

How I Became an Atheopagan

Religion, Science, and my Journey Towards Rational Religion

by Mark Green

Introduction

The truth matters.

To me, this is an axiom. Examining the world, myself and others with as informed, dispassionate and objective an eye as possible is the heart of my intellectual life. Without this, any comforting delusion is allowable, any rationalization can pass unquestioned. *Look. See. Learn. Question. Think.* These are my touchstones.

It's no accident that truth is my compass. I was raised surrounded by secrets, lies contrived to cover them, and blunt denial of events I knew personally to be true. Knowing the truth and holding to it despite my parents' efforts to suppress it in favor of prettier stories kept me sane—though it led, eventually, to my ejection from my family.

So I begin this essay with the acknowledgement that my insistence on seeking truth is personal, and it is possible that to many, the issues I explore here are not even important.

This essay grows out of thoughts that have been evolving since late 2004, when I experienced a sort of cosmic reckoning and was forced to reevaluate my spirituality. Since that time, I have struggled to integrate *The Truth Matters* with my self-identification as a Pagan and my ongoing desire for spirituality and connection in community, and to press forward towards identification of an approach where the understood facts of the nature of the Universe and of ourselves as human beings can be integrated into a spirituality not rooted in fantasy.

It's a complicated question, and has led me into having to consider what a religion really is, functionally, and what that reflects about our nature as humans.

The following, for what it's worth, is where I have arrived.

I: My Journey to and Through Modern Neopaganism

Becoming a Pagan

I was raised as a rational materialist, in the household of a scientist and a medical professional. I learned curiosity and a thirst for knowledge early on. The Universe was filled with intricate, fascinating, knowable and discoverable things which behaved according to laws. I wasn't so much an "atheist" as a non-theist; the idea that gods might exist was about as germane to modern life, in my thinking, as pursuit of the Philosopher's Stone. It wasn't until middle school that it came to my attention that there were a lot of churches around, and people actually believed in God. The thought was beyond quaint: it was preposterous.

In 1987, at 25, I was invited by a friend to a gathering of his Pagan co-celebrants to mark the autumnal equinox. I went, and was deeply uncomfortable with the standing-in-a-circle-holding-hands, talking-to-invisible-presences stuff, yet I was also intrigued. The color, pageantry and feeling of symbolic enactment of connection to the forces of nature struck a deep chord in me, opened a poetic, glowing, *non-linear* state in me that was pleasurable--it felt right (and True) to acknowledge connection to the natural forces from which we evolved and through which we are able to eat, breathe and survive. Unlike the other religious practices I'd heard of, which struck me as miserable, cringing traditions sown with guilt and misery in the name of obviously imaginary gods, at least this was rooted in the objective truths of soil, sun, and seasons.

It wasn't long before I became involved, drawn into a broad community, and spent nearly two decades actively participating in Pagan practice. There was a time when I was deeply passionate about this practice, writing poetry and music to celebrate the Earth and the cycle of the seasons, and writing and leading rituals myself.

Before I go farther, it bears saying that there are literally hundreds of flavors of Pagan belief and practice. Because there is no central religious text, modern Paganism is very much a make-it-yourself religion. Practices and traditions vary so widely that the differences between, say, Catholicism and Mormonism pale by comparison. Nonetheless, there are broad characteristics which are shared by nearly all modern Pagans (at least, in the English-speaking world) and it is these I discuss here. I am generalizing, and that is inherently inaccurate to some degree. But in my experience, the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of the Pagan community I describe here are, in the main, generally true.

What made Paganism work for me was that unlike the mainstream religions, it got a lot of things right. It didn't have a demonstrably error-laden "holy book" to which it slavishly adhered, and it wasn't as sour and mean-spirited as the various cults of Yahweh, steeped as they are in blood and sin and guilt and self-righteous humorlessness. Paganism's values celebrate the natural world, revere beauty and pleasure and creativity, suspect authority, and encourage gratitude, celebration, self-parody, humor and enjoyment. I could enthusiastically embrace all of that. For the first time, I found a community where I felt as though I fit in.

Being in the Pagan community is cool. Pagans tend disproportionately to be bright, creative misfits--the kids that were the genius nerds in high school. They may be expert in obscure disciplines, such as unusual genres of art or music, fencing, smithcraft, brewing, classical history or pyrotechnics. Many paint, draw, sculpt, write, play instruments, sing, or drum. Pagans are liberally sown throughout the computer and IT industries, and Pagans in general reflect the libertarian values often seen among programmers. They celebrate diversity and tolerance, probably largely as a result of so many having been outcasts; a downside is that many have poor social skills, particularly in relation to conflict resolution, and their reflexive anti-authoritarianism often combines with this to create "witch wars" of astonishing bitterness. Many are enthusiastic about scientific discovery--so long as they can cherry-pick the discoveries that fire their imagination and ignore those which undermine what they choose to believe.

At first, it seemed to me that the parts that were hardest for me to swallow--the myths, the credence in gods and "magic"--could all be taken simply as metaphor. The myths and rites are largely seen as symbolic enactments of deeper truths about the nature of the world and our relationship to it.

All that was fine by me. It was tremendously enriching to my life to join with my friends to ritually celebrate the turning of the Earth's seasons at regular points throughout the year, to remind myself of what each time and season means in the natural world and the agricultural cycle, and what it meant to people long ago.

...and Why I Left.

Nonetheless, there are elements of belief central to the cosmologies and practices of most modern Pagans which I have always had problems reconciling with my core value that *The Truth Matters*. It is these conflicts which have led me no longer to self-identify as a Pagan, and to begin the reassessment which has led to this essay.

Pagans are romantics. Taken as a group, they are deeply creative, and they love to imagine. A typical Pagan is a reader of fantasy and science fiction and enjoys stories and participatory let's-pretend contexts which represent idealized worlds, such as *The Lord of the Rings* and the Elizabethan England of Renaissance Faires. Many are past or current enthusiasts of imaginative environments and roleplaying games such as Dungeons and Dragons, EverQuest or Second Life. There is particular emphasis in the Pagan worldview on nostalgic, idealized imaginings of the past, and the meme of long-lost or suppressed "ancient wisdom" carries strong currency in Pagan circles, as the represented antiquity of beliefs and practices is viewed as increasing their legitimacy, particularly if these beliefs and practices are said to stem from preliterate or indigenous sources. There is heated ongoing contention within the community regarding whether or not modern Paganism is a reflowering of old traditions which have remained in practice since indeterminate past times, or a modern creation based on mythological themes; it seems generally recognized that the latter, if true, is a disappointment.

Unfortunately, Pagans' vivid imagination and the create-it-yourself nature of their religion leads them to have a tremendous weakness for nonsense. While I rode along for a

considerable time feeling comfortable that this was a colorful, meaningful but ultimately *metaphorical* practice, I found increasingly that I was surrounded by people for whom this was not a life-enriching game of let's-pretend. Rather, they literally *believed*. More often than not, in my experience, modern Pagans live in a community consensus reality which renders planet Earth itself as a romantic and idealized self-aware and communicative “Mother”, and believe that behind the deceptive screen of the “mundane world” exist fairies, ghosts, spirits and deities with which they believe they can interact. Their credulous enthusiasm for “ancient” traditions--real or invented--results in a general embrace of superstitious systems of thought ranging from astrology and reincarnation to belief in UFOs and literal, physically effective ritual magic.

While many Pagans may be delighted and fascinated by what science reveals of the beauty and wonder of the Universe, what I have seen is that by and large, they cheerfully ignore Occam's Razor and the scientific method, choosing instead to seize on scientific findings which reinforce their superstitions. They'd much rather believe in something because it would be really cool if it were true than genuinely to enter into thoughtful and informed inquiry about the nature of the Universe and the human species. They resist the idea of coincidence, preferring to see subtle messages, patterns, omens, "destiny" and supernatural causalities in the unfolding of events, and when it comes to scientific matters such as medicine, are so suspicious of authorities and institutions that they are far more likely to endorse and find credibility in “alternative” therapies, however half-baked, than to trust in the science-vetted products of Western medicine. They accept subjective experience--even experience under the influence of mind-altering drugs--as having a verbatim objective reality which is typically communicative in nature: it is Someone trying to Tell Them Something. And they are highly resistant to the idea that there are more reasonable explanations for subjective experiences which fly in the face of what is possible than the supernatural explanations they choose.

Stir in the heavy romanticism and enthusiasm for fantasy and imagination that characterizes those who are drawn to Paganism, and the result is a community of people who willingly enter into a consensus reality in which it is believed that gods communicate with humans, “magical” rituals influence the course of events, "past lives" inform modern events, ghosts and spirits populate an invisible omnipresent dimension of reality, aliens pay regular visits, fairies reside in the wood, the relative positions of the larger Solar System bodies influence human behavior, and all of this colludes in an inevitable, *intentional* evolution --a divinely ordered “cosmic plan”-- toward what is still, embarrassingly, often called the “Aquarian Age”.

In other words, the Paganism I have experienced over the past 20 years is very much an outgrowth of the American youth counterculture of the 1960s, and it is no surprise that many of the primary leaders of the resurgence in Paganism were in their late teens and early 20s in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Paganism they have created rejects reason and authority, delights in tales of the supernatural, "secret knowledge", conspiracy theories and nostalgic longing for lost Good Old Days, and imagines itself as being a “movement” which is pushing human society towards an idealized utopian future. It falls into the common smugness of subcultures, feeling moral superiority in relation to mainstream religions and "straight people" even though the vast majority of its practitioners are

college-educated middle class white suburbanites, and is prone to out-of-proportion victimized outrage when confronted with anything that can be even remotely construed as discrimination. It is sensually hedonistic and libertarian, and places extreme emphasis on what it conceives as its rights, with little emphasis on any corresponding responsibilities. It is materialistic despite its expressed environmentalism, delighting in colorful, sensual costuming and expensive altar and ritual furnishings. The irony of hundreds of people driving hundreds of miles to a Pagan festival (the most common kind of community event, typically camping together in a rural setting over several days to share rituals, workshops and socializing) to celebrate the Earth does not appear to strike any of this religion's adherents as odd, but to be fair, Pagans are human: they feel different, and need community, even if they have to travel distances to get it and turn a blind spot to their supposed values in the process. It must be acknowledged that considerable effort is expended at many Pagan festivals to recycle and minimize waste.

