

Are You a Born Again Unitarian Universalist?
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville
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This morning, this Easter morning, I want to pose the question, I want to ask, “Are You a Born Again Unitarian Universalist?” Or perhaps, “Do you aspire to being a born-again Unitarian Universalist?” Or, more realistically, “What does it mean, what could it possibly mean, to be a born-again Unitarian Universalist?”

But I’m not going to plunge right into that issue. Let’s circle around it for a while, first.

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It was Easter Sunday, maybe twenty years ago. Kerry and I were visiting my mother, in Birmingham, Michigan. The three of us went to church, to my mother’s church, the church I had grown up in – the First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham. First Presbyterian was large, prosperous, probably complacent. The preacher that morning preached about the resurrection of Christ. It was Easter Sunday, after all, what else could he preach about? But what he said got my attention.

What he said was, it didn’t really happen. It’s a story, a wonderful story, he said, but you can’t expect late 20th century, educated Americans to believe, to literally believe, that a man was executed, crucified, was without doubt dead, and then a couple of days later he’s seen walking around, talking to people. Dead people stay dead.

What a surprising message to hear in a Presbyterian church! What a shocking message for the good Presbyterians sitting in the pews to hear!

I should point out that the preacher – I have no idea what his name was – was the church’s *interim* minister. He would be leaving in June. He didn’t have to live with the hornet’s nest he was stirring up. He could throw his bomb and then move on.

I don’t actually know how the congregation reacted to his revelation. Of course, they were polite. Of course, they wouldn’t reveal to others what they were feeling.

I don’t know how the *congregation* reacted, but *I* was outraged. He’s stealing our message! If Presbyterians and other main line Protestants don’t have to believe the impossible any more – if they don’t have to accept a literal resurrection or a literal virgin birth – what’s the point of switching to the Unitarian Universalists? The Presbyterians were invading our turf, and I wanted none of it.

The same thing had happened a few generations earlier. The Universalists, back in the 19th century, had grown to be a fairly prominent denomination. Their trademark was the denial of hell. The God they found in the Bible, the God that their reason led them to, was a God of

love. They were unwilling to believe that a loving God would consign anyone to permanent hellfire and damnation. They preached that all souls would ultimately be reconciled to God.

As time went on, their viewpoint became widely accepted among liberal Protestants. You no longer heard much mention of hell in main line Protestant churches. The expectation became that we're all going to heaven – at least all of *us*.

As a result, the Universalists could not hold onto their market share. They were unable to come up with a new purpose. The Universalists were gradually sliding towards oblivion until their consolidation 47 years ago with the Unitarians.

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Who will show up for Unitarian Universalist worship on Easter Sunday is always a matter of uncertainty and speculation.

In most Unitarian Universalist congregations there are those who favor a traditional Easter service, like the ones they remember from their childhood, even though they no longer believe that the rock was rolled away from the entrance to the tomb, and that Jesus emerged, looking none the worse for wear despite his recent ordeals. They want the traditional; so they return to a Methodist Church or a Lutheran church or what have you.

In most Unitarian Universalist congregations, there are, as well, those who want nothing to do with a traditional Easter service, with all that silly, incredible resurrection and alleluia stuff. They avoid even the Unitarian Universalist church on Easter, for fear that they might have to endure the traditional.

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A few years back, before we moved to Fayetteville, it was a Sunday evening, and I was driving home from my monthly ministering with the good Unitarian Universalists in Cumberland, Maryland. Along the way, I listened for a while to a Pentecostal preacher. He was preaching about being reborn, about being born again. One way to look at Easter, I thought to myself, is to think of it as being about rebirth, about the born-again experience. The rebirth that occurs all around us every spring makes this approach a natural. There is no reason for the Pentecostals and others of similar perspective, I thought to myself, to have a monopoly on the rebirth metaphor. Easter would be a good time to explore what it might mean to be a born-again Unitarian Universalist.

Pentecostals and Unitarian Universalists are often thought of as polar opposites; you can't find two religious groups more different. At least that's what many people think.

Mark Chaves is a sociologist whose specialty is the study of religious groups. In a book that explores differences in styles of worship, he compares different denominations according to

how enthusiastic their worship is. [Mark Chaves, *How Do We Worship?* (Alban, 1999)] Here are some of the criteria he uses in determining levels of enthusiasm:

- Do adults jump, shout, or dance spontaneously?
- Are drums used?
- Do electric guitars provide music?
- Do people call out “amen”?
- Do people, other than the leader, raise their hands in praise?
- Do people speak in tongues?

