meaning or purpose. I believe that what gives our lives meaning, what redeems us, is *philia*, human love and friendship. Knowing this is part of knowing what it means to be human, *Gnothi Seauton* (Know Thyself). Greek humanism was not about rejecting the gods and elevating humans to that

place, but was rather about understanding the place of the human and the god, and giving to each the credit and honor that was due.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

1. For the conventional interpretation of Gnothi Seauton, see Elizabeth Vandiver's Teaching Company course, Classical Mythology, Lecture 9 (<http://www.thegreatcourses.com>) and Donald Kagan's Open Yale Course, Introduction to Ancient Greek History, Lecture 1 (available for free at <http://oyc.yale.edu/classics/introduction-to-ancient-greek-history/content/sessions/session-1-introduction>). Donald Kagan also gives a wonderful summary of the Greek view of human nature.
2. An interesting article on the evolution of gods is available from the Friesian School at <http://www.friesian.com/god.htm>. At the end of this page is an essay on Euripides.
3. For a wonderful exploration of reverence and its importance in Greek society see *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* by Paul Woodruff (Oxford University Press, 2001). Woodruff discusses the Bacchae in several places, most notably on pages 94-97, 128-32 and 210-11.
4. Jon D. Mikalson in *Ancient Greek Religion* (Blackwell Publishing, 2005) examines the Greek view of the place of the human and divine based on actual temple dedication. On this he says, "The thousands of dedications in the hundreds of Greek sanctuaries are certainly expressions of gratitude to the deities, but they are equally monuments of human achievement and usually the human achievement is given considerably more emphasis than the deity's contribution" (page 159). In his book *Athenian Popular Religion* (University of North Carolina Press, 1983) he sums up the Athenian attitude about divine intervention as, "In simple terms, opportunities came from the gods. It was up to the human being to make the best of them. If he was successful, he praised and thanked the gods. If he failed, he faulted, if not himself, a daimon or fortune" (page 62). We might say the same thing about nature and chance.

7 responses



# HOW THE UNIVERSE SPEAKS TO ME

BY RYAN SPELLMAN

07.03.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHY DO IT?

FOURFOLD PATH: RELATIONSHIP WITH MYTHOLOGY

ELEMENT: FIRE

Throughout my life I have gone through several phases of spiritual evolution. In my youth, my first step seems to have been a time of rebellion. During this time, I was seeking to divorce myself from the Christian religious views forced upon me as a child. I've never harbored any ill feelings toward Christianity, it's just something that never worked for me. From there, I began to grow and found myself experimenting with paganism, which eventually led to an interest in Teutonic traditions. Something about it felt right, so I soon got in touch with a community of Asatruar. I truly felt at home and continued to work with them for years. About midway through this period of my life, I had what was at first a very exciting, and later heart-wrenching, realization.

I cannot remember when it struck me exactly, but I do remember it being one of those "eureka!" moments. I had already started making my way toward the discovery that the gods and goddesses were not supernatural, external beings for me. As these thoughts began creeping in, I started to develop concerns regarding what others would think about such views. Would they accept my personal understanding of the gods, goddesses and ritual as being introspective/psychological rather than metaphysical? For a time, these concerns had me turning a blind eye to my true feelings. It was in the middle of this mental struggle that I had an epiphany. So what if I didn't see anything supernatural in what I was doing? Essentially, what I had done was discover how the universe speaks to me.

There is nothing supernatural about it, and there is not a single thing wrong with that. I had found something that resonates within me. The ritual, myths and lore had become a very important part of my growth over the past four years and would continue to for many more.

### **True to myself**

Following this discovery, I knew that I had to be honest with everyone. No matter what the response might be, it was important to be true to myself and open about my views.

As it turns out, not many pagans have similar ideologies – which was to be expected. However, most of those that had come to know me still respect me, and are comfortable with me being around during their functions. I have run into several folks who seem to take offense to such naturalistic views, but it is something I'll get used to. The important thing is that I have come to such a deep understanding of myself and my spirituality.

The largest argument that comes up is the question, “Why bother?” To paraphrase a response I once had: With views such as these, any fictional world would work just as well. They weren't entirely off the mark, but the deep psychological connection I have to Teutonic mythology was missed in this statement. For me, it's all about what raises the hair on the back of my neck. It always makes me think back on a writing I read when I was in my teens by Anton LaVey entitled *The Combination Lock Principle*. In it, he stresses the importance of finding the right “tumblers” and getting them to fall into place. Of course, he was likely working toward a more metaphysical slant than I, but the general principle is the same.

### **How the universe speaks to me**

Honoring the gods and goddesses is a way I can connect on a deep psychological level with different aspects of the natural world around me. This connection is obtainable without metaphor, but those moments tend to be spontaneous. With ritual, those times of connection are controllable. It doesn't stop at the gods and goddesses, either. Similarly, the runes are outstanding tools for reflection and meditation. The myths and lore provide avenues of self-exploration and solid advice on how to live a good life. So much of what I found within Asatru still speaks strongly to me. Even though I don't call myself Asatru any longer due to such a philosophical deviation from the norm, I still hew tightly to its traditions. Through them, the universe speaks to me.

#### **5 comments**

# HOW PERSEPHONE KILLED THE GODS FOR ME

BY B. T. NEWBERG

07.24.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHY DO IT?

FOURFOLD PATH: RELATIONSHIP WITH MYTHOLOGY

ELEMENT: WATER

Persephone killed the gods for me.

That slender-ankled goddess, mistress of the underworld – she *killed* them. And, in that strange way that only gods can do, they came to life again.

Whatever I believed about deities before her, it all changed one summer solstice. This is the story of how Persephone turned me into a Humanistic Pagan.

## **The gods are dead**

For me it was not Nietzsche but Persephone who proclaimed “God is dead.” It is appropriate, for she is a goddess of death after all, a being who dies and rises with the seasons.

According to myth, the young maiden Persephone was picking flowers in a meadow one day when suddenly the earth opened and out came Hades, god of death. He swept her into his chariot and plunged back down to the underworld. There she was to be his bride. Meanwhile, her mother, Demeter, goddess of grain and fertility, searched frantically for her missing daughter. So distraught was she that nothing on earth would grow, no plant nor animal would bear life. At last, Zeus, ruler of the gods, had to step in. The human race was withering, and without them the gods would receive no offerings. Without offerings, the gods too would wither. So a deal was brokered: Persephone would spend most of the

year with her mother, but a third of the year she must return to the land of the dead. Thus began the seasons.[1]

So, Persephone knew about dying. If any had authority to declare the demise of the gods, it was her – this lady of life and death, this woman of both worlds.

Let me back up a little. It was the summer of 2009, and I was standing over a small altar built beside the river. In my hand was a copy of Sargent's Homeric Hymns, and around my neck was a special pendant. I had worn it for nine months, from the season of her last rising to the present moment of her immanent descent. It was to be an offering for Persephone. Just as she would go below, so I would bury it in the earth. What I didn't realize was that I would bury the gods too.

For years I had been experimenting with polytheism. I had joined an organization of Pagans, gone through its rigorous training program, and emerged fully proficient in myth and ritual. Demeter and Persephone had been with me through it all. Through them I felt a kinship with the cycles of nature; through them the changing of the seasons came alive. The year felt enchanted, full of meaning. And that experience was very real. But the gods were not – I knew that, and could bear it no longer.

As I poured a libation of barley tea, read aloud the Hymn to Demeter, and called out to the Two Goddesses, Demeter and Persephone, a dull frustration was in the air. The words rang empty.

Then, as my fingers dug into the dirt and deposited the pendant into the ground, a rush came over me. Through my mind flashed a voice:

"Let them die."

It was one of those moments, the ones you remember long after other memories have faded. I was left ruminating over what it meant, and where to go from there.

One thing was certain: I could no longer pretend, neither in public nor in the privacy of my own mind, that the gods were real.

For me, the gods were dead.

### **The gods live again**

Yet that was not the end of the story. Persephone had still more mysteries to unveil.

How could it be that the goddess herself wanted me to disbelieve in gods? Didn't they need human offerings, as told in the myth? Without us, wouldn't they wither away?

I began to ask myself what it was that had persuaded me to "believe" in the gods in the first place. In truth, I had carried an agnostic attitude through it all – intellectually. But emotionally, I had developed a deep relationship with the gods. In some sense, the gods had been real to me.

When I sensed their presence, it was an intensification of emotion that tipped me off. Likewise, a successful ritual was a ritual that was moving, that felt powerful. These were the experiences that "proved" the gods, as it were.

Not all polytheists rely so exclusively on feeling. Others point to more objective phenomena, like strange coincidences or perceptual visions. I experienced some

things like that too, but nothing that could not be explained by a naturalistic interpretation. Nor did I ever hear others tell of more convincing happenings. Some had inexplicable experiences, like one friend who saw phantom smoke wisps during ritual. But it is a long leap from seeing something to concluding that gods are real. Better to admit the unknown than to leap to an explanation, theistic or otherwise.<sup>[2]</sup> Ultimately, it is an act of faith. And my faith was based on emotion, it seemed.

Yet it was not for that matter insignificant.

Real or not, the gods did provoke powerful and beautiful experiences. I am a better person for having them. I feel more in tune with my world, and more alive as a person. This is no small thing in an era when alienation and apathy run rampant. To find connection to the world is to find meaning.

So maybe, in a sense, the gods are real after all.

They may not be literal, independently-existing entities. They may not be causal agents with the power to influence events, save through the actions of my own two hands. They may not send messages, save for what pops to mind through the power of imagination. Yet in some meaningful sense, they are real.

As presences in the imagination, they are real. As cultural and psychological forms, they are real. As sources of meaning and beauty, they are real.

The gods live again.

**Thank you, Persephone**

Persephone killed the gods for me. And she brought them back to life.

She showed me that gods don't have to be real in order to be *real*.

You can develop wonderful relationships with them. They can enhance quality of life, and motivate responsible action. Through their power, your world can grow vibrant.

In that fateful way that makes sense only in myth, the gods had to die in order to bring life back to the world. Inside me, it had been the barren season. Like Demeter searching for her daughter, I was searching for my truth. So long as I had not found it, no living thing could grow. But by letting the gods die, life returned. They were reborn as beings of the mind.

Ultimately, I had to be honest with myself. I simply didn't believe literally in the gods. Yet that was no reason to foreswear them. On the contrary, it was reason to embrace them all the more.

Since that fateful summer ritual, where I buried the pendant and the gods too, my world has come alive again. No longer do I feel that dull frustration in ritual, that sense of empty words. Now I speak with full knowledge and confidence in what I'm saying. Now I see gods in the human, and the human in the gods.

I became a Humanistic Pagan.

And that's why I say to you, Persephone, beautiful goddess in my head:

*Thank you.*

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[1] The timing of the barren season is debated. Since Bulfinch's mythology, many have assumed it to be winter. But Nilsson challenged this in his book



Greek Folk Religion, arguing that in Athens it is the summer when crops cease to grow due to the oppressive heat.

[2] My friend did in fact admit the unknown. He himself offered a number of alternative, brain-based explanations for the wisps. He prefers to believe in the gods, but claims no conclusive evidence.

**36 comments**

## ENCOUNTERS WITH THE GODDESS?

BY THOMAS SCHENK

10.23.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHY DO IT?

FOURFOLD PATH: RELATIONSHIP WITH MYTHOLOGY

ELEMENT: WATER

### **From the dream world**

When I was thirteen, I had a wonderful dream. The dream was quite complex and involved, but here are the main elements. I was in a huge arena, which I came to understand was the “arena of the world.” There was a large crowd of people walking up stairs into the arena, but I was walking down a set of stairs away from the arena. I walked down many flights of stairs, and came to an underground passageway. I entered the passageway and I saw a door ajar with a golden light coming from it. I opened the door, and inside was a beautiful woman, giving off a radiant golden light. We exchanged no words, but I felt a great joy in her presence.

The dream was so beautiful and powerful, that I wrote it down when I woke up, so I was able to remember many of the details. I had never heard of Jung at the time, but years later, when I read Jung, I immediately recognized the woman as the Jungian anima. While I know a Freudian would quickly read such a dream in a youngster at the age of puberty in sexual terms, there was absolutely nothing sexual about the dream.

Many years later, at the age of twenty-two, I had a dream that contained the following. I was on the North Shore of Lake Superior at a place like Gooseberry Falls. There was a gas station built out on the rocks by the water, a Mobil station. I stopped in the station and went into the bathroom. There was a stairs leading

down into a lower level, and men were walking up the stairs. I walked down. When I got to the bottom of the stairs there was a woman there lying naked in a pile of rags. Semen was dripping out of her vagina. I looked at her and I knew she was the same woman I had visited in that earlier dream.

### **Into the waking world**

A few years before this second dream, I set about living the hedonistic life style. I wanted to explore every avenue of pleasure and maximize the amount of pleasure I could have. Being the early seventies, there was a great opportunity. I lived the sex, drugs, and rock and roll scene to the maximum. I had a great time, but after a few years, I felt like ashes.

It was at this time that I had the second dream. It had a very powerful effect on me. I understood immediately the connection between the two dreams. The first dream was a calling, and the second told me I was failing in my calling. Recognizing this, I put an end to my pursuit of hedonism, and went back to my Zen Buddhist practice that I had abandoned. (The Mobil station and the North Shore are personal elements of the dream — my earliest sexual encounter is associated with a Mobil Station, and the North Shore has always been for me a sacred, holy place.)

The encounters with the Anima, the Goddess, did not end there. The most recent was a few years ago on an October night at Gooseberry Falls on the rocks by the Lake. I was meditating in the moonlight. During the meditation, I had made a commitment towards a certain course of action in my life. But as I was getting up to leave, a female voice said to me, “No, that is not the way it is to be,” and then told me the way it was to be. From the distance of a few years, I can now see that the course of action I was told to take was both wise and also aligned with that original calling.

## **Toward awakening**

Now, I understand if at this point the reader thinks I'm simply crazy. It is very un-modern to hear voices and heed them. I write all this only to give a concrete example of how the archetypes can operate. I do not believe that the Goddess I have so wonderfully met exists as an entity out in the world, but nor is she something solely in "my" mind. I do not think she belongs to the supernatural, or is in violation of the dictates of naturalism, but I do think she challenges any simplistic understanding of dreams or the nature of the unconscious.

While I'm not sure what level of reality all this occurs on, I do know that through these dreams and in this calling, I feel deeply blessed, and I wouldn't trade that blessing for anything.

## **5 comments**

## NO RAPTURE: RESONANCE, NOT TRANSCENDENCE

BY B. T. NEWBERG

05.21.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHAT DO WE MEAN?

FOURFOLD PATH: A SENSE OF WONDER

ELEMENT: WATER

*This post celebrates Non-judgment Day, the day which is not the May 21st Judgment Day predicted by Harold Camping and followers, but rather a day for celebrating who you are, promoted by the queer nuns called the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. So, in honor of non-judgment, we have a non-theme: nontranscendence.*

In the last post, I mentioned that Humanistic Paganism does not seek transcendence. This provoked one commenter to remark “this leaves me feeling a little sad.” Yes, it is sad. But when you’re done being sad, it becomes wonderful.

