



In Sync With The Sine Wave

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My talk is a series of illustrations about how a small spiritual group in Christchurch have attempted to integrate some of the themes that have been going through the Conference this weekend — connection with the earth and our sense of place — into the development of our worship programme. The Christchurch Unitarian Universalist Fellowship was started in 1995 — the same year that the first edition of Juliette’s book was published so it is an interesting coincidence that we appear on the stage for the first time to talk about this very topic.

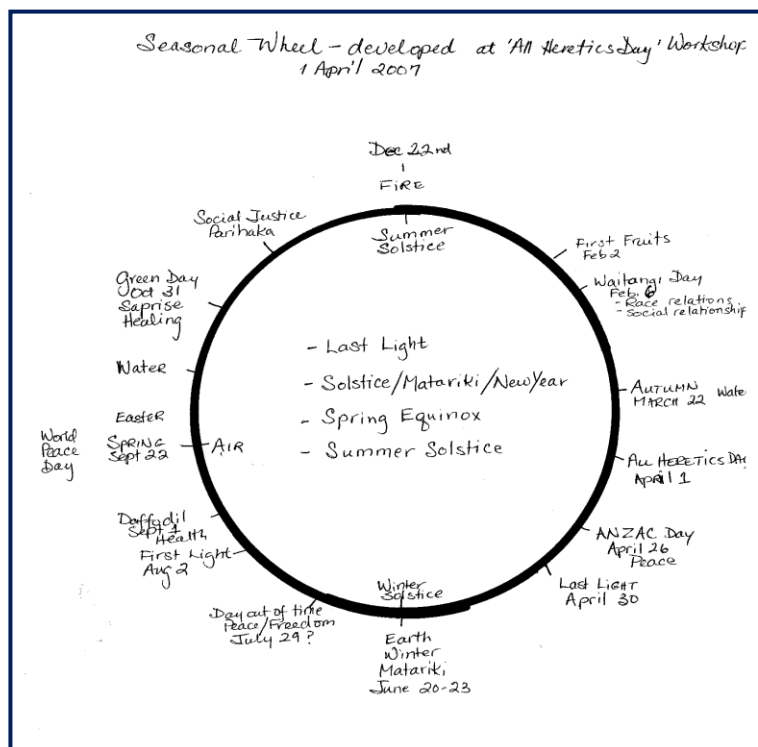
The development of a worship programme that integrates our history with our geography started a couple of years ago in Christchurch. We have a celebration called All Heretics Day where we honour choice. Heretic is from the Greek word “to choose”, as freedom of choice is one of the foundations of our particular faith. It is pleasing to note that we have two All Heretics Days speakers — Lloyd Geering and Juliet Batten — in the room with us today. The heresy that Juliet brought to her particular talk was that we should celebrate our religious calendar in conjunction with our own seasons and not with the seasons of the northern hemisphere from whence they came. She used the example of Easter which is a very obvious one but that just really is the tip of the iceberg in terms of aligning our connection with the sense of place to our spiritual observation.

So we did a workshop on All Heretics Day with a group of about 50 people of diverse backgrounds. What came out of that was the development of a seasonal wheel.

We start with the summer solstice at the top and we went round and we put into on the wheel natural aspects of the year and things that we considered worthy of worship.

You can see how the year currently takes shape, starting at Waitangi Day. One that was new to me was The Day Out of Time. This comes about because the lunar year is 13 x 28 day lunar cycles, equalling 364 days, and the solar year is 365 days so every year there is one “day out of time”, so that was one of the celebrations that came into this wheel.

So that was how we started – the seasonal wheel.



At the end of that same month I attended a spiritual directors' conference in Vancouver where one of the workshops in that conference was called "Points Along the Way". It was a very similar process that we had been through in developing the wheel but instead of using a wheel as a template they used the sine wave. The sine wave is really the seasonal wheel of the year but in a lateral fashion.

Let me explain it this way.

If you measured where the sun was at noon each day, you would notice that it from winter solstice onwards it gets a little higher each day until you get to the summer solstice where it flattens out and then you will notice that each day after the summer solstice it gets a bit lower and a bit lower and a bit lower and so on until you get to the end of the first year.

