

Elements of Faith

Allison Claire

August 2, 2015

We are stardust. In the words of Joy Atkinson that we read together, “We are of the stars” — and “We are of the earth.” The stars and the earth, after all, are made of the same stuff. But they symbolize very different — even diametrically opposed — things in our culture. Think about the dichotomy for a moment: Is your head in the sky, or are your feet on the ground? Are you earth-bound, or a star-gazer? Brilliantly blazing, or solid and rooted? Can one be both?

The neurologist and author Oliver Sacks wrote last week in the NYT that as he nears death from cancer, he is drawn to the stars as he was as a boy. Despite a long career in the biological sciences, it is the physical sciences that now capture his imagination. As he confronts his mortality, he is drawn to the universe of metals and minerals in which there is no life or death. His essay is titled “My Periodic Table.” As I read it I exclaimed: Oliver! Remember that the rocks and stars are the same stuff as the plants and the people that live and die! You are a scientist, you know this! And isn’t that really the greatest mystery and

wonder of all — that when we think our way down to the level of atoms and molecules, to the elements of the Periodic Table, the distinction between the animate and the inanimate blurs!

Hydrogen, oxygen, carbon —the living and the non-living are quite literally made of the same stuff. The duality of life and death, the greatest duality of all, is not an absolute. The idea that life and death are part of one another is not just a spiritual metaphor, it's a scientific truth.

Oliver Sacks does in fact realize this. In the middle of a piece about his end-of-life turning away from the life sciences and toward the physical sciences, he tells a story about making a trip to a lemur research center. Before he dies he wants to visit these tree-dwelling creatures because he “love[s] their leaping vitality, their inquisitive nature.” Reminds me of Mary's monkeys! Tricksters, aren't they, messing with our neat distinctions between the animate and inanimate, rational and intuitive, this and that!

So I want to tell you about *My Periodic Table*. It's entirely unscientific. Where Oliver Sacks finds comfort in a linear progression of atomic weights, I find wisdom in the ancient notion that the world is made up of earth, air, fire and water. I told you it was unscientific. Think of it as poetry. These are symbols so rich

with potential meaning that I've been exploring them for most of my adult life and still find something new when I use them as a prism for exploring my experience of the world and of my inner life.

Eight times a year for the past 20 years, I have celebrated the changing of the seasons — what we call the Turning of the Wheel of the Year — with the same circle of women. We gather to celebrate the shifting dance of of sunlight and darkness, the cycles of life-and-death-and-rebirth, that mark the changing seasons, and to explore how they relate to the dance of light and darkness in our own hearts and spirits, and to the cycles of life-and-death-and-rebirth that we experience on our life journeys. We begin each ritual by calling the directions and invoking the traditional elements: earth, air, fire and water.

Many different cultures have identified earth, air, fire and water as the essential constituents of material reality. Many different cultures have ascribed spiritual significance to these same elements. Despite cultural variations, the similarities are striking.

Earth represents matter, the body, literal grounded-ness. Earth is associated with manifestation, stability, and security. By invoking

the power of earth we remind ourselves that we are rooted beings, dependent on the Earth for sustenance. We also remind ourselves that we need to fully inhabit and accept our bodies, celebrate our physical selves, in order to be whole.

Air represents intellect. It is associated with insight, clarity of vision and goals, cleansing and purification, and new beginnings. By invoking the power of air we invite the crackling electricity of ideas, the winds that blow away cobwebs and mental clutter to make way for new understanding.

Fire represents the life force, physical energy, passion of all kinds. It is associated with creativity, healing, and transformation. By invoking the element of fire we seek to kindle the power that we each possess to transform ourselves and our lives.

Water represents emotion and intuition. It is associated with depth of psyche and spirit. And as raindrops join in streams to feed the rivers and flow to the sea, water reminds us of our connectedness to each other and to the Source of Life. By invoking the power of water we honor our interdependence, and the wisdom of our individual and collective unconscious.

There are times when I meditate on one or another of these elements, deeply exploring its particular attributes and reflecting on what lessons and gifts it offers me. This doesn't require any esoteric knowledge about underlying symbol systems — what other people have thought the element means. *I* know the feeling and the smell of soil in my hands, *I* know what it means to lie in the grass beneath a tree and feel the planet spin beneath me. *I* know what it means *to me*, which is all that matters. I know what it is to gaze into a flame. . . to feel the wind against my skin. . . to let the water flow over me. Symbols have the meanings we give them. The wisdom that matters to me doesn't come from the words of sages and teachers, but from my own experience — and my own ideas and insights about the significance of these elements *to me* is exactly the lesson I need. Earth, air, fire, and water give me a never-ending opportunity to create meaning, to connect my own internal process to the processes I observe in the natural world.

So sometimes I reflect on the attributes and potential meanings of a single specific element, and sometimes I focus on the ways the elements depend on and balance each other. Fire needs air to burn, after all. And it needs earth and water to limit it, so that its transformative power does not become destructive. Some

destruction is necessary, of course, as fire reminds us. Earth needs fire — think of the redwoods that need fire to propagate. Think about whatever in your own life needs to be burned away to make room for new growth.

