

EASTER THROUGH A UU LENS
by Rev. Kit Ketcham, March 27, 2005

Happy Easter! This time of year, the question always begs, what is Easter supposed to mean to Unitarian Universalists? Because of our pluralistic, multifaith makeup, there are many answers to this question, but there is one which I think may be universal to all spiritual paths.

If you were raised as a Christian, you probably know by heart the stories of Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection, the empty tomb with its angelic guardian, the subsequent appearance of Jesus to his disciples in various settings and his ascension into heaven.

If you were raised Jewish, Passover, which celebrates the Hebrews' escape from slavery in Egypt, is the springtime story which represents your heritage.

If you grew up in a more secular environment, it may be that Easter advertising campaigns--for chocolate bunnies and Easter eggs and new clothes--were your primary source of information.

And if you grew up north of the equator in an earth-based religious context or in an indigenous culture, you may think of Easter as a recognition of the rebirth of the earth, the resurrection of the life force inherent in all nature, the vernal equinox.

Our service today has included readings and hymns from a variety of religious traditions, in an effort to portray the range of religious thought which reflects the ideas of redemption, rebirth, and renewal of wonder at the very preciousness of life.

The opening words Mavis chose, attributed to Khalidasa, a Hindu poet and sage, speak to the value and meaning of life itself, calling us to live well today, to recognize that all of life's possibilities can be achieved today, that yesterday is a dream and tomorrow a vision.

Our first hymn, "Lo the earth awakes again" celebrates the rebirth of the land after the winter's cold and pain, singing praises to the cycles of the seasons, acknowledging the faithfulness of the earth's yearly renewal. This hymn, written by Transcendentalist Samuel Longfellow, expresses the sense of earth-based religious traditions about this season of the year.

We didn't sing it, but I also like the Christian version of this song, though I'm aware that it may push buttons for some folks, and I always hope that singing those joyous Alleluias will help overcome that discomfort.

Our second hymn, "Bring out the festal bread" is a modern song of Passover. Taking an old Jewish folk tune, UU minister Mark Belletini wrote words which describe the human struggle for freedom, in ancient times and yet today. These lyrics speak to the long journey into transformation and challenge us to awaken to the social plagues which still affect us and to seek the solutions of justice.

Our responsive reading came from the Bhagavad-Gita and expresses the Hindu version of the source of life and creation, of Brahman, or Atman, the infinite center of every life.

Because we draw our living tradition of Unitarian Universalism from a variety of sources, including Jewish and Christian teachings and wisdom from the world's religions, it is appropriate to include materials which those traditions have offered to the world about this time of year.

It is important also to heed the interpretations of Humanism, which is what I will add, for it is this strand of our living tradition which counsels us to use our minds and our own experience as guides, rather than blindly accepting the teachings of even the wisest prophet.

It may be our innate humanism, that inner sense that human reason and experience are our best tools for understanding the universe, which has brought many of us to Unitarian Universalism in the first place. It was my own emerging humanistic thinking that helped me to conclude that it didn't matter if Jesus rose from the dead, that his teaching about human love was the real miracle, the real salvation from sin and death.

Jesus the human being became my teacher and it is in the spirit of his inclusive and humanistic message that I celebrate Easter today.

So conservative Christians celebrate a physical resurrection of the body of Jesus, while liberal Christians often celebrate a more metaphorical resurrection, acknowledging that science doubts the possibility for physical resurrection, and transferring emphasis to the rebirth of spirit, of the emergence of the Christian church after Jesus' selfless death on the cross.

Jews observe Passover with a seder or commemorative meal which symbolizes the meal eaten just before the flight out of slavery in Egypt. In the ceremony which accompanies the meal, the plagues which came down upon the people of Egypt are enumerated and God is praised for the many blessings given to the People of Israel.

“Dayenu”, they sing, “if God had only brought us out of Egypt, it would have been enough, but God also divided the sea, gave us the Sabbath, and a host of other blessings.”

A Passover observance also notes that there are other people who are still oppressed and urges all to work toward freedom and justice in the world.