*Nontranscendence* means not seeking another world, another body, or another life. Instead, there is *this* earth, *this* body, *this* life. However imperfect they may be, they are ours. They are yours. Embracing that fact is the first step to finding yourself in a world that resonates with every step.

I don’t mean you shouldn’t try to improve yourself or the world. On the contrary, such improvement is essential to Humanistic Paganism, as encapsulated in the Fourfold Path under *responsible action*. There are plenty of challenges to be met, and HP affirms the responsibility and power of the individual to meet those challenges. By so doing, the world can become a better place, and you can become a better person. If that’s what meets your definition of transcendence, then by all means bring it on.

But that's not what *I'm* talking about. The idea I have in mind has more to do with the mystical and fantastical. There are many religions and philosophies today that focus on other worlds, bodies, or lives. Harold Camping's prediction that the rapture will arrive today is a case in point, but there are less extreme examples. Christianity and Islam look forward to an afterlife, while Contemporary Shamanism communicates with a spirit world. Many New Age cults concentrate on a subtle or light body, at the same time that the pseudo-religion of consumerism obsesses about that perfect body that *you* just don't have (not without product *x*!). Meanwhile, forms of Hinduism and Buddhism postulate past and future lives, and cryonics panders to the desire for immortal life. The problem is not that these hypothesized other worlds, bodies, and lives are necessarily false – we'll let empirical investigation determine that. Nor is it that they cannot have psychological benefits – I engage many spiritual practices for that very reason. The problem is that they can distract from something equally extraordinary right here and now: the world of the ordinary.

### **The extraordinary ordinary**

What do people seek in other worlds, bodies, or lives? I'll concede that some may genuinely pursue them for their own sake, but I'd hazard to guess that many if not most are really seeking escape from the ordinary. Much of what masquerades as spirituality is really hope for *something else*. Joseph Campbell suggests that people aren't really seeking the meaning of life so much as an experience of being alive.

The humdrum rolling on of life, the daily inundation of violent or depressing news – who wouldn't hope for something more? It's human nature to always want more. Where we go wrong is in assuming that something *more* must come from something *else*.

That's just not true. The ordinary world, just as it is, has so much more to offer. In fact, it has so much to offer in each and every moment that our conscious minds cannot possibly take it all in, and that is one of the reasons why it quickly acquires a tedious veneer.

Cognitive psychologist Timothy D. Wilson explains in *Strangers to Ourselves* that our minds assimilate some 11,000,000 pieces of information per second from our sense organs, but only about 40 can be processed consciously. The rest, according to Wilson, are handled by the unconscious. This enables us to consciously concentrate on one thing while unconsciously monitoring the environment for danger. So, the vast majority of perception happens beyond conscious experience, beyond what we normally take for our world. The result: as non-critical sensations are relegated to the unconscious, the everyday environment quickly begins to feel ordinary.

However, how would our experience change if we brought attention to a fuller range of sensations? For example, have you ever stopped to really take in all the sensations of eating an orange – the sound of peeling the skin, the softness of the pulp, the spray of juice as you bite into it? What an extraordinary experience it becomes when you bring awareness to this thoroughly ordinary phenomenon. Likewise, many meditation techniques call attention to the breath. The rhythmic rising and falling of the abdomen, the warmth of air passing over the upper lip, the fleeting moment after one breath is finished but before the next has begun – a sense of peace and wonder may accompany observing these ordinary sensations.

So, experiencing something more doesn't require something else. It only requires a deeper approach to what is already present. Through mindful practice, the realization gradually dawns that the extraordinary is already available in the ordinary. All it takes is an alteration of awareness. The world begins to resonate, suffused with a new vibrance. The humdrum bursts to life, the droll pulses with

vitality. There arises a sense of wonder, or as Campbell puts it, an experience of being alive.

### **Resonance and the Five +1**

The Fourfold Path of Humanistic Paganism addresses this through exploration of the *Five +1*. These are the five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, plus one introspective sense that perceives thoughts, feelings, emotions, and mental imagery. By turning awareness to these phenomena, particularly to those normally relegated to the unconscious, a fuller experience is raised to consciousness. The fruit of such activity is a profound sense of wonder at the world of the extraordinary ordinary.

Is this a kind of transcendence? Maybe. If there are those who wish to use the word for this, I won't argue. But I prefer *resonance*. The word *transcendence* seems to imply getting over or above or beyond something, as if there were some lack to be overcome. On the contrary, the task is not to go beyond but right into the heart of things. Deep in the trenches of experiences is all the rapture I need.

### **Mythology and Resonance**

But wait a minute... what about the Fourfold Path's emphasis on mythology? Why isn't bare perception enough without mythologizing it? Isn't this just another attempt to go over and above the ordinary, to seek something *else*?

Here is where we return to what was said earlier about spiritual practices, including those focused on other worlds, bodies, or lives. They can have psychological benefits. The question is whether they orient the individual toward or away from ordinary experience. Approached from a desire to escape the ordinary world, they become escapist and unhealthy. Approached from a



desire for resonance with the world, however, they can be profoundly beneficial. Furthermore, they can actually lead the individual to the ordinary by way of the extraordinary.

In a previous post I mentioned a storm in which I felt the majesty of Zeus, god of thunder. This was a case in which mythology reminded me to look deeper at the environment, to open my awareness to a fuller range of experience. As a result, the brooding sky acquired a more vivid, vital aspect. The clouds almost breathed. It was not that I was no longer perceiving the sky, but rather that I was meeting it with more of my being – not just the five senses but also imagination. The entire field of experience, the Five +1, was humanized and unified. By including the imaginal realm of myth in the experience, inner and outer worlds became one. The sky as well as my whole being was in resonance.

It is not necessary to transcend this world, this body, or this life – at least, not in order to have an experience of being alive. What is necessary is to go deeper into everyday experience. Exploring the Five +1 can enable that, as can developing a relationship with mythology. If motivated by a desire not to escape the ordinary but to achieve communion with it, something extraordinary can happen. World, body, and life begin to resonate.

### **6 comments**

## PART III: CRITICAL APPRAISAL



PHOTO BY A LWIN DIGITAL

Some of the most useful voices in HP have been critical ones. Through responding to challenge and critique, we understand ourselves better and improve how we explain our paths to others.

In this section, Jake Diebolt ventures a "challenge piece" - an article critiquing ritual from a naturalistic perspective. The ensuing conversation in the comments proved quite enlightening (click the link at the end of Jake's article while connected to the net to see the comments).

Others also offer various forms of critical appraisal. First, B. T. Newberg self-critiques his Humanistic Pagan retreat, asking whether it accomplished its goals. Then he questions whether his path might be a shallow parody of religion, and finds a litmus test for genuine spirituality. Finally, Ian Edwards - who is *not* a naturalist, asks what such folks offer to the larger Pagan community, and finds their contribution positive.

Other pieces in other sections of this ebook may also be considered critical. John H. Halstead's article, for instance, critiques how psychologizing the gods may

have contributed to the ongoing disenchantment of the world, leading to a resurgence of literalistic interpretations among Pagans. The comments of articles also frequently contain critical appraisals.

Overall, critique has strengthened HP. Readers voted "challenge pieces" to be among the top three most-valuable features on the HP website.

## RITUAL – WHY BOTHER?

BY JAKE DIEBOLT

06.11.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHY DO IT?

FOURFOLD PATH: RESPONSIBLE ACTION

ELEMENT: AIR

Let's get a few things out of the way first.

I'm not a Humanist. I'm not a Pagan. I'm certainly not a synthesis of the two. I'm an atheist of no particular stripe or affiliation. I suppose you can consider this an outsider's perspective.

There's some mention about the role of ritual in Humanistic Paganism. I suppose that with the word Paganism in the title you've set yourselves up to invoke some ancient tales and mystical rites. The question to ask is this: what's the point?

### **How to justify it?**

Since HP isn't meant to be a literalist movement, I'm assuming a lot of people reading and contributing don't believe that gods or spirits actually exist. The word 'metaphorically' comes up a lot, but all that really means is 'I find this to be a useful and/or clever philosophical/literary construct to get my point across, so there'. I set my hand to writing fiction occasionally, so I can appreciate a good metaphor as well as the next person. I just don't find them particularly relevant to real life.

For those of you who believe the gods actually exist, ritual makes sense. It's a way of bribing, blackmailing or pleading with an entity vastly more powerful than yourself, who's just as likely to accidentally squish you as give you the time

of day. You probably need all the help you can get.

However, for those of you who don't believe the gods are actually real, how can you justify ritual? If you do a sunrise ceremony to welcome the sun, while acknowledging that the sun 1) Cannot hear you across the vacuum of interplanetary space, and 2) Is not capable of caring even if it could hear you, then what are you really doing? Well, to be frank, you're performing a religious or spiritual rite that you don't believe has any impact or effect on the world around you: that makes you a religious hypocrite, of one form or another. When Christians do this, we sneer and call them "Sunday Christians."

### **Just because it makes you happy...**

So why do the ritual, if it doesn't have any real impact? Most people will say they feel a sense of fulfilment, wonder, comfort or satisfaction, and use this to justify the performance. So essentially, you're doing repetitive, physically meaningless motions, while repeating certain phrases, in order to provide a sense of comfort to yourself. This sounds suspiciously like obsessive compulsive disorder, or some related medical condition, which is generally considered unhealthy. What I'm saying is, just because it makes you happy doesn't mean it's good for you.

The problem with ritual is that it takes up time, which has value, while producing nothing of value other than a sense of 'happiness' or 'well-being'. I'm not against time-wasting in general (I quite enjoyed wasting days away playing video games in my youth) but I think we have to call a spade a spade. We can't pretend that ritual is inherently more valuable than, say, watching a movie, or going for a jog, or sitting down and reading hours and hours of webcomics (my own personal vice, alas).

### **A thought experiment**

Here's an example. Two people lock themselves in separate rooms for the rest of their lives. One sits down and begins a lifelong meditation ritual. The other boots up the computer for a lifetime of World of Warcraft. Eventually, as humans do, they die, leaving the inevitable stinky corpses. Out of the two, which life had more meaning? One person sat in a room thinking all day, the other spent all day pwning n00bs. Neither of them had experiences that they might otherwise have had. Neither of them accomplished anything real, since the meditator and the gamer lived and died in isolation. Neither have spirits, so there's no way for the one who meditated to achieve some kind of nirvana or spiritual reward, and I think that we can all agree that the gamer didn't do anything spectacular with their life either.

In fact, one could argue that, in the absence of a soul, the gamer accomplished more, since they at least were interacting with other people through the game. For better or worse, they, however briefly, touched the life of another. The world did not even notice the death of the meditator, while perhaps the gamer's guild still tells tales of them in some digital tavern somewhere.

### **Contributing to humanity**

The point, then, is this: ritual may give a sense of fulfilment and happiness to people, but it's empty. It produces nothing, and you learn next to nothing from it. It's no better than a potent drug.

The danger in ritual is that it has a way of supplanting actual experience, because people believe it has intrinsic meaning. It's dehumanizing, when you think about it. It creates nothing, encourages conformity and mindlessness, and makes individuality irrelevant.

If you want to spend your time doing something meaningful, go out and climb a mountain, or read a book, or chat with a friend. Go out and make something, write something or fix something. Learn! Do! Create! These are all human experiences, through which we can contribute, even in small ways, to the species as a whole.

If that's not fulfilment, I don't know what is.

**85 comments**

# NONTHEISTIC RITUAL: IS IT EFFECTIVE?

BY B. T. NEWBERG

05.29.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHY DO IT?

FOURFOLD PATH: RELATIONSHIP WITH MYTHOLOGY

ELEMENT: AIR

Two weeks ago I completed a seven-day Humanistic Pagan retreat. In this post, I evaluate the effectiveness of the retreat, and then focus on one of its most controversial aspects: nontheistic ritual.

## **Was the retreat effective?**

Effectiveness can only be assessed in terms of objectives. The goals of the retreat were to:

- put into practice the principles of Humanistic Paganism
- relieve stress after a demanding graduate program

The first goal is self-explanatory – the daily posts of the retreat serve as record and testimony to the practical implementation of Humanistic Paganism. The second is more complex. The short answer is yes, the retreat helped relieve loads of stress. The long answer is that a complicated series of practices proved effective in making a change in the subconscious mind.

Essentially, stress is an internal response to demands in the environment that seem beyond the ability to cope. After the triggering event, the effects of stress linger as the mind continues to hold on to that anxiety. Relieving stress is thus a matter of making a change in the mind.



The retreat served remarkably well for making that change. It didn't grant peace or serenity, but it completely turned me around. Before the retreat, I felt the urge to "run away" every time I thought about my career as a teacher of ESL (English as a Second Language). I'd put in as much as ninety-five hours per week during the grad program in order to get my teachers license. At the end of it, I felt not only exhausted but also phobic. The thought of what my first year of teaching would be like terrified me. Would I be able to handle the stress? Would I end up getting stress-induced illnesses, like I did during the grad program? Would I have to quit half-way through the year as a result? I could hardly bear to contemplate it. Now, I am normally a fairly confident person with no history of psychosomatic illness. Obviously, something big was going on deep inside me, somewhere in the subconscious. Thanks to the retreat, I was able to confront it. I came out feeling like I'd made a 180-degree turn, like I was no longer running away but now facing it directly. It wasn't that everything felt cheery and hopeful now, but rather that I'd found the courage and strength to meet challenges head on.

You wouldn't think that a regimen of myth, ritual, and meditation would be the best way to do that. It might seem like questioning your beliefs or giving yourself a good pep-talk would be the best route. The problem with such rational approaches is that they tend to stay on the conscious level, whereas the root of the issue may lie deep in the subconscious. Thus, you have to communicate with your subconscious in a language it understands: the language of symbols. The imagery of myth, the physical postures and gestures of ritual, and the clear perception of meditation all work together to send a message the subconscious can understand. Using symbolic images and actions, these practices activate neural networks that go beyond conscious, discursive thought and access deeper levels of the mind. In this way, more of yourself is recruited to the effort at hand.

Overall, I've experienced lasting effects from the retreat, including relief of stress and a renewed sense of wonder. The benefits of some of the practices that contributed to this are well-established: exercise, diet, spending time in nature. Others are more controversial. The rest of this post will be devoted to one of the most debatable aspects: nontheistic ritual.

### **Was nontheistic ritual effective?**

Nontheism can be described as practice which is not primarily concerned with the divine. Deities may or may not be part of the picture. Buddhism, for example, is considered a nontheistic religion since it is primarily concerned with human enlightenment, even though the Buddha talked about numerous deities. Goals of nontheistic practice may include psychological benefit, creative inspiration, social integration, and so on. Nontheistic ritual, then, is ritual with the primary aim of human development.

During the retreat, I made daily water libations to the goddess Isis. This ritual proved profoundly effective, despite my belief that deities exist only in the mind. How could that be? The answer requires a foray into the psychology of ritual, and the relation of the conscious and subconscious mind.

