Springing Onto the Wheel of the Year
February 2, 2014
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On the wheel of the year today is the first day of spring, wherever you may be in your personal breath or life.

This may surprise some of you who have not seriously thought about the mathematical logic of words such as "midsummer" or "midwinter." All of us have surely noted how short the days grow in December and have begun to appreciate earlier dawns and later sunsets over the past few weeks. We know that winter and summer solstices mark the shortest and longest days of the year respectively, when the rising or setting sun seems briefly to stand in lateral position over three days: The word "solstice" literally meaning "sun stands." A few of us may also know that the word "equinox" means "equal night" and marks the two points each year where day and night are equal. We chuckle when our most secular and scientific friends note each Christmastide that "the reason for the season" is really axial tilt. And many standard calendars list these four days, solstices and equinoxes, with phrases such as "summer begins," "autumn begins," "beginning of winter" or "beginning of spring." But how many among us have thought what that might mean, in a unitary or universal sense, religiously?

That is what I hope to speak about a little today, exploring the history and uses of what today's Neopagans of UU's sixth source call "the wheel of the year."

Wheels are of course a common religious and metaphorical image or motif, from Ezekiel's wheel to the great wheel of fortune, with circles even more so: the circle of creation, circle of community, the circle of life. From eyes to faces, from nipples to the flag of Japan, humans are naturally drawn to circles, and naturally think in circles, from our wingspan to the moon to the horizon which "encircles" us. This is a common thing and very clear. It is true "universal" among human cultures: as universal as being cold, falling in love, or grief.

It is universal not only in a religious sense, but also in a psychological and anthropological sense. Almost every human culture notes and uses the presence of circles in its art and speech, as is clear upon reflection.

Imagine for a moment the image of a simple "plus sign" or cross of perpendicular lines, drawn onto a paper or perhaps a wall, marked at the top "summer solstice," at the bottom "midwinter" then clockwise left then right as "spring" and "fall equinox." This is the basic structure. Now imagine an "x" of diagonal lines exactly laid over that to mark the spaces in between, both figures then encircled within a great circle to form an eight-spoked wheel. This is the simplest way to begin thinking about the Neopagan "wheel of the year." Entire sermons might be written about this, but the key thing for this morning is its unitary power as a universal, and how that might be used in many ways to enrich our lives.

As Unitarian Universalists, the phrases "unitary" and "universal" are important to our congregation, of course, and have different meanings at different points in time, among different groups and within different contexts. The wheel of the year is both, however, across time and in interesting and useful ways.

Coined and popularized by two very specific men in mid-twentieth century England, the Neopagan "wheel of the year" was devised by Gerald Gardner and Ross Nichols. Gardner would famously go on to popularize the term "wicca" which many conflate today with all Neopagan witchcraft, and Nichols would go on to found the largest druidic group in the world, today's Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids. Gardner and Nichols did not invent the phrase "wheel of the year," but married it to this diagram, "christening" it (if we may mix a metaphor). Reflecting on British seasonal observances and celebrations, Gardner and Nichols noted the presence of several summer and
winter, spring and harvest festivals, then reconciled them in a very particular way: a way which happens to touch on all six sources of contemporary Unitarian Universalism.

Some claim the wheel of the year has ancient origins, but it is deeper than that. It has a universal origin, at least as old as human consciousness, and paralleled in other things such as the Chinese pa qua.

All of us have heard the tale of Ptolemy, Galileo and Copernicus: a simplistic morality play where brave secular thinkers wrench the sun from the heavens to boldly create the heliocentric model of the solar system we love today. Rather than seeing the earth as the center of a celestical sphere, this model makes earth just another planet, circling with its sisters around a central star. As educated, post-enlightenment English gentlemen, Gardner and Nichols both understood this model but, drawing not only on our fifth tradition of humanistic science, they sought to reconcile it with our other five traditions, uniting culture, direct experience, literature and science into a sort of spiritual poetry. Much spiritual poetry is embedded, instantiated and embodied in that phrase: wheel of the year.

Some theologians borrow from Pascal or Empedocles to famously liken God to a circle whose circumference is nowhere but whose center is everywhere: a deep thought which merits meditation. In the Copernican wheel of the solar system most of us were taught in elementary school, the earthly year might be imagined as existing within a circle whose center is the sun and whose circumference is its annual cycle. In a geocentric model such as that historically used by ancient Greeks and in astrology, the cosmic order might be seen as a sphere whose center is the earth and whose circumference is the heavens. To a Neolithic person on any given plain, such as that of Salisbury where Stonehenge stands, the day might be seen as a circle whose center is where we stand and whose circumference is the great arc of the sun, only part of which we see each day. For the circle of the year at a personal level, all of these are true, and more. The center of that circle might be our personal heart or consciousness, the circumference of which is our entire life. Or, metaphorically, all of human life.

In psychology I am told there is a phrase: "over-signified." A thing is over-signified when it means or signifies not one thing, but many things, such that its ambiguity leads to an embarrassing or confusing richness of meaning in several ways and at several levels. The wheel of the year, gifted to the world, is over-signified in several ways and at many levels.

With its eight celestial spokes the "wheel of the year" might be used as a metaphor for many things: the breath, the day, the seasons or all of human life and existence. Imagine the eight-spoked wheel and consider. Spring is like dawn or youth or the first inspired inhalation of the breath. Hold your breath and then breathe in purposely, feeling the spring-like joy of youthful inhalation. Next, hold that breath and liken it to midsummer, as the very cells of your body oxygenate and burn with the midlife fire of your full metabolism. One cannot hold one's breath forever, of course, as what goes up must come down.

