"To Reenchant the World"

Rev. Shawn Gauthier
Vancouver Unitarians
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It began as a prank, but the joke quickly took on a life of its own.

In the early 1960's, Carlton College, in Minnesota,
like many universities at the time,
had a lot to say about what students could and couldn't do outside of class,
taking on a role akin to the students' parents
and looking after their moral development.

The school's paternalistic policies divided women and men into different dorms,
and, quite unfairly, imposed a curfew, but only on the women.

Carlton College also required students attend weekly religious services.

One night in 1963, three young men, sitting in a dorm room,
decided to rebel.[1]

They would start their own religion—
and attempt to "get credit for attending its services."

"After all," they thought, any religion they might invent
was "no more or less true than any other religion."

Apparently, in deciding on a name for this new faith,
one of the men, Howard Cherniack,
who was raised in a secular Jewish family,
recalled that his parents, when asked about their religion,
would try to shut down pesky questions by emphatically stating they were druids—
as in that mysterious ancient religious tradition that traces back to the British Isles.

Because they knew next to nothing about actual druids,
from the past or the present,

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[1] "American druid: how a 1960s campus prank became a serious lifestyle," Deena Prichep, *The Guardian*, 27 December 2024.

these men decided to call their new religion
the Reformed Druids of North America.

The students crafted organizing tenets open enough
not to alienate people of other faiths
("nature is good", more or less),
drew a sigil, [a magical symbol,] and donned some robes.

They wrote a liturgy, built an altar in the college's arboretum,
called upon the Earth mother and passed around the waters of life
([which was actually] watered-down whiskey,
in a clear violation of the college's alcohol policy).

And the Reformed Druids of North America (RDNA) was born.

Cherniack submitted a public letter to the dean of students,
asking how the college—
which encouraged intellectual questioning within its classes—
could call any established religion more valid than the one they had created.
He never received an answer, but declared it a victory.

Feeling they had made their point after a few months,
Cherniack resolved, from there on out,
to sleep in on Sunday mornings.

Although Cherniack spent his Sundays in bed,
other students continued—either for protest,
or because they enjoyed gathering to hear something
with the cadence of worship among the trees.

The protest worked.
Within a year, the religion requirement [at the school] was abandoned.

So, it may surprise you to hear that, over 60 years later,
the Reformed Druids of North America,
born as both a protest and a gag, is still a going concern,
with chapters—or, more precisely, Groves—
spread across the U.S., with even a couple in Canada.

It turns out that not everyone chose to sleep in on those Sundays in the 60's.

Some of the students continued to gather for ritual,
to sing and chant, to pray and meditate,
because they found power in this new religion that had, inadvertently,
led them into a deepening connection with nature and something of the divine.

Across the passing years, as the students graduated and returned home
or went off to other universities for graduate school,
they took their Reformed Druid faith with them,
starting new Groves wherever they went.

While settling on a satisfying definition of religion is notoriously difficult,
the most convincing case for me that these latter-day Druids qualify as one
is that their movement has, over the last six decades,
splintered into a number of smaller denominations
over theological disputes and arguments over worship practices.

If that isn't a true sign of being a religion, I'm not quite sure what else is!

This story has stayed with me over the past several months
as I've thought about the challenge put to me by Louise Bunn, last winter,
when she described what she'd like to hear in the sermon she bought at our auction.

While we talked about different issues I might explore in this sermon,
the one that has caught fire for me
is Louise's wonderings about who controls access to the divine,
who gets to say what is sacred and what is not,
who is allowed to take on the priestly powers
to conjure magic or lead the rituals that touch us, that move us,
and that can transform the world around us in meaningful and material ways.

These are hearty questions, with a long and complicated pedigree.
A questioning of the place of authority, of ritual power, in religion
that is weaved into and throughout the history of religion itself,
from the Druids thought to have gathered on Salisbury Plain millennia ago,
and shamans and healers and medicine workers through time,
down to priests celebrating the mass on the altar today,
or a Unitarian community, such as ours, that will gather for our AGM this afternoon,
practising as a religious democracy operating under Roberts Rules of Order,
but more importantly, under our 8 Principles, our Six Sources,
our Five Aspirations, and our Covenant of Healthy Relations.

The use of religious power can take many forms.

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To know me well is to know that I can obsess over etymologies.
I love words and the history of words.
I find a thrill in tracing their evolution across time
into the groupings of syllables and sounds we use to communicate.

One of my favourites is the backstory to the term "hocus pocus."

There is a compelling theory that these words we now associate
with magicians and tricksters trace back to the Latin mass.

A corruption of the words spoken as the priest,
with his back to the people,
raised the communion host at the moment of transubstantiation,
the magical moment in some Christian traditions when it's believed
that bread becomes the body of Christ:
hoc est corpus meum.
Hocus pocus.

A second modern definition of hocus pocus is that it is
"meaningless talk or activity, typically designed
to trick someone or conceal the truth."

Or, more plainly, a bunch of hooey, a load of nonsense.

Magical words that hold a long history of scepticism
towards at least some of those who, across the centuries,
have claimed spiritual authority and the power to control access to the sacred.

This history of doubt and distrust of such authority
is a feature of our own history as Unitarians.

In fact, there is a deeper, older story behind our symbol of the flaming chalice
that goes to the heart of this.

In the early 15th century, Jan Huss,
a Catholic priest serving in Prague,
defied church authority by preaching not in Latin, but in the Czech language.

He also argued that the wine of communion should be consumed
not only by the priest, as was the practice of the time,
but by everyone who had gathered for the ritual.

These views got him excommunicated.
And then they got him burned at the stake.

In the wake of his death, over six centuries ago,
the image of the coming together of the cup of wine
and the fires that consumed his body was a flaming chalice—
a symbol of religious freedom and spiritual defiance,
and a potent sign that the powers of ritual were meant to be shared with all.