When plotted along a timeline of 365 days, it forms the sine wave. You may also notice the pattern made by looking at a globe and tracking the path the sun makes as it goes from the Tropic of Cancer, through the equator to the Tropic of Capricorn.

It also leads us to pondering one of the big theological questions, perhaps the biggest after "Who am I?", namely "where am I?"

There are two ways of finding that out.

The modern way is just to take out the GPS locator and switch it on and you can find your so many degrees west, so many degrees south. But the other method, the method that has been used by the ancients and which is far more appropriate, is the idea of paying attention: of looking at nature and working out by the track of the sun in the sky and things around as to where you are and then from that point you can start to work on aligning ritual to where you are which directly relates to where we are in the southern hemisphere.

If you are to look in the northern hemisphere for example June and July are at the top of the cycle, mid summer, whereas down here for us it is the middle of winter, so that their whole sign wave is completely antithetical to ours and if you look at all the religious occasions they are all mapped on the northern hemisphere sign wave. So if you are to think about how can we connect with nature, how can we connect to where we are then using a northern hemisphere template to try and locate ourselves in the southern hemisphere automatically creates a dissonance which makes it hard to be in touch.

The sine wave also appears throughout nature in various ways. It is the graph of the sound that is made when you run your finger around the rim of a glass.

A second example that many of us know about is surfing and surf waves and the nature of waves through the ocean. So as Craig and Peter will attest back from the old Nelson days that sense of surfing, of riding that pulse and it is just a sine wave moving through the water. A lot of non-surfers are under the impression that you are riding moving water; that the water is pushing you along, where as the water is stationary, it is the pulse through the water that does it and so as an example of energy and a concept of energy in the universe, the sine wave is something that is good to be in tune with.

The other is the concept when you look at the wave is the balance between the zenith and the nadir. A zenith technically is the point directly above your head and the nadir is the point

technically an astronomical point on the other side of the zenith but for our practical purposes the nadir is the ground beneath your feet. So if we are talking about sky gods and earth mothers there is a connection with the sine wave as the zenith is the sky god and the nadir is the earth mother.

I think the sine wave is a wonderful representation of balance at work, and it has been suggested that you can define the spirit is the part of the sine wave when we were above the centre line and the soul is below the centre line. So the spirit is what we look up to in the sky and therefore outside of ourselves and the soul is the introspective part, the internal part looking internally the contemplative part.

And of course in a graphic representation one section of the sign wave is very close to being the yin yang symbol and one of balance. It is also worth I think recognising how different this as a graphic representation differs from all of the graphs that you see in the material business world which is exponential growth which is a percentage better than last year, sales must grow and market share must grow. It is a straight line that goes on the way up whereas we know in nature that that is not the case and if we are going to be looking at how we can integrate our religious ritual with nature then we need to be looking at waves and not straight lines.

So once you decide that this is the pattern that you are going to follow, we in Christchurch have started to look at getting away from the Christian ritual calendar. Unitarian Universalism grew out of the Christian and Jewish traditions, but we want to work more on where we are and how we can use this as a basis ritual celebration. Our rituals are around the solstices, in particular the summer solstice, and it is interesting also that by using this graph as the template you really get the idea of the meaning of solstice which means “sun stands still” — for three days it looks like it is not going up or down so solstice is the sun standing still both at the top and at the bottom of the cycle.

So we have summer solstice as our major festival and it is the one we get the most people at. We have written all our own songs for it, usually to the tune of well known tunes like ‘You Are My Sunshine’ and ‘Summer time is here again’. Everyone loves singing songs like that and it is very easy to pick a common tune and to write meaningful lyrics to it. So summer solstice is one of our regular ones and the winter solstice we view from the rock outcrop in the Port Hills and often by using bagpipes and piping in the sun in the middle of winter.

It is here that you get a vertical sense of the sun getting lower in the sky but also in a horizontal sense of just where the sun is coming out of the ocean compared with in the middle of summer. But they are very meaningful in that they get, particularly in winter time, they get you out into nature at important times of the year to be directly relating to it. We are not putting a layer of theology or a layer of liturgy between the natural forces and us we are just directly relating, directly communicating with it so a lot of the services at those times are silence.

