

EASTER!

Transitions, Transformations and UU Perspectives!

Unitarian Universalists don't know what to do with Easter. Most of us do not really believe the legendary myth, even if it is repeated with some variations in all four of the canonical gospels of the Christian Bible and some later Christian writings. We know that stories of miraculous births and resurrections and other magical occurrences were far more often reported in pre-literate and especially pre-scientific times. Even if we appreciate the metaphors, many of the Christians of recent times have insisted that these stories are historically and scientifically true and must be taken literally for one to really be a Christian.

Now, the metaphors of death and rebirth are extremely powerful and meaningful, if only they weren't taken literally. There are those who remain within Christianity who can find meaning while taking a more realistic approach to the imagery of the first century. Scholars of the Jesus Seminar and other biblical scholars who remain within Christianity but who have moved beyond literal readings of events which were not recorded historically have been able to find meaning in the gospels and other writings. The loud voices of fundamentalist evangelical Christians remain a roadblock for many of us who might otherwise identify with the teachings of Jesus. Among other things, I would not want to be associated with many of the loudest modern Christian voices, who mix their religion with xenophobia, homophobia, theocratic ambitions and fears of gun control.

The modern world has moved on from the magical world of Biblical times, and any important tenets of faith must pass the test of rationality to be really meaningful for this new age. Fundamentalists selectively calling out for a return to Biblical understandings, especially those which are not meaningful in the 21st Century, cannot be the driving forces of a modern society. Even so, there may yet be valuable messages in the teachings of the Bible.

There are lessons of moral judgement, relationships, community values, and ways to appreciate beauty that are invaluable. There are stories which challenge us to respond according to the best values of humanity. There are stories that

may help us get through difficult times and losses. There are stories of celebrations and holy days and there are stories of great women and men of history which almost all have lessons to teach. The problem with these stories comes when people try to take them literally as if they were written by unbiased reporters in the best journals of the time. Mythic and heroic stories are not newspaper accounts, they are examples of how people should strive to deal with life. Myths and legends and dreams have great power and wisdom, but they are not scientifically chronicled history.

Many of the symbols associated with Easter such as bunnies and eggs actually came from the Germanic Goddess Eostre or Ostara who was also associated with rebirth and springtime, whose celebrations in the springtime provided a convenient time to celebrate stories of the resurrection which had also been connected in time with the springtime Jewish celebration of Passover. Christians have a long history of turning older pagan celebrations into their own, including Christmas at the winter Solstice, Easter in the spring, and all-Hallows, all-Souls, and all-Saints days at the time of harvest and Samhain celebrations. Modern Christians do not often recognize their own history and just assume that these days have always only been Christian festivals.

Even when I was a United Methodist Minister, I tried to emphasize the psychological and emotional aspects of resurrection, elaborating on ways that we each experience re-births and renewals at times during our lives. I talked about the re-birth and metamorphosis of the caterpillar as it becomes a butterfly within its cocoon as a metaphor for our human experience of transformation. Another appropriate metaphor for our time is the transformation and rebirth that comes to transgender persons as they become free to be their true selves. Another modern metaphor is in the maturation process that we all experience as we progress from the magical beliefs of childhood to the higher thought processes, abstract thinking, psychological and emotional maturity of adulthood.

Taken metaphorically, there are many lessons in the Easter story, from the times of preparation and fellowship with friends and disciples, through the period of denial as Jesus' friends scattered, the aloneness and searching in the dark night of the soul, to the silence in the face of false accusations, and on to

the acceptance of Jesus's fate to be crucified with thieves, and then miraculous rebirth to a completely new understanding. It is a version of the classic heroic journey into the underworld and back into the world of the living accompanied by a rebirth and flowering of the spring, appearances, and new life.

This is hardly a unique story when compared with Greek and Roman mythic legends and whether any of them really happened is not the point. The point is that we each face times when we are abandoned by those who were just a moment ago our friends, we each face false allegations and trials, we each face dark nights of the soul, and we each face crucifixion with the possibility of transformation and rebirth to new self-understandings. This is not just the story of Jesus, this is the story of all humans who are coming to adulthood. This is our story, our metaphor, our journey. We cannot become fully human adults unless we undertake this journey in some fashion.

The God and Jesus of the Bible are only a help to us if they can point us along the pathways of our own journeys. The time for deities to be intervening in the affairs of humans is long past, for we have become our own gods and saviors. The religious communities of today only have meaning if they are places where we can learn about and explore alternative pathways as we discover the journey to which we are each called. If Jesus or the Buddha can lead us into higher awareness, great. If not, we need to find other teachers and exemplars who can.

I do believe that most of us can benefit from learning about Jesus, but I have been a bit discouraged to see how few passages in the Bible really can be attributed to Jesus. I am glad for the work of the Jesus Seminar in seeking to unravel the layers of what has been written about Jesus, but I wish there were more that could help us to really know what Jesus was about.

In Unitarian Universalist communities, we try to welcome in all searchers, including those who have been wounded by their previous religious communities, those who have never experienced community, and those who don't really know what they are looking for in a religious community. Because we UUs are at so many different places in our journeys, our communities are often a bit chaotic. At best, we provide a safe space for those who are

searching, a resting place for those who just need time to relax and recover, a launch pad for works of social justice as well as opportunities for leadership for those needing to develop skills for their journeys. We are many things to many people!

Just as we cannot know the future of Christianity, we do not really know what the future of Unitarian Universalism will look like. We can fairly safely assume that claims of historicity for mythical legends will continue to be challenged by modern people, and that groups holding onto such claims are likely to continue losing influence and adherents over time. Whether Unitarian Universalism can offer a sufficient sense of meaning for modern people remains an open question. While we may preach a more rational religion, we do not always inspire our people to a sense of mission, to go out and make a difference.

Easter has always offered a new sense of meaning to many who celebrate it, an opportunity to not only hear about but to in some sense experience a new life. That kind of resurrection is still meaningful today, just as long as it realistically recognizes the differences between first century myths and modern realities. There are still plenty of opportunities for transformation in people's lives. There are still lots of needs for change in our world.

Thanksgiving and Christmas may provide more celebrative memories than Easter, but if you have a history of celebrating Easter, what kind of memories do you have? What made it a special time for you and your family? What do you do with concepts of resurrection and rebirth?

I thought I would invite you to share a few thoughts or memories before I close with a piece I wrote for the Sunrise Service.

DISRUPTED AGAIN

March 22, 2016

Rev. Bob Klein

Here we are with Holy Week disrupted again by a new disturbance in the force.
We are more than ever in need of an Easter that will really change things.
Jesus tried to make a difference, as did Buddha, Abraham, and Mohammed,
Many prophets over many millennia, but no end to the violence.

Why do people choose the most divisive readings of every tradition?
Why don't we choose the words that unify, that celebrate love?
It is so easy to tear things down, so much rage, so much hate!
Didn't Jesus and Mohammed both preach love?

We need the words from every tradition that build up the community!
We need revelations that include everyone in Universal harmony!
We need to make peace with each other across every boundary!
We need to bridge differences in culture and religion!

We need an Easter which will make a difference, inviting everyone!
We need a Resurrection of love and understanding in relationships.
We need a rebirth of diplomacy and interfaith cooperation!
We need a faith that will allow us to build a new world!

May this Easter be the start of a new world order of peace and love!
May we join together in celebrating the prophets and saviors of all faiths!
May we sing and dance together, gay and straight, old and young!
May we find common ground in one Universal Love!