Conscious thought is but the tip of the iceberg, or as cognitive psychologist Timothy D. Wilson puts it, more like "a snowball on the tip of the iceberg." It is associated with the prefrontal cortex, which was the last major region of the brain to evolve. Now, when evolution upgrades, it doesn't re-invent, it revises. It builds on what was previously present. That means that the human brain is but a revision of the brains of our ancestors, going back to mammals, reptiles, and all the way back to the earliest nervous systems. We still have those early-evolved systems operating in our own contemporary brain structures. It's a bit like having Windows on your computer screen, but still having DOS running in the

background. Just as computers don't operate primarily on what we see on the screen but on hidden bits of binary code, so too do we operate on a different language. The largest part of us does not process information in terms of conscious, rational, discursive thought, but in terms of instincts, emotions, associations, habits, and gut reactions. If we want to make a change in our life, we need to plug into that part of our minds. Otherwise, the change will fail to penetrate to the root, and we'll become frustrated with the results. One way to reach the subconscious is through spiritual practices. By engaging the language of symbols, we can send a message that gets through to those parts of the brain that evolved before rational thought but which are still very much a part of our human operating system.

I found ritual effective in communicating with the subconscious. The rhythm of chanting put my mind into a slightly-altered state, open to non-discursive information. Meanwhile, the physical gesture of offering water as a libation to the goddess Isis activated neural networks surrounding the ancient practice of gift-giving (for cognitive effects of ritual bodily gesture, go [here](#)). Feelings of generosity, gratitude, and relationship emerged in response. Finally, speaking to the the statue of Isis, even though fully aware that no deity existed outside the mind, initiated the enormously-complex neural program of communication. The words didn't matter half as much as the feeling of relatedness, which I can only describe with Martin Buber as an *I-Thou* relationship. A qualitative change in consciousness occurs when we address a being as a subject rather than as a mere object or instrument of use-value. That change occurs naturally for most of us when we converse with people. The same happens for many who talk to pets, even though they know full well the animals don't understand their words. For some who have established a relationship over time with a figure of myth, as I have with Isis, the relationship is similar. There is no need to believe literally in the existence of the deity any more than there is to believe that your pet can understand English. The brain reacts the same. What's more, that reaction

happens on more than just a verbal level; it engages the whole mind. Nonverbals, including gesture, posture, and vocal tone, recall modes of communication used by mammalian and reptilian ancestors that are still part of our human functioning today. As a result, the message gets through to the subconscious. Deeper parts of the mind understand that *something out of the ordinary is happening*, and suspend habitual patterns of behavior accordingly. That's why it becomes possible to make a change. Old habits are disrupted, and the mind becomes open to forming new patterns. Ritual opens the mind to change.

A further aspect of ritual may contribute to its effectiveness: interaction with extraordinary, even impossible beings. Deities shock the mind into paying attention, because they are entirely out of the ordinary. Pascal Boyer suggests that the mind perceives things in terms of basic ontological categories, and those that defy the typical attributes of their category, such as winds that talk or bushes that burn without being consumed, are more memorable to the mind. Deities are non-human entities that display will and personhood, and affect the world despite having no material bodies. These are highly-counterintuitive attributes. As a result, they send a message to the subconscious, the same very simple message we've seen all along: that something out of the ordinary is happening. It doesn't seem to matter, in my experience, whether you believe the gods are real beings or not. So long as you are able to temporarily suspend disbelief, in the very same way as with a story or movie, the brain reacts the same. Before and after the experience there may be some cognitive dissonance (for examples, go [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), but that is not necessarily bad. It can be taken as a sign that what you are doing is getting through to the subconscious, enough that it is responding with palpable discomfort. That discomfort, in turn, can be used as a stimulus for reflection and contemplation. And since you know the subconscious is now listening, that reflection is more likely to be effective in creating lasting change.

Ritual is a complex practice influencing the subconscious mind from multiple directions. By accessing the symbolic language of imagery, gesture, and action, and by relating to beings that defy the attributes of their category, it disrupts habits and creates a sense of the extraordinary. This results in what educators call a “teachable moment.” Alert to new threats or rewards in the environment, the mind opens to a moment of learning. Ritual is a tool to educate the mind.

### **Implications for further Humanistic Pagan retreats**

The bottom line is that this retreat offers support for Humanistic Paganism as a viable path. Principles have been put into practice, and effects have been measured. Nontheistic ritual has proven powerful for stress-relief as well as self-discovery. Further retreats may thus benefit from the model provided here.

Must every Humanistic Pagan retreat look like this? Absolutely not. This retreat was highly contextualized to my own situation and needs. Furthermore, it drew on some eleven years of practice in meditation and retreat within numerous spiritual traditions. Others coming from different situations should modify the regimen to address their needs and take advantage of their own background and skills. For example, those who relate to mythological deities better as characters in stories may choose to dramatically re-enact the myths rather than perform ritual. It is up to the individual to decide what suits them best. There is no one authentic way to practice Humanistic Paganism.

Of course, changes in the retreat will produce changes in results. The watchword in all cases is *empirical investigation*. Whatever practices you adopt, treat them as experiments and observe effects on the quality of your experience. Thanks to the Five +1 (five senses, plus one introspective sense), we are empowered to see for ourselves the potential of spiritual practices. Rather than relying on traditional

religious authorities, we can take the matter into our own hands. We can take responsibility for our own self-development.

**13 comments**

## REAL RELIGION?

BY B. T. NEWBERG

11.13.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: IS IT RESPONSIBLE?

FOURFOLD PATH: A SENSE OF WONDER

ELEMENT: WATER

What makes for “real” religion? How do you know that what you’re doing isn’t just playing dress-up, a shallow parody of religion?

Well, maybe you “just know.” But aren’t there times when you doubt whether all your beliefs and practices mean anything? Don’t you ever say to yourself, with Luke Skywalker on Dagobah, “Aw, what am I doing here?”

This question may be especially pertinent for those walking a naturalistic path. Who are we to strike off the well-trodden trail of traditional theism? How do we know we’re not headed toward a muddy dead-end?

I struggled with this question. For a long time I was seeking something, I wasn’t sure what. Something that would make this alien and hostile world feel like a home. So I passed through Christianity to Agnosticism to Buddhism to Paganism. Each gave me something special, but was I *really* practicing religion? Or was I just play-acting, trying on different costumes?

“Religion” may not be the best term for what I mean here, so replace it with “spirituality” if it makes more sense to you. But I don’t want to debate semantics. I want to get to where the rubber meets the road.

How do you know whether your religious practice is genuine?

## **A litmus test**

One test I've found is whether you turn to your religion in times of trouble. When beset by hardship, does it give you strength, comfort, or solace?

Malinowski was the first to suggest that religion functions to manage anxiety. Burkert and Armstrong agree. But let's leave scholarship aside today and just look at personal experience.

If you find yourself riddled with stress, anxiety, or depression, and the farthest thing from your mind is your religion, it may not have really taken root yet.

On the other hand, if you find yourself going back to your rituals, meditations, walks in nature, or whatever it is that you do, and feeling buoyed up by them, there may be something deeper going on. When your ego is drowning, and then here comes the lifeguard to keep you afloat, that's real religion.

## **My journey**

As a young Christian, I never found myself praying to God when under stress, except when I was too little to know what I was doing. After high school, when I became agnostic, there was a certain confidence in myself that was of benefit, but ultimately agnosticism alone was too vague to provide real support. Eventually I found Buddhist meditation, and that got me through my college and post-college years. The ability to calmly and mindfully observe a situation was powerful. Yet Buddhism, with its notions of karma, rebirth, and enlightenment, just didn't work for me. It still felt alien. Not till I discovered Paganism did I find something that was truly my culture, something that felt like home.

Encountering the gods of myth through ritual and prayer proved surprisingly



therapeutic. Something about reaching out to them, with words on your lips and a gift in your hands, activated something deep inside me. It may be what Martin Buber calls the *I-Thou* relationship. Or, it may be the human instinct for communication responding to the gods as supernormal stimuli, larger-than-life parental figures. In any case, it worked. I could talk to them, especially to the one with whom I'd become close, Isis. In times of stress, kneeling before her altar, I would pour my heart out. And then some insight would flash through my mind, or a feeling of release would come over me, and with it would be the strength to carry on.

Yet there was still something missing.

### **Real naturalism, real religion**

As much as Paganism relieved stress, it also produced it. The idea that there were gods "out there" with whom I could communicate went against everything I felt to be true about the universe. So, why was it working for me?

It wasn't until I realized where the power was coming from that I felt truly supported. The gods weren't "out there", they were *in here*. The therapy I was experiencing was coming from the mind's ability to project its inner reaches onto the images of the gods. In this way, I was able to make contact with that part of me that possessed the strength to carry on, the "big self." Meanwhile, the conscious ego, or "small self", the one that frets and worries, felt a part of something larger.

I still regularly kneel before my statue of Isis, ring the bell and offer her a cup of life-giving water. I chant a traditional hymn, then tell her what's bothering me. All the while I know I'm talking to myself, but it doesn't matter because, well, it *works*. By the end I feel release and a sense of strength.

That's how I know what I'm doing is *real* religion.

So that's me, but now I'd like to hear from others. What about you? Is there something that convinces you that your spirituality is genuine?

**32 comments**

# EXISTENTIAL PAGANISM

BY IAN EDWARDS

12.4.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: IS IT RESPONSIBLE?

FOURFOLD PATH: RESPONSIBLE ACTION

ELEMENT: EARTH

Most followers of Paganism follow it as their preferred way to connect with the Divine. However there are a significant number who, although they do not believe in Divinity either as a single force or a particular pantheon, still find that Paganism is an important part of their personality and day to day life. They tend to base their beliefs on science, Jungian psychology, and the latest findings in neuropsychology and neuropsychiatry.

## **An existentialist Pagan**

Interestingly, most of the practitioners of this branch of Paganism still believe in magick. Usually this is based on synchronicity as encountered by Jung, and commented on in his case notes and autobiography and backed up by practical experience.

One Pagan I know who follows this path first became interested in it when he read Scott Adams' *The Dilbert Future*, in which Scott, an atheist and trained hypnotist, mentions experimenting with both affirmations (successfully) and having an experienced Tarot reader predict the order of Tarot cards drawn randomly from the pack whilst in a trance.

My acquaintance tried some similar experiments, particularly with the affirmations, and got good results. Following on from this, he looked for a system that would explain why this sort of thing worked. After a brief flirtation

with Chaos Magick he realised that Paganism was the path most in tune with his psychology and his love of nature.

Instead of the Divine, he works successfully with the inner Archetypes as described by Jung. He certainly gets the results he wants with his magick and, over all, is a pleasant person to be with, and respects all living things.

The latter to the extent that he is vegetarian, believing that as there is no afterlife it is particularly cruel to deprive an animal of its life – and subject it to a potentially unkind lifestyle when growing up – purely so he can eat it. He doesn't even wear animal sourced items such as leather and is the only person other than myself I know of to help worms out of puddles so they don't drown.

### **A neutral party**

He isn't alone. Even my friend, a Witch whose Pagan shop I helped out at back in the 80's and 90's, is an existentialist Pagan. Because she had no particular ties to any of the many spiritual paths that people who visited her shop followed, she was respected by all as a neutral party. Her magick too was based on synchronicity and she was a skilled Tarot counselor.

The shop was a magnet for Pagans of all persuasions and prospered, only closing when the building it was based in closed down. Rather than continue in a new shop my friend became a fine arts teacher and still follows a Pagan path.

### **The gadfly that spurs reflection**

Personally I have learned a lot from my existential friends and atheists such as Jonathan Miller, mainly because they make you think.

I'll always remember seeing Miller on "The Late Show" hosted by Gay Burne sometime in the early 1990's carving very large holes in the arguments of an invited audience of various spiritual persuasions. They were saying things such as "Of course there's life after death – look at all the people who've come back to life after dying on the operating table and told us their experiences". To which Miller pointed out "How do you know they just didn't die, and the hypoxia and natural endorphins released by the body just gave the illusion of an afterlife?"

Then they mentioned reincarnation and people remembering past lives. Miller's response was to explain how much a person's personality depends on their biology. Different biology = a different personality, and therefore a different person. Thus, the personality could not survive death.

His arguments were so good I rang up a couple of fellow Pagans while the program was on and suggested they watch it too. "This is the sort of thing we should be looking into" I said. "Also if near death experiences and reincarnation are real, these are the sort of facts we should be able to explain to show our side of the debate with equal clarity and evidence"

What I liked was the way Miller was showing up the gaps in the reasoning and knowledge of the people he was debating with rather than disputing the existence of the Divine.

This is exactly the sort of reasoning that makes existential Pagans such a vital part of the Pagan community as a whole – they encourage critical thinking rather than just blindly accepting dogma. It's the Pagan equivalent of the Buddhist Kalama Sutta on discerning religious teachings

## **Dialoguing with the Other**

My being comfortable in discussing Paganism from the existentialist viewpoint has always drawn comment from my more traditional Pagan friends. "You've had personal encounters with different Gods and Goddesses, and even channeled them on occasion." They say "How can you take someone seriously who doesn't believe they exist?!"

My reply is that there is a lot more to the Divine than the limited view that many people have of it, and by looking into the existentialist worldview and dialoguing with them, both sides learn a lot more about nature, the foundations of the multiverse, and our place in it.

*First published at [BellaOnline](#).*

#### **14 responses**

## PART IV: DIALOGUES



PHOTO BY B. T. NEWBERG

Socrates practiced philosophy not by composing soliloquies but by talking with his fellow Athenians. Likewise, existential theologian Martin Buber raised dialogue to the level of spiritual practice. In that spirit, HP has undertaken several interviews and interfaith dialogues, with naturalists and non-naturalists

alike.

Drew Jacob follows what he calls the Heroic Path, a way of life embracing radical self-challenge and self-development. At the time of this writing, he is traveling abroad in preparation for a walk from Minnesota to Brazil. In the interview here, Drew shares a little about his path as well as his ebook *Walk like a god*.

Ernest Vincent Pons has been combining Wicca and Humanism for years, and in this interview he shares some of the wisdom learned along that path.

Rua Lupa, founder of the naturalistic path called Ehoah, tells us about this innovative new tradition.

Finally, *Encounters in nature* is an interfaith dialogue between Celtic polytheist Drew Jacob, Vodou priest Urban Haas, and Humanistic Pagan B. T. Newberg. An excerpt of the conversation is reprinted here, while the rest is available as its own ebook and podcast.



## SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT RELIGION: AN INTERVIEW WITH DREW

### JACOB

BY B. T. NEWBERG

10.07.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: IS IT RESPONSIBLE?

FOURFOLD PATH: A SENSE OF WONDER

ELEMENT: FIRE

*This week we talk to Drew Jacob, author of the blog Rogue Priest and the new ebook, Walk Like a God: How to Have Powerful Spiritual Moments With No Church and No Dogma.*

*Drew explicitly addresses his work to both theists and nontheists, so I thought it would be interesting to interview him and find out why.*

**B. T. Newberg:** Let's start off by diving right into what readers of *Humanistic Paganism* want to know: Why should they care about this book?