But more than anything else, modern Pagans are a product of their culture because they have made their new religion in the image of their cultures' entrenched ones. The paradigms of modern Paganism are no different from those of the mainstream religions, which have served as models for what a religion *is* to those who have created the new Pagan practices, subculture and cosmology.

Which leads me to a story.

II: Paganism: the "New" Old Religion that's Just Like All the Others

The Mythological Shell Game

Once upon a time, the cosmological and mythological narratives of religion were believed to be literal truth. An ancient Roman or Christian or Hindu didn't need "faith" to be devout; the state of human knowledge was so limited at that time that the stories told in their myths were the accepted and literal explanations for the phenomena they purported to explain.

But people learned, experimented, and the scientific method emerged. A divide began to develop between what is demonstrably true and what the dominant religions insisted was true. By the time of the Middle Ages, authoritarian repression of heretical thought was at root less a battle between Christian factions than a full-fledged war on the part of the Roman Catholic Church against the waning of its monopoly as recognition grew of emerging factual truths which undermined its cosmology.

With every brutal suppression of free thought and philosophical curiosity, the Church dug itself a deeper hole. Horror at the extremes of violence this war provoked in the 16th and 17th centuries as science decisively moved the ball up the cosmological field resulted in The Age of Reason and the rise of the valuation of the individual in Western culture.

As religious institutions lost their grip on cosmology, they fundamentally transformed their strategy for recruiting and retaining their adherents. The shift at that time, which has only grown more pronounced as human knowledge has increased, has been the increasing emphasis on *faith*.

These days, to be a good Christian, Jew, or Muslim you must accept as true claims which are demonstrably false. Those who want to believe do elaborate dances to try to evade the point, but anyone who is conversant with the current state of cosmological physics and willing to be honest will acknowledge that not only is there no credible and verifiable evidence for the existence of gods, there is also no verifiable phenomenon for which a disembodied, intelligent entity which can suspend the laws of physics at will would be the most reasonable explanation, nor is there any evidence at all save purely subjective anecdotal claims by individuals to suggest that such beings exist. Said subjective experiences by their very nature as experiences occur in the brains of those who perceive them, and it is far more likely that they are self-generated than that they come from an invisible, telepathic Other Being.

The existence of gods--or of any form of invisible, non-corporeal self-aware personality or intelligence--is simply a poor hypothesis at this point for explanation of any phenomenon in the Universe. Clinging to belief that gods exist in the face of the complete lack of physical evidence for them--and substantial physical evidence that gods as conceptualized by most religions *cannot* exist in the Universe--in no way contributes to advancement in navigating physical reality, evolving tools and technology, or understanding the nature of the Universe. At a cosmological level, there is no room for gods left in the Universe.

Which is not to say that religion does not have any practical purpose--quite the contrary, and I'll get to that below. Religion performs critically important psychological and social functions which are so desirable that most people choose to participate in religion or spirituality *even if they don't literally believe in gods...* or if they choose not to focus too much on the question of whether they see their religion as literal or more as guidance, philosophy, and community.

Yet the world's major religions have not been willing to cede the cosmological ground they cannot hold. And so, in order to defend the validity of their largely arbitrary, self-contradictory and outdated teachings, these religions rely more and more on requirements of faith on the part of adherents. Indeed, without faith--without the willing subscription to the veracity of what can be demonstrated to be impossible or wildly unlikely--the cosmologies and supernatural myths of these religions are so obviously off-base that no minimally educated modern person could possibly believe them.

I call the shift from a "this is the way the world is" religious narrative to a "you must have faith and believe our cosmology even though the evidence is plain that it is untrue" narrative The Mythological Shell Game.

All the mainstream religions have belabored explanations for why their mythologies fly in the face of what we now know to be true (e.g., "God has placed all this false evidence to test our faith.") Rather than drop their pretense--and grant that their holy texts are wrong--the major religions of the world simply move the pea under another shell. Liberal denominations say of the clearly nonsensical parts of their religions *oh, that's just an instructive metaphor*; conservative ones say *you are required to have faith and believe literally, however obviously false the claim we're telling you to believe, and you're damned if you don't*.

Neither is honest, and neither promotes genuinely inquisitive openness to learning; each requires that all knowledge be sieved through the distorting filter of arbitrarily applied belief.

The significance of this process to the development of modern Paganism is that the Mythological Shell Game defines the shape of what is understood to constitute a religion in our society, and it is to fit within this shape that modern Paganism has been created. Though there is no particular reason why it should be so, we have inherited a conceptualization of the nature of religion *which requires a supernatural component*. "Rational religion", in fact, would be seen by most in our society as oxymoronic.

Modern Pagans have selected different core values and narrative mythologies than those of the mainstream religions, and they do not themselves have much in the way of "holy" texts. This has allowed them to incorporate much of what we now know about the Universe into their cosmology: evolution, for example. But they have adopted without question the presumption that a religion must expect its adherents to believe in supernatural phenomena for which there is no credible evidence, and have therefore built their practices, philosophies and subculture on a foundation of superstition and credulous fantasy--just like the mainstream religions they point to as outdated and cosmologically

wrong.

They didn't have to do so. Science now gives us a much better way of coming to understand the nature of the Universe. Nonetheless, modern Pagans built a new religion in the shape of the predominant Judeo-Christian ones. Given how many bright, educated and scientifically literate people there are in the Pagan community, one has to ask: why?

So: Why Do People Still Believe in Gods and the Supernatural?

The answer to this question begins with culture. We are surrounded by a context which accepts as normal that people will subscribe to belief in invisible beings which are highly unlikely to exist and supernatural events contrary to the laws of physics. Our communities are heavily salted with buildings constructed for the express purpose of indulging behaviors relating to these beliefs and communities of people whose primary point of mutual engagement is to engage in these behaviors. Large proportions of our population go regularly to these buildings to engage in rituals reinforcing their beliefs in company with others who share them. Political leaders are expected to subscribe to such irrational beliefs. So the "normality" of this irrational behavior encourages people to subscribe to such beliefs and strongly discourages as impolite (at least) or heretical (at worst) any questioning of them.

But the core of humans' propensity to see evidence for gods is the very nature of our process of perception.

Humans are pattern-recognizing beings. Other animals do this to a lesser degree, but humans have evolved a capacity to store tremendous volumes of memories--both of actual sensory experiences and of imagined experiences generated by dreams, reading or hearing stories, or by experiencing artificially created media designed to fool our minds into thinking we're having an experience, such as movies. We use these memories to help us identify objects and situations we encounter, and to inform our decisions about how to act when we encounter a particular object or situation.

I'll go into more on the brain later, but the key point here is that the way we negotiate our world is to take sensory information and make sense out of it by deciding both what it is and what it means (a threat? An opportunity? Beautiful? Edible? Fun? Frightening?)

Meaning is created in the brain through a process first of categorization of sensory input (stimulus) based on previous experience (to determine what the stimulus is likely to be), followed by development of a conclusion about how to behave in relation to the stimulus, based on memory of real *or imagined* events as well as one's interests and worldview. It is important to emphasize that these remembered "experiences" do not have to be real in order to be used by the brain. None of us has ever seen a dragon, but we'd certainly recognize one if we did.

The two-step nature of the process is also an important distinction. While both a devout

Muslim and I might agree based on our previous experience that what we are looking at is a pork chop, we would have markedly different behavioral impulses in relation to it.

Critical to this process is the ability to slot sensory input into recognizable patterns. Our brains create systems of criteria for categorizing sensory input: while there are many different kinds of chairs, we have internalized criteria for “chair” which help us to identify one when we see it. Without this capacity, I couldn’t figure out that the input to my eyes and nose meant that I was confronted with a pork chop. If I didn’t have previous experience of a pork chop, or if I concluded erroneously instead that the object in question was a soldering iron, it would be difficult to make a good decision about what to do in relation to the object. Neurologist Oliver Sacks relates many interesting stories of people with brain injuries or dysfunction which illustrate the importance of these functions in his wonderful book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*.

We are, in fact, so dependent on our ability to find patterns in sensory input that *we do it erroneously all the time*. Our brains hungrily project patterns onto incoming data, trying to fit what we’re perceiving into understood categories so we can figure out what it is and, therefore, what we should do in relation to it. This is most apparent to us when we experience data which actually doesn’t have a pattern: we end up seeing animals (or Elvis) in the shapes of clouds, the texture of tree bark, etc. Driving on the freeway, we may peer far forward to read a sign, and do so...only to have the letters rearrange into different words when we get closer, because what we “saw” the first time wasn’t what was really there, it was just our brains trying mightily to solve the problem of low-resolution data. Most “divination” methods rely on this phenomenon, generating random patterns of information in which “patterns” are then “seen” and interpreted, be they arrangements of celestial bodies, palm lines, animal entrails, or a layout of randomly ordered cards, bones, etc.

In *The Ghost Map*, Steven Johnson’s medical history of the 1854 London cholera epidemic, he discusses the persistence of the “miasma theory” of disease transmittal, which is a perfect example of how a brain function (in the case of miasma theory, the visceral, biologically based revulsion response provoked by the brain when the olfactory center detects methane, hydrogen sulfites, or products of decomposition such as cadaverine and putrescine) can combine with the projection of wishful thinking to “see” a pattern which does not exist to reinforce an erroneous belief: in this case, that “bad air” causes disease. By the time of this epidemic, sufficient statistical data was being collected on disease and death that if it had been considered without prejudice, it would have become clear to those reviewing the data that the miasma theory didn’t hold up: why, for example, would some people in a house be struck by cholera, and others not? Why would the disease skip houses on a given street, where all were breathing the same air? Yet none of these questions were viewed as pertinent, and as a result, public works projects designed to rid the city of “disease-causing miasma” led to the diversion of millions of gallons of raw sewage into the Thames, which was the drinking water supply for much of London. Thousands died unnecessarily as a consequence.

