

UU EASTER: Resurrection, Heaven & Things We Don't All Believe!

Unitarian Universalists have choices, opportunities to explore and discover what we do and what we do not believe. It was a huge relief for me to come into Unitarian Universalism after years of doubt and feelings that I did not fit into mainstream Christianity, particularly around the questions of miracles, the immaculate conception, physical resurrection, heaven and hell. As someone who loves scientific discoveries and who is grounded in evolutionary biology, quantum physics, and the empirical process, I really had trouble for years making sense of the claims that many Christians make around the historicity and factual basis for the Biblical story. And yet, for many reasons, metaphysical questions, religious history and the needs of people drew me toward ministry.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I can follow Thomas Jefferson's lead in choosing the parts of the Bible I find believable while discarding the rest, or I can see the Bible in the context of Judeo-Christian Mythos, the story of those traditions that both predated much of our scientific knowledge but also stood as a different kind of record or story which is neither historical nor scientific, and yet carries and maintains religious meaning. I could also become a Buddhist or Pagan or atheist, but I remain connected to the Judeo-Christian story even if I currently identify as neither. This is the freedom of Unitarian Universalism that I love best, the opportunity to be grounded in a community of the highest humanistic values and principles, while having the freedom to discover the religious story that is most meaningful to me at any time, even if it is none.

In deference to our Judeo-Christian heritage, I have made it my custom to address the Christian story around the holidays of Christmas and Easter. Being guaranteed the freedom of the pulpit by UU custom and my contract, this is entirely my choice, but it is something that I believe to be important. In this movement, as in the United States generally, we have this tendency to forget where we came from, such as the fact that almost all our ancestors were immigrants, and many were undocumented!

In Unitarian Universalism, both sides of our movement grew out of Christianity, something that would have been readily acknowledged until well into the 20th Century! The philosophical and theological perspectives which separated us from what became orthodox Christianity, can be found in the earliest days of Christianity.

The proto-Unitarian view that Christ was the son of God but not one with God may have been among the earliest and most common views of the first and second centuries of Christianity, though it was voted heretical while the Trinitarian view won out at the Council of Nicaea, which had been called by Constantine, in 325 A.D. The belief that a loving God would call all souls back into relationship in Universal Salvation was held by many in the 2nd Century but was voted heretical in the 6th Century.

These views appeared from time to time in the theologies of many throughout history. Unitarianism was particularly frequent from the 16th Century developing from the views of Michael Servetus, Laelius and Faustus Socinus, and Francis David. Universalism began to flourish in 18th Century America, and is reported to have been the 6th largest Denomination in the United States with 600,000 adherents by the middle of the 19th Century. As itinerant Methodists and Baptists adopted a view of a more loving God, spreading that view across the growing nation, Universalism began to lose traction.

Anyway, I was intending to talk about Easter, so I will save the rest of the history for another time! Enough to realize that our forebears held alternative or heretical beliefs about how Jesus was related to God and about the work that he was sent to accomplish. The Unitarians saw Jesus as something more like the ultimate Prophet as the Son of God. The Universalists may have believed that Jesus signaled the way to salvation and/or heaven, but not because those who believed differently were destined for hell, in which they did not believe. Each of our traditions took some of the punch and fear away from the evangelical interpretations of the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

If Jesus did not embody the fullness of God, he was really more a man throughout his life and on the cross. If Hell did not exist as a threat and all souls would return to a loving God anyway, then Jesus' death on the cross might be a powerful martyr's example of faith but could not really inaugurate a new age.

But these are just my thoughts, theologians might argue over similar notions for the next several millennia. The super-humanity of Jesus rather than dual humanity-deity, and the somewhat diminished sense of importance of the crucifixion and resurrection leave both Christmas and Easter far less important for even many Unitarian Universalist Christians than for Christians who see each as an absolutely essential test of faith.

Beyond these matters, there is the current reality in which adherence to Judeo-Christian beliefs is seen as one range of options, but not really superior to Buddhist, Pagan, or humanistic beliefs for Unitarian Universalists. At this time in Unitarian Universalism, it is perfectly acceptable to believe in Jesus as man or God or both; to believe in heaven and/or hell; to believe in crucifixion and/or resurrection; and it is equally acceptable to believe in none of those things.

So, if our context, history, and current story take so much of the punch out of Easter as a holiday for Unitarian Universalists, why celebrate it? Many UUs of course do not celebrate Easter, or if they do, it may be in the context of the Pagan holiday from whence many of the Easter traditions have been borrowed. The Easter Bunny and Easter Eggs do not come out of the Christian Story. They do however, help to connect us with a deeper and more cyclical understanding of resurrection. The idea of celebrating the rebirth of trees and flowers and the birth of animal young in the spring is a particularly old tradition among humans. Like the harvest celebrations in the fall, the new life, birth, and rebirth traditions of the spring have been part of the human story for far longer than any organized religious tradition.