Balance between earth, air, fire and water makes a healthy ecosystem. Balance between body, mind, will and emotion makes a healthy person.

I need that balance of the elements in my own life. For example, my own personal temperament is heavy on fire and air qualities. I am willful and intense— that's the fire — and highly intellectual — that's the air. I am drawn to earth and to water, both literally and metaphorically, because I need them to balance me.

In my personal life, I have struggled with a life-long tendency to intellectually override my intuition. I have paid dearly for misusing my intellect to discredit my own feelings, deny my gut knowledge. This is an issue that I can, and do, address in contexts including 12-step recovery and psychotherapy. But what's been really key for me recently is to recognize that I am giving my rational mind (air) too much power and not trusting my subterranean streams of knowing (water). I can't rely entirely on my analytical mind to

solve a problem that is all about my analytical mind being having too much power! So I meditate on water and earth, on flow and grounding. I walk in silence among the trees. I enter the dark, cool, quiet places. I choose spiritual practices that are devotional. When I deliberately balance myself this way, over time my anxiety recedes as I become more grounded in my body, my heart opens, I make progress in therapy, I begin to heal.

Balance is crucial. It's also not enough. The whole concept of balance implies two distinct things, opposites — like mind and heart, or body and spirit — given equal weight. But if we think of balance that way, the two qualities remain essentially distinct, on opposite sides of the scale. As modern people who understand the periodic table — or at least remember it vaguely from school! — we know that earth, air, fire and water aren't distinct essential elements at all in the scientific sense. They're not even comprised of completely separate and distinct elements. In fact, they're not *substances* at all. Earth, air and water represent different *states* of matter — solid, gas and liquid — and fire is a process of state change. So you could say the traditional elements are actually transformed versions of each other.

Isn't that great! When we add a little bit of elementary-school science to the traditional symbolism of earth, air, fire and water, we get even better metaphors! Mind and body (air and earth), head and heart (air and water), reason and passion (air and fire) — aren't opposing forces at all, they are part of each other!

*Literally* part of each other. Just as we are all part of the same star-stuff as each other, the same star-stuff as every person and plant and animal and stone — and as the earth, the air, the fire and the water. Talk about an interdependent web!

These connections are represented in yet another symbol dear to UUs, the flaming chalice. Last spring Roger preached about the origins of the flaming chalice symbol as a secret sign for American Unitarian efforts to rescue European victims of Nazi and fascist persecution during WWII. It went on to become the official symbol of the Unitarian Universalist Association. This congregation's flaming chalice is particularly beautiful, and I love that it integrates the elements of earth, air, fire and water with the symbol of Unitarian Universalism. If you've never seen it up close, please come up after the service and take a good look.

Our chalice is made of bronze, metal from deep in the earth, and takes the shape of a tree — rooted in the earth, trunk reaching up



to form the stem of the chalice, branches and leaves cradling the cup, which holds not water but fire.

I have always found symbolic meaning in the flaming chalice independent of the symbols' origin story. The chalice itself has a long history as a symbol for the divine feminine. As a cup, it suggests water — and so emotion and intuition. And because a cup gathers individual drops of water together, it can represent community. In Western cultures the flame commonly represents reason, the light of truth. The single flame suggests the individual. We UUs speak often of the light of individual reason, and of the divine spark in each of us. For me, the image of the chalice holding the flame speaks to the equal valuing of individual and community, and of reason and feeling. For me, this flaming chalice represents the integration of head and heart, respect for the worth of the individual and acknowledgement of human interdependence.

And how beautifully those metaphors support the historical origins of the symbol! Our flaming chalice was a sign of solidarity, hope, and commitment to freedom and justice in a time of oppression and terror. It is my belief that we cannot effectively transform the world with our care, serve freedom and justice as our faith calls us

to do, unless we equally value the individual and the community, and equally honor the head and the heart.

One more point about this chalice. Note the two distinct, overlapping circles that encompass the flaming chalice. The two circles were deliberately adopted by the UUA as part of its logo to represent the the dual sources of our heritage: Unitarian and Universalist. The two denominations merged in 1960, becoming a single association of congregations. But having two distinct circles — instead of a single, completely merged one — reminds us to remember and honor *each* of the two traditions. To vastly oversimplify our religious heritage, the Unitarians were big on reason in religion and gave us our cerebral bent, while the Universalists were all about God's love, giving us the heart of our faith. Head and heart, again symbolically united.

I began by asking whether is possible to be both brilliantly blazing, like a star, and solidly rooted, like a tree in the earth. The song Spirit of Life, which we so love to sing together, expresses our deep yearning for both experiences: "Roots hold me close, wings set me free, Spirit of Life, come to me." Concrete grounded-ness and limitless freedom — roots and wings, earth and air — are equally necessary for us to experience oneness with the Spirit of

Life, and with each other. I need both. Just as I need the active engagement of my head and my intuition *with each other* as I face my life's daily challenges. And just as I need both my critical mind and my devotional heart to create a meaningful religious life for myself.

Which, by the way, I can't do alone. I come here to find spiritual depth and faith-based action *in community*. Because your minds, and your hearts, and your hands ready to join with me in tending to the needs of the world we live in, are what fills the cup that holds the flame. This flame.

Blessed be.