

Easter, April 20, 2014

Thought to ponder at the beginning:

Awake, thou wintry earth – Fling off thy sadness!
Fair vernal flowers, laugh forth Your ancient gladness!
— Thomas Blackburn, *An Easter Hymn*

Opening Words and Chalice Lighting

God, kindle Thou in my heart within
a flame of love to my neighbor,
to my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all,
to the brave, to the knave, to the thrall...
from the lowliest thing that liveth,
to the Name that is highest of all. – Gaelic

Reading “Blessing the Blend,” by Jane Rzepka

The sentence, “May we bring ourselves and our stories to church this morning and consider the blend a blessing,” appeared twice in our Palm Sunday service yesterday. I always believe what I say on Sunday morning, but I said this prayerful sentence in particular earnest, having lived through a lifetime of Easter and Passover seasons in Unitarian Universalist churches.

Every year I fight the feeling that our UU churches just can't win on Easter. Our familiar congregation will come through the doors, alongside a number of Easter visitors we've never seen before. Why do they come?

- To hear familiar, traditional, Easter music
- To NOT hear familiar, traditional, Easter music
- To be reminded of the newness of spring, the pagan symbols of the season, and the lengthening days, without a lot of talk about Jesus and resurrection
- To be reminded of Jesus and His Resurrection, without a lot of talk about the newness of spring, the pagan symbols of the season, and the lengthening days.
- To participate in a family service, where children delight in discovering the many roots of our religious tradition
- To participate in a dignified service, where adults celebrate the undeniably Christian holiday, Easter.

We each have religious stories, spring dreams, seasonal celebrations. And on Easter they're with us, joining together in church. It is our glorious celebration, and by considering the blend a blessing, we

win every time.

Sermon *Resurrection and the Earth*

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I begin with some seasonally appropriate science – the science of hatching chicks. What makes chicks peck on their shells and push their way into the world? A good question to ask in springtime, the season of baby birds, at Easter time, the season of baby chicks.

We might guess hunger inspires the chick to peck at its shell. There is some truth to that. By the time the chick hatches, it has exhausted its food supply inside the egg.

We might surmise the chick pecks on its shell because it needs more space. Could be true. The chick has certainly outgrown its cradle by now.

We might think the chick needs more air. That's partly true. The eggshell is porous enough to allow an exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide to flow to and from the tiny chick. Until hatching time, the chick has enough air.

But then an odd and miraculous thing happens. The buildup of carbon dioxide inside the shell becomes so highly concentrated that it causes the neck muscles of the chick to jerk, thus initiating the pecking that ultimately breaks the shell.¹ Too much carbon dioxide: Time to start pecking on the shell. I will let you ponder that, while I move on. I will return to the chicks shortly.

This week contains an amazing confluence of important holidays. From the Jewish tradition, Passover began on April 15 and will end of April 22. Passover celebrates freedom and justice in general and the ancient Israelites' escape from slavery in Egypt in particular. Today is Easter in the Christian tradition. Easter celebrates the resurrection of Christ after his death. Both the sacrifice and the resurrection of his life are interpreted by many Christians as the means to redeem humanity, to open the gates of Heaven, and to bring humanity into God's good graces. And Tuesday is Earth Day, a secular holiday, but for many Unitarian Universalists a Holy Day.

In addition to those holidays, we see the advent of crocuses, daffodils, birds, and – dare I say it? – warmer weather. Plus, in the wee hours of last Tuesday morning, we had a complete lunar eclipse, the moon turning into a coppery-red “blood moon” as it passed through the earth's shadow. “Lo, the earth awakes again from the winter's bond of pain,” indeed. After the long, cold winter we've had, the spring festivals, the rejuvenation of the natural world around us – indeed the auspicious lunar eclipse – all pull us toward warmer, brighter times.

I think it would be hard to find many Unitarian Universalists who believe in the literal telling of the Passover story or, especially, the Easter story. We tend to be doubters and skeptics. The stories do not hold up to scientific scrutiny. Burning bushes? Seas parting to make way for fleeing Israelites? People rising from the dead? Angels appearing? Not so much. Taken literally, the stories seem fanciful, preposterous.

1 <http://chickscope.beckman.uiuc.edu/explore/embryology/day15/dev.html>

Historically, the stories are not validated by contemporaneous sources either. Yes, elements of the Israelites' history chronicled in the Hebrew Bible can be proved by archeological digs... things like the movements and settlements of people across the land, or sites of great battles, but not things like the tablets bearing the 10 Commandments and certainly not the conversations chronicled in the Bible between Moses and God – or even Moses and the people.