Life, Death and Resurrection; reincarnation or the transmigration of souls; travel, kidnapping, or banishment into the nether realms and return or rescue therefrom, the guardians of hell and the river Styx; heaven and the choirs of angels, all are

images of whatever may lie beyond conscious awareness. Easter in all its pagan and Christian manifestations and the Vernal Equinox put a focus on the passing of the seasons, the end of Winter, the rebirth of the growing season of Spring. So too are they symbolic of the psychological and emotional return to life after death, the return of light after the darkness and depression of winter, the new growth after dark nights of the soul.

Those of us from the liberal religious traditions tend to focus more on the metaphorical and symbolic experience of Easter and Resurrection rather than try to make mythos into science or history. There absolutely is religious meaning in the crucifixion and return from death, but religious mythos from pre-scientific times was not written as science or history. We experience many deaths and rebirths throughout our lives. Every challenge small or large can be the death to previous ideas and awareness, opening the way to a rebirth into broader understanding, wisdom, and a wider awareness. Anything that opens us to broader understanding, greater wisdom, and wider awareness helps us to be better and healthier human beings. When the celebration of or meditation upon the meaning of Easter can do that, I am all for celebrating and meditating upon the meaning of Easter. And though I might wish more time spent celebrating, meditating, reading or thinking upon certain others, those of us who have been through dark and difficult wintry times know that change and rebirth only comes when we become open to it, ready for whatever might come next. If we still believe we have all the answers, we are really not open to learning and growing.

While the crucifixion may have been expected, the resurrection was not. We can expect the consequences for failure, ignorance, stupidity, but we don't expect the new opportunities for learning, growth, and development that come from the big and little deaths, disasters, and failures we face in life. But we have to be ready to move on, to open ourselves to those new possibilities, to be willing to try new things and new ideas and new approaches. After the dark wintry times, we have to be willing to get up, get out, and open ourselves to the new birth of spring. We have to be ready to make the transition, to keep on moving forward even when the way is hard and unfamiliar!

Easter provides us the opportunity to see things differently each time it comes around! For many Christians it offers a reminder of the new possibilities that appeared in the teachings and life of Jesus: new ways of seeing, new ways of understanding, new ways of relating to others and to God. For the rest of us, it may also provide a learning opportunity, a reminder that things are not always as they seem, that new life may come out of the most profound disaster, that change is sometimes necessary and that seeing life in different ways may be really important at times in our lives.

Whatever we may or may not believe about the history and reasons for Easter, it offers a moment to consider new possibilities, to open ourselves to the unknown and surprising, such as a bunny delivering eggs, to let ourselves move beyond the darkness, depression, and deaths of winter and open ourselves to the new opportunities, possibilities, and life of spring!

Matthew Fox, following the teachings of Meister Eckhart, describes the faith journey in 4 segments in his foundational work, *Original Blessing*. These segments or paths are the *Via Positiva*, the *Via Negativa*, the *Via Creativa*, and the *Via Transformativa*. Crucifixion is of the *Negativa*, the tomb perhaps like a cocoon a time of *Creativa*, and the Resurrection a time of *Transformativa*. From Caterpillar to Butterfly this fits the pattern of life. From simplicity, blessing, and childlike ignorance, into the darkness of challenges, and from them into times of creativity that lead to transformation. This is the archetypal journey of soul work. These are the paths that lead to mature adulthood if our development is not stopped along the way. Just as many do not complete the stages of moral development, many do not move into the creativity that opens one to meaningful transformation. We can be caught anywhere for any length of time, held back by satisfaction or fears or arrogance or narcissism or so many other compulsions, addictions, misguided beliefs or any number of other things.

In traditional Christianity, the season of Lent prepares one for the Passion Story of the final week of Jesus' earthly life including the Entrance into Jerusalem, the Passover shared with his Disciples, the Arrest, Trial, Crucifixion, Death, Burial, and finally Resurrection. This journey goes from joy to despair, to exaltation.

This is the hero's journey, the archetypal human experience. This is the story of our lives, written out in the life of the Christian religious exemplar, Jesus. When taken literally, as it was never intended, it is hard to swallow. When taken as the paradigm for the human life well and fully lived, it begins to make more sense. When we look for the symbolic meaning, there is much to see and celebrate. There is reassurance that the darkness, difficulties, and challenges of our lives will be followed by times of creativity and transformation. There is the affirmation that we live on after death, whether it be in our children and grandchildren's lives and memories, or through the things we have accomplished.

There is also a reassurance that our lives have meaning, so that when we come to the end we can trust that we each have made a difference.

HAPPY EASTER!