In earth-based religions, those of indigenous peoples and those of modern day practitioners, the ongoing cycles of creation are the primary source of inspiration. The vernal season of rebirth of the land and of the birth of new life are faithful indicators of the goodness of life itself. Human life is tied to the earth, dependent upon it, and homage is paid to the earth as mother.

Hinduism has been compared to UUism at times because of its acceptance of the universality of human experience and the understanding that all meaning already exists within the human self, that every life contains a reservoir of Being that is inexhaustible and undying, that exists beyond consciousness and is capable of great bliss.

For Hindus, rebirth and transformation come from recognizing and living out of this Being. We often let our finite bodies limit and restrict us and if we will only seek our true center, we will find transformation and renewal.

A practitioner of Buddhism seeks life's changes through the journey into enlightenment. This journey acknowledges that to live is to suffer and that to be enlightened is to reach the end of suffering.

For Muslims, transformation and rebirth come in working out one's relationship with Allah while understanding oneself. This relationship and understanding bring freedom to the soul; there is an urgency about Islamic belief because every day is seen as a precious opportunity, not to be wasted.

In all of these religions, it seems to me, there is a common theme which we might relate to this season. For every religious tradition emphasizes the human need for transformation, if one is to find peace and happiness.

Christians connect transformation to living out Jesus' teachings. Jews say that freedom from oppression offers transformation.

Nature religions glory in the transformation from frozen ground to flowers and food. Hindus seek liberation from the hindrances that keep humans from discovering their true inner selves.

Buddhists overcome suffering by learning to let go of the desire which causes suffering. And Islam finds rebirth in self-understanding and a deepened relationship with Allah. And all these ways offer much truth.

Where does that leave us Unitarian Universalists? How shall we think of Easter? At Eastertide, I believe, we UUs celebrate the **many** opportunities for personal and social transformation which appear before us, particularly those which are a part of our daily experience.

Every year at this time, we watch the azaleas and camellias bloom, the dandelions appear, the peas pop up in our gardens. We hear squirrels in love, chasing each other passionately up and down tree trunks and across telephone lines. The birds chatter and sing as they build their nests. The sandhill cranes soar overhead on their way north. The rivers swell with runoff. The rain becomes a little warmer, the sun seems a little brighter, the days a little longer.

Every year at this time, we feel a renewed push to DO SOMETHING about the way the world is. Every spring I receive petition after petition, urging me to write the President about one disastrous policy or another, urging me to protest the repressive policies of one government or another, or support this measure or that. Oppression of the earth and its people stand out as issues to be attacked vigorously, with the head of steam that builds up during winter's cabin fever.

To me, it is no fluke that many of the biggest events of the Civil Rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and joined by people of faith from all traditions, occurred in the Spring.

"Let my people go" was the refrain sung by those women and men, a spiritual which reflects the struggle of the Jews in Egypt and Germany, as well as the struggle of African Americans in this country and the struggles of the oppressed across the planet.

For many of us, this is the time of year when we resolve to DO SOMETHING about our personal lives. We diet. We eat more fruit. We fall in love. We exercise. We have our yearly physical exam. We resolve to cut back on our alcohol consumption. We vow to spend more time with spouse and kids, we clean out our gardens, we clean out closets, we start therapy, we quit smoking.

Whatever our choices, Spring is often a springboard for improving ourselves. It seems to me that there's an innate human yearning for transformation, of ourselves, of our lives, of our world. And that yearning is at its strongest in the spring.

Now, transformation is a big idea. We think of the 1962 book by Rachel Carson, "Silent Spring" which awakened us to the poisons we were sending into the air, or of Alcoholics Anonymous, formed by two men known as Dr. Bob and Bill W., or even how rock and roll transformed the music scene. These transformations are sea changes, and they clearly have changed the face of history.

But I question whether transformation always comes in one large package. I think that transformation, whether of the world or of one person's life, often starts in one small way and continues because of many more small moments.

Environmentalism didn't begin when "Silent Spring" was published. It began when Rachel Carson--and many of us--found dead birds in our gardens, got sick from chemicals, saw how much garbage we were sending to the dump every week, noticed the mangy-looking clear-cuts that defaced our mountainsides.