Drew Jacob: *Walk Like a God* is a field manual for cultivating spiritual experiences without faith in a supernatural higher power. Many humanists feel the natural human drive to seek out a sense of connection to the world around us. That can mean a search for a greater meaning, a search for personal identity, or simply a sense of wonder when experiencing the vastness of our world. In *Walk Like a God*, I set out to give people practical tools to create those moments of wonder and connection.

**BTN:** Some may find it strange that you are a polytheist, yet you go to great lengths in your book to include nontheistic points of view. What's the reasoning?

DJ: Gods may be completely within the psyche of the believer. Since I personally have had wonderful spiritual experiences with these beings, I find it practical to treat them as real beings. But I wouldn't presume to say others must believe in them too. That seems backwards to me.

When I wrote *Walk Like a God* I knew my audience is non-religious. Many people want to pursue spirituality but have no desire to join a religion. So I made sure the book would be just as useful to non-theists as it would be to anyone else.

**BTN: You write about the Heroic Life – it says so in your introduction. But this book is about taking a walk. What's heroic about that?**

DJ: The Heroic Life means taking action, living for high ideals, and making a great impact on the world. The surest way to change lives is to start off changing your own life, and *Walk Like a God* is an arsenal for doing just that. A simple walk outdoors can be the basis of a spiritual practice that leads to a radical shift in perspective. Cultivating a sense of connection to nature leads to a deep and abiding affection for the world and the people in it.

**BTN: So, are you advocating a “back to nature” approach, *a la* Thoreau? Is this book another *Walden*?**

DJ: Thoreau and Emerson led great lives, and their work is inspiring. But it's not always practical. *Walk Like a God* presents basic and advanced strategies for pursuing spirituality. It gives clear guidance on how to do these things, how to find these experiences. Telling people to go live by a lake for a year isn't very helpful. I made sure *Walk Like a God* has practices that anyone can do. Those basic practices build up to more adventurous ones. The goal through the whole book is to make it very clear how the reader can do this themselves. They can experience

it firsthand.

**BTN:** And this *is* very much a do-it-yourself book. This may seem jarring to those who know you mainly from your role in reconstructing an authentic Celtic religion as faithful to history as possible, including building Temple of the River in northeast Minneapolis. I mean, *Walk Like a God* doesn't mention the Celts once. What's with the 180-degree turn?

DJ: There are a million books for people who want to follow the Celtic gods. There's very little out there for people who want solid spiritual practices *without* religion. That's really who I wrote *Walk Like a God* for. There is an amazing, transformative experience hidden within spirituality and you do not need to be faithful to discover it.

**BTN:** At one point you casually begin a sentence "When I lived with hunter-gatherers..." What's up with that?

DJ: I spent part of a summer living at a primitivist camp in northern Wisconsin. Now I do a lot of forays into the wilderness with no modern gear. It's dramatically changed my perspective on spirituality and what it takes for humans to be happy. Everyone talks about how nature is sacred, but what does that mean? It's something you have to experience firsthand. Once you do, it's amazing.

I really believe in seeking out challenges and expanding my horizons. Living in the wild is one way I've done that. Other people choose other ways. This idea of adventure as a spiritual practice is a core part of *Walk Like a God*. It teaches you how to take something big, something scary, and embark on it as an adventure. For most people that doesn't mean living in the woods. It might mean quitting a job or having a child. The range of human adventure is as wide as human

imagination. All of us have an adventure to lead.

**BTN: What do you advise readers do to be safe and smart in the wilderness?**

DJ: I'd advise them to get a different book! *Walk Like a God* is really about using spirituality to transform your life. I expect that most people will take their walks in a city park. These practices can be done anywhere. No matter where you live, nature surrounds you. We spend much of our time trying to shut nature out. Learning to embrace it is a powerful way of shifting your consciousness.

**BTN: The layout of the book is striking. The 86 pages, set in landscape orientation, are full of short lines, half pages, and photographs of wide-open natural scenes. If it were a print book, I would imagine it somewhere between a photo journal and a poetry chapbook – certainly not as a manual on spiritual exercises. What did you intend to convey through this aesthetic choice?**

DJ: *Walk Like a God* is laid out to feel like the wide expanse of the road opening up before you. Each idea gets its own page. I use images sparingly, but in a way that hints at the meaning of the words around them. I want the book to feel like a landscape painting.

Ebooks are my favorite medium because they have such amazing aesthetic options. Print books are limited by cost: more pages means a higher price, and color ink is expensive. Ebooks don't have that limitation. If the author wants a lush montage of full-color images, in they go. If a sentence should meander across the page like ants, no problem. Ebooks allow authors to turn their manuscript into visual art, and that in turn allows a mood to come across. That speaks to readers. I'm really proud of what I did with *Walk Like a God* and I wish more authors would try this approach.

**BTN: The book runs \$8 at your site, but you encourage readers to email it around... *for free*. Why so permissive with your work?**

DJ: Spirituality is not meant to be caged. I spent a lot of time working on *Walk Like a God* and I really appreciate it when someone buys a copy. But if they read it and think, wow, this would really help my friend – why can't they just pass it on to them? Every reader who buys *Walk Like a God* has permission to share it for free. Maybe it will mean less profit, but it will also mean more people benefit from the book. That's what I really want to see.

**BTN: Do you have any plans for a discussion group or forum where people can support and encourage each other in this practice?**

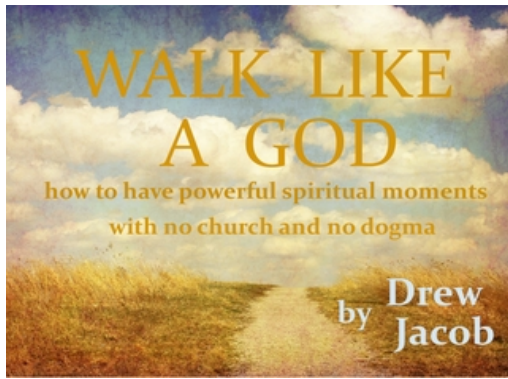
The best way is to come on over to *Rogue Priest* and join the conversation. Or get tweeting. If readers want a dedicated discussion forum then I'm sure we could get one started.

**BTN: What would you like to know from readers of *Humanistic Paganism*? What's your one burning question for them?**

DJ: Oh, wow! That's a fun question. Okay, Humanistic Pagans, here's what I want to know: What is your adventure? What's the thing you do that will change the way the world works?

**BTN: Okay, last question: If you could offer one take-away for readers, something that sums up your view on spirituality and the Heroic Life, what would it be?**

DJ: Remember that dream you had when you were little? *You can fucking do that.*



*The ebook Walk Like a God by Drew Jacob is available for [purchase here](#).*

*For a full review of the ebook, go [here](#).*

**6 comments**

# INTEGRATING WICCA AND HUMANISM: AN INTERVIEW WITH

## ERNEST VINCENT PONS

BY B. T. NEWBERG

08.21.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: IS IT RESPONSIBLE?

FOURFOLD PATH: RELATIONSHIP WITH MYTHOLOGY

ELEMENT: AIR

*This week we interview Ernest Vincent Pons, initiated Wiccan Priest and ordained Preceptor in the Church of Spiritual Humanism.*

**B. T. Newberg: First off, for our readers, can you tell us a little about what Spiritual Humanism is?**

Ernest Vincent Pons: Spiritual Humanism is a new religion of and for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It was created by a man by the name of Zorger as a reaction to the 11 September attacks in 2001. In his words, “It wasn’t just the fundamentalist origins of the terrorists but also the jingoistic responses of our leaders [that made me] realize that not everyone has the time or inclination to formulate their ideas into a cohesive philosophy. [I felt that] if I didn’t make the effort to publicly present a simple, rational, religious system perhaps many people would never realize such a thing could even exist.”

Our basis is that human beings have the ability to solve the problems of society using logic, science and reason. Most people rely on religion to help guide them through life’s challenges and difficult moral decisions. Recognizing how the power of religious rituals, methods, and communication can impact human behavior, Spiritual Humanism attempts to fuse traditional religious behaviors onto the foundation of rational humanist inquiry.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to rid ourselves of age-old traditions from human culture. We can, however, redirect them by redefining their underlying significance and meanings. Spiritual Humanism is natural, not supernatural. By using a method of scientific inquiry we can define the inspirational divine spark inherent in all living creatures.

The Church of Spiritual Humanism is unique in that it is “a religion based on the ability of human beings to solve the problems of society using logic and science.” Our goal is to make the world a better place. We also want to make humanism an acceptable religious/philosophical stance. For example, people should be able to run for and win elections while saying, “my religious outlook is humanist.” Right now you have no chance of being elected unless you profess to believe in god and claim allegiance to a mainstream (supernatural) religion.

The Church of Spiritual Humanism maintains a web site [here](#), where you can find more information.

**BTN: What is your take on how Wicca fits into Spiritual Humanism as a whole?**

EVP: How does Wicca fit into all of this? Well, since we seem to “need” some sort of religion, those of us for whom an earth-centered outlook is appealing can look to traditions such as Wicca as a framework on which to hang our humanistic beliefs. Religious rituals, methods, and communications have a profound impact on human behavior. We can harness that basic, human drive and use to move us away from the darkness of superstition, prejudice and ignorance toward the light of rational humanist inquiry. I personally feel that the structure of Wiccan ritual works well with the tenets of Spiritual Humanism because Wicca leaves a lot of room for improvisation and even encourages participants to create their own



rituals.

**BTN: Are you part of a particular style or tradition of Wicca that is more Humanist in outlook, or do you just carry a personal Humanism into an otherwise mainstream Wiccan coven?**

EVP: I carry a personal humanism into an otherwise ordinary tradition. I am not at present a member of a coven, but rather a solitary practitioner. I lean toward Celtic traditions due to my family background and my appreciation for Celtic art. There's more about me [here](#).

**BTN: How do you integrate humanism and Wicca?**

EVP: Well, the way I integrate humanism into Wicca is that I conceive of the gods, goddesses and spirits as archetypes. As I write in the [blog](#) that you found:

My Celtic ancestors did not worship anthropomorphic deities, but rather totemistic and animistic ones. This is hard for the modern mind to understand. For example, the Irish Goddess Danu was thought of as the "waters of life." Most rivers – e.g., the Danube, were named after her. The idea of the gods is best explained in terms of what Carl Jung termed "archetypes." This is where things get abstract and hard to pin down.

For the sake of this brief introduction, suffice it to say that the human mind consists of many levels – the conscious mind, the subconscious mind, the anima, the animus, and the shadow. And then there is the "collective unconscious."

If you know anything about Jungian psychology you will recognize some of these terms. There is considerable overlap between Jungian psychology and witchcraft.

The conscious mind, and the left brain specifically, is where speech is processed and concrete thoughts such as these being expressed on this page are formed.

But to always dwell in the conscious mind is to neglect our full brain – our full mind. We must “speak” to those other areas of the mind/brain that do not know how to process speech, have no sense of time, nor think in a linear fashion. That is the purpose of ritual and archetypes – a tool to help us fully integrate our mind/organism. Just as we don’t “have” a body – we “are” a body, and just as our emotions have their own language and we must learn to “speak” the language of emotion, so too must we learn to “speak” the language of the other parts of the mind in order to be full human beings.

So when I “invoke the gods” I am not attempting to communicate with supernatural entities, but rather with the subconscious levels of my own mind.

When I set time aside to perform a ritual, what I am really doing is repurposing my will, focusing my intent or programming my mind to set after some goal.

“Magic” in the humanist sense is not supernatural. We can make something happen, achieve some outcome, by setting our inner resources toward that goal.

Sometimes when I am working on a difficult problem, the answer comes to me suddenly in the middle of the night. That is an indication that the subconscious mind continues to work on the problem when the conscious mind is not thinking about it. So by programming my mind with ritual, I am setting myself on the course toward achieving some goal or outcome.

**BTN: Do you get other Wiccans complaining that they can’t understand why you would do ritual if you don’t “believe” in the gods, how it would be “empty” ritual?**

EVP: Well, the short answer is that I don’t get involved with people like that. No

one has actually made the complaint to me that ritual as I do it is “empty” or meaningless. But then, I hang out with intelligent, rational people of like mind. Most of my friends and family are atheist or agnostic. The others I just smile politely and change the subject.

**BTN: I guess that helps if you don’t have people in your face like that. I don’t either, except online. Email listservs and what not. But I guess I also signed up for it by carving out a path that belongs neither in Humanism nor Paganism, but exists between them. Ultimately I just want a religion that I can feel comfortable believing in while also resonating with my more creative yearnings and contributing to personal growth and development.**

EVP: I would say then that you have two possibilities. If there is a tradition that is familiar and you find comforting – something you grew up with, perhaps – you can still enjoy the richness of it whilst maintaining your own humanistic worldview. For example, I was active in the Episcopal Church for many years and I still enjoy what the rich Anglican tradition and liturgy offers – especially the music. When it comes to Christianity, I have to say that I agree with Dawkins when he says it is “barking mad” (cf. *The God Delusion*). But I can enjoy the pageantry and participate in a sense of community of a parish without necessarily buying into the tenets of Christianity *in toto*.

Your other choice is that you could invent your own religion that works for you.

After all, all religions are “made up.”