The “miasma theory” had been a dominant analysis of the causes of epidemic disease in one form or another for more than 2,000 years. In fact, the word *malaria* is Latin for “bad

air”. Smart and well-intentioned people over that entire time were so convinced by the idea that even by the time of Victoria, when systematic collection of public health data provided the means of understanding that the miasma model didn't work, they were unable to see what was right in front of them. Their desire to understand a problem and their conviction that they already did led them to cherry-pick reasons for believing what they wanted to believe.

In short, the first part of the two-part perception process, pattern recognition and categorization, frequently either chooses to emphasize information which reinforces what is believed, or interprets sensory data to provide us with false experiences which are created by our minds as they grapple to categorize what we sense. The psychological term for this phenomenon is *confirmation bias*: the tendency to see and lend credence to evidence which reinforces what you already believe. *We see patterns which aren't there.*

...And then we decide what they “mean”. Which brings me to the second part of the perceptual process: meaning.

Meaning is created based on our past experiences. What we remember and what we have learned serve as reference libraries which help us to make choices about what to do in a given situation.

However, we are nearly incapable of differentiating between memories of actual and imagined experiences. Research shows that identical areas of the brain are activated through access of actual memories and imagination, and further that imagined memories (dreams, movies we've seen, imagined scenes of stories we've heard) can be as strongly believed as are memories of actual events.

Our capacity to categorize memories as “not real” versus “actual” is exceedingly weak, and when combined with the cultural “normality” of believing in such supernatural events and beings and the natural human desire to fit in and belong (more on this below), it is inevitable that for people who have grown up hearing tales of gods and supernatural events, these tales can be every bit as vividly believed as events which actually happened to them. Add in the well-documented phenomenon of confirmation bias, and the result is a human perceptual array which cannot be considered reliable in any way at the single-person, subjective level.

The combination of these inherent flaws in both steps of our perceptual process result in a deep susceptibility to seeing patterns where there are none and ascribing them to imagined causalities which conform both to our desires and to the cultural narratives to which we subscribe, such as those of religion.

In fact, supernaturally credulous religion is dependent on this phenomenon. Its precepts and narratives connect unrelated events through the explanation of deific intercession: person prays for a job, person gets a job, *voilà!* God's hand. Believers in supernaturalism “see” support for their beliefs because their confirmation-biased brains are poised to find patterns which support what they want to believe, explaining these “perceptions” to themselves as confirmation that they live in a world in which unrelated events are

mysteriously woven into a deliberate and intentional pattern by undetectable forces.

The conversation between those who subscribe to a supernatural worldview and those who do not inevitably leads at some point to the religionist's statement that he "knows" his beliefs are true because he "believes his own experiences". The problem with this is that we *can't really trust our experiences*. Our brains are so subject to projection of patterns where there are none and self-reinforcing wishful thinking that without some kind of verifiability, we shouldn't be loyal to our perceptions. This is the genius of the scientific method: to avoid the unreliability of individual subjective perception through controlled and repeated experimentation.

Challenging though it is to recognize, "I saw it so I know it's true" simply isn't a valid statement. If that's all you have to base your beliefs on --especially beliefs about things as profoundly important as the nature of the Universe and whether or not we are being monitored by profoundly powerful invisible beings—they're probably wrong.

At this point, I'm moving on to discuss other ways that Paganism cloned the predominant religions, but want to point out that the foregoing explains the mechanics of how people can come to sustain supernatural beliefs, but it doesn't address why they want to do so. It's a big topic; I'll get to it in Section III.

Looking Up to Mommy and Daddy

Another characteristic of established religions which has informed the development of modern Paganism is the parental metaphor sown liberally throughout its liturgy, imagery and practice.

Traditional religions approach the world through a child's perspective: "*We are ignorant and powerless, and must engage in behavior we believe will please the Giant Omnipotencies who rule our world to curry their favor, and thus receive the help we need to survive and be happy.*" Stripped down, there is little difference between a Muslim prayer and a Pagan prayer at this level. Both frame the relationship between the world and the individual in a manner which embodies the operational survival strategy of a child, adopting a fundamental misunderstanding of the Universe as a top-down system in which larger orders of scale are deterministic of what happens at smaller levels of scale. The same model is advanced by "Creationists", who insist that a Universe so complex cannot have arisen from simple or mechanical means, and must therefore have been engineered by an intelligence.

It's no surprise that this model for the human relationship to the world has taken hold: we spend the long years of our upbringing in exactly such relationships with our parents, and the world is, after all, much larger and more long-lasting than we are. But in actuality, what science tells us about how our Universe and the structures within it evolve and function is quite the opposite from the top-down monarchic paradigm embodied in the "gods as parents" model, or indeed of any predestined cosmic plan model. With the advent

of complexity science, it is becoming evident that the emergence of structures in complex dynamic systems is an inherent, mathematically-driven quality of such systems as they ride the fractal edge between spinning out of control into chaos or freezing into stasis. We see this fact in the escalating levels of complexity which emerge at each level of scale: atoms to molecules, molecules to increasing levels of complexity which, under certain circumstances, are now believed possibly to begin to self-catalyze, forming rudimentary life; thence, increasing complexity of such life, cells which embrace individuals of such life as organelles, cell colonies, multi-cellular organisms, tissues, organs, bodily systems, biotic assemblages, ecological webs, families, organizations, communities, societies, states, multi-state confederacies, entire economies. Or, strictly at the large scale, from undifferentiated subatomic particles to molecules, then larger molecules, dust clouds, stars and solar systems, and on up to galactic superclusters and structures at orders of scale we are only now beginning to identify in the microwave background echo of the Big Bang itself.

As physicist Stephen Wolfram demonstrates in his revolutionary 2002 book *A New Kind of Science*, such complex phenomena need not be the product of particularly complicated systems. In fact, quite the opposite is true: extraordinarily complex behaviors can be generated by very simple algorithms. The available evidence is that rather than being products of a romantically magical generative process, we and everything we know are the inevitable outgrowth of rather simple mathematical processes.

The world we actually see isn't top down. It is bottom-up, driven by its very nature to accrete and evolve toward increasing adaptive complexity within the constraints of the laws of physics. What gives rise to what we see in the living world, including ourselves, does not come down from above and requires no intelligence to manage or steer it. It rises from complex interactions in which any one individual of a system may have no, little or profound impact, largely due to factors over which it has no control. Comforting as it may be to think of a one stop personage to whom we can address requests for support, ours is not a parental world.

Finally in relation to the parental paradigm is the ego problem inherent in the model. The very principle that the imaginary Large and Powerful Invisible Beings that god-believers worship would care about such tiny and temporary beings as humans--living our eyeblink existences on a backwater mote of salty mud whirling about a garden-variety star in a not-particularly large galaxy, in a Universe which contains more galaxies than our Milky Way does stars--is arrogant and hard to justify, to say the least. There is no reason to believe such beings would be any more aware of humans--or concerned for them-- than we humans are of the individual bacteria that populate our digestive tracts.

So...What's the Problem? Who Cares if People are Kidding Themselves about Gods?

At this point, it's fair to ask why any of this is a problem. The role of religion through time has been far more than simply to answer questions about the nature of the Universe. Religion has also served to instill and reinforce values, to define what constitutes

acceptable and moral behavior, to build a sense of connected community and mutual loyalty among its adherents, to inspire creation of works of art, and to reduce fear through communication of the “knowledge” that some part of the believer remains in existence after death.

At a social scale, it has served as an organizing principle for entire societies; in fact, there is a strong push today to reestablish this as the norm, as has happened in Iran and is desired by American dominionist Christians.

From my standpoint, the values of the established religions are simply unacceptable. They are authoritarian, arbitrarily repressive, discourage individuality and encourage the association of pleasure with guilt. If constrained by the pluralistic and secular democratic political framework originally envisioned by the writers of the American Constitution, however--claims by said dominionists notwithstanding--many of religions' social and personal functions can be beneficial. There are exceptions, mostly related to the lack of tolerance for diversity that is sown into the religious texts followed by these religions and emphasized by their most extreme adherents.

But the Pagan community, by and large, is less that way: more libertarian, more pleasure-positive, less obsequious to authority. And they don't have a book of dusty frowny rules and threats. So long as we go that way, what's wrong with a little delusion?

My answer to this question is twofold: one personal, one societal.

Personally, I just can't overcome my allegiance to *The Truth Matters*. It's as simple as that. However challenging it may be, it is in my nature to try to become as fully aware of the true nature of the world and of humanity as I am capable. Romanticism is an obstacle to this impulse. The world is beautiful, terrible and everything between; indeed, such value judgments don't mean anything in the broad context of the Universe's steady, entropic unfolding, uncaring and incapable of caring about how we feel about any of it. Embracing all of this, and looking for the very real beauty, wonder and joy that the realities of life's experience can offer should be enough, I think, without having to make things up.

At a societal level, I believe that superstition is deeply harmful. Delusions based in wishful thinking and an unwillingness to consider the implications of available evidence have consequences. In London of 1854, to give one of countless examples, thousands died as a result of well-intended wishful thinking on the part of sanitation planners.

What I see happening around me is that deterioration of reason and the return of religious zealotry is leading us into a renewed Dark Age which will be increasingly characterized by the excesses of violence and conflict which are inevitable when ignorance, superstition and self-righteous extremism are high. Pluralistic tolerance, which was on the rise in the world until the 1960s, is plummeting, and it is doing so as ignorant belief in the face of available evidence becomes a primary driver of public policy and social movements throughout the world.