Nor is there any proof – or even extra-Biblical records – of Easter. Outside the Bible itself, only one early writer – Josephus – ever mentions Jesus at all. His book *Antiquities of the Jews* was written around the year 94, roughly 60 years after Jesus' death is believed to have occurred. The mention of Jesus is scant. And many scholars believe that what appears in the book was subjected to self-serving forgery by the 4th century Christian apologist Eusebius.² So there is a lot to be skeptical about.

Historical accuracy is only one problem for many Unitarian Universalists. At bedrock, many have a hard time at the most basic theological level: What kind of God would demand the violent, brutal, and painful sacrifice of a human being to bring all of humanity back into covenant with God? If, in God, all things are possible, surely there must have been a better way.

And yet, regardless of skepticism, regardless of theological reservations, here we are today, the sanctuary festooned with flowers, the singers singing, and the people greeting one another, saying, “Happy Easter.” Here we are. Why? Because the stories are compelling, *not* because they are literally true, but because they provide powerful metaphors that make sense in the face of the human experience.

Passover's messages about freedom and justice are inescapable, stirring, and inspirational. Passover asks us to root out injustice and to set the captives free. When oppression mounts, it's time to start pecking and burst forth from the shell that holds us back from an equitable, compassionate world.

Another metaphor that I think works in so many lives is the metaphor of the journey to the Promised Land. The metaphor of wandering in the desert, confused, lost, agitated, impatient, afraid. And then, lo, finally, finally, the Promised Land looms into view. Who among us has never felt lost or alone? Confused or impatient for the tide to turn? How very human to lose one's way, then to find one's way again. Over the course of a lifetime, many of us will have multiple opportunities to experience losing our bearings and then finding them again and again and again. The Passover story holds out the hope that no matter how deep our feelings of disorientation or disillusionment, the day will come when we will reach the Promised Land. Our congregation has experienced something like that together – wandering in the desert for nearly three years after the fire, then reaching the Promised Land a couple of weeks ago. The Passover story is compelling because it mirrors the life story of so many. When we are lost, it's time to start pecking and burst forth from that shell of confusion and blindness so that we can see a new way forward.

Easter's resurrection metaphor also applies to the human condition. Year by year we watch the natural world seemingly resurrect itself: “Now the dark, old days are o'er, spring and gladness are before. Alleluia!” But people experience personal resurrections, too. Resurrections of lives that have seemed lost to the countless life circumstances that can dim our internal fires – resurrection of lives that have

2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josephus_on_Jesus

seemed to be lost but then have been made whole again.

A human soul can spiral into despair and suffering. Resurrection is when, by some miracle, one can ascend from the depths of such suffering. The person who suffers from addiction who finds solace and direction in a recovery program. The person from whom the pain and strain of illness is lifted. The person who opens his or her eyes, ears, mind, and heart. Resurrection is the transformation of what has been all but lost into some new hopeful, life-affirming, life-giving surprise.

The Chairity auction our congregation will host in May is an example. Over the last many months, our Fundraising Committee has collected dozens of old worn out chairs, many of them tossed aside as so much trash. With great care, people stripped the chairs, repaired them, sanded them, applied a base coat, and then invited local artists to paint and decorate them. The chairs have been transformed into amazing works of art that we will auction off. Not only that, but the proceeds from the Chairity auction are meant to help transform our community by funding Oasis Health Clinic and Mid Coast Hunger Prevention.

One could view our congregation's journey to this new building through the frame of resurrection, too – our life as a congregation, here on this location, reborn after tragedy and loss. That metaphor is so strong and so apt that we actually considered holding our first service in the new building on Easter instead of on April 6.

Resurrection is when brightness, hope, and new beginnings can peck their way out of despair and wretchedness.

Which brings me to Earth Day. I don't need to tell you how dire an environmental calamity we face – indeed, how dire a calamity we are creating. The news is grim and scary. We are in great need of resurrection. Carbon dioxide is literally building up in our atmosphere, changing our climate and choking life as we know it. Time to start pecking.

Human beings will need to modify their impact on the planet dramatically to head off the worst of the damage. We will need resurrections of the highest order to heal our planet. It strikes me that at least one resurrection we need is an internal one, a change of heart – so that new hope and a new way of being in harmony with creation can peck its way out of the shell of blindness, indifference, and hopelessness.

