

Sermon Presented on November 2, 2008

Priestess of the Earth
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I have not always been a formal Druid. I grew up a devout Catholic in a family where you are either very religious, like my three aunts who are nuns or very not, like my own mother who is a devout atheist. In the mix of spiritual beliefs, and lack thereof, I learned a deep respect for religious diversity at an early age. For this reason I have always had a tendency to embrace the validity of all paths and never have been able to profess one path's truth over another.

I resonated deeply with all things churchy and spiritual as young girl and still do. I love stained glass, candles and incense. I get a special kick out of weaving seasonal readings into a service. But it wasn't enough to keep me in the Catholic church. I've wanted to be a priest since I was very young. I tolerated for years the Catholic conception that only men can be priests, but never believed it. I also never succumbed to believing that all those who are unbelievers will burn in Hell. My frustration seemed to amplify with each passing year. I've always been one who wants to dig deeper and understand more. I took several courses in college like World Religions, Ethics and Philosophy that in retrospect I enjoyed as much, if not more than, the Engineering courses I took. I married young, at age 20, and soon stopped attending the Catholic masses, even after having worked for the church the prior year. My hopes of becoming a Priest one day were now banished, not one but two strikes against me.

As I sat in a state of spiritual unrest I became pregnant for the first time. It was a wakeup call to me. Suddenly I had to figure out how I wanted to raise my child, should I work or stay home? What religion will I raise my child? I couldn't find it in me to raise my child in a religion I no longer could ascribe to. So I began to search for answers. In searching I met a woman who had a homebirth with midwives. I spent several hours talking to her and decided to pursue this route myself. Working with the midwives I found myself suddenly having a renewed interest in health food and alternative ideas. I was a part of a subculture that was much nearer to my own nature than that of the scholarly detached engineer I had become.

When the labor pains began and it was time to give birth a new chapter of my life began. Progress went very well for the first 20 hours of labor. Then I reached the pushing stage and found myself in an entirely new world. My daughter's head was firmly stuck in my hips. Four hours of excruciating pushing without the opportunity for drugs as midwives are not allowed to practice anything bordering on medicine. I had to reach into depths I had never been to before. The midwives became worried and said that I had 15 minutes to deliver or else we would have to transport to the Hospital. Needless to say at this point I did not want to go anywhere and with all I had left I moved to the birthing stool and summoned all my remaining strength. Meanwhile the midwives prayed for me, one even called all the Catholic saints to assist. I felt a very strong spiritual presence and strength that did not come from me. Ten minutes later Kim was born. Five minutes later I was collapsed on the bed, losing a lot of blood and completely out of energy. At this time I drew on that strength that was not my own and pulled through. It was one of the most spiritual experiences of my life. It also woke me up to realize that this spiritual force was not the Christian God I had grown up with. It had multiple faces and an energy that was very familiar.

I was inspired to again search for my spiritual path, so I began to read. I read a few New Age books from the local library and found I resonated with the messages in them. My reading stumbled upon that of a journal about Celtic history and Druidism, *The Keltria Journal of Druidism and Celtic Magick*. In this issue was an article on Celtic history and the roots of Druid theology from the past. I read the issue with great interest and resonated deeply with the article. There was something very familiar about it that felt like coming home. It was a very scholarly article drawing on mythology of the Celtic culture, archeology, history and general philosophy. It did not sound like something from the devil. It sounded like something I had been searching for.

So I contacted the group and began to study the literature. I was the frustrating student who asked a ton of questions and did not enjoy the ambiguous answers I sometimes received. You see, Druidism also lacks a creedal set of beliefs. Many of the deeper spiritual concepts are left to the individual to interpret in a similar way to Unitarian Universalism. Concepts like what is divinity, have many answers all equally valid ranging from a very vague and undefined notion to that of the polytheistic view. Differing views are common and accepted. A good theological discussion is always welcome and it is said whenever more than one Druid is gathered, there will be differing ideas. Having grown up at the feet of Priests and nuns, I

was no stranger to a deep theological discussion. Not having concrete answers was initially difficult, but has been a relief in the time since. It has allowed me to open up and grow in ways that a structured theology would not have.

Here I would like to pause for a moment and give some background on the historical Druids. Historically the Druids were part of the Celtic caste system that also included a Warrior caste and a Production Caste. They occupied Britian, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. However the Celts traveled extensively and archeological evidence shows traces in many other countries. They were a tribal society that had little overall structure. At one point in history they even conquered Rome. This stronghold did not last however given the lack of a cohesive military structure.

What little information we have about the Druids of the past is mostly from the eyes of foreign invaders. Much of it is from when Caesar conquered the Celts and wrote about what he had found. It is from these accounts that were no doubt meant to be political propaganda that we see accounts of gruesome human sacrifice, "barbaric practices" and hear that the Celts were uneducated savages. Modern archeological study finds this to not be the whole truth. It is thought now that the sacrifices were for the most part criminals, not unlike our modern capital punishment system. The Celts also had an oral tradition and believed that spiritual knowledge should be fluid and living. It should not be written into books as it would then become lifeless. They had a written language called Ogham that was used primarily to create property markers.

The Druid class was known to have advised Kings. It is said a Druid could walk across the battlefield and thus stop the battle. The Druids were said to have studied for 20 years to become priests and priestesses. They memorized great tracts of ancestry, history and poetry in their studies. They were the learned class of Celtic society. We see historic portrayals of mostly men in white robes. However numerous accounts exist of female Druids as well. The Brehon Law also recognizes the legal rights of women and it is clear that they held a status that is rare for women in ancient societies. Lineage was also traced through the female side of the family in pre-Christian times. In addition there are accounts of female warriors and leaders. Boudicca is perhaps the most famous. She lead her people to battle after her husband was killed.