The equinoxes are when we talk not only about the spring and the autumn and the nature, but it is also a time of balance, it is a time when things are in equilibrium, the sun is equally high and low and it is a chance to look at the balance between order and chaos, between the internal and the external, between planning and spontaneity and how they reflect not only as paradigms outside in nature but also within us as humans.

The other festival that we have put onto this calendar is the Matariki Festival which I notice is becoming more and more popular each year. I think it has got quite a future to it and I may be an optimist (and that also could be related to where I was born on the sign wave.) When we were at the spiritual director's conference, they were looking at the way that the sine wave relates to human behaviour. If the sine wave is the wave of nature and we are of nature then the people that are born in August and September are born when the sun is rising and they have optimistic tendencies and the people born in April and March are going into winter and perhaps they are a little bit more introspective and pessimistic; it is a theory.

But where I think Matariki might come in terms of identifying a sense of place is I believe that at some stage, perhaps not in my lifetime, but that New Zealand will probably become a republic. When that happens the big dilemma we are going to face is, what do we do with Queen's Birthday weekend. The long holiday in the middle of winter is a necessary part of how we live and Matariki is quietly building up into a festival that happens in June on a sliding scale very much like Easter. And maybe that by the time we become a republic and we are looking around for an indigenous festival that will give us a Monday off so that the university tournaments can take place and all the other things that Queen's Birthday is very important for. It can just step into the breach and it will be a festival which does all those things but is very much about a sense of place, it is about where we are on the planet.

Another aspect is celebrating the natural elements of water, fire, earth and air.

Maybe the celebration of water would be in the natural place of springtime because of its reference to growth and reference to nurturing and reference to life so it helps to have these things on the sine wave in that context. And so these are aspects of how we integrate the natural world with our celebrations.

But there is more to life than just the natural world, it is an underpinning of what we do but I also think that as part of worship we should put time aside to honour the things that we value that are man-made — the human aspects of our life that we need to honour and put into the seasonal programme somehow.

I start with the one that the UU's (Unitarian Universalist) have started which is "All Heretics Day". We have it as close to April Fool's Day as possible because we believe the noble fool or the asking of the difficult questions is an important part of life and so hence the placement of All Heretics Day on the first Sunday in April.

Heresy plays a part in what we have been talking about this weekend in that heretics, and the heretic tradition, is where most human growth or human development comes from. When the great Unitarian Darwin came up with the concept of evolution it was considered heresy, just as when Galileo came up with his concept. When a new world view is put before us the response tends to be that it is heresy but it really just means we have the choice to choose between the old world view and the new world view.

And that is really what we are facing now: do we want to look on the earth as we have in the past which is an unending source of resources or do we choose to look at it under a different light — that of a vibrant and sustaining home for us which is finite in its resources.

Another of the things that we honour is partnership and we do that as close to Waitangi Day as possible. We are taking the universal concept of partnership, which is expressed by the

Treaty of Waitangi in New Zealand and we think that partnership in that sense is worth honouring so we have slotted partnership into the ritual. And the same thing with peace. Peace is going to be an increasingly more important aspect of what we cherish and what we hope for and it deserves its place on the ritual cycle. Whether we have it on Hiroshima Day or whether we do it around when most of the churches have Peace Week in November has yet to be established, but it is worth putting time aside to honour the things that we value.

Social justice is another aspect that as Unitarians we value very strongly and we are just looking at ways that we can integrate that into our cycle of worship. One of the suggestions we have had is a thing called 'Dirty Laundry Sunday' where out in front of the meeting house we put up a clothesline and we get a whole lot of second hand t-shirts and we paint on them facts about our society that we are not happy with, that we are ashamed of, things that we would like to change. We are hanging out our dirty laundry so that we notice it because we need to identify these things that we would wish to change.

Halloween is one that we do on April 30. The idea of Halloween is to honour the fact that we are going into the longer nights when story telling, when introspection, when contemplation become more a part of our lives through the winter months. Halloween is a lovely way of honouring that concept in a way which works for both adults and children. Kids love it because that is when the pumpkins are on the ground in New Zealand and so we carve pumpkins and later have pumpkin soup and eat pumpkin pie the following Sunday when all the pumpkins have wilted.