When Rachel Carson wrote an expose of commonly used insecticides and weed killers, it touched an exposed nerve. Our concern for the environment emerged when it became personal.

Alcoholics Anonymous didn't really begin with Bill W. and Dr. Bob. It began when men and women, desperate to quit drinking, realized they couldn't do it all by themselves and sought the help of others. In this way, the two men, Bill W. and Dr. Bob, came together and formed the first AA group in Akron, Ohio in 1935.

And rock and roll didn't really begin with Bill Haley and the Comets. Jazz and gospel paved the way, and rock and roll began when some obscure musician tried something new, had fun with it, showed others. This new rhythm, this new way of doing music gained momentum and then Bill Haley's rendition of Rock Around the Clock took the world by storm.

Think of the things that have changed your life. Was it a friendship? Was it a new habit formed or an old habit broken? Was it a chance remark? Learning something about yourself? A spiritual experience? Getting pregnant? Losing someone? A personal crisis? Telling or hearing the truth?

And how did it transform your life? Did it awaken you to some new perspective? Shift your behavior patterns so that you found yourself in new situations? Rearrange your priorities? Send you back to school?

Whether your first inkling of the transformation awaiting you came in a positive or negative way, very likely it was one moment in your life. You had no way of knowing the profound impact that one moment might have.

We might liken that moment to the first sighting of a daffodil's green shoots emerging from the ground. But that daffodil bulb didn't get there all by itself. That daffodil bulb was planted---by you or someone else. And in order to be planted, it had to be acquired. And in order to be acquired, somebody had to be open to the possibility of daffodils.

Open to the possibility of daffodils. Open to the possibility of transformation.

How does Unitarian Universalism offer the possibility of transformation and how can we be open to that transformation?

It's scary to open ourselves to change. It's scary to leave something familiar and begin something new. It's scary to take a risk, scary to let go of an old way of doing things. It's scary to challenge our own assumptions, about ourselves, about others, and about the universe. It's scary to take a stand, even when we know it's right. But when we face down that scared feeling, that fear, we open a door in our lives.

I remember the terror in my mind when I stood on a ledge above Lava Falls in the Grand Canyon and looked down on the jumble of jagged rocks and deep holes and furious waves that our small boat had to negotiate. I'll never forget the remark someone made at that time, "The only way out is through."

Those words have come back to me many times since then. The only way to get to the exhilaration of surviving Lava Falls was to go through the terror of running Lava Falls. The only way out of my looming heart surgery six years ago was to go through it and find out what having enough oxygen meant to my body.

The only way to deal with the pain of a broken marriage was to go through it and experience the new life that followed. The only way to answer the call to ministry was to go through four years of training, after age 50, and discover the joys of being the minister of this congregation and the others I've served. Each of these journeys transformed my life and set me on a new track.

What does Unitarian Universalism offer for human transformation? We offer here an opportunity to belong to a community of love and caring. We offer new ideas about religion. We offer new ways of looking at life. We offer the challenge of trying new things, of seeking spiritual growth, of working for justice with others. We offer new people with widely divergent outlooks. We offer moments that shake us up, make us mad, push our buttons. We offer moments that comfort us, reassure us, renew us.

All of what this congregation and Unitarian Universalism offers is potentially transformative. All we have to do is be open to it, to try something new, to examine a new thought, to question our own hot buttons, to talk with new people, to let others care for us, to think about our own spiritual needs.

All we have to do is be open to the possibility of daffodils and take the steps that will cause daffodils to sprout in our gardens. All we have to do is be open to the possibility of transformation and take the steps that will lead to the changes we need in our lives. We'll get a field of daffodils and a new life in return.

Let's pause for a moment of silent reflection and prayer.

Our closing hymn is #123, Spirit of Life, that quintessentially UU hymn of hope and transformation.

BENEDICTION:

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that we human beings carry within us, like the daffodil within the bulb, the potential to change the world, just by changing ourselves. May we open ourselves to that transformation daily, may we be mindful of the world's needs daily, and may we move to meet those needs, daily. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.