I believe this phenomenon arises as a result of two drivers: growing dissatisfaction with the

failure of reason to address the other human needs which have been traditionally met by religion, and the development of mass broadcast media: first radio, then television and now the Internet, which have collectively enabled mass distribution of crackpot ideas at a greater rate than at any previous time, and have changed the primary modality by which people receive information from the written (processed by the linear, rational parts of the brain) to the visual (processed by the emotional, irrational parts of the brain).

I'll address the former driver in the following section. As to the second, the surging return of fundamentalist evangelical religion in the United States has closely paralleled the rise of radio and television. We are now at the point where no differentiation is made through these media between the real and the fictional, and a majority of citizens are unable to distinguish between the two. "News" sources like Fox News and right-wing talk radio spout hate speech and logically inconsistent, evidentially unsupported ideological nonsense which is taken as verbatim truth by their listeners, who are culturally habituated to believing things that make no sense. Supposedly factual media outlets such as the Discovery Channel carry "documentaries" about "ghost hauntings" and supernatural "unsolved mysteries" such as "mummies' curses". It hasn't always been this way: far fewer people embraced such stupidity fifty years ago.

The power of these media is fundamentally different than that of the print media of past centuries. Words on a page have never had the level of penetration, immediacy and emotional punch that radio and television deliver. Seeing is believing, and now we can see anything that can be imagined, in riveting detail, through the miracle of digital imagery. And belief has consequences; for those who believe that they will be "raptured" at any given moment, for example, the implications of global warming become unimportant.

In this regard, suspension of critical thinking on the part of Pagans simply worsens the problem. This is a time when bright, creative people need to be more realistic, not less. The kinds of people who are willing to strike out into new territory should do so, rather than wandering parallel to the mainstream highway and thinking they're in unexplored realms.

Modern Paganism gets half of the equation right: the tolerant, Earth-caring values and appreciation for joy and pleasure in living are unquestionably the kinds of values that will promote less conflict and greater happiness in the world.

But Paganism, like the religions that preceded it, is built on a foundation of willful denial of what we now know with high degree of confidence to be true about the nature of the Universe. By deriving from religions of the past, it fails in many of the ways these other religions fail: it encourages credulity instead of thought, and frames the world for its adherents in ways which promote insularity, self-importance, and the incorporation of the fantastic and irrational into its communities' decision making.

However...

Where Science Fails

Science's modality of cognitive, reasoning evidence-based analysis has racked up so many triumphs of discovery and innovation in the past four hundred years that many of its leaders have come to conclude not only that science has or will eventually lead to all the answers, but that any questions to which it will not eventually find the answers are not worth asking.

In this, these leaders are completely and profoundly wrong. While they are correct that religion can no longer be looked to for credible explanation of the cosmological and phenomenological nature of the Universe, this has been only a relatively small part of religion's human function. Religion performs other valuable functions which science cannot possibly fulfill.

Science and critical thinking are the best tools for answering questions about the nature of the Universe and, indeed, about our nature as humans—as products of our evolutionary history, our cultures and our times. These are "thinky" questions, and cognition does the best job in attacking them. But questions about how to live, what to value, and how to be happy aren't "thinky". They're "feely", and this is where science falls flat.

Proponents of the purely rational as an approach to living, in fact, are themselves ignoring current scientific understanding of our very nature. In the next section, I will examine why proselytizing atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Bill Maher and Stephen Weinberg will never win their argument, so long as they frame it as against religion rather than against *superstition*. For the social and psychological functions of religion meet core human needs. We will not move beyond superstition and its damage until we have something with which to replace it in performing these functions--something that is not focused on the thinking mind.

III) Protecting the Lizard, Petting the Dog, and Why Richard Dawkins is Barking Up the Wrong Tree

Until now, this work has been based largely in what we can learn about the Universe through scientific analysis and cognitive thought. Now, let me introduce a curveball idea: this exploration isn't going to get where I'm hoping to go using reason alone. If the task at hand is to identify a rational religion which informs and supports a fulfilling life, elements appealing to cognition will only get us partway there.

An Accumulated Animal

In *The Dreams of Dragons*, his book on the nature of human intelligence, Carl Sagan begins with the obvious fact that evolution is an additive, rather than a subtractive process. New, successful adaptations are layered atop those which have developed previously. It is only when a new set of adaptations is so successful that previous ones are no longer necessary that previously evolved functions atrophy and disappear. The latest species in an evolutionary lineage is a cumulative accretion of traits which contribute to its ability to survive and reproduce.

We can see this, for example, in the appearance in human embryos of gill slits. They fade with later development, but they are clear evidence that we still have the coding for the breathing apparatus of our aquatic predecessors in our genes. It is only because we later developed the capacity to breathe air that gill structures are not fully expressed in a formed human.

The central point here is that we are not engineered organisms whose systems were designed to integrate smoothly with one another. Our bodies evolved from earlier forms, building on their strengths and adapting their weaknesses up to--and not beyond--the point where we were evolutionarily competitive. We can see dozens of examples of how this is so, such as the injury-prone spines we inherited from our quadrupedal ancestors, now precariously tipped up to balance vertically atop our pelvises, which themselves have extreme difficulty meeting their dual requirements of allowing us to walk and having the capacity for successful childbirth of young with the disproportionately large heads our intelligence has brought us.

Where I'm going with this is that the same characterization is true of our brains, and this may be the most central fact of our existence. Our brains are not fully integrated and self-consistent systems designed in parallel to work in tandem: they are layers of adaptations, one atop another, and these systems have different processing modalities, different priorities, and can, in fact develop deep conflicts with one another. This is the human condition, the nature of our minds, and the reason we have such struggles internally though we succeed so well as a species. The human brain is a *kluge*, as Gary Marcus, director of the NYU Infant Language Learning Center puts it: a clumsy cobbling-together of systems and adaptations which work *well enough*... but not all that well, really, when compared to a computer or how they might have worked if engineered as an integrated whole. Our brains are not vaunted supercomputers, as some like to describe them: they're Rube Goldberg

arrangements held together with quite a bit of evolutionary duck tape and bailing wire. Taken as a whole, these accumulated adaptations work well enough to assure species survival, which is as far as evolution goes. Natural selection selects merely for that which provides competitive advantages to individuals of a given species such that they can survive to reproduction age and successfully reproduce. That's it.

Unfortunately, successful completion of that bare-bones functionality doesn't exactly add up to what we would call happiness. We view the story of a 16-year-old boy who manages to impregnate his girlfriend before wrapping his Mustang around a utility pole as a tragedy and a cautionary tale, not a complete and fulfilled life.

And there's the rub: what we're built to do isn't enough to satisfy us. What we need to feel fulfillment requires that we go farther. People are religious because it feeds them in ways that just surviving to breed--or being knowledgeable and rational--does not.

The Triune Brain

In the early 1950s, neuroscientist Paul MacLean introduced a model categorizing three functional complexes of the brain, each composed of several distinct structures. These three complexes are built in layers atop one another from the very core of the brain to its outer regions and developed in subsequent evolutionary phases. MacLean termed his model *the Triune Brain*. Its elements are the Reptilian or "R-Complex", the Limbic System (or Mammalian Brain), and the Neocortex. Over the past 50 years, our growing knowledge about the functioning of the brain has refined and generally reinforced this broad model.

The R-Complex is a set of core brain structures including the brain stem and medulla which remain largely the same as they were in our reptilian ancestors. It has two simple priorities: *survive and reproduce*. When we are in "fight or flight" mode, the R-Complex is running the show. When someone acts in a manner we describe as "being driven by their hormones", it is the R-Complex, which has no comprehension of following rules to sustain relationships, which is in the driver's seat. The R-Complex is opportunistic, paranoid, and simple in its priorities. It does not have morals. The R-Complex is where our fear, our violence, our territoriality, our reflexive responsiveness to social hierarchy, and our impulse to submit to those we perceive as more powerful than ourselves live. As the earliest part of our minds and the part most completely focused on survival, the R-Complex can—and does—assert control of our behavior when it concludes that life is on the line.

The Limbic System developed in early mammals and became increasingly important as they evolved. Mammals' significant departure from their reptile antecedents is in nurturing of their young, and we are thus wired to care about our offspring, to pursue connection and belonging. In the case of humans, the limbic system has had to be more robust and prominent in driving behavior than in most other mammalian species, because our young are helpless and need our care and attention for many years after their birth.

This requires us not only to care about them, but to bond in family and social units which are capable of providing the physical and economic security which will enable our young to survive to adulthood.

The Limbic System feels and expresses emotionally: that is its innovative adaptation. Love, sorrow, creativity, longing, joy and compassion arise in the Limbic System. Its motivation is *to seek pleasure and avoid pain*, and it has built-in systems which release chemicals creating pleasure when social connection—most strongly, with mates, prospective mates and offspring—occurs, and pain when it does not. Interestingly, there are other ways to stimulate some of these chemicals as well, particularly in the creative process. This is probably an evolved system reinforcing technological innovation, which has been the primary function in humans which has enabled us to succeed despite being slow, weak, unarmed (or armored) and having rather poor senses.

Thus, the Limbic System pursues its motivation to seek pleasure and avoid pain through the dual strategies of seeking belonging and connection (love) and through self-expression. The overlap between other-directed motivation for connection and self-directed motivation to self-express and “actualize”, as Maslow would have it, lies in *play behavior*, pleasurable pastime which can be either solo or in groups. The Limbic System hurts when isolated, rejected or ostracized, and, through the connections it establishes, broadens the definition of “self” for the R-Complex such that the reptilian brain will react every bit as strongly to protect those to whom the Limbic System feels connected as it will to defend the self.

The Limbic System experiences joy when its imperatives--connection, belonging, self-expression and enjoyment--are fulfilled, and grieves when it suffers loss or privation.