Like a spinning wheel, let the circle of your breathing go around and fall into an autumnal exhalation, perhaps a sigh. This is harvest time. This is finish line. This is the natural counterpoint to exhalation, analog to the final exhalation of our passing. Hold your breath now, and think on winter death.

I invite you to close your eyes now and breathe again, imagining your heart like a personal sun, in your chest just above your solar plexus, literally "the place of the sun." Closing your eyes, note your heart. Breathe in spring and youth and dawn. Hold at the prime of summer mid-day. Exhale through the autumn of harvest and fullest ripening, then hold again after sunset for the winter of night and death, awaiting rebirth. And again, breathe in spring and youth and dawn: Hold. Exhale. Hold, then breathe in to open your eyes to the apparent sunlit world as you wish.

I have been a student of paganism for almost all my life, and of the great green gospel of the natural world longer than that. I could talk for hours about the wheel of the year and the metaphors and mysteries it holds, only some of which I have found. These are mysteries not because I will not tell you, but because they cannot be told. They must
be experienced. And part of that experience for us as humans is embodiment.

The wheel of the year is embodied in one way in the cycle of seasons marked by a series of eight festivals, although no known previous culture has ever marked all eight exactly. The Persian new year of Nowruz begins at the spring equinox, as it should, and those of us who have read the words of Henry David Thoreau will surely appreciate that idea.

The spring equinox holiday is called by some Neopagans "Eastra" from a phrase meaning "lady of the east" and some claim that word is the forerunner of our word Easter, now used to mark another spring festival. That festival takes place on the Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox, as some of you may know, but there is nothing vaguely Pagan about that. The spring equinox has many names and various customs associated with it, but most center around the metaphors of spring and terrestrial rebirth. If the wheel of the year is applied to a human lifespan, spring equinox is the time of just-prepubescent childhood, before the adolescent exuberance which comes next around the first of May.

The next spoke in the wheel of the year is Mayday or Beltane is often celebrated as a time of fully-awakening sensuality.

Metaphorically the youthful explorations of Beltane may heteronormatively move toward a peak of commitment, as exuberance reaches its acme and is harnessed to commitment, sometimes represented metaphorically as a midsummer marriage: the beginning of real work and all that comes after. On the wheel of the year, that is midsummer.

The first fruits of the harvest are often celebrated at another midpoint: between midsummer and fall equinox. In Scots Gaelic the month of August is called Lughnasadh, in honor of a god whose stepmother died to give human beings agriculture: Not coincidentally the time of county fairs and Scottish highland games. In the Anglo-Saxon Christian tradition, this festival may be marked as Lammas or "loaf-mass." Lammas is a time when the first fruits of the grain harvest are blessed at the church, in thanks for what Providence has delivered. "From us to the earth to the gods,"

A thanksgiving time of full harvest logically follows at fall equinox, both physically under one agricultural model but lifewise as well at the human time of grandchildren or retirement, leading naturally to the time of Samhain, from the gaelic for "summer's end," a time of endings marked today as Halloween or in the Christian church as All Saints Day and then All Souls Day, a time to honor our beloved dead as we wait for the birth of the Christ Child and the rebirth of a new year's sun from out of the darkest night.

Which brings us to today, the eighth station on our cross or spoke on our wheel, an eternal recurrence. The wheel turns once for each breath, when we see it that way. The wheel turns once for each day, when we choose to focus on that. The wheel turns once for each year, if we wish to view it at that level. And the wheel turns once for each life, if we believe that we only live once. The thing about a circle, though, is that it is eternal; and one can choose to step onto it or get off of it at any point. "To every thing there is a season," as one song has it.

And the seasons they go round and round
And the painted ponies go up and down
We're captive on the carousel of time
We can't return we can only look
Behind from where we came
And go round and round and round
In the circle game

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A common Neopagan name for this holiday is "Imbolc" from an Irish term for "in the belly," and sometimes it celebrates the first milk and birth of sheep, (which does not happen in December). In Anglo-Saxon Christianity this festival may be known as Candlemas, coming forty days after Christmas as the time when the candles for the liturgical year are blessed, concomitant with the
first presentation of the Christ Child in the temple, culturally similar to our first day of school.

Because the name "Imbolc" is Irish and the day is associated with a young child and candles, many Neopagans and Celtic Christians also use this as an opportunity to honor and celebrate either the goddess Brigid or her cognate saint, Brigit of Kildare as "Saint Brigid's Day." Entire sermons could be devoted to Saint Brigid as well, but the goddess Brigid or Bridhe is often honored as the threefold goddess of smithcraft, poetry and healing.

Rather like an Irish Kuan-Yin, Brigid is a nurturant, maternal goddess, strongly associated with three key products of honeybees, who coincidentally begin their first flights at this time of year. Honey, beeswax candles or mead, the fermented drink of poets, may also be associated with Brigid, as is the soft and nurturant sun of early spring itself. I'd encourage anyone who is interested in such things to meditate as they see fit on Brigid, in whatever incarnation. This morning's beautiful song "She Rises" is a good place to start.

On the great wheel of the year, today is the first day of spring, with all that implies and all which naturally follows. Welcome to the first day of spring.

I had a teacher once who used to say "Folks folks folks folks. There are only three essential answers to life: Yes. No. And Wow.” And so to close this morning's message, a poem by the Unitarian e e cummings.

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of
trees
and a blue dream of sky; and for
everything
which is natural which is infinite which
is yes
(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the
birth
day of life and love and wings; and of
the gay
great happening ilimitably earth)
how should tasting touching hearing
seeing
breathing any - lifted from the no

of all nothing - human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?
(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

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