I am currently reading a book called *Crow Planet: Essential Wisdom from the Urban Wilderness*. It's author, Lyanda Lynn Haupt, is helping give me some new ways to understand and frame my place in the natural world. She writes:

“We love our vision of untouched nature and cling tightly to images of pristine wilderness or desert or ocean as solace for our souls, as places of peace and transcendent beauty to which we can turn as a diversion from our cluttered, material lives. We believe ourselves to be intimately connected to wild places, as indeed we are. Too often, though, nature is romanticized as the place out there, the place with all the sparkly trees in the Sierra Club calendar, the place we visit with a knapsack and a Clif Bar, where we stand in awe of the beauty and refresh our spirits. But it is a kind of hubris to pretend that we come to such places unencumbered, that we can leave behind the snares, entanglements, and activities of our everyday lives and return to a kind of purity when we drive our SUVs (or even our hybrids) up to

*the hills for a sub-alpine-meadow hike, no matter how far we walk. Such sojourns are nourishing and necessary, but it remains our daily lives, in the places we live, that make us ecosystemic creatures; these are the seat of our most meaningful interactions with, and impact upon, the wider, wilder earth.*³

Where I live, I notice plenty of crows but very few songbirds. I hear very few spring peepers, even though the habitat in my neighborhood should support them. I notice the dramatic weather – dramatically hot last summer, dramatically cold during the winter. Haupt would have me notice much, much more. She would have me learn the names for the vegetation in my yard and the animals, birds, and bugs that live alongside me. She would have me study the flora and fauna, record my findings, and, above all, make a regular habit of spending time doing so. She would have me acknowledge my place as one living creature among all the others living in the place where I live.

That may seem a small thing, but consider what it could lead to. Consider the story I read in Tuesday's *New York Times*, “Paying Farmers to Welcome Birds,” by Jim Robbins⁴ as just one example of what studying the land we occupy can lead to. Robbins explains the Central Valley in California was once a 450-mile stretch of land with extensive water systems that migratory shorebirds used to depend on during their migrations. But farmers tamed the wetlands so that they could plant their fields – thereby drying up as much as 95% of the wetlands where the birds landed to rest and refuel when they migrated.

Studying the impact of that human activity on the land, a Nature Conservancy program called BirdReturns documented the sharp reduction in migratory bird populations – many of those birds now officially designated to be “of concern,” the category just below “threatened.” BirdReturns now pays rice farmers along the migration routes to flood their fields for several weeks during migration, providing “pop up” wetlands for birds. The farmers retain their land and continue to farm it, but the birds can land there during migration season. Who knows what other changes the return of the birds will bring about? They are bound to strengthen and diversify the environment there.

This business of healing the earth is not just about us. And it's not just about us and the migratory birds. It's about us as part of all creation. The kind of resurrection we need now, the resurrection of the heart that might save us, is one that helps us to see our rightful place in creation and to help us to partner with other life forms to create a world of harmony and balance. The kind of resurrection humanity needs now is one that helps us to peck our way out of the egg that gives us the illusion of being separate, apart, and even above the rest of the natural world. Time to peck our way out of that egg and open our eyes, hearts, spirits, minds, and arms to the rest of the world that waits,

In that spirit, will you join me in this responsive reading that comes from the U.N. Environmental Sabbath Program.

It has a refrain that is repeated several times: “We join with the Earth and with each other.”

We join with the Earth and with each other.

³ Crow Planet: Essential Wisdom from the Urban Wilderness, Lyanda Lynn Haupt., 2009. (New York: Little, Brown, and Company) 33-34.

⁴ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/15/science/paying-farmers-to-welcome-birds.html?_r=0

**To bring new life to the land
To restore the waters
To refresh the air**

We join with the Earth and with each other.

**To renew the forests
To care for the plants
To protect the creatures**

We join with the Earth and with each other.

**To celebrate the seas
To rejoice in the sunlight
To sing the song of the stars**

We join with the Earth and with each other.

**To recreate the human community
To promote justice and peace
To remember our children**

We join with the Earth and with each other.

We join together as many and diverse expressions of one loving mystery: for the healing of the Earth and the renewal of all life.

When we join with the Earth and with each other, when we truly do that, we will be part of a saving, redemptive resurrection that will help us to reach a new Promised Land of beauty and harmony. May we pray for that. May we work for that. May it be so.