# BALANCE WITHIN NATURE: AN INTERVIEW WITH RUA LUPA

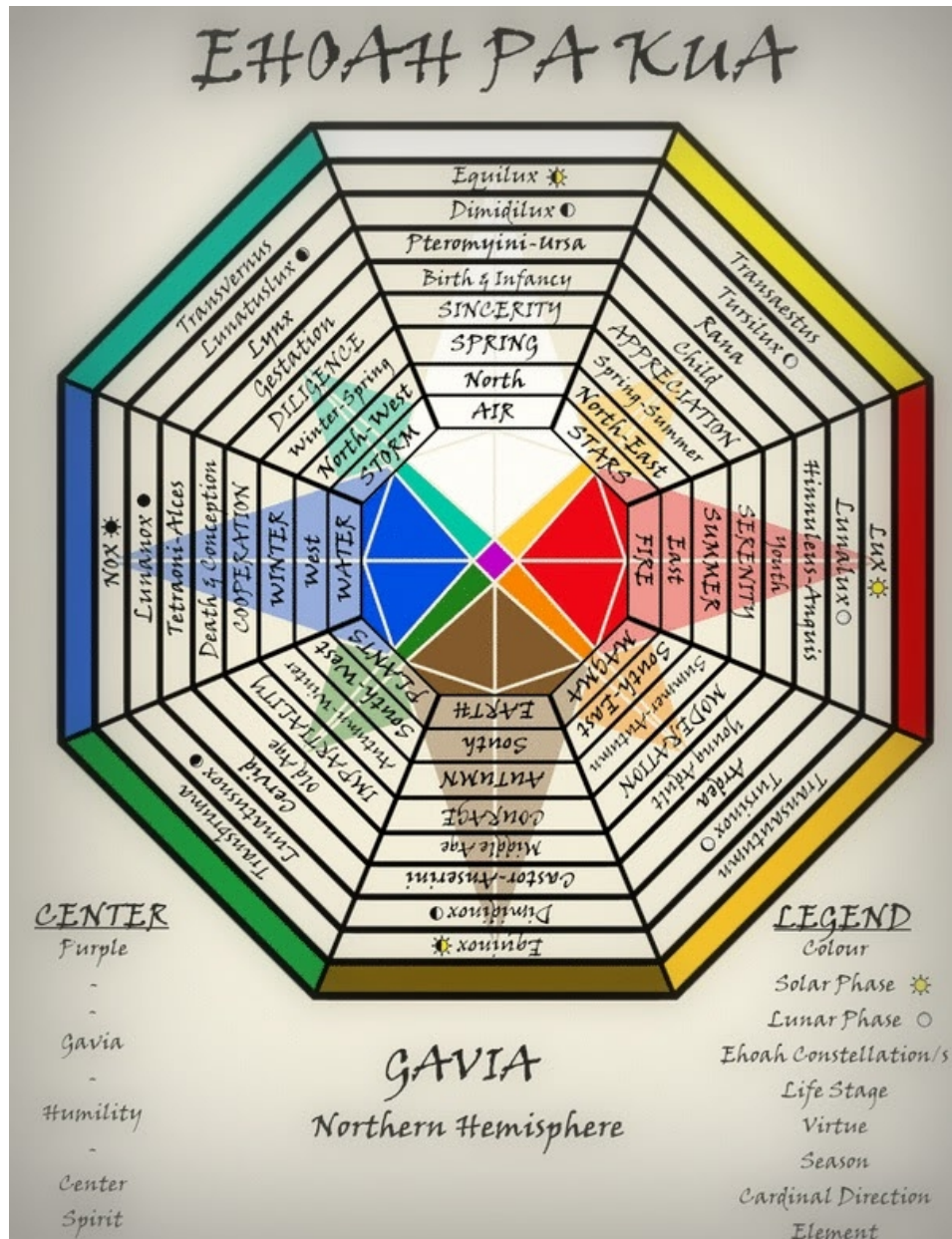
BY B. T. NEWBERG

09.04.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHY DO IT?

FOURFOLD PATH: EXPLORATION OF THE FIVE +1

ELEMENT: EARTH



THE PA KUA OF EHOAH

IMAGE: BY RUA LUPA

*This week we interview nature spiritualist Rua Lupa, creator of the naturalistic tradition called Ehoah.*

**B. T. Newberg: First off, what is Ehoah?**

Rua Lupa: Ehoah is a philosophy and tradition that is based on being balanced within Nature. The word Ehoah is used to describe being completely balanced within Nature. Individuals who follow this tradition are called Seekers of Ehoah. Seekers of Ehoah feel that there is need to live more actively within Nature instead of exclusively focusing on the spiritual aspect of Nature. Images associated with Ehoah are made to symbolize this balance.

**BTN: Is this a theistic tradition, with gods, goddesses, and so forth?**

RL: Ehoah tradition and philosophy is a Nature Spirituality and therefore has no focus on any Gods, Goddesses or any ancestral culture, i.e Celtic or Norse. With no focus on these things, you as an individual are free to decide which God(s) and/or Goddess(es) to praise and worship, or none at all, and what ancestral culture to follow in your personal search for Ehoah.

The Three Basic Tenets are the basis of everything in the Ehoah Tradition. To be a Seeker of Ehoah you need only believe that these Three Basic Tenets hold true.

**BTN: What are these Three Basic Tenets?**

RL: Ehoah is an offshoot of Reformed Druidism (RDNA) by way of revising their Two Basic Tenets and adding a third tenet to the Reformed Druid's Basic Two. Ehoah's Three Basic Tenets are:

1. 'One of the many ways spiritual fulfillment can be found is through Nature'
2. 'Nature, being one of the primary concerns in humanity's life and struggle, is important in spiritual quests'
3. 'It is important to be balanced within Nature as to live unbalanced within Nature is destructive physically and spiritually'

The added tenet is considered important because Seekers of Ehoah feel that there is need to live more actively within Nature instead of exclusively focusing on the spiritual aspect of Nature. Like that of the Reformed Druids, to be a Seeker of Ehoah you need only believe that these Three Basic Tenets hold true. In believing this, naturally you would actively work toward being completely balanced within Nature, physically and spiritually.

**BTN: Could you explain a little of the significance of the Pa Kua mandala? What does it mean to you? How do you use it in your practice? What prompted you to create it?**

RL: I was fascinated with Feng Shui and the Pa-Kua which is essentially a compass for organizing your life. So I decided to make my own.

The Ehoah Pa Kua in its early development naturally had the elements and the calendar incorporated into it. As I wanted Ehoah to revolve around Nature, I added the lunar changes, life stages, and the cardinal directions. The virtues seemed appropriate to add as I felt that everyone should benefit from trying to better themselves.

**BTN: How did you choose the virtues?**

RL: I chose those particular virtues, through asking myself what I wanted to

instill in my own children. What nine things did I want to see in the generations after me? Through much thought and debate, I decided these were the best and aligned them with what seemed the most appropriate direction considering what was seasonally occurring and the stage of life represented.

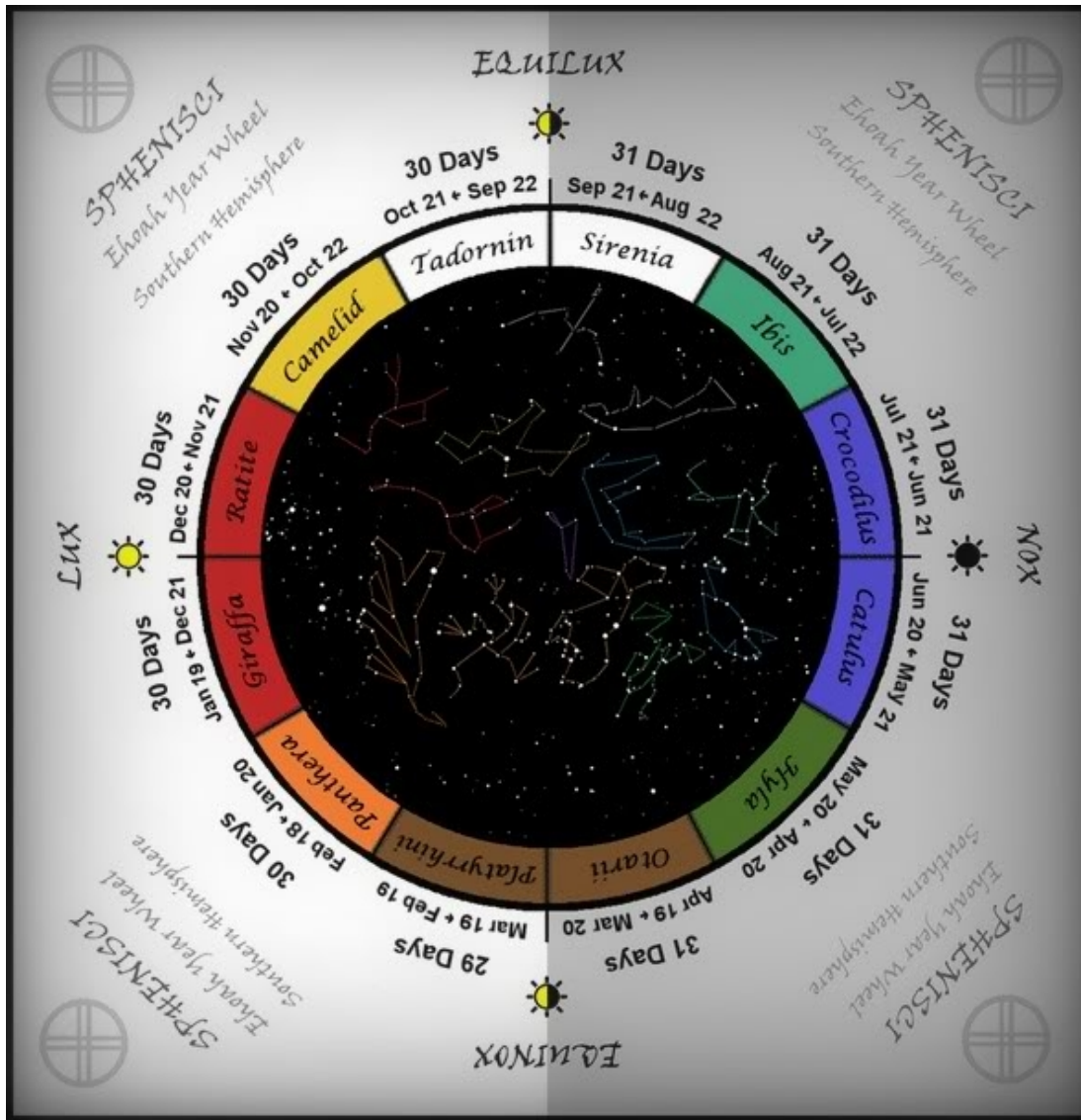
Not to mention that I had researched in depth different cultural views of virtue and noted that it was considered a high valued element in any society.

As for the elements, when looking into the subject I had found that the when individuals were categorized as one of these four elements, some of them were really in between yet there was no place for them. So I made a place for these few between people.

Between Air and Fire is Stars, which also incorporates the Galaxy; Between Fire and Earth is Magma, which also incorporates metal; Between Earth and Water is Vegetation, which incorporates wood; Between Water and Air is Storm (Fog, Clouds, & Lightning). In the center is Spirit. To express this I designed the emblem so that the structure is better understood. This final elemental design is the foundation of the Ehoah Pa Kua.

**BTN: What about the subjective feelings you experience working with the Pa Kua? And how has it helped you grow as a person?**

RL: Human habit is to categorize and organize the world around you. The Ehoah Pa Kua does just that. Making the Natural World easier to understand and conceptualize. Using the Ehoah Pa Kua, rituals can be devised in respect to how Nature functions. Reminding us how interconnected we are in Nature and how we are very much a part of the big picture. This is what it has done for me as well.



YEAR WHEEL FOR THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE

IMAGE: BY RUA LUPA

### BTN: What about the Year Wheel calendars?

RL: Before the Ehoah Pa Kua, I made the calendar. The calendar began from the Pagan Association contemplating creating a calendar for themselves because our climate did not work with the Celtic Calendar used to mark important dates, as the times spring was celebrated in the Celtic Calendar it was still dead of winter here. So I took it upon myself to make a calendar that worked, mostly because I



could never understand why we use the Gregorian Calendar as it is a Solar year, but didn't recognize the solar changes in its design. I had counted the days between solar changes and divided these days into months so that the solar change would remain at the beginning of the month. I had found that the months did not look anything like the Gregorian Months as the summer half of the northern hemisphere had 31 days a month and the winter half 30 days a month.

For a bit of creative fun, the colours from the emblem were then put on the calendar. It was found that the colours were accurate to the seasonal changes and complimented each other and were left with the final version.

All three calendars took about 2 years to complete.

I forgot to add how the Pagan Association reacted to the calendars (as they helped me kick it off). They loved it and found that it worked very well, but by the time it was complete, they had felt that it would be better for individual use rather than for the group as a whole. They explained that the point of the Pagan Association was to be inclusive to all paths and felt that this would create a feeling of exclusion to those who followed a different calendar. And therefore had left that idea of creating a new calendar behind them as a result. So instead of using the calendars I made, they put all sacred days and events onto the common Gregorian calendar for each different path that was involved so that everyone could celebrate the diversity. This I felt worked very well for what the group had wanted. I then asked about what I should do about the calendars I made, as they were completely nature-based and still useful (and after spending 2 years on making them, you do kind of get attached). They simply pointed out that I was making my own tradition and that I should keep doing so as they felt it was a very complimenting path to their group (at this point I hadn't really put together the fact that I was creating a tradition and this was a bit of a new realization for me).

**BTN: How do you use the calendars in your life, or your spiritual path?**

RL: I use the calendar to make me aware of what is currently happening in Nature. Right now we are in Mensis Hinnuleus (month of the fawn), which instantly makes me aware that a) that is the constellation currently in the middle of our night sky (in the northern hemisphere); b) that fawns are currently being born or have been recently born, which also reminds me that I can keep an eye out for them when I see does; and c) It is the first red month so Lux is near (summer solstice for northern hemisphere) and we are in the summer half of the year.

**BTN: How do you see a specifically *naturalistic* spirituality embedded in Ehoah?**

RL: In terms of Naturalistic Spirituality, the stepping stones specifically address that, as each stepping stone has a physical and spiritual aspect. As well as the Ehoah Silva (not yet up on the site, but watch for it soon!).

**BTN: You offer an unusual training program called the Stepping Stones. At first glance, this looks like a simple gardening program. But is it more than that?**

RL: First off, I'd like to ensure that it is understood that the stepping stones are a completely voluntary option to follow and are not mandatory in any way; and that each individual can go about pursuing Ehoah in their own way.

That said, yes, at first glance the stepping stones would certainly look that way as the first portion of each has you do some physical activity and the second is more spiritually linked.

In the physical portion, the reasoning behind encouraging someone to find seeds from a wild plant and then grow it in your home is first – to realize that nature is always there and doesn't have to come in an animated form of a mega fauna. And second, that without plants nothing we know on this planet would exist, so it is key to begin your learning with the primary life form. Not to mention that your local environment is completely determined by your local flora.

By understanding the needs and forms that your local plants grow, you gain much knowledge on why they grow where they do, how other life forms utilize it and how fauna activities revolve around it. Not to mention the direct benefits we have from them for air, food, water purification, medicine and aesthetics.

**BTN: What about those who rent, move from place to place, or otherwise cannot keep a garden. How can they complete the Stepping Stones?**

RL: Simple answer – an outdoor space is absolutely not necessary for you to follow the stepping stones. In fact, it explicitly states to utilize a pot and grow indoors. Most plants will do fine in a small pot in its first few years of life and someone in a life of continual moving shouldn't feel encumbered by this (I have two pots that each fit within one hand that are currently growing a white spruce and scots pine. The scots pine is over two years old and can stay in it for its entire life).

When it comes to the time when the plant requires to be planted in the ground a yard seems a mandatory thing, when it really isn't the case. I myself live in an apartment and have planted several trees already since I moved here in the winter.

One option is to ask someone who has a yard if they would like to have your

plant.

Another is to sell it at a market, i.e. Farmer's Market, for a small price. A free give away sign wouldn't be a bad idea either, but would likely get less experienced individuals that may not be good care takers or lead well experienced people to think your plant is somehow diseased or inferior (if you are moving that might be a good thing to add to the sign and lead more experienced people to take it off your hands).