In the earliest origin story of our flaming chalice
is embedded fundamental questions of who holds religious authority,
who has access to the sacred,
who is empowered to celebrate our rituals.

There have been many twists and turns
in trying to answer these questions
throughout the history of our tradition.

During the Puritan period of our history, in the 16th and 17th centuries,
authority was vested in our clergy and, by and large,
their interpretations of scripture.

This remained mostly the case,
even as the Unitarian tradition emerged from the Puritans in the early 18th century,
through a process of challenging the Christian orthodoxy of the time.

But, then, in the middle of the 19th century, a curious thing happened:
what you might call the Transcendentalist turn.

A turn that was ushered in, in dramatic fashion,
by Ralph Waldo Emerson, during his address
to the graduates of Harvard Divinity School in 1838.

Rev. Emerson, who had recently left the Unitarian ministry,
after deciding he could no longer, in good conscience,
serve communion to his congregation, delivered a stem-winder of a speech.

So much so that he would not be invited back to speak at Harvard for decades.

His famous "Divinity School Address" took as its formal title:
"Acquaint Thyself First Hand with Deity."

Today, in Divinity Hall Chapel where he spoke—
a pulpit I've been privileged to preach from a number of times—
this title is inscribed in a marble plaque on the wall,
marking the most famous, or most infamous, thing to happen
in that chapel's two centuries of history.

In his address, that mid-July day, Emerson turned for his inspiration
from a focus on scripture to the grandeur of the natural world.[2]

With your eyes closed, I invite you to take in this, his opening paragraph
(with apologies for the highly gendered language of his day):

> In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm-of-Gilead, and the new hay. Night brings no gloom to the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. Man under them seems a young child, and his huge globe a toy. The cool night bathes the world as with a river, and prepares his eyes again for the crimson dawn. The mystery of nature was never displayed more happily. The corn and the wine have been freely dealt to all creatures, and the never-broken silence with which the old bounty goes forward, has not yielded yet one word of explanation. One is constrained to respect the perfection of this world, in which our senses converse. How wide; how rich; what invitation from every property it gives… In its fruitful soils; in its navigable sea; in its mountains of metal and stone; in its forests of all woods; in its animals; in its chemical ingredients; in the powers and path of light, heat, attraction, and life, it is well worth the pith and heart of great men to subdue and enjoy it. The planters, the mechanics, the inventors, the astronomers, the builders of cities, and the captains, history delights to honour.

This was no typical treatise on Christian theology.

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[2] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," 1838.
https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/dsa.html

This was an opening, a radical and sensual invitation
to a way of knowing the natural world as divine.

Later in this address, Emerson encouraged his listeners—
he actually used the verb admonish—
to leave behind the old forms and models and imaginations of "sacred men,"
and, instead, to "dare to love God without mediator or veil."

And he spoke of our knowledge of the divine as coming from intuition,
through our own felt experience of the sacred all around us—
without the need of an intermediary, without benefit of clergy.

Instead, the divine was to be felt with a direct knowing
taken in through our very senses.

Faith, he said, "should blend with the light of rising and of setting suns,
with the flying cloud, the singing bird, and the breath of flowers."

This was not the stuff of Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*.

But it did give rise to the movement known as Transcendentalism—
and gave birth to a two-centuries old tradition within Unitarianism
of finding spiritual sustenance in the living landscape of the natural world,
what some of us today call religious naturalism.

It also made the case that religious authority
ultimately rests in the hands of each person,
as they navigate the meaning of life on this beautiful, improbable planet.

Some, of course, consider this heresy.

But I see it as our way back.

At the end of the 19th century, the German sociologist Max Weber
described the process of the secularisation of modern life
as the "dis-enchantment of the world,"
our letting go of religious, spiritual, and magical explanations for phenomena
in favour of more scientific and rational views of life.

While his theory has been severely challenged,

this disenchantment process of his has also been a significant part
of the story of Unitarianism and UUism for more than a century.

Over this century, we have questioned authority, embraced humanism,
and moved much of the conversation about the divine to the proverbial dustbin.

My fear is that we threw out the blessings of spirituality
with the bathwater of superstition.

For the past fifty years, we've had plenty of battles
between the Pagans and the Humanists among us,
between the mystics and the dyed-in-the-wool rationalists—
a struggle, as I see it, to determine who controls access to the sacred,
who gets to claim spiritual authority.

I'm relieved to say this struggle isn't what it once was.
There's less energy for the fight than there used to be.
Perhaps we've just worn ourselves out.

But I suspect, and I hope, there is another reason behind this shift.

I sense that we've begun to find common ground through wonder—
through a deepening connection to the natural world
and our growing awareness of the hard fact of our interdependence
on this good green earth.

This is our spiritual and theological inheritance in this tradition.

It's never needed to be an either/or choice between our hearts and our heads,
between the mystical and the rational.

We are built for both and capable of holding it all,
with its complications and its questions.

We are made, in the words of William Blake:

> To see a world in a grain of sand
> And a heaven in a wild flower,
> Hold infinity in the palm of your hand

And eternity in an hour.[3]

That's what those Reformed Druids discovered, to their surprise,
on that college campus some 60 years ago.

It's what Emerson was pointing to.
And Jan Huss before him.

That the sacred is open to us all.
That we are free to bask in the wonder of it all.
And that there is transformative power to be found
through a direct encounter of the divine,
by whatever names we may call it,
and whether we count ourselves as theists or agnostics or atheists.

Let us, then, rational mystics all,
take our place in this proud tradition,
and moved by an abiding love of natural world,
do our part to re-enchant this splendid place we call home.

Amen.

[3] William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence."