

Wind on the Water

A Viewsletter To Encourage Unitarian Universalist Theology and Spirituality

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Isis and Osiris

Myth. When Osiris became king, he elevated the Egyptians from savagery, taught them agriculture and wine making, to obey laws, and to honor the gods. He charmed them with reason, song, and all the arts. When he traveled to bring these gifts to all humanity, Isis ruled in peace and harmony.

When Osiris returned, his brother Set burned with envy. Set had a casket constructed to the exact dimensions of Osiris. Hiding seventy-two followers close at hand, Set invited the gods to a feast. He had the casket on display, and when the gods admired it, he offered it to whomever it would best fit. It fit none of the gods until Osiris lay down in it, whereupon the seventy-two followers rushed forward, nailed down the lid, sealed the casket with molten lead, and threw it in the Nile which washed it

into the sea.

Cutting off a lock of hair, Isis put on a dress of mourning and wandered weeping in search of the casket. Adults could tell her nothing, but from the chirping of birds and the babbling of children she followed it.

The casket washed ashore in the Byblus country beside a Erica bush. The bush grew up to a mighty tree completely enclosing the coffin in its trunk. The tree then was cut down and taken to form the ridge-pole for the king's palace. The king was unaware it contained the coffin.

Isis was brought to the place where the coffin had washed ashore by her dog Anubis, the child of Osiris and Nephthys. She asked for the tree trunk containing the body of Osiris.

Isis cut the casket out of the trunk and sailed away with it on her barge. She also took a child of the king with her. She opened the casket and threw herself on the dead body of Osiris with intense love. The child saw her, fainted, and died; or some say he fled and fell into the river and drowned.

Isis hid the casket and went to find her son Horus the Elder who she hoped could help her bring Osiris back to life. While she was gone, Set went hunting by moonlight and came upon the casket. He cut the body of Osiris into fourteen parts and scattered them across Egypt.

When Isis found out what had happened, she set out in her boat hunting for the pieces which she reassembled. Every place she found a piece, she had a temple built. She

found all the pieces except for the phallus, which had been thrown into the Nile and eaten by fishes, so she made a wooden image of it which she mounted and by which she conceived a lame child, Horus the Younger (or Harpokrates).

Osiris returned from the underworld and taught Horus the Elder how to conquer Set. After a hard battle, Horus bound Set and brought him to his mother. Isis would not allow Set to be killed, but released him. Horus in anger tore off his mother's crown, but Thoth made her a new one from cow horns.

Rituals. The Egyptians enacted each year the death of Osiris and the wanderings and lamentations of Isis. The rites culminated in the resurrection of Osiris and a procession displaying the Phallus, the symbol of his power. The worshippers shared the grief and joy of Isis. In time, the religion became one in which worshippers are redeemed through emotional ecstasy, becoming one with the Goddess.

As best we can make out, in the mystery rites of Isis, the initiate prepared by fasting, remaining abstinent, and meditating in solitude. During the rites, the initiate would be presented with temptations. At the culmination of the rites, the initiate would impersonate Set and be abused. Then the initiate, brought to a simulated death, was raised through the power of Isis. The following morning, having become one with Osiris, the initiate, wearing a robe, bedecked with a garland of flowers, and carrying a lighted torch, would be placed on a pedestal across from a statue of Isis. Curtains were drawn back and the

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Isis and Osiris, continued

people hailed him as a god.

Homily. To understand the myth, you must understand that you are Osiris and you are Set, you are intellect and you are desire.

There is something that we will call Isis.

You remember -- I'm sure you remember -- when your desires have trapped you and confined you so tightly you could not move, could not breathe, Osiris.

It is Isis who releases you.

You remember when your desires have cast you off and you have been lost, Osiris.

It is Isis who finds you.

Your desires have cut you into pieces, scattering one to work, and one to family, and one to friends, and one to church, one to politics, and so throughout your life, Osiris.

It is Isis who makes you whole again.

You remember when your creativity has seemed to be lost and as dead as a piece of wood, Osiris.

It is Isis who makes it live again and bring forth creations as miraculous as new gods.

Isis loves you with a passion so intense that no mortal can gaze upon it and live, but must swoon away or flee in terror.

You are Osiris and you are Set, you are intellect and you are desire.

It is not the will of Isis that you die Osiris.

It is not the will of Isis that you die, Set.

Osiris and Set you will remain all your days.

Pain

In past generations, we used to inflict pain on an institutionalized basis a lot more frequently than we do now, not only in flogging and torture, but also in games, like nailing cats to poles and trying to butt them to death without getting scratched too badly.

Maybe it is due to the invention of aspirin that we no longer inflict pain so casually; we are no longer in as much pain as we were before. When I'm in pain, I find myself hurting other people.

Mary-Allen Walden thinks that it is not pain itself, but the rejection of pain, anger at pain, that makes us cruel. If pain is unnecessary, if it shouldn't happen, it makes us angry to be in pain. We think other people don't feel this way. It isn't fair that we should hurt when they don't. So to make it fair, we make them hurt too. But if we realize that life gives everyone their lot of pain, that people hurt much of the time, then we feel compassion.

As it is, we are embarrassed by pain. If friends are in pain, we shun them; we don't look. If we are in pain, we try not to show it. We put on a good face. We brave it out. And if the pain is too much for us to ignore, others reject it and reject us.

Buddhism starts from the observation that life is suffering. Parts of Christianity also accept pain: the central myth of Christianity shows God joining us in our suffering. But Unitarian Universalists, Mary-Allen thinks, reject pain, which leads us toward shallowness and cruelty.



Goodness

Why are good people good? Three things seem to help: (1) They have learned how to be good, typically as children watching good adults. (2) They are members of a group that esteems goodness. (3) They can be good and satisfy their basic physical needs.

Why do you do good?

Windigos

According to the Swampy Cree people, there is a monster who inhabits their land of forests and swamps west of the Hudson Bay. This monster is the Windigo. It is described in many forms, but those who tell of it agree on these two points: The Windigo has a heart of ice, and you can kill it by melting its heart. Secondly, people can "go windigo"; perhaps all Windigos were once people.

Winter is long in Cree lands: it can come in September and last until June. Darkness is long. The winter hunting camps are isolated. Starvation is an ever-present fear.

Sometimes the hunting is bad. The men must drum to the animals to ask their help. They must travel far hunting for game. They can lose the four directions when the wind sweeps up the snow snakes, the waves of blowing snow. They worry about what is happening back at camp. Has any game been killed? Have any fish been caught? Has anyone died?

Strange things happen in the depth of winter. A storm can blow for days, and the kettle can stir on the fire, and then people can realize that it is the storm in the kettle that is making the storm blow outside.

Some people go windigo. One man stole all the guns and traps one winter and hid them leaving people to starve. Another time a man started asking his brother what it was like inside a nearby beaver lodge. He thought his brother was a beaver. He wanted to eat him.

People who live alone are most likely to go windigo. When someone in the lodge is going windigo, it doesn't make sense to send him away, it will only get worse and he will come back and cause trouble.

It is told that once some hunters who were having no luck for a long time had to hunt down the man who was conjuring against them and kill him. Even then, the hunting remained bad. Perhaps it is not only individuals who go windigo.