A third option (and an admitted favorite of mine), is to guerrilla garden. For those not in the know, guerrilla gardening is pretty much what it sounds like. You plant your vegetation in rebellious areas, such as parks, alleys, vacant lots – pretty much anywhere soil isn't used. You can easily learn more about it by looking it up online. There are a surprising amount of methods to accomplish this. I mostly do this either at night, or during the supper hour when it gets quiet outdoors. This is mostly because I can't do the "wear a orange vest and hard hat" method (which works wonders I'm told, especially in urban areas) as I am in a small community where people would recognize that I am not a municipal worker.

So yeah, its a pretty simple process that in reality doesn't require much from you, just an eager mind, a willing hand, and a little patience.

**BTN: Last question – If you could sum up your path in one sentence, what would it be?**

RL: The following quote is sometimes used to summarize the outlook of Seekers of Ehoah,

*"There is no one right way, as there are many paths to the same destination, you just*

*need to choose the path that feels most right to you, even if it means blazing it."*

**9 comments**

# ENCOUNTERS IN NATURE: AN OPEN-AIR DIALOGUE IN THE

## NORTH WOODS

BY B. T. NEWBERG, WITH CELTIC POLYTHEIST DREW JACOB AND VODOU PRIEST URBAN HAAS

08.14.2011

CRITICAL QUESTION: WHY DO IT?

FOURFOLD PATH: A SENSE OF WONDER

ELEMENT: EARTH

*Editor's note: Encounters in Nature began as an interfaith dialogue between Celtic polytheist Drew Jacob, Vodou priest Urban Haas, and Humanistic Pagan B. T. Newberg. It was published serially at HP as a five-part podcast. To conclude the event, the entire dialogue was released as an ebook, complete with lush woodlands photography, and is now available at the links below. The following excerpt gives a taste of this rousing conversation.*

Urban Haas: So what is it you're seeking then?

B. T. Newberg: What am I seeking?

UH: I mean, are you seeking to break out - when you say you're looking for this wild nature, what are you trying to experience, or how would you define wild nature?

BTN: Well, I mean it's always kind of an *ad hoc* definition. But if you could break it up between what is familiar to man, and within sort of his realm of control, and that which feels beyond his control.

UH: Well I was just thinking, one of the experiences we had today, with the three of us out canoeing, was like it's nice to be in a place where we're very much a

minority compared to the creatures living around us. Really, there's not people staying around out here, except for someone across the lake. It was nice to feel like we're not the majority species in this dense little clump of land. Is that what you mean by wild?

BTN: Yes. Yes, I'd definitely say that. It's a very different experience. I value both types of nature, but I really enjoy and identify a lot with the wild aspect of nature. There's a different sort of relationship I think, especially if you're more or less alone in it, or if you just have a few trusted friends with you. A lot of your interaction is no longer with humans and human-made things, but it's with trees, the trail you're on, or the thing that's brushing against your foot right now and you don't know what it is. The sound of the water off somewhere - you're not quite sure, but it's off on another ridge. It puts you in your place. And I think that's healthy.

UH: It can be disorienting, too. When we used to go camping out in Wyoming, we'd spend like seven days without seeing anyone else, and then we'd go into a grocery store, and we'd go into culture shock! I remember one experience when we were going into this grocery store in Wyoming. You know how in the produce area where sometimes they'll spray it - like a little water will turn on and mist everything up to keep it wet and fresh? So we're walking through this grocery store and all of a sudden there was this sound of thunder. The lights flashed, and then the water started. It was so surreal to us we couldn't handle it. We had to get out of there!

BTN: Drew, when you were talking earlier, what really struck me about the way you were describing your experiences was that you were very sensual in the way you were describing your experiences. Sense-based. You could describe the nuances of what you were experiencing, not in abstract terms, but in how it was actually coming to your five senses.

Drew Jacob: Right, yeah.

BTN: And to me that is a very important aspect of spirituality. Because to me, we experience the world beyond us, and the world of which we are a part, through the five senses. And being mindful of our experience, being present with that, is freeing and liberating in a way that is rarely experienced in the common day-to-day, job-dominated, work-dominated consciousness that we tend to, by habit, live our lives in. And when we take that moment to take a break from that, whether it's through meditation in our own homes, or whether it's through going out into wild nature or semi-wild regions of nature, it's therapeutic. And profound.

DJ: Hm. Yeah, I agree. I think that that's, uh... Hm, I don't disagree in any way. I totally agree that is true. But to me, my relationship with nature is different than that. To me, the idea of using it as sort of the therapy or sort of the release in-between a life that is stressful is not appealing. It's, hm... It's about the breakthrough experience of starting to actually understand the world that we live in.

BTN: I can identify with that.

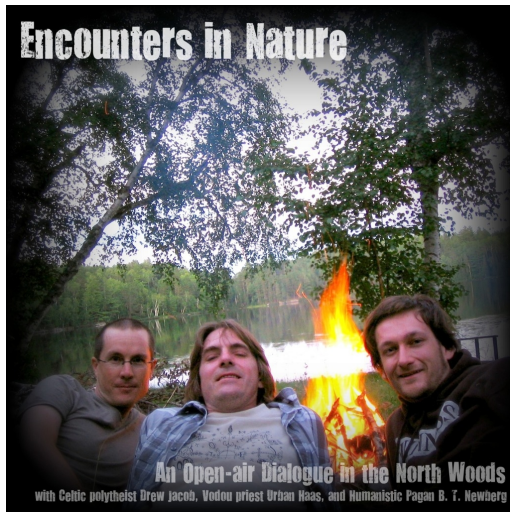
DJ: When you spend a lot of time out in nature, and learning to live within nature – so, taking your food from nature, building your shelter from nature, etc., rather than bringing those things with you, or going back to them – it stops being an unknown, it stops being a mystery, and it becomes a comfort. Because the things we need in life – so food, shelter, and so forth – are things you can just get freely from nature. There's never ever a concern of, well what if I starve? Once you know how to gather things, how to hunt things and so forth, there's really no such thing as a famine in hunting and gathering society. Famines are usually dependent on people storing large amounts of crops and needing to store them



over a certain season for a later season, and then something going wrong – a drought with that one crop, or a pestilence, or a war. In nature, there are hundreds or even thousands of edible things that are coming in and out of season at all times. I've never been to a grocery store that has as many varieties of food as a couple of acres of Minnesota forest. And when you start to realize that everything you could ever need – literally everything – can just be gathered for *free* off of the ground! Shelter – and when I say shelter, I don't mean like you're going to be miserable living in a little pile of dirt. No, you can actually build comfortable shelter out of fallen trees and so forth. It's going to be warm in the winter, dry year round, cool in the summer. And you can find a really rich, varied diet that's healthy, and has some sweet things, that has some protein, and lots of greens – and just pick that up walking around. People often focus on the dangers of nature – well what if I was attacked by a bear or a mountain lion? That's possible, but you also learn how to avoid or drive off bears and mountain lions. And it stops being this sort of scary, momentous, abstract force, and it does become central. I don't want to undermine the fact that nature can be dangerous, but nature is also incredibly generous. It just gives whatever you need; it's never withheld.

UH: So, I've heard someone describe you as *hardcore*.

DJ: Okay. (laughs)



*Encounters in Nature: An Open-air Dialogue in the North Woods*

*With Celtic Polytheist Drew Jacob, Vodou Priest Urban Haas, and Humanistic Pagan B. T. Newberg*

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**6 comments**

## PART V: DATA ON THE HP COMMUNITY



PHOTO BY B. T. NEWBERG

From the Autumn Equinox till the Winter Solstice, HP ran an event called *Thing on Thursday*. This series of polls gathered data and sparked discussions on matters vital to the future of Humanistic Paganism. The objective was to discover something about the community that had formed around HP.

The name represented both the generic term for, you know, a *thingie*, as well as the Old Norse term for a council of elders: a Thing.

Each week until the Winter Solstice, *Thing on Thursday* explored a new controversy. Participation was open to all – the more minds that came together, the better.

Thanks to the poll data, the community came into much clearer definition. The results, as sampled on Thursday, December 15, 2011\*, are published here.

\*The final poll was sampled on Sunday, December 18, 2011.

## WHAT KIND OF COMMUNITY SHALL WE BE?

09.29.2011

THING ON THURSDAY #1

Today we begin the conversation with a big idea: What kind of community is Humanistic Paganism?

- Are we a spiritual orientation, a kind of viewpoint shared by individuals of various religious traditions, aiming to keep naturalistic interpretations alive?
- Or are we a new tradition in the bud, looking forward to developing our own unique rituals, meditations, calendars, and so forth?

What kind of a community do we *want* to be?

**What kind of community shall we be?**

A new tradition in the bud - let's start afresh! 58.33% (7 votes)

A spiritual orientation - let's inspire each other along our different individual paths! 41.67% (5 votes)

Total Votes: 12

Note: For the first several weeks, the two options were tied in votes, and "a spiritual orientation" was favored in the comments. Some development has proceeded according to those early results favoring the spiritual orientation approach, though the other later pulled ahead. The two should probably be considered neck-in-neck, and both options explored in the future.

**51 comments**

## WHAT ARE YOUR TOP THREE MOST-VALUED ELEMENTS OF HP

10.06.2011

*THING ON THURSDAY #2*

Evolution happens. This site began with a statement of principles called the Fourfold Path, but Humanistic Paganism has evolved quite a bit since then. Now it's high time to revisit the basics.

The goal here is *not* to decree what individuals should believe or do. Far from it! The idea is to find out what values we hold in common.

Think about what you, personally, value most about the Humanistic Pagan path. Nevermind what's already been put forward, this is about *your* vision. What do you value most?

### **What are your top three most valued elements of HP?**

relationship with mythology 19.44% (7 votes)

embrace of nature 19.44% (7 votes)

responsible action 16.67% (6 votes)

rituals and meditations 16.67% (6 votes)

naturalism 13.89% (5 votes)

sense of wonder 13.89% (5 votes)



magic and divination 0% (0 votes)

Other: 0% (0 votes)

Total Votes: 36

**17 comments**

## WHAT DOES NATURALISM MEAN TO YOU?

10.14.2011

THING ON THURSDAY #3

One of the top values from last week's poll was *naturalism*. But naturalism has many meanings. Wikipedia lists some fourteen disambiguations for the word.

Of those fourteen, two of the most relevant are quoted as follows:

- Methodological naturalism, naturalism that holds that science is to be done without reference to supernatural causes; also refers to a methodological assumption in the philosophy of religion that observable events are fully explainable by natural causes without reference to the supernatural
- Metaphysical naturalism, a form of naturalism that holds that the cosmos consists only of objects studied by the natural sciences, and does not include any immaterial or intentional realities

Which one do you mean when you say naturalism is important for us? Do you mean it's important as a method of discovering our world? Or do you mean that nothing else exists besides observable nature?

**What does naturalism mean to you?**

methodological naturalism - it's all about scientific method 35.71% (5 votes)

neither 28.57% (4 votes)

both 21.43% (3 votes)

metaphysical naturalism - there's only this reality we can see, touch, and measure  
14.29% (2 votes)

Total Votes: 14

**27 comments**

## HOW DOES MYTH FUNCTION IN YOUR LIFE?

10.20.2011

THING ON THURSDAY #4

At the top of our values poll results was *relationship with mythology*. This week, let's dig into that idea.

We are *not* talking about simple falsehoods here, such as the "myth" that money brings happiness. We're talking about something deeper. Here are a few famous definitions:

"Myths are things that never happened but always are."

- Sallustius, 4th cent. A.D. (quoted in Carl Sagan's *Dragons of Eden*)

"Myth is a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance"

- Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*

"Myths are public dreams; dreams are private myths."

- Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By*

Examples of myths include the stories of Perseus slaying Medusa, Thor fishing up the world-serpent, or Inanna descending to the underworld. They usually feature extraordinary figures, such as gods, spirits, or first people, and often describe a primordial time, or how something came to be.

Karen Armstrong notes myths are "usually inseparable from ritual", so we may think also of the acts that may or may not accompany myths in your life: rituals, devotions, festivals, meditations, visualizations, and so on.

With this in mind, what are the top three ways mythology functions for you?

Remember, this is about myth in *your* life. Myths may have served some of these functions at one time without necessarily serving them adequately today or for you.

Please choose your top three.

**How does myth function in your life?**

experience of mystery, the unknown, or the sacred 23.73% (14 votes)

psychological insight 22.03% (13 votes)

stories to accompany rituals or meditations 16.95% (10 votes)

inspiration or enjoyment 16.95% (10 votes)

connection to the past, or sense of cultural identity 10.17% (6 votes)

cosmology (how I understand the world) 5.08% (3 votes)

sanction for social order or values 1.69% (1 votes)

answers to questions like "Why are we here?" "Who are we?" "What is our purpose?" 1.69% (1 votes)

Other: 1.69% (1 votes)

Total Votes: 59

18 comments

## TO WHOM OR WHAT ARE YOU RESPONSIBLE?

10.27.2011

THING ON THURSDAY #5

Recently, a commenter posted:

*"I would like to see responsible action more defined, but could see that as something that would be refined over time by further posts from the community."*

So let's take that issue up today. It's such a huge topic that we can only hope to scratch the surface, but we can begin the dialogue nevertheless.

As always, this is not meant to decree how others should believe or act; it's about discovering values. Answer only for what's true for *you*.

Responsible Action was one of the original elements of the Fourfold Path. It affirmed that humanity has both the capability and the responsibility to meet our challenges without recourse to supernatural aid. Essentially, we're talking about ethics within a naturalistic worldview. The lack of some supernatural father figure telling us what to do is not license to go nuts; rather, we reap what we sow. Our behavior causes many if not most of our challenges and it can meet those challenges as well. If we hope to prosper, it's up to us.

There are two parts to responsible action: responsibility and action. *Action* suggests it is not enough to theorize or speculate or hope; we must actually get off our behinds and do something. This is not an armchair path. *Responsibility* suggests we choose acts that are somehow beneficial or harmonious within a larger context.

The question for today is: within what larger contexts ought we be responsible?  
To whom or what are you responsible?

Please choose your top three.

**To whom or what are you responsible?**

all of humanity - we're all in it together 27.78% (10 votes)

environment - it's all about ecology 22.22% (8 votes)

family and close friends - help those nearest first 16.67% (6 votes)

individual - to thine own self be true 13.89% (5 votes)

truth - speak the truth, even if it hurts 8.33% (3 votes)

animals - they have rights too! 5.56% (2 votes)

local community or group affiliation 5.56% (2 votes)

nation - patriotism all the way! 0% (0 votes)

Other: 0% (0 votes)

Total Votes: 36

**13 comments**



## WHAT FEELINGS DO YOU ASSOCIATE WITH "SPIRITUAL"

### EXPERIENCE?

11.03.2011

*THING ON THURSDAY #6*

This week we come to the spiritual experience itself.

"Spiritual" may not even be the best word for it necessarily, but it is that unique experience or range of experiences encountered in moments of transcendence or depth. For some, it might be encountered in religious ritual, for others in camping overnight in the wilderness, contemplating the infinity of space, or exploring the dream world.