Remarkably, the Limbic System also produces our altruistic impulses. It is a nearly unique characteristic of the human species that we often act in ways which benefit others beyond the immediately defined “self circle” of loved ones, even if these actions do not immediately serve the survival needs of ourselves, our families or larger social units. This altruistic impulse seems to reflect a general evolutionary competitive advantage in our having a capacity to get along with others and see that their needs are met as well as our own, and is also part of a feedback loop in which “good acts” enhance a person’s self-esteem, which is a pleasurable sensation and may provide competitive advantage through enhanced valuation by others in the surrounding social context. It should be noted that in nearly all cases, this impulse is trumped by self-interest if the two come into conflict.

Significantly, the Limbic System participates in memory formation by integrating emotional states with stored memories of physical perceptions archived by the Neocortex. Thus, the scent of orange blossoms may evoke a memory from childhood and its associated emotional experience. This associative function has the dual effect of enhancing survival by enabling us to learn to anticipate potential pleasure or pain when we encounter the circumstances which have brought them in the past, as well as creating a “meaning-making” function which cross-references a given cognitive experience not only with its associated emotional responses, but also with experiences which evoked similar emotional responses at other times in the past. The drawing of these parallel associations

is the core matter not only of psychology, but of art. It is the physical process of metaphor.

The Neocortex is the conscious, rational mind. Its adaptations are *abstraction*, the ability to imagine projected outcomes of possible courses of action in light of previous experience, as well as to accumulate and integrate knowledge and cognitive memory and to process language. The Neocortex evolved latest of our three brains, and it is what makes humans so markedly different from other animal species, with our capacities to conceptualize the abstract and imaginary, our use of complex symbolic systems such as language, and our capacities to accumulate encyclopedic knowledge of facts and procedures as well as to develop, use and train our fellows in the use of tools. The Neocortex is what most people think of when they think of the mind: it is that which *thinks and imagines*.

The Neocortex uses its tremendous powers to *understand*. That is its core purpose, and it applies its ability to develop understanding in two broad forms.

The first is to augment prospects for survival through accumulation of *knowledge*. Knowledge gained through learning and experience enables us to make better strategic choices and enhance our likelihood of surviving a given decision point. Knowing how to recognize different kinds of dangers, how to use tools, how to negotiate perilous situations, and knowledge of the nature of the physical world all contribute to prospects for longer survival.

The second form of understanding as a core motivation of the Neocortex is to create *meaning*, which I define broadly as an internal narrative about the purpose and value of the person's continued life.

Meaning is important for humans because without it, even though we may have the means and capacities available to survive, we may not see any reason to do so. Meaninglessness conflate with despair and is a primary driver of suicidality, a uniquely human phenomenon.

As discussed above, the power of the Neocortex to create meaning combines with the emotional systems of the Limbic System to produce the expressive impulse. This manifests in *creative expression*, which runs the Neocortex' sense of life's meaning and skill with tools and disciplines (words, paint, sound, movement) through the emotionally expressive nonlinear Limbic System to create art, and in *play*, wherein we seek pleasure through exercise of the Neocortex' ability to imagine, strategize and create.

What is interesting about the Neocortex' two forms of understanding is that they may relate to one another...or they may not. Consider as an example a physicist who is a devout Catholic. This person's deep knowledge about the nature of the physical Universe nonetheless has failed to inform the meaning s/he has developed about life, which is built around the existence of a God which s/he should be completely cognizant is vanishingly unlikely to exist.

Yet I remain convinced that knowledge can inform meaning, that the two can remain harmonious in the context of a rational, rewarding spirituality. More on that later.

When Brains Collide!

The three minds within each of us do not live in partitioned boxes; they are wired together. The interpenetration of the three processing systems of our minds gives rise to emotions which combine their functions: nostalgia, say, or regret, pride, hope, or shame, which are Limbic emotive responses to Neocortical analysis of events (past, present or anticipated). The different parts of our minds, with their different modalities and agendas, are in communication with one another, and their impulses are not infrequently contradictory, as in our endless vacillations between desire for connection and for emotional safety.

For example, accumulating knowledge and skills can lead to enhanced ability to survive. Assuredness based in such capacity not only reduces the R-Complex' fear of destruction in the circumstances where the skill or knowledge apply, but also has the potential to raise one's estimation in the eyes of others, increasing self-esteem (internally generated Limbic pleasure) and enhancing ability to connect socially (externally generated Limbic pleasure). This is only one of many examples of how the three brains can scratch one another's backs.

Alternatively, they can eat one another's lunch--as when, triggered by Neocortical memory associations with past Limbic pain, the R-Complex is triggered in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and a simple backfire in the street results in a panicked veteran diving for cover.

The human Triune Brain is an abstract thinker wired into a foundation of emotional and survival motivations: a lizard wrapped in a dog wrapped in a human. The lizard came first, and when the chips are down, the R-Complex seizes the reins to get us out of danger. And these functions didn't just *evolve* sequentially--within us as individuals, they *develop* sequentially. A newborn baby has no cognitive capacity at all--it is driven pretty much entirely by the R-Complex and the Limbic System, which tell it what to do to stay alive. Over time--many years--we develop the ability to relate effects to causes, to use language, to reason, to think. We become adults through the development of our brains, and cannot be children, whose experience is a product of their formation stage, ever again.

The interconnectedness of these systems and their differing approaches and goals lead to misunderstandings between them which can drive our behavior. One characteristic of our Neocortical minds--so ubiquitous we hardly think about it, yet which can lead to real difficulty in our lives--is our limited ability to differentiate between the imagined and the real, or to accurately gauge the real degree of threat when our fear has been provoked.

For example, a person's Neocortex may assess current circumstances in light of a past traumatic experience and inaccurately conclude that s/he is in danger, plunging the R-Complex into a fight-or-flight response although there is no actual threat. Likewise, the

Limbic System may flood us with emotion when the Neocortex reports that conditions have arisen similar to those of a past event--as, for example, when "that song", so filled with old associations, comes on the radio. We may say in such circumstances that a person has been "triggered" or "is projecting", and we acknowledge that damaging experiences may render a person insecure and prone to such inappropriate reactions.

Yet we play on this inability to differentiate between the imagined and the real all the time: much of our entertainment is based on it. We read books, go to movies and play video games to have simulated experiences which provoke our Limbic Systems and even our R-Complexes despite the fact that the events on the page or screen are not really happening. The popularity of horror genres plays directly on our inability to make this distinction, parading illusory reasons for terror which trigger the flight-or-flight response of the R-Complex, resolving when the fear is allayed with a palpable and pleasurable wave of relief as epinephrine production returns to normal and this neurotransmitter is catalyzed. While we "know" in our Neocortical minds that the scary monster isn't really coming at us (otherwise, we would flee the theatre in terror), we don't know it in the parts of our brains which don't understand abstraction and can't make fine-grain discernments between apparent perceptions and real ones, so we go for a vivid neurochemical ride while sitting in our seats.

In fact, a strong argument can be made that all human behavior--*everything* we are motivated to do--can be fairly characterized as efforts to feed the appetites of the three brains. Our entertainments and pursuits shock or titillate the R-Complex, stir feeling in the Limbic System and present learning, puzzles to be solved and stimulation to the Neocortex. Even a sad movie is better to the Limbic System than feeling nothing at all. What are our most-resisted states? Physical danger or pain (R-Complex), followed by dull lack of feeling, alienation and loneliness (Limbic System), followed by boredom (Neocortex). Our social punishments have always involved presenting one or more of the brains with its worst nightmare: death, pain, alienation, and confinement without mental or emotional stimulation.

My point with all this is that a rational spirituality will fail unless meeting the needs not just of the rational, Neocortical mind, but of all three systems of our brains. As we will see, the reason religion is so ubiquitous is that it delivers on each of the core motivations of the triune brain, providing a sense of safety, of belonging, of meaning and of self-expression to its participants. The cold comfort of simply "being right" does not--cannot ever--satisfy the appetites of our triune brains.

Religion and the Brain

From the time we are capable of autonomous behavior as toddlers, we begin to perform ritual behavior. In enacting imaginative play, children are literally exercising their developing Neocortexes, learning to imagine and create. They need to play—it builds the abstraction-creating, analytical and language capacities of their Neocortexes, and teaches them social skills which will enable them to meet their Limbic imperative to develop and

maintain relationships. The imaginary connection of ritualized behavior to events in the future or occurring elsewhere (frequently referred to as “magical thinking” in the psychiatric literature) is a hallmark of children’s behavior, and persists as religious behavior of adults under the established model of religiosity, associating ritual behavior with hoped-for outcomes, and crediting this behavior with such outcomes if they come to pass. There’s really little difference between not stepping on a sidewalk crack to avoid “breaking your mother’s back” and intoning a prayer for the safety of someone far away--neither does anything in a physical sense, but each helps the performer to hope for a little control over uncontrollable and frightening circumstances (the potential loss of a loved one), thus reassuring the R-Complex.

Ritual behavior is particularly suited for persistence into adulthood, unlike many children’s imaginary undertakings, because as the Neocortex comes online, it develops the capacity to correlate its accumulated experience and knowledge to develop *meaning*, which can stimulate pleasure responses in the Limbic System. This combination of belief and feeling frequently occurs through the process of metaphor: “Action A has a poetic/symbolic meaning of B” says the Neocortex and in response, “ahh, B feels good” says the Limbic System. Examples of B in this case can include such concepts as belonging in the Universe, moral goodness or superiority relative to non-believers, or of being loved by a powerful god.

