

Breaking the Ice:

Introducing Paganism to Your UU Congregation

David R. Burwasser

UU Pagans who are Earth-centered pioneers in their UU congregations, sometimes find that their first public Goddess-talk met with risible laughter from those congregations. A stepwise approach might be helpful.

When I introduced UU Paganism into the Unitarian (now UU) Society of Cleveland in 1988, I had already secured the first CUUPS audio tape, Margot Adler's CUUPS General Assembly Keynote Address for 1987. I took this tape and a boom box to church, slipped a worship-service announcement into the regular cycle, and played the tape after church in a Sunday School room for anyone who would listen. This went on for several weeks.

I requested and got a pulpit slot after CUUPS was accepted as a UUA affiliate organization, and made announcement of that fact the kicker of my sermon. It was definitely "don't show, tell" and among other things I tried to put my old Humanism and my new Paganism into a common frame in a reassuring way. (As then-president of the congregation I felt some reassurance was in order *ex officio*.)

The CUUPS chapter I co-founded did a demo Pagan ritual in the sanctuary but after hours, not part of a UU worship service. All the UUs were invited, and quite a few showed. It bombed, big-time, but was very useful information as to what Pagan commonplaces were acceptable with a shrug by a majority of UUs and which ones flat-out wiggled them out.

Before I ever did anything Pagan in the pulpit, I talked to anyone who would listen. I got laughs at the first mention of the P-word and went right on talking, neither faltering nor responding directly. The *laughers* became embarrassed: My lack of response cued them that they had made not only a faux pas but a childish one, strictly as a matter of manners; I let them frame it that way for themselves. By my intro sermon, no one was laughing.

The first actual UU Pagan liturgy I did was my UU Samhain service. That was crafted strategically, aimed at a hole in standard UU liturgical offerings, being about the dead. Once you see it, this is a huge hole; UUism is very good with the allied but different subjects of death and with dying, but fairly reticent about the dead, as there is no UU consensus about their location and circumstances.

I took as much liturgical matter as possible is from the [Hymnal](#) (the *old* Hymnal, somewhat of a greater challenge) with the subliminal lesson, "this stuff is already part of the UU heritage." Having not dealt with their dead under UU liturgical auspices, the congregants experienced a fountain of pent-up emotional agendas. Acceptance of UU Paganism at that society was never really in question thereafter.

Pagan acceptance was also enhanced by the Pagans who came in, in response to the CUUPS Chapter, digging into the Worship and Ways & Means committees and pumping in energy. This got the approval of some pillars of the church who were not Pagan themselves but feel warmly about anyone who puts in work.

By the time I dealt with bringing Paganism to the Oberlin UU Fellowship, the Sixth Source had been adopted. My partner (now wife) and I first had a chat with the leadership about Pagan acceptance. Again we started with an initial "don't show, tell" service. Except this time a Pagan student from Oberlin College showed up and begged permission to complete the symbolic Great Rite with ritual tools we had brought to point to and talk about. We deferred to the congregation

gathered, who gave approval. Getting students from the college involved is a Good Thing at OUUF. We couldn't have planned this but we did accept the synchronicity with grace. After a second talking-heads service we did the UU Samhain with similar results as at the Society. By then the new UU Hymnal had come out, with a wealth of explicitly Pagan resources, and we used it.

Outside the Pagan realm we also plugged into the Program Committee, put some editorial juice into the newsletter, and lobbied for Bylaw amendments to propel the intentional turnaround and comeback that fellowship was then engaged in.

So I would summarize:

- 1) Lay some groundwork.
- 2) Tell before you show.
- 3) Find something they need and aren't getting, and offer it.
- 4) Use the UU Hymnal as a resource as much as possible
- 5) Get involved with other things than Paganism in the congregation.

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