At the extreme end of Chaves’s enthusiasm scale – the full of enthusiasm end – are the Pentecostals. At the other end – the absence of enthusiasm end – well, Chaves doesn’t actually include Unitarian Universalists in his study, but is there any doubt in your mind that we belong at the unenthusiastic end of the spectrum? (If you were to prove me wrong on this, I would not be upset.)

While Unitarian Universalist and Pentecostal worship services may not resemble each other, in another respect the two groups are similar. Pentecostals believe that they can be in direct communication with the Holy Spirit. That is, the Bible is not the final word for them. Nor is what church leaders say the final word for them. Each individual can receive inspiration.

We probably wouldn’t use the same language, but that sounds to me a lot like our view that revelation is not sealed. We can be inspired this Easter morning, for example, by the return of spring, by the joy on the face of a grandchild, by those who risk their lives in attempting to bring the blessings of democracy to the Iraqi and Afghan peoples.

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The idea, the metaphor, of rebirth can be traced back to the third chapter of the Gospel According to John. Jesus is having a conversation with a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus makes a flattering remark to Jesus about his apparently close connection to God, and Jesus, perhaps embarrassed by the flattery, responds by changing the subject, or at least redirecting it. “Nicodemus,” Jesus says, “to tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is *gennethe anothēn* [γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν].” [John 3:3]

This Greek expression, *gennethe anothēn*, literally means *born again*, but Jesus is obviously using it in a metaphorical way. Nicodemus’s response, however, is at the literal level. “How can anyone be born,” he asks, “after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” [John 3:4] Jesus then attempts to explain to Nicodemus what he has in mind, using different metaphors.

For Nicodemus, the metaphor of rebirth was a stumbling block. For us, rebirth may seem like a foreign, suspect concept. And while Nicodemus didn't seem bothered by Jesus's use of the metaphor *the kingdom of God*, that one may give *us* trouble, as well.

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Birth is a discrete event. It may be difficult; it may take quite a few hours, but eventually it's over – the child is born, alive and healthy, we hope. Rebirth can be a different matter. Here is how the novelist D.H. Lawrence describes it:

[M]ost are born again on entering maturity; they are [re]born to humanity, to a consciousness of all the laughing, and the never-ceasing murmur of pain and sorrow that comes from the terrible multitude of brothers [and sisters]. Then, it appears to me, one gradually formulates one's religion, be it what it may. A person has no religion who has not slowly and painfully gathered one together, adding to it, shaping it; and one's religion is never complete and final, it seems, but must always be undergoing modification. [quoted by F. Church, *Born Again Unitarian Universalism*, p. 73]

Rebirth, as Lawrence describes it, is a continuous, or perhaps an intermittent process. We might recognize annually – Easter Sunday would be an appropriate time – how we have been gathering our religion together, adding to it, and shaping it during the past twelve months.

Forrest Church, the Unitarian Universalist minister and the son of the late United States Senator, comments on Lawrence's understanding of religion:

It is open, free, liberal, in that each one of us is invited, even charged, [Church writes,] to plumb life's essential questions to the very depths, without subjugation to the enforced guidance of dogmatic prescriptions, as to what the answers of these questions must be. The questions, of course, remain the same:

- Why are we here?
- Who are we?
- Where are we going?
- What is life?
- What are our responsibilities to others?
- What is the nature of our human potential?
- And how can we tap [our human potential] to insure the greatest good? [Church, pp. 74-75]

Deepening one's religious faith, deepening one's understanding of oneself, coming to grips with one's position in the universe, in the grand scheme of things – it's not easy.

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The difficulty is personified in the story of Jacob at Peniel from the Book of Genesis. [Genesis 32:22-32] Jacob, you may recall, was the son of Isaac and Rebekah and the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. Jacob and his family are traveling. One night, Jacob sends the others ahead. "Jacob was left alone," the story reads, "and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." The appearance of this man is not explained, nor is his identity revealed. But neither man is able to overcome the other, in their all-night struggle. At dawn, Jacob demands a blessing from his antagonist. The stranger asks Jacob what his name is – perhaps learning his name is a prelude to the requested blessing, perhaps the stranger is changing the subject, to evade the request – and then the stranger says to Jacob, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." *Israel* means, literally, *the one who strives with God*.

Do you feel that you are in a struggle? – a struggle with yourself? with God? with God's angel or messenger? Are you in a struggle to make sense of your world or of yourself? A struggle to find meaning? or to learn to live without meaning?

Forrest Church comments, "Like Jacob, we each have our own personal angel. This angel calls us out of our complacency and locks us in mortal combat. It forces upon us ultimate questions of purpose and meaning in life. It demands that we discover who we are." [Church, p. 45]

The stranger with whom Jacob struggles – the angel, we can call him, ambiguously – the angel does not give Jacob the answers to life's persistent questions. We Unitarian Universalists don't have a book that gives us the answers, and if we did have such a book, we would probably find its answers inadequate.