Celtic mythology also holds a great deal of information worthy of review. The myths were transcribed by the monks during the early days of the Christian takeover. When the Christians invaded Britian, Wales and Scotland there were many bloody massacres of the Druids in an effort to subdue the spiritual practices. Ireland remained protected for longer as it was further away as an island. Much of the mythology is from Ireland. Here we find a rich tradition that although it has been Christianized still holds very Pagan roots in it. We find in it Gods and Goddesses who walked the Earth, heroes learned great lessons and woven through it all is a very deep connection to nature, animals and the Earth. We see tales of shapeshifting, shamanic journeys and encounters with the Gods and Goddesses by heroes. We also see the attempts made to humanize the Gods and Goddesses as well as written words to indicate that they professed devotion to the Christian God. But overall the monks did a great service to all in preserving these ancient oral tales that have a deeply Celtic feel to them.

From the study of archeology, mythology and the connection to the ancestors we have the roots of modern Druidism. It is for this reason that it is called a Celtic Reconstruction religion. We are attempting to put the pieces back together. As we are doing this in a modern time with some influence from the greater Pagan community where the emphasis there is also on nature religion, the term NeoPagan was coined. Many in the tradition however are tending away from the terms Pagan and NeoPagan. It has become a very vague term that encompasses a very large basin of belief. Focusing back to a Celtic Reconstructionist Druidism allows the study of this path to continue with a sharp focus on the Celtic roots.

As it is a growing and alive tradition it has been woven into the Celtic Christian church, family traditions and folktale customs. Evidence shows that the ancestors practiced seasonal rites such as Samhain (a festival honoring the ancestors), Imbolc (a festival honoring the return of spring), Beltaine (a festival honoring fertility and Midsummer), and Lughnasdh (a harvest festival). Less evidence exists for the celebration of the Equinoxes and Solstices but they are marked by modern Druids as lunar and solar rights connecting the Earth to the Sky. The connection to the land and the importance of farming to survival no doubt influenced the importance of these feasts.

There can be a nostalgic look to the past as a time of great spiritual freedom and closeness to the land. But many find the luxuries of our modern society gifts that are very hard to live without. Yet there exists a struggle to remain or become connected to nature in meaningful ways. The goal is to find a way to

balance modern luxuries with a respect for the Earth, while fostering a connection to nature. This takes continued knowledge, continued growth and practice.

Druids find the spiritual in the nature spirits, the ancestors and the Gods and Goddesses of our tribe. We highly value the individual personal experience of religion. We honor the diversity of paths to the divine. As such it is also hard to find complete agreement between Druid groups. We do not profess a monopoly on religious truth, but recognize multiplicity and the importance of finding a spiritual expression that suites the individual. We value continuing study and knowledge, recognize a path that grows and changes as new wisdom is gained. We honor the ancestors by our own ethical standards and recognize that ethics involves personal accountability, deep reflection and action based on respect for all life. This is not an easy path to follow. Living without specific rules means fumbling and thinking to find the right way of action. It means growing; not doing what is right because someone said it was right.

There is more to my story. Life found me divorced in 2000. Then it found me married again in 2005 with both of my daughters facing type 1 diabetes. Through these struggles and great moments my spiritual strength held me. I could no longer teach and host rituals due to new demands on my time but I continued my studies and spiritual practice.

On the morning of June 2nd, 2006 I awoke like most mornings and left for work at 4:30 am. At 8 am I received a phone call from the Regions Hospital ER. My husband of 15 months, my best friend of 18 years was suffering a stroke. He was 37 years old and one of the healthiest people I know. The following four days I lived by his side in the hospital my family and Druid friends always nearby. He died four days later on June 5th, 2006 due to complications from surgery and four clogged arteries. My spirituality deepened from that point in my life and became more and more of a focus for me.

This is not to say that I did not descend into grief and feel a deep pain unlike any I have ever felt before. I also felt a growing need to reach out to others who followed non mainstream paths such as my own. I want to become a Chaplain and fulfill my lifelong dream of being a Minister. Some say they learn great lessons from death. Mine are not really great lessons. They are more reminders and earthy resonances. Nothing protects us from pain and grief. Life goes on in the womb of the Mother Earth. This time of year I am especially conscious of this. I honor my ancestors, invite the deceased to my dinner table and look upon the dying Earth. I know it is only descending into the darkness for a short time. Darkness and death are very hard spiritual concepts to work with. It is easy to become lost within them and forget that the light will return. I have found that darkness does not make me appreciate the light more. Instead I find darkness is a safe place to cry, to express grief and to connect to the Earth Mother. I am both deeply alone and yet connected to life always. All we ever have is the present moment.

It is hard to live with the lessons of death everyday. I much prefer to visit it once a year. Yes, I hold deeply in my heart that any moment could be my last. But I still enjoy wasting time sitting in the Sun, crunching leaves between my toes and sitting in the trees to meditate in the still warm fall afternoons while they last. These moments make me feel just as, if not more so, alive than contemplating the greater mysteries of life.

I am learning to be a Unitarian Universalist as well as a Druid. It gives me an even wider platform on which to speak. As I begin my studies to become a Unitarian Universalist Minister I appreciate the deep similarities between the paths. I hope to be ordained in both traditions. I hope to serve those who have alternative beliefs. I hope also to continue my respect for Christianity as well as to embrace my Druid roots. I do not harbor resentment towards the Christian path, I just see that it can no longer hold my own spiritual beliefs nor does it resonate for me like it once did.

I hope to sit by many fires and discuss my spiritual roots, deepen my understanding and practice. I hope to continue to feel the presence of the Gods and Goddesses in the wind, the bark of a tree and the breath of the Earth. I hope to be able to join other Unitarian Universalists in the celebration of seasonal rites. I hope to continue to run with the buffalo.