Attempts to describe the feeling of spiritual experience have been made by Schleiermacher and Otto, among others. But truth be told, it is a subjective and misty topic. It can be different for different people, and different for the same person at different times. Yet how we choose to describe it can say a lot about our values.

This week's question, then, is: What feelings do you associate with "spiritual" experience?

Please choose your top three.

**What feelings do you associate with "spiritual" experience?**

awe 22.45% (11 votes)

serenity 16.33% (8 votes)

mystery 16.33% (8 votes)

wonder 14.29% (7 votes)

oneness with reality or the divine 14.29% (7 votes)

empowerment 6.12% (3 votes)

hope 6.12% (3 votes)

emptiness or detachment 2.04% (1 votes)

Other: 2.04% (1 votes)

fear 0% (0 votes)

dependence 0% (0 votes)

guilt or shame 0% (0 votes)

Total Votes: 49

**15 comments**

## WHAT SHOULD THE GOALS OF THE WEBSITE BE?

11.10.2011

*THING ON THURSDAY #7*

The topic this week is goals for the website. I've long wanted to craft a mission statement, something that sums up our aspirations and sense of direction.

I do *not* mean a mission for the HP way of life. The goals of individuals are their own. These are goals for the website.

What are we trying to accomplish by maintaining a public presence on the Internet, publishing writing, and debating the topics we do?

Please choose **your top three**.

**What should the goals of the website be?**

help naturalists reflect on their beliefs and practices 26.32% (10 votes)

develop and debate a new way of being-in-the-world 21.05% (8 votes)

connect naturalists to each other 21.05% (8 votes)

amplify the voices of spiritual naturalists 15.79% (6 votes)

help emerging naturalists find their way 13.16% (5 votes)

help emerging writers 2.63% (1 votes)

raise funds for worthy causes 0% (0 votes)

Other: 0% (0 votes)

Total Votes: 38

**5 comments**

## WHO WOULD MAKE THE BEST ALLIES?

11.17.2011

THING ON THURSDAY #8

Last time we identified our goals, now who can help us attain them? All good movements work in concert with others, mutually enriching each other. What other movements might be closely aligned enough to make exceptional allies?

When I say allies, I do *not* mean people from whom to rip off traditions or otherwise appropriate culture. I *do* mean people with whom to work, engage in interfaith dialogue where appropriate, cross-fertilize ideas, and from whom to draw inspiration.

The following shortlist of choices doubles as a nice resource list, since *every* movement here has something valuable to say. If there are any you're unfamiliar with, they might be worth checking out. Examples and links follow after the poll.

Please choose your top three.

### **Who would make the best allies?**

Spiritual Naturalists 26.23% (16 votes)

"Liberal" or "Humanistic" religionists 11.48% (7 votes)

Contemporary Pagans and Polytheists 19.67% (12 votes)

Deep Ecologists and Gaians 8.2% (5 votes)

Jungians 8.2% (5 votes)

Epic of Evolution advocates 6.56% (4 votes)

Pantheists 6.56% (4 votes)

Secular Humanists 6.56% (4 votes)

Stoics 3.28% (2 votes)

Skeptics 1.64% (1 votes)

New Atheists 1.64% (1 votes)

Other: 0% (0 votes)

Total Votes: 61

**1 comment**

## WHAT SHOULD OUR NEXT PROJECTS BE?

11.24.2011

*THING ON THURSDAY #9*

Recently, we identified our top goals: help naturalists reflect on their beliefs and practices, connect naturalists to each other, and develop and debate a new way of being-in-the-world

Then we identified our best allies to help us achieve those goals: Spiritual Naturalists, Pagans and Polytheists, and “Liberal” or “Humanistic” religionists.

Now, what projects should we pursue toward these goals?

Please choose your top three.

### **What should our next projects be?**

develop meditations and rituals 22.22% (10 votes)

create a calendar of celebratory days 20% (9 votes)

interview allies 17.78% (8 votes)

start a regular podcast 13.33% (6 votes)

engage in interfaith events 13.33% (6 votes)

interact more on social networking sites 6.67% (3 votes)

create fun quizzes to spur reflection 4.44% (2 votes)

write more ebooks 2.22% (1 votes)

advertise widely (takes cash) 0% (0 votes)

hold contests 0% (0 votes)

Other: 0% (0 votes)

Total Votes: 45

**1 comment**



## WHAT DOES MEDITATION MEAN TO YOU?

12.01.2011

*THING ON THURSDAY* #10

We're down to our last three weeks in the *Thing on Thursday* series.

Last time, one of the most popular projects voted for was developing meditations and rituals. But those words mean different things to different people.

So, this week, we'll focus on meditation. What does it mean to you?

To gain a sense of the breadth of the topic, check out the [Tree of Contemplative Practices](#), and this [guide to meditation types](#).

The choices in the poll may involve some overlap, and there will no doubt be plenty left out. Please use the "other" box for any missing types you wish to vote for.

Please choose your top three.

### **What does meditation mean to you?**

mindfulness meditation 24.44% (11 votes)

breath meditation 17.78% (8 votes)

deep thinking or reflection 17.78% (8 votes)

hatha yoga, tai chi, or other movement-based meditation 13.33% (6 votes)

visualization 11.11% (5 votes)

chanting 6.67% (3 votes)

guided meditation 4.44% (2 votes)

biofeedback or relaxation response 4.44% (2 votes)

trance, astral travel, or shamanic journeying 0% (0 votes)

Other: 0% (0 votes)

Total Votes: 45

**4 comments**

## WHAT DOES RITUAL MEAN TO YOU?

12.08.2011

*THING ON THURSDAY #11*

Developing meditations and rituals was voted as a potential project for us, now let's get more detail on what that means. Last week we asked about meditation, so this week let's talk about ritual.

The choices in the poll may involve some overlap, and there will no doubt be plenty left out. Please use the "other" box for any missing types you wish to vote for.

There may also be considerable overlap between "ritual" and "meditation", the boundaries between which may be blurry or ultimately non-existent.

Please choose your **top three**.

### **What does ritual mean to you?**

seasonal celebrations or observances 23.53% (12 votes)

rites of passage such as namings, weddings, and funerals 17.65% (9 votes)

prescribed activities intended to transform the self or inspire visions 13.73% (7 votes)

communion with deities, nature, others in the community, or one's inner self  
13.73% (7 votes)

offerings to gods, ancestors, the earth, or the sacred in oneself or each other  
11.76% (6 votes)

group worship or reverence 5.88% (3 votes)

spontaneous activity set apart in sacred space and time 5.88% (3 votes)

ceremonies valued by virtue of being traditional 3.92% (2 votes)

prayers and devotionals 1.96% (1 votes)

Other: 1.96% (1 votes)

initiations 0% (0 votes)

Total Votes: 51

**7 comments**

## WHAT'S BEEN MOST VALUABLE ON HP?

12.15.2011

*THING ON THURSDAY #12*

Well, this is the final Thing on Thursday, which means that just around the corner is the Solstice (Dec. 21st), and with it the beginning of our Winterviews event!

With this last poll, I'd like to get feedback on the services provided by our website. What has been most valuable for you?

If there's something missing from the choices, or if there's some other service you'd *like* to see, please add it in the "other" box and explain in the comments. Thanks!

Please choose your **top three**.

### **What's been most valuable on HP?**

articles 25% (8 votes)

Thing on Thursday polls and discussions 21.88% (7 votes)

"challenge" pieces - articles critiquing HP issues 18.75% (6 votes)

discussions in the comments on articles 15.63% (5 votes)

interviews 12.5% (4 votes)

Resources and Community tabs 6.25% (2 votes)

chance to submit your own work 0% (0 votes)

ebooks 0% (0 votes)

the Fourfold Path as a framework for exploration 0% (0 votes)

Other: 0% (0 votes)

Total Votes: 32

**5 comments**

## CONCLUSION



IMAGE: CONSTELLATION 2, BY STEVEN KENNY, USED WITH PERMISSION

To finish off this collection, the metaphor of marriage is extended in *Saving the marriage of science and mythology*, and the call for submissions is renewed with *Speak your truth*. We're looking forward to another great year, and we want to hear from you! Send your articles and artwork to [humanisticpaganism@gmail.com](mailto:humanisticpaganism@gmail.com).

Check up on each of our authors and their work in the *Contributing Authors* section, and consider adding yourself to this growing list in the year to come!

# SAVING THE MARRIAGE OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION

BY B. T. NEWBERG

12.11.2011

Marriage is hard. Zeus and Hera were constantly bickering. Inanna banished her husband Dumuzi to the underworld. Skadi and Njord couldn't live together no matter how they tried. Are all marriages doomed to failure?

Humanistic Paganism bills itself as a naturalistic "marriage" of science and myth. It would be nice if it were a neat, sweet, picket-fence relationship. But that's not how most marriages go, is it? Marriage is hard work, but it's worth it.

This metaphor is particularly poignant to me since I'm two and a half months into a marriage of my own. The honeymoon phase is over. No one said marriage would be easy, whether it's between two people or two cultural phenomena like science and myth.

By *science* I mean that modern method of empirical investigation which has given us everything from toasters to quantum physics, and which takes naturalism as a working principle. By *myth* I mean the ancient stories that have given us the likes of Zeus, Thor, and the Morrígan, as well as the rituals, meditations, and other practices that go along with a living tradition of mythology.

Now that we know what we mean by science and myth, what does it take to make their marriage work?

## Couples counseling

No marriage has much hope if the couple can't learn to listen to each other.



It takes courage to hear hard criticism. Science and myth have plenty of grievances, so they'd better find a way to air them in a safe space. HP aspires to be just such a safe space.

It also takes patience. We aren't necessarily able to express our feelings coherently or all at once. Each person must discover themselves in the process, while the other waits patiently for them to work out their issues. On HP, we have folks more science-oriented and folks more myth-oriented, and both need the patience to let the other speak their truth.

Finally, it takes responsiveness. It's not enough just to listen, you also have to be willing to be persuaded. On HP, we've been challenged by critical voices, and we have to recognize the value of that process. Likewise, critics need to be open to having their challenges met.

As with couples counseling, we must find the courage and patience to talk through the tough issues, and the willingness to let the process change us.

### **The parent trap**

It also takes creativity to make a marriage work.

Remember that old movie The Parent Trap? Two teenage twins conspire to get their divorced parents back together. Their cutesy antics may make you laugh or vomit, depending on your taste, but the point is they use creativity to re-ignite love.

Theology is a lot like that. A recent term in religious studies is *creative misunderstanding*, whereby a tradition changes by re-interpreting the old in a new

way. This enables a community to meet the needs of the present while maintaining continuity with the past.

It may take some creative misunderstanding to keep science and myth together. Like the twins in *The Parent Trap*, we may need ingenuity to rekindle their flame.

### **The languages of love**

Gary Chapman has a book for couples called *The Five Love Languages*, which proposes you have to learn how the other expresses love, and learn to speak that language yourself. Science and myth speak different languages, and they may need to learn the other's in order to communicate.

HP is about learning to speak the languages of both science and myth. Michael Dowd frames these in terms of *day language* and *night language*, respectively. Science speaks of reality in the clear light of day. Myth also speaks of reality, but in the strange imagery of dreams in the night. Both have important things to say, and it takes learning the other's language to achieve understanding.

### **Awesome make-up sex**

Often the best love-making is after a fight. When couples kiss and make up, they re-affirm they'd rather be together than apart, despite their differences.

Science and myth have had a rocky relationship, and currently stand facing away from each other with crossed arms. Can HP turn them toward each other again?

If so, we're looking forward to an awesome make-up.

It'll be like *Psyche and Eros*, or *Isis* after finally recovering her lost husband

Osiris.

**13 comments**

## SPEAK YOUR TRUTH

BY B. T. NEWBERG

06.19.2011

*Editor's note: This was written early on as the inaugural call for submissions on HP. Hitherto all articles had been written by me, and I had no idea how many authors would take up the challenge, if any at all. The response was, in fact, overwhelming. It seems appropriate to conclude the book with this post, as we look forward to another year of brilliant submissions.*

The last post emphasized how critical it is for those neither religious nor secular to make their voices known. Now, here is an opportunity to do that.

### **Humanistic Paganism is now accepting submissions.**

What's the point of having only one voice represented? The more diversity, the better. Do you have an experience to share? Some artwork to show? Or a naturalistic community to promote? Or are you critical of Humanistic Paganism, and have a challenge to offer? All these are welcome. Even those who do not identify with Humanistic Paganism, or even flat out *disagree* with it, are encouraged to share words in the spirit of dialogue (so long as it's constructive and civil, of course). See the new "submissions" tab for details.

We're kicking off our new multi-vocal direction with a post by Rhys Chisnall who's going to talk about a fascinating subject: neurotheology. Watch for that this coming Sunday. But first, here's the story of how I began speaking my truth.

**No, it couldn't be (not me)**

I grew up in the tiny town of Hector, population 1151. In a place that small, it's not easy for a sensitive, intellectual dreamer like me to feel accepted. Actually, I felt like a space alien.

I knew that I thought differently than those around me, but I learned early on not to voice those thoughts or risk ridicule, ostracism, or even violence. More than that, I came to assume that I was the only one like me. Finally, I grew to accept that the way I saw the world was just a fantasy, entertaining perhaps but of no social value.

I spent my youth just waiting to get out of that town, much like Luke from Star Wars, who said of his home world of Tatooine: "If there's a bright center of the galaxy, you're on the planet that it's farthest from."

When I finally got away to the city for university, and then further away for study abroad, I discovered I was not alone. There were other thinkers like me.

Yet it was not until I met a certain young atheist – we'll call him Norton – that I ever suspected I could take responsibility for my own spirituality. He was no perfect role model – an introverted young mathematician, arrogant and condescending as anyone I've ever known. Yet there he was, believing in himself and actually living his truth. It gave me an inkling that maybe I could too.

I had long since known that I was both agnostic and spiritual, but never did I think I could live life openly that way. It took Norton's encouragement before it dawned on me that I really could be who I was.

What's more, I didn't need to be more like him. I needed to be more like *me*.

That's how it came to be that my first "spiritual teacher" was an atheist, strange

as it may sound. He taught me one of the greatest spiritual maxims of all:

Speak your truth.

### **And they came out of the woodwork**

Fast-forward to 2011. The last decade had seen me explore Buddhism, Shamanism, Wicca, Druidry, Humanism, and more. Each of those paths taught me invaluable insights, and I would not be who I am without them. Nor would I be able to say what I feel with any nuance had I not first learned from these great traditions. Yet none of them were quite right for me.

That's when I decided to start the Humanistic Paganism blog. Surely there were others like me, I thought. Perhaps if I began putting myself out there, they would find me.

And they have.

Since launching this blog, I've met tons of like-minded people. Let me introduce you to just a few.

Rua Lupa – Originally intending to create a belief system for a fiction novel, she soon discovered she was developing her own real-life naturalistic tradition.

Ethan Zaghumut – When I met him at a Nature Spirituality meetup, I was shocked to find someone with monk-like calm and compassion, but no formal Buddhist training. He found mindfulness his own way.