Now the next one I am sure none of you have ever heard of: Osmas. I had better explain Osmas. I did this talk as a workshop for the Unitarian Fellowship in Brisbane earlier this year and the idea was that once we all worked on how the template worked the idea was that they would break up into small groups and they were to come up with something that they would like to integrate into their worship and celebration calendar.

The one which they liked was Osmas, which they celebrate close to the summer solstice. It is a celebration of the glory of an Australian summer. They thought that it was just magic and that it needed to have its own special day and so as of this coming December the first Osmas will take place and they are planning to do all of those things to rejoice in what it means to be in that part of the world at that time and all of that sort of stuff. It is a very lovely joyful occasion.

And so Osmas is one that came out of that particular workshop and it is an example of how you can create your own template of worship that is integrated into nature and the cycle of life but also includes those things that as humans or as a community you really cherish and you want to give proper attention to. The Sydney group have a thing called Wattle Day which I think is maybe Australian wide but when you see all the wattles out at that time of the year you can't help but be filled with this amazing joy, so they have their Wattle Day as a wonderful celebration in Sydney.

And lastly is the concept of community, or ways that the community can develop around ritual worship based on the sine wave, based on the rhythm of the earth but also the personal aspects - you can mark on the line here perhaps where you have your first swim. I have noticed that mine is getting closer and closer to the very, very top of summer than it used to a few years ago. I am lucky enough to live above an estuary in Christchurch and when the godwits arrive and when the godwits leave I can tick and put onto my personal sine wave as

they are a wonderful aspect of being aware, of paying attention to what is going on around you and reinforcing the sense of place, the sense of knowing where we are and how can we rejoice in that and honour it in a way that is meaningful.

I just want to talk about some of the benefits that we believe come from using this template on which to base our seasonal calendar of ritual. The first one is that using a cosmological template is inclusive, as we are all under the same stars so whether you are a Christian or whether you are a pagan or whatever you are we can all fit those into the same template. It doesn't exclude anyone in the same way that perhaps trying to have a mid-winter Christmas for everybody which is inexplicably linked to the Christian tradition. The cosmological template connects us both to the earth and further on to the cosmos which in terms of a sense of place is about where we are.

We also think that using this template encourages us to pay attention and to take notice of what is going on around us. We have talked earlier about how disconnected we can get from the natural world and I think that is illustrated in a survey that was done in America (but I am sure it would be the same here in New Zealand given the global or the nature of teen culture.) But they did a survey of American teenagers and they found that they could instantly identify 20 global logos so Nike, the Swoosh, Apple, Coca Cola, you name it they knew them, this was their world they knew it. But put them in their back yard they couldn't name the trees, or the birds unless it was the logo of a sports team a Cardinal or a Bluejay or something like that.

They had lost that connection to their natural world but they had intimate connection with their man-made world. One thing about using a template is that it encourages you to pay attention to where we are, to what is going on and to make that meaningful in your life. I think that is one of the real advantages to getting away from a historical approach to how we run our religious lives and into a more Gaia oriented or earth oriented cosmology.

I think this relates directly to how most of our religious occasions have become overwhelmingly festivals of material consumerism. They are retail events. You only have to compare the number of people that buy presents to the number that go to church. Even in a Sea of Faith group we are looking at a huge difference, so in other words Christmas is for the most people a celebration of retail therapy, a celebration of material consumerism which is the one thing that we have got to curb if we are to survive on this planet.

This was driven home last Easter when I was gardening on Easter Saturday and had the radio on. The top story of the news all day was how Easter Saturday had now become the second largest retail day of the year because the malls are closed on Friday.

By changing our rituals to our own seasons so that New Year is where it should be in the depths of the winter, we uncouple that aspect of ritual from material consumerism and I think that there is some benefit in that in terms of trying to separate the spiritual from the secular in our celebrations

I would just like to close with a quote from Brian Swimme, author of "The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos".

"Cosmology, when it is alive and healthy in a culture, evokes in the human a deep zest for life".

He is not talking about a zest for human life, he is also talking about the life of the planet.

By getting in synchronisation with our planet, we can better integrate Gaia into our worship, making it more meaningful and relevant.