“This cardboard box is a rocket to the Moon” is no longer tenable without a willing decision to pretend to believe it, once the Neocortex has reached a certain level of development, but “this cup of wine *means* the redemptive power of Jesus” is still viable because it makes no literal claim and offers the pleasurable benefit of a good feeling to the Limbic System¹. Religious rituals, their symbols and activities informed by the thinking/knowing of the Neocortex yet rooted in the feeling/connecting of the Limbic System, produce waves of pleasurable feeling of belonging, connection, meaning, rightness, and well-being from the Mammalian Brain...and help to mitigate the Neocortex’ frightening catalogue of potentially terrible fates with reassuring messages that we are not alone, that there is a plan in the cosmos that cares about us, that we have hope for help from a supernaturally powerful figure if we need it.

In short, religion serves the R-Complex and Limbic System with so many of their core objectives that it is no surprise that it continues to persist even in many whose level of knowledge about the physical Universe renders religious cosmology plainly false. Religious ritual, observance, and community offer experiences of meaning, of social connection, of self-expression (in singing, for example) and of safety (both in a social group, and in a larger context as Protected by a supernatural being).

¹ However, “this cup of wine *has been literally turned* into the blood of Jesus” is more problematic; it requires a full and willful suspension of the brain’s cognitive faculties. As I observe it, only heavy social conditioning and external conformity pressures (i.e., threat of withholding of the connection sought by the Limbic System) could possibly lead a person to believe such an obvious untruth. It is much more likely that most who claim to believe such untruths are simply playing along with the conventions expected by their social context (in this case, a religious tradition), rationalizing that the small fiction supports a larger philosophical truth.

Dealing with It: What Religion Offers the Cognitive Mind

Religions offer more to their adherents than the comforts and pleasures described above. They also serve the thinking mind by providing a moral and ethical compass and psychological technologies for negotiating problems in life: ways to weather adversity, survive grief, feel connection and relevance, achieve happiness and peace. In our increasingly complex, socially alienated and technological world, it is these qualities that many of us most long for, and science comes up empty in providing them. In fact, a strong argument could be made that the recent decades' stampede away from reason and toward superstition is a reflection of the fact that most people have a far stronger need for these functions than they do for what science offers.

Maslow observed that while physical survival is the primary human motivator, we pursue other values when survival is secured. The challenge before each person is not just survival: it is how to be happy. Science sheds no light on this question. Science and its products are extraordinary in their capacity to help us survive, but they offer little toward meeting these other needs.

We are organisms the nature of which is to make meaning: it is our successful evolutionary adaptation. Our capacity to assess our perceptions is inextricably linked to our sense of what these perceptions mean to our well-being and our wishes for future outcomes. To project likely outcomes of different available strategies for action, we process our sensory input and compare it to stored memories and knowledge, applying meaning as we do so. *That's dangerous. That would be fun. That's beautiful, it looks like the one my mother had. That would be unethical. That would probably kill me.* These are the kinds of conclusions our meaning-making generates and they, in turn, drive our behavior.

Religion offers the thinking mind a way to *deal with It*, where *It* is the navigation of an unpredictable Universe which can be painful and frightening. For the Neocortex, religion can provide answers to the difficult and fundamental existential question that awareness of the world and our nature poses: *what is the point in being alive? Why should I bother with the effort required to strive in a world filled with dangers, with death the unavoidable result?*

Religion is an Evolved Strategy for Fulfillment

My point, in sum, is that there are beneficial functions which historically have been delivered by religion, even long after it ceased to be the central organizing principle of Western societies. Religion is an *evolved strategy* which enables the potentially warring impulses of the different parts of our minds to have their needs met. In fact, this is almost a tautology: if religion didn't perform practical, effective services for its adherents, it likely would have faded long ago.²

² It should be noted that a primary function of religion in the past (and today, elsewhere in the world, as in © 2009, 2015 Mark Green; All Rights Reserved

Exploring a way forward through a new model will require not only dispensing with the superstition and fantasized cosmology of religion, but incorporating those elements of religious tradition which provide these personal and social functions.

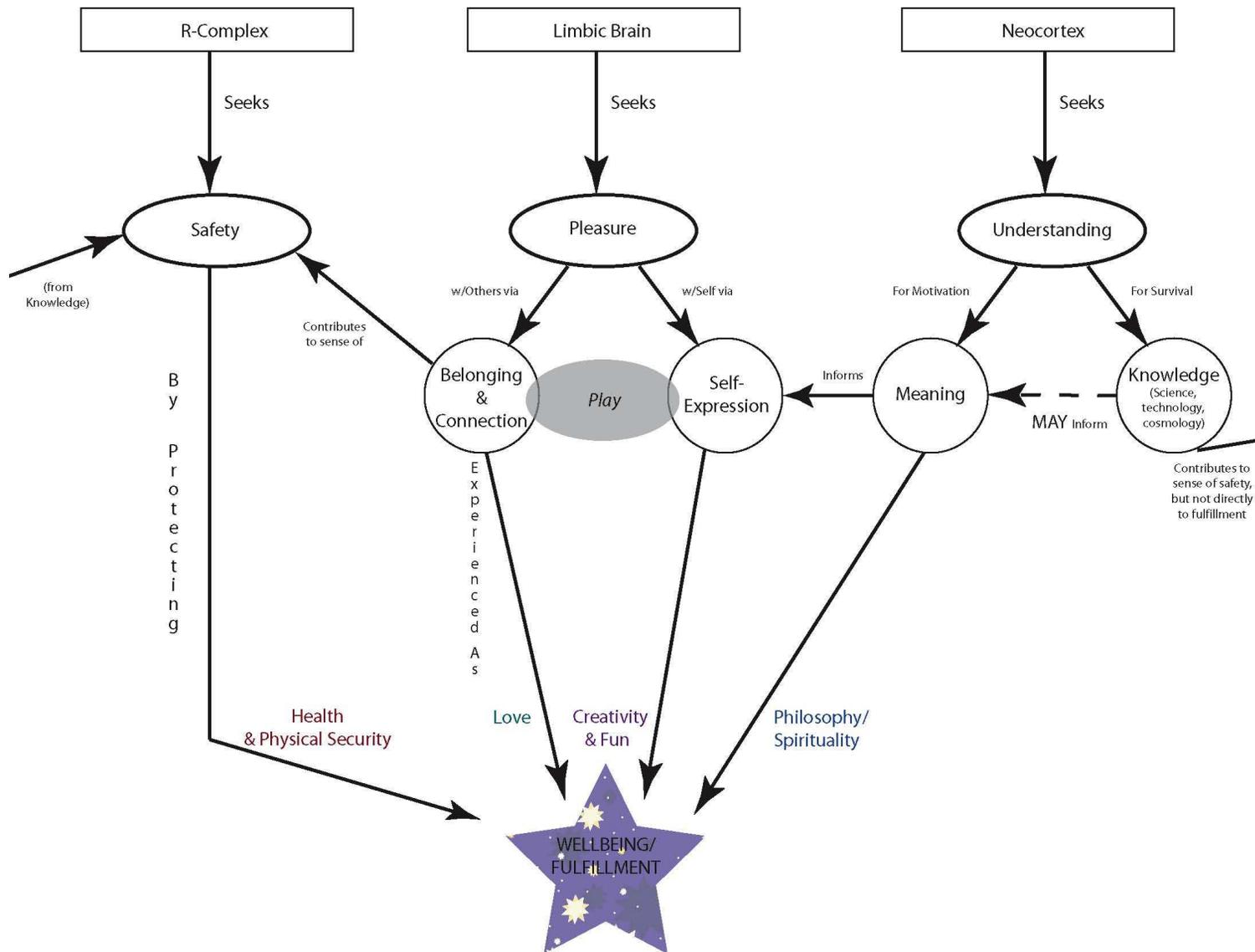
We pass through our lives trying to meet the needs of these very different parts of our minds, which are not infrequently in conflict, and usually without being aware we are doing so. When we are successful in this, we are happy: we say our lives are satisfying, fulfilling, meaningful. But functionally, what we mean when we say this is that we have satisfied the imperatives of our three brains. We have made safe the Lizard, petted the Dog, and provided meaning and stimulation to the Thinker.

Religion, therefore, despite positing cosmologies and supernatural processes which are fictitious, is not simply something stupid left over from more ignorant times. Religious practices and traditions build community among their adherents, provide a reassuring sense of moral purpose and meaning, teach values that create ways of knowing how to negotiate morally complex or ambiguous moral situations, and tell reassuring stories of deific support, survival after death and a cosmic design that renders a given life more weight than merely as the accidental outcome of a nearly random combination of history and genetics. They teach practices which clear, reassure and calm the mind such as meditation, prayer, and ritual, equipping adherents with social and psychological resources every bit as useful and powerful as the technological tools science provides in the material realm.

Religion is a uniquely human strategy which serves the function of helping our three brains to fulfill their motivations and even to get along better with one another. That's a pretty large menu of services, and for billions of people--even some very educated ones-- religion continues to perform these functions today.

Which brings me to Richard Dawkins.

Iran) has also been to establish the social order and maintain a power structure, typically ensuring continued domination of an elite. I do not propose to recommend means of fulfilling this function in this essay, as I believe that role for religion to be inappropriate and socially damaging. What is addressed here is religion's functional role to the individual in terms of fulfillment.



Why Richard Dawkins is Barking Up the Wrong Tree

Before moving on, there are two key points to be touched on here. The first is about the persistence of religion into the modern world, and the second is about the inherent pointlessness of atheist drum-beaters like Richard Dawkins' efforts to make the case against it.

Above, I refer to my theory about the resurgence of religion in modern American life in the wake of the advent of broadcast media and particularly since the 1960s. But there is more to be said on this subject: the primary reason religion has experienced a returned prominence in the world is not just the decline of reason. It is also that reason alone does not provide to the *other* components of our minds the satisfaction it does to the Neocortex. Since the thought-brain is the most recently evolved and least core of our mental systems, to abandon practices which are so comforting to the Limbic System and R-Complex simply won't fly.