Rhys Chisnall – His writing shows a clear depth of understanding of both Paganism and how the mind works as we call to gods and spirits.

Amber Magpie – If you haven't read her essay currently featured on the Witches' Voice, do so right now.

And I'm meeting more like-minded folks every day. In fact, I've met enough to justify opening the blog up for submissions. I'll still remain the primary author, but why not let other voices take the floor too?

### **Aletheia, the spirit of truth**

Aesop has given us a wonderful story of Aletheia, the personification of truth. One day, the potter Prometheus decided to fashion Aletheia from clay, in order to guide his other creation, humanity. But his plan was confounded when he was called away by an unexpected summons from Zeus. Prometheus rushed off, leaving his workshop in the charge of Dolus, his apprentice. Now Dolus, whose name means "trickery", undertook to copy his master's work. The forgery was almost flawless, like the original in every way but one – he didn't have time to make the feet. When his master returned, Dolus trembled in fear, hoping he would not notice. Prometheus beheld not one but two figures of "Truth", and was amazed. Seeking to take credit for both, he fired them in the kiln, then breathed life into them. That's when the fatal difference was revealed. Aletheia stepped forward in measured steps, but the false copy, lacking feet, stood stuck in its place.

That is what it is like to speak your truth. You can walk by it. The inauthentic voice, on the other hand, immobilizes you, keeps you tied to someone else's version of "truth." What is needed is that voice which breathes life into you, which frees you to move forward.

Of course, there are those who feel they might have a voice, but it has nothing

special to say. Many need a little encouragement – just as I needed it from Norton. Yet when you look at the thought and care those same people put into a conversation, or an email list post, or an artwork, it's plain as day that they have plenty to offer.

And I'm pretty sure *you* have something to offer too.

May I add as well, if it isn't already clear, that whatever you write, it must be *your* truth. What you bring to the table might not look anything like the picture of Humanistic Paganism I have painted so far. And that's just fine. As ecologists know well, diversity is the sign of a healthy population.

Don't stop with Humanistic Paganism, either. Sure, I'd love to have you here, don't get me wrong. But what would be really cool is for folks to be vocal in their communities. There are a number of groups and forums, online and offline, that are sympathetic to spirituality from a naturalistic point of view. See the "[resources](#)" tab for some of these. There are also lots of places in the wider community where we can add our voices to the growing diversity. [The Witches' Voice](#) is one site in particular where you can get a lot of exposure without having to be a great writer.

So if you've been waiting for encouragement, here it is. If you've been hesitant to speak up, now's your chance.

Learn from my friend Norton, and follow one sweet, simple maxim:

*Speak your truth.*

**7 comments**



## CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

HP could not be what it is today without its contributors. Here you'll find them in alphabetical order, with anchor links to their works in this volume.

It should be noted that not all of these authors necessarily identify with or describe themselves by the HP label. Many are Naturalistic Pagans or Religious Naturalists of various stripes. Some are even secular Atheists or traditional theists. Such range of perspectives is welcome at HP. Diversity is the measure of a healthy ecosystem.

### Blake, Jonathan



[Do we owe gratitude to the universe? by Jonathan Blake](#)

Jonathan Blake: Born into a Mormon family who had followed railroad work to the Mojave Desert, Jonathan Blake struggled with religious doubts from early childhood but went on to serve as a Mormon missionary in upstate New York and to marry his first love during a secret ceremony in a Mormon temple. With the birth of his two daughters and a growing sense of responsibility for their welfare, he sought greater certainty about his religious beliefs and more knowledge about Mormon history. What he learned caused his faith in Mormonism to fall away and his eyes to be opened to a world with more freedom and beauty than he had imagined. He now seeks to live according to the

dictates of his own conscience and to learn as much as humanly possible about the cosmos. Still living in the Mojave, he recently completed a Master of Science degree in computer engineering and earns his living as a data warehousing professional.

### **Chisnall, Rhys**



#### Paganism and the brain

Rhys Chisnall grew up in the Suffolk countryside and as such has a deep interest in nature and wildlife. He works as a lecturer at Otley College of Agriculture and Horticulture, specifically with special needs students, and is currently studying for a degree with the Open University in Philosophy and Psychology. He has been interested in Paganism since his teen years and was lucky enough to be trained by a coven who takes a naturalistic approach to the Craft. He later joined that coven and now runs a training group for those interested in initiatory Witchcraft.

### **Diebolt, Jake**



#### Ritual – why bother?

Jake Diebolt works as a GIS Technician (translation: map guy) on Manitoulin Island, Ontario, Canada. By night he reads, writes, and cooks (he does the best he can). He also enjoys archery, hunting and getting pushed face-first into snow banks (see photo).

#### **Edwards, Ian**



#### Existential Paganism

Ian Edwards is the Pagan editor for the on-line magazine “Bellaonline”. He has been practising magick since he lived in Mexico in 1979, and following the Pagan path since the mid 1980s. Ian spent most of his early life travelling as his father

was first in the British Royal Navy and later part of the British Embassy staff in various parts of the world.

During his travels he saw and learned about the indigenous spiritual paths of many countries and also trained in several martial arts with strong psycho/spiritual roots including Aikido, Fung Sau Kung Fu, and Ninjutsu. He is a third degree black belt in the latter which he was presented with by the Grandmaster of the Bujinkan system after studying the art in Japan.

He also helped out at a Pagan shop called “Broomsticks” in his natal city of Portsmouth (UK) run by an existentialist Pagan. Ian learned a lot about that path in addition to appreciating the many different spiritual systems that used the shop for supplies and discussing esoteric matters.

He is the author of The Wizard’s Way to Wealth published by Cappel Bann Publishers.

### **Effinger-Weintraub, Eli**



What does your practice look like?

### Deities as role models

Eli Effinger-Weintraub is rooted in the Twin Cities Watershed. She practices a mongrel brand of naturalistic Reclaiming-tradition hearthwitchery influenced by Gaia theory, naturalistic pantheism, and the writings of Carl Sagan. But she tries not to think too deeply about any of that and mostly just rides her bicycle, instead. Eli writes plays, creative nonfiction, and short speculative fiction, often inspired by the visual art of her wife, Leora Effinger-Weintraub. She is also a mercenary copyeditor. Find her online at Back Booth, on Twitter as @AwflyWeeEli, and at the Pagan Newswire Collective blog No Unsacred Place, where she writes the Restorying the Sacred column.

### **Haas, Urban**



### Encounters in nature: An open-air dialogue in the North Woods

Urban Haas, a.k.a. Oungan François, finds humor in life while strumming to a different tune. He's a musician, blogger, traveler, activist, Vodouan, technologist & mediator. Urban Haas is a priest of New Orleans Vodou, and the author of Chasing the Asson. He lives on a hobby farm in southern Minnesota with his wife, two dogs, and his horses.

### **Halstead, John H.**



The archetypes are gods: Re-godding the archetypes

John H. Halstead is a former Mormon, now eclectic Neopagan with an interest in ritual as an art form, ecopsychology, theopoetics, Jungian theory, and the idea of death as an act of creation. He maintains the website [American Neopaganism](#) and the newly-minted blog [The Allergic Pagan](#).

**Host, Jon Cleland**



Naturalistic meaning and purpose

Dr. Jon Cleland Host is a scientist who earned his PhD in materials science at Northwestern University & has conducted research at Hemlock Semiconductor and Dow Corning since 1997. He holds eight patents and has authored over three dozen internal scientific papers and eleven papers for peer-reviewed scientific journals, including the journal *Nature*. He has taught classes on biology,

math, chemistry, physics and general science at Delta College and Saginaw Valley State University. Jon grew up near Pontiac, and has been building a reality-based spirituality for over 30 years, first as a Catholic and now as a Unitarian Universalist, including collaborating with Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow to spread the awe and wonder of the Great Story of our Universe (see [www.thegreatstory.org](http://www.thegreatstory.org), and the blog at [evolutionarytimes.org](http://evolutionarytimes.org)). Jon and his wife have four sons, whom they embrace within a Universe-centered, Pagan, family spirituality. He currently moderates the yahoo group [Naturalistic Paganism](#).

### Jacob, Drew



[Encounters in nature: An open-air dialogue in the North Woods](#)

[Spirituality without religion: An interview with Drew Jacob](#)

Drew Jacob is a priest of many gods, a seasoned nonprofit professional, a writer, an observer and all too frequently a student of his own misadventures. He follows the [Heroic Path](#): the idea that the highest goal in life is to live gloriously, to distinguish oneself through one's deeds, to be clever and brave and become known for it – to use the moments of life to leave a lasting and worthy impression on the world. He is the author of [Rogue Priest](#) and the new ebook [Walk Like a God: How to Have Spiritual Moments With No Church and No Dogma](#). Currently he is in preparation for the [Great Adventure](#), a walk across two



continents from Minnesota to Brazil.

### Lee, Maggie Jay



Being human when surrounded by Greek gods

Maggie Jay Lee lives in west Tennessee with her husband, cat and two dogs. When she is not working as an environmental consultant, she likes to spend her time enjoying nature, dancing and learning about this strange, beautiful world. Maggie is a naturalistic pagan with a particular interest in ancient Greek religion.

### Lupa, Rua



Balance within nature: An interview with Rua Lupa

The indifference of nature

Rua Lupa is a Canadian Metis of Celtic and Anishinabek (Native peoples of the Great Lakes region) descent. By studying what is being rediscovered about the Celts, and getting involved in the spiritual practices of the Anishnabek, she



hopes to find out more about herself, bring to light valuable insights from these cultures, and maybe bring about a new way of being. Rua's strong love of Nature has led to a passion for photography and Wildlife Technician degree. She dedicates her life to conserving what is left of our unaltered wilderness, and helping humanity regain balance within Nature through Ehoah, a naturalistic path. Rua founded the Sault Community Drum Circle, the Gore Bay Drum Circle on Manitoulin Island, and has been a board member of Bike Share Algoma. She also has a background in tandem canoe tripping, winter camping, lifeguarding, advanced wilderness first aid, and a myriad of other outdoor activities.

### **Mula, C Luke**



Of consequence and wonder: The “why’s” of Humanistic Paganism

C Luke Mula is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Endlessly fascinated by meaningful experiences of all stripes, he is constantly experimenting with ways to make life more meaningful, a process he calls “faith design.” He co-directs The Way to Actuality, a website founded to foster the discussion and discovery of Purpose wherever it can be found, regardless of religious or secular context.

### **Newberg, B. T.**



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B. T. Newberg is an author, editor, teacher, and husband. For eleven years and counting, he has been practicing meditation and ritual from a naturalistic perspective. After leaving the Lutheranism of his raising, he experimented with Agnosticism, Buddhism, Contemporary Paganism, and Spiritual Humanism. Currently he combines the latter two into a dynamic path embracing both science

and myth. He headed the Google Group [Polytheist Charity](#), and organized the international interfaith event [The Genocide Prevention Ritual](#). In 2009, he completed a 365-day challenge recorded at [One Good Deed Per Day](#). As a Pagan, he has published frequently at [The Witch's Voice](#) as well as [Oak Leaves](#) and the podcast [Tribeways](#), and has written a book on the ritual order of Druid organization Ar nDriocht Fein called [Ancient Symbols, Modern Rites](#). Several of his ebooks sell at [GoodReads.com](#), including a volume of creative nonfiction set in Malaysia called [Love and the Ghosts of Mount Kinabalu](#). Professionally, he teaches English as a Second Language, and also runs an SEO writing business at [www.BTNewberg.com](#). After living in England, Malaysia, and Japan, B. T. Newberg currently resides in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with his wife and cat.

### **Pons, Ernest Vincent**



#### Integrating Wicca and Humanism: An interview with Ernest Vincent Pons

Ernest Vincent Pons: In 2003 I was ordained in the Church of Spiritual Humanism. My official church title is Preceptor. My spiritual journey began in the Episcopal Church, where I was active for many years (I still attend mass once in a while, enjoying the rich Anglican liturgical traditions whilst maintaining my private, humanist world view). You may find my ministry page [here](#).

### **Schenk, Thomas**



The mystery of being

Bicycle meditation

Encounters with the Goddess?

Thomas Schenk: “If asked, I’d call myself a Space-age Taoist, Black Sheep Catholic, Perennial Philosophy Pantheist, Dharma Bum. In other words I am a kind of spiritual and philosophical mutt. I’m not out to change the world, for I believe the world has a much better sense of what it is supposed to be than I ever could. But I do try to promote the value of the contemplative life in these most un-contemplative of times. I don’t know if the piece presented here has any value, but I feel blessed that I can spend my time thinking about such things. My version of the American dream is that here, as the child of a line of farmers and peasants going back through the ages, I have the privilege to live with my head in such clouds.”

Thomas is also the author of the naturalistic spirituality blog [Golden Hive of the Invisible](#).

**Spellman, Ryan**



How the universe speaks to me

Ryan Spellman lives happily in the foothills of Appalachia with his wife of seven years and three spoiled kitties. He is lucky enough to spend his day job working at a library and does a little web and graphic design, painting, drawing and almost anything else creative he can get his hands on as time allows.

# DYNAMIC TABLES OF CONTENTS

As explained earlier, this ebook contains multiple tables of contents that put its pieces together in fresh and revealing ways. See the front of the book for the Topical Table of Contents. For the other three, proceed below.

# CRITICAL QUESTIONS TABLE OF CONTENTS

This table arranges the articles according to their relevance to four essential questions raised by critics of HP. The four questions are: 1) What do we mean?, 2) Why do it?, 3) Why not do otherwise?, and 4) Is it responsible? The first asks for definition, nuance, and elaboration. The second asks what we gain by engaging in spiritual practices from a naturalistic point of view. The third is similar, but focuses on what we gain that we cannot get by pursuing alternative practices, for example: can we get the same benefits of myth by reading fiction, and if not why not? Finally, the last question inquires into the ethical implications of naturalistic spirituality. None of the articles answer these questions comprehensively, but all have something to say in response. Most interestingly, there are no articles addressing the third question. Is this a question that needs to be addressed at all? If so, it looks like we have a challenge set for us in the coming year.

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## **Question 3. Why not do otherwise?**

(None)

## **Question 4. Is it responsible?**

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# FOURFOLD PATH TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Fourfold Path is a basic framework structuring HP. This table of contents sorts articles according to their relevance to each point on the Fourfold Path. Articles are often relevant to more than one point, though each has been limited to a single category. A few comment explicitly on all four, and have been placed in the "All" section.

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# FOUR ELEMENTS TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Four Elements motif common in Contemporary Paganism offers a contemplative look at the articles. How does each reflect the correspondences of its element? What can it tell you about how that element manifests in the world? An article might even be read after a ritual or meditation focused on its element.

This table works with the following correspondences:

- Earth - gut instinct, practicality, sociality
- Air - thought, intellect, analysis
- Fire - action, inspiration, power
- Water - feeling, emotion, the unconscious

In this context, the elements are used for their symbolic and imaginative value. Attending to all four elements in turn encourages a balanced perspective, and cultivates holistic harmony.

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