The imperative of the R-Complex is to *stay alive*. Traditional religions' teachings cause the Neocortex to communicate a soothing narrative to the R-Complex: *do this, and live forever. Do this, and you will have a Big Friend to bail you out of danger. You will have magical powers--either directly, through the mediation of the priesthood, or through prayer--to deal with situations you otherwise have no power in confronting*. To the Limbic System, these religions offer feelings of approval, connection in community and the deeper satisfaction of having the Love of Big Daddy (or Mommy). Religion provides warm, glowing Limbic feelings through ritual practices which evoke feelings of belonging, of meaning in life, of understanding one's place in the scheme of things. Intellectual satisfaction in being "right" can't possibly hold a candle to such satisfactions for the overwhelming majority of people.

What I observe in many proselytizing atheists is that they are the kinds of people whose histories reveal a strong pattern of pursuing approval (feeling of belonging) by demonstrating intelligence (as have I, to be fair). Many of the most well known hold advanced degrees and positions at prestigious universities, and clearly get considerable personal satisfaction in being viewed as Very Smart. In other words, they get a positive pleasure-wave from their Limbic Systems when they demonstrate their superior capacity to reason. Where they err is in assuming--as I do not--that others will be wired the same way, and will be wowed by the Big Atheists' dazzling erudition into abandoning beliefs and practices the primary personal functions of which have nothing to do with thought, knowledge or reason, but rather with the imperatives of the R-Complex and Limbic System. That most people do not choose to throw over their religious practices when confronted with the arguments of such proselytizers has nothing to do with ignorance, stubbornness, or failure to be able to reason, as they often seem to imply.

It is clear based on our current understanding of the triune brain that proselytizing atheists can spin logical, evidential cases about how illogical the traditional, superstitious religions are until the end of time, and though they may be completely correct in their analysis, they will gain little ground with the public at large because they are not confronting the reasons

that people subscribe to religion in the first place. Making the argument as they do, they can never win it: a *prima facie* argumentative case against the existence of god can only, at best, win over the most recently evolved and *least personally compelling* of our three interpenetrated minds.

Trying to talk someone out of being religious because it's not rationally justified is like trying to talk someone into giving up chocolate because it has an unappealing color. Entirely different factors are at play in the decision of the person being exhorted which have nothing to do with the arguments being made, and those are real factors with every bit as much factual, biological legitimacy as any made by the Rational Atheist Camp.

Dawkins and Co. talk as if they believe we are—or can be—purely rational creatures. But we're not.

We're *biologically, inherently* not.

It's not a failing or a matter of choice. Parts of us have needs that bright steely science will not serve. While this does not mean that we should just give up and be superstitious, in my opinion, it means that any real solution to the conundrum of reason and human fulfillment will address our root needs as human organisms and not simply carry on with the nonsensical pretense that we aren't as we demonstrably are.

Towards Atheopaganism:

knowing what we know of the world,
what can a rational yet functionally effective religion look like?

Interregnum: Toward a Reasoning Religion

So, where have we arrived? We have found that religion does a poor job of describing the Universe, but a good one of serving many of our diverse needs as humans—that the values and practices of religious observance support and feed the inherent needs of our brains' interpenetrated systems. From here, what remains is to attempt to define a viable, meaningful religious practice comprising values and practices which support happiness while remaining based in a rational cosmology.

To be clear, this marks the point where I leave what can strongly be argued to be universally and objectively true, and turn to what is more subjectively a matter of taste. Any attempt to create a religion requires core philosophy—what is valued, what is seen as unimportant, what behaviors and perspectives are encouraged—and as such is inherently subjective. The below will necessarily reflect my values. Someone with different values than mine could articulate another rational religion built around different values, so long as they met the demands of the triune brains of those seeking to practice it.

The Sacred Pillars

Extant religions do a poor job of describing the Universe, but a good one of serving many of our diverse needs as humans. Values and practices of religious observance feed the inherent hungers of our brains' interpenetrated systems for meaning, community, and celebration. This brief paper seeks to sketch out a viable, meaningful religious framework comprising values and practices which support happiness, while remaining based in a scientifically valid cosmology free of the supernatural.

The Sacred

We can't talk about religion--or define a new one--without addressing the issue of what is to be considered sacred: what that means, and how it informs the values by which the practitioner is expected to live.

While many traditional religions seek to define the sacred as an inherent quality possessed by certain objects, beings, or activities--and, therefore, not by others--at root "sacredness" is an ascribed quality: an opinion. It is applied to whatever is highly valued by the tradition or practice in question, and to those objects, events and practices which evoke internal narratives which communicate the religion's beliefs and values.

So: what, exactly, is sacred to an atheist Pagan: an Atheopagan? At least—to this one?

Only four things, ultimately; to me, these are the Four Pillars:

The World. Meaning generally the Universe, but most specifically the biosphere: *Life*. Evolved from the mathematical unfolding of the exquisite Universe, the interconnected fabric of Life on Planet Earth is to me the single most sacred of all phenomena. It is these systems which gave rise to all humanity—and thus, to me—and which support our ability to survive. All we eat, all we breathe is this, and it is thus holy.

Beauty. Beauty is that which inspires joy in living and which communicates the inner truth of the creative person. Beauty fills our hearts and provokes our minds, strikes us motionless with the recognition of our good fortune in being alive. Bright and dark, soaring with joy or filled with rage, we know beauty because it sets our Limbic brains to singing. It is not optional, trivial or superfluous. It is to be cultivated, celebrated, revered as the means by which the finite and precious moments of our lives are best measured.

Truth. I believe that what is true is of deep and inherent value. It is the only beacon we have to light our way into the unknown future. And the more significant the topic, the more sacred is the truth about it. It is a deep wrong to lie about matters of deep significance: to deny human-driven climate change, for example, or the genocides of the 20th century from Armenia to Germany to

Rwanda. It is a deep wrong to deny what is true when it effects what is sacred. This isn't about "little white lies". It's about the tremendous and humbling power of Truth to bring down despotism and corruption, to right wrongs, to advance liberty, to advance closeness between us.

Love. Living as we do, each of us, trapped inside our skins with the endless ongoing dialogue between our various parts, our various minds, humans are subject to a degree of loneliness suffered by no other creature. Evolved as social creatures, we are nonetheless subject to such fear, such doubt, such storms of self hatred and delusions of inadequacy that many collapse under the weight of it, fall to self-destruction and madness.

But love corrects this. Love lights up the dashboards of our Limbic brains and provides us the courage to reach across the great gulf to the Other. It drives our kindest and best impulses, enables us to forgive what we suffer, spurs us to face down the darkness and carry on, to insist that betterment is possible, that the ugly moment needs not be the end of the story. Love brings hope where it has flagged, sometimes for years. It is the redemptive power each of us bears within us to deliver another from hell and into light.

Principles: Guidelines for living

Principles define ethical and moral guidance rooted in understanding of what is sacred.

Principles tend to be practical and specific, specifying how the adherent of a religious practice should behave in day to day life. Here are the principles of Atheopaganism as I intend to practice it. They're not in any particular order, but there happen to be 13 of them, a culturally significant number in the Pagan community—it's the number of lunar cycles per solar year—which is kind of cool.

1. I recognize that the metaphorical is not the literal. I acknowledge value in poetic expression of feelings about the experience of living, while not going so far as to confuse a poetic description with a factual definition: *Spring resurrects*, I can say, while understanding clearly that there is no such thing, literally, as resurrection from death. Particularly, I do not cite metaphorical or poetic events as justifications for behavior. Poetic expressions in ritual occur in the context of suspension of disbelief--of "let's pretend"--in order to enable creation and maintenance of the state of ritual presence (which I termed in Part I as the "Limbic State").

2. I honor the Earth which produced and sustains humanity. Recognizing the unique role into which human capacity and history has delivered us, I accept as my most important value my responsibility to minimize my impact on the biological fabric of Planet Earth and to heal and steward its natural systems.

3. I am grateful. I celebrate and express regularly and often my gratitude for the beauty and bounty of my life. I am thankful for my good fortune in being alive, and honor the many processes which enable me to continue to live, both natural and human. I celebrate and wonder at the beauty of the Universe, of the natural world and of humanity. I honor beauty and seek out its enjoyment. I speak my gratitude though I know there is no ear to hear it but my own and those of those around me.

4. I am humble, acknowledging that I am a small, temporary being not inherently better or more important than any other person. I recognize my commonality with others, the human condition we all share. To the degree I exercise leadership, I do so out of willing participation of those I lead, and with full recognition of the value of their contributions.

5. I laugh a lot—including at myself. In a world containing horror, absurdity, disappointment and terror, if we can't laugh we can't stay sane.

6. I enact regular ritual play, in which I willingly suspend my Neocortical thinking mind and use the technologies of religious ritual to invoke a state of presence in the moment and heightened experience of the metaphorical. I do this in order to celebrate the turning of the seasons, to live my life as fully as possible in honoring the sacred Four Pillars and to share meaningful experiences with my loved ones.

7. I celebrate diversity and am respectful of difference.

8. I recognize and embrace my responsibility to the young and future generations.

9. I acknowledge that freedom is tempered by responsibility, respecting the rights and freedoms of others and meeting my social responsibilities by voting, paying taxes, serving jury duty, obeying laws which promote the safe and orderly conduct of civil society and supporting and participating in social movements which are consistent with the Four Pillars.

10. I celebrate pleasure as inherently good, so long as others are not harmed in its pursuit and the Four Pillars are respected.

11. I understand that knowledge is never complete. There is always more to be learned.

12. I conduct myself with integrity in word and deed.

13. I practice kindness and compassion with others and myself, recognizing that they and I will not always meet the standards set by these principles.

These principles enable the living of a good, productive, and happy life, and the fostering of healthy relationships. There are more, I'm sure, that I haven't articulated here, and you should certainly consider adding them.

There is value in having a *creed*, a set of principles to serve as touchstones and beacons when faced with difficult situations. And by doing so, we avoid the accusation sometimes leveled at atheists: that because we do not subscribe to superstitious religion, we must therefore be amoral anarchists.

Being a moral person is about how you act, not what you believe. And principles help us to know how to act.

Religiosity expresses itself primarily in two ways: through ritual enactment and personal expression. In the former category are communal ceremonies, observances, holy days, and traditions; in the latter are individual artistic expressions of the spiritual experience, which can be rituals themselves or development of liturgical poems and music, symbolic artworks, etc.

Ritual enactment in a religion lends itself to establishment of regularly repeated structural forms, both so that participants know what to expect and so meaningful traditions can evolve and be revisited each year. Much of what practitioners think of as “their religion” is not just beliefs, but the schedule of observances (or Sabbaths) at various scales, be they once-per-year observances such as Christmas, Easter, Ramadan, Passover, etc., weekly sabbaths or even five-times-per-day prayers facing Mecca. In addition, special circumstances such as naming ceremonies, initiations into adulthood, weddings, funerals and other life events may also be marked through rituals. A rational religion needs ways of observing special times, just like any other.

The eight holidays of the modern Pagan “wheel of the year” present an annual cycle of holidays tracing seasonal changes, agricultural cycles, and metaphors of the cycle of life. It's not a bad point to start from, rooted as it is in astronomical fact (the holy days are the solstices and equinoxes, and the midpoints between them) and the reality of seasonal change in parts of the world which have a European climate cycle. And while there is a large body of mythology in the Pagan traditions which ties these seasonal changes to stories about gods, the gods aren't really necessary for the cycle to work. It doesn't require them in order to be meaningful and apropos for anyone living today.

For my calendar, I adapt these 8 observances for the area where I live, which has more of a Mediterranean climate, and to add the elements of modernity that the old cycle of holidays ignores. I kept some Pagan holiday names because I know that new ones for the more prominent holidays won't catch on anyway:

Hallows (midpoint between Autumnal Equinox & Winter Solstice). The Feast of Darkness and Endings. Celebrates the wisdom of old age, acknowledges the inevitability of Death, the legacy of ancestors, the memory of those no longer alive. A time of the drawing down of nature into the dark and dormant part of the year, to contemplate the unknown, to acknowledge the darkness in life. It is a time for burial/release/composting of what is ended to make room for what is to come, to call the rains back, and to enjoy the spooky, gothic and atmospheric. It is the final Harvest festival (the Flesh Harvest) and the beginning of Winter.

Yule (Winter Solstice; equivalent Christmas or Chanukah). The Festival of Lights, keeping us warm through the Longest Night. Celebrates family, community, and beginning of light's return with the lengthening of days). A time to gather together to survive the cold and dark,, to celebrate and give thanks for what sustains us even in the darkest times. It is the height of Winter.

Riverain (Midpoint between Winter Solstice and Vernal Equinox). The Festival of Rain. Celebrates rain, water, art, poetry, music. A time for service to and preparation for what is hoped for in the future (as, caring for a newborn or sharpening agricultural tools). The beginning of Spring.

High Spring. (Vernal Equinox) The Festival of the Newly Born. Celebrates renewal, childhood, innocence, playfulness, discovery. A time for sowing the crops and garden. Per the name, the height of Spring.

Beltane (midpoint between Vernal Equinox & Summer Solstice). The Festival of Love and Maturity. Celebrates passage into adulthood, sexuality, freedom, fertility. The beginning of Summer.

Midsummer (Summer Solstice). The Festival of Attainment. Celebrates the Longest Day, arrival into comfort, leisure, relaxation and enjoyment. The height of summer.

Summer's End (midpoint between Summer Solstice and Autumnal Equinox). The Festival of Work. Celebrates technology and handcraft, science and invention, responsibility, physical work. First of the Harvest Festivals (the Grain Harvest) and the beginning of Autumn.

Harvest (Autumnal Equinox). The Harvest Festival. Celebrates gratitude for the bounty of the Earth, the harvest of what has been worked for, the gifts of the World, enjoyment of the fruits of labors. Second of the Harvest Festivals (the Harvest of Fruits and Vegetables), height of Autumn; beginning of transition into the darker time of year.

Additional holidays can be added to this calendar as celebrants see fit. I recommend International Talk Like a Pirate Day (Sept. 19), and Pi Day (March 14).

*Note that this wheel of the year is one that works for me, in an area with a Mediterranean climate. If you live in Minnesota or Montana or Massachusetts (or Manchester or Melbourne), your experience of seasons will be different and you will want to roll your own. The point is to have a cycle of Sabbaths that *work for you*. You shouldn't have to pretend it is Spring when it won't stop snowing for another six weeks. Adopt and adapt as you see fit, or toss the whole thing and go with another concept. This book must never be viewed as dogma or the "right" way to do atheist paganism—there simply is no such thing...nor are there "experts" whose views are any more important than your own.*

No hierarchy

Note that nowhere in this work is there any suggestion of hierarchical levels or "priest/esses". As I choose to practice my Atheopagan religion, there are none. While a particular person might take on responsibility for organizing or designing a given ritual, no Atheopagan participant is higher in status or standing than any other.

Contemplation

There is great value in meditative/contemplative practice. If religious ritual is intended to create the state of *heightened presence*, practicing mindfulness and being present in the moment is a way to develop the ability to experience greater impact from such rituals.

Rituals

Every religion practices rituals: formalized procedures the intent of which is to provoke and maintain a mental state of liminal presence (which I have termed the “Limbic state”). Activities in religious rituals take place in a manner participants come to know and anticipate, fostering a sense of familiarity with what is happening and what will come next. This contributes to the sense of safety necessary before this ritual state may fully be entered.

The Focus

Rituals commonly have at their center a collection of symbolic objects which carry meaning for the participants. Worshipping religions call these “altars”, but to avoid the implication that there is worshipping going on, I choose to call this assemblage a “focus”.

The focus contributes to the mindful presence of participants, and their contemplation of the symbolic meanings associated with the purpose of the ritual.

The focus might, for example, include bright spring flowers, colored eggs and/or seeds for a High Spring ritual. For Halloween, there might be pictures of ancestors or those who have died in the previous year, and a jack o’lantern or two. A focus can be as elaborate or as simple as the participants wish, or they may prefer to have none at all.

Structure

Here, then, is one possible structure for an Atheopagan ritual:

1. **DECLARATION OF PRESENCE.** Begins with mindfulness practice to calm/center the mind. Then an action or statement is made by one or more participants to declare presence and purpose; e.g., “We are sentient beings of Planet Earth, present in this place, this moment. The Cosmos is above us, the Earth is below us, and Life is around us. Here the wise mind unfolds. Here the playful child creates. Here the wondering human gazes out to view the vast and mighty Universe. We are here, and together.” (Perhaps the group might repeat: “We are here, and together.”) Obviously, there are many ways this could be done. Note that this is *not* a “container”—there is no separation from the world, nor is there another world to be “between”. This is about presence in and *connection to* the present time and place, and the world writ large.
2. **QUALITIES.** Invoking the Qualities participants hope to carry within themselves as they move towards the Intentions: “May we know and embody these Qualities, that our rites guide us forward to achieve our dreams and better the world...”
3. **INTENTIONS.** Participants call out their intentions for what is to be attained/achieved/realized during the ritual, such as to celebrate and give thanks for all they

enjoy, to grow closer among one another, or to align themselves with a specific hoped-for possibility in the future.

4. **DEEP PLAY.** Ritual enactment meant to symbolize and concretize the desired Intentions for participants. Activities which stimulate the metabolism and the expressive self at this time will contribute to the feeling of presence and connectedness. Can include singing, chanting, drumming or other music making; dancing or other movement; symbolic enactment of drama; creation of some kind of art or crafted object in an intentional and allegorical manner, or recitation or spontaneous creation of poetry.
5. **GRATITUDE.** Expresses gratitude at having been supported by the Qualities the participants invoked, and for all they are blessed with in their lives. Sometimes expressed with shared food and drink. May also involve expressions of commitment on the part of participants of what they will do to act in accordance with their intent.
6. **BENEDICTION.** Example: (unison): “To enrich and honor the gift of our lives, to chart a kind and true way forward, by these words and deeds we name intent: to dare, to question, to love. May all that must be done, be done in joy. We go forth to *live!*”

Conclusion: What It Looks Like

The perspective and practice described here can deliver the fulfillment benefits of a traditional religion, yet remain rooted in what is true and open to learning, change, and constant reconsideration of itself so it is not in danger of becoming ideological. While it does not make promises of eternal existence, a cosmically-determined plan leading to a “happy ending”, or magical powers, it also does not ask us to sacrifice the unique and marvelous capacities of our Neocortical minds in the name of living with a pretty story.

I, for one, find this trade-off a worthy exchange.

An Atheist's Prayer

Praise to the wide spinning world
Unfolding each of all the destined tales compressed
In the moment of your catastrophic birth
Wide to the fluid expanse, blowing outward
Kindling in stars and galaxies, in bright pools
Of Christmas-colored gas; cohering in marbles hot
And cold, ringed, round, gray and red and gold and dun
And blue, pure blue, the eye of a child, spinning in a veil of air,
Warm island, home to us, kind beyond measure: the stones
And trees, the round river flowing sky to deepest chasm,
Salt and sweet.

Praise to Time, enormous and precious,
And we with so little, seeing our world go as it will
Ruining, cheering, the treasured fading, precious arriving,
Fear and wonder,
Fear and wonder always.
Praise O black expanse of mostly nothing
Though you do not hear, you have no ear nor mind to hear

Praise O inevitable, O mysterious, praise
Praise and thanks be a wave
Expanding from this tiny temporary mouth
This tiny dot of world a bubble
A bubble going out forever
Meeting everything as it goes:
All the great and infinitesimal
Gracious and terrible
All the works of blessed Being.
May it be so.
May it be so.

May our hearts sing to say it is so.

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