But the questions remain. To continue Forrest Church's interrogation–

- How do we attain the spiritual health of wholeness, that is, how do we attain salvation?
- How do we live a life that befits our promise?
- How do we face death?
- And how do we insure, here and now, that our lives, when they reach their close, will prove to have been worth dying for? [Church, p. 46]

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Let's return now to Nicodemus. Nicodemus, you will recall, confined by literal thinking, was puzzled by the notion of rebirth. Jesus's explanation doesn't help him much: "Very truly, I tell you," Jesus says, "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." [John 3:5]

Born of *water* and *spirit* – what in the world does that mean?

My first thought was that this is Jesus's unidiomatic way of referring to the benefits of Scotch and water – "Have a Scotch and water every evening, Nicodemus, and you can enter the kingdom of God." But we probably have to go deeper than that.

Here's how I see it. Water is a symbol – indeed, a prerequisite – for life. That's why we search for water on Mars, from time to time. That's why we use water during joys and concerns, and use water in naming or dedication ceremonies. We consist mostly of water. We cannot live very long without water. I would read the reference to water as an injunction to go deep into life. Don't be superficial; don't take life for granted. Go to the deep end of the pool and dive down to the bottom.

The other half of the formula was spirit. The same word can mean breath, or wind. [in Greek, *pneuma*, πνεῦμα; in Hebrew, *ruwach*] This reminds us that our own life is not all there is. Humanity is not all there is. There is something more. There is always something more. Don't close yourself off. Don't stop learning, or exploring. Be open to the new, the different, to the breath of God, whatever that might be.

Spirit can be the metaphor for that which assures that revelation is not sealed, either for us or for the Pentecostals.

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Here's a poem from the Rigveda, one of the ancient, holy works of Hinduism. It's called "To the breath of the Gods." [Karen Thompson, *Times Literary Supp.*, No. 5269, March 26, 2004, p. 15 (X, 186)]

May the wind blow healing hither,
Kind, refreshing to us in the heart,
May it extend our lives.

Wind, you are to us a father
And a brother and our friend,
So equip us for life.

And if, Wind, there in your house
 A store of immortality is laid,
 Give some to us, that we may live.

To live fully, we need both water and spirit.

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About a decade ago, when I was in the earliest stage of my seminary training, I participated in a retreat for Unitarian Universalist seminarians. A group of us, with various mentors, spent a long weekend together, at a retreat center in New Windsor, Maryland, if I remember correctly. One of our sessions was with Sandra Kamman, a liturgical dancer. Sandy is the dance director for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington. – Should we have a dance group here? – She led us through various exercises, to loosen us up, to help us become comfortable with moving around.

And then Sandy told us that we were going to do an extended exercise. She would turn down the lights and play music, and we were just to move to the music, to let the spirit guide us. “Don’t pay attention to the others,” she said, “just let your body move and explore. At the end, when the lights come back up, and the music fades away, I’ll ask you what thought, what image, what idea, has come into your mind.”

As you can imagine, I was just a little skeptical about all this. I was a philosophy major, after all, and a lawyer. I was trained to use my mind, to make rational arguments. Dance meditation as a theological technique was far away from my training or inclination.

But I like to be a good sport. I’m willing to be open to new approaches. And, besides, I thought to myself, it may be perfectly silly, but nothing really *bad* can come out of it.

So I moved around as the tape played. I did my best not to compare my movements with those of my comrades. I let myself get *into* this strange ritual, to get lost in it.

Eventually, the music faded away as the lights came back up, and what popped into my mind was, “Wake up!” *Wake up.*

And that has been a theme, perhaps *the* theme of my ministry ever since. Wake up. Realize that you are awake; you are alive. Life is short; don’t sleep through it. We are reborn when we are aware that we are alive, when we are aware that we are awake.

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If one were to do a caricature of a Unitarian Universalist Easter sermon, it might end, not with appreciation of the risen Christ, but with a story of the Buddha. So here it is.

After Gautama had achieved enlightenment and become the Buddha, people were drawn to him, and asked him questions:

“Are you a God?” they asked. “No,” he answered.

“Are you a saint?” “No.”

“Are you a prophet?” “No.”

“Who are you then?” To which the Buddha would reply, “I am awake.” For that is what the word *Buddha* means, “Awake.” [F. Church, pp. 36-37]

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Let’s see now if I can summarize these Easter ramblings.

First, may D.H. Lawrence help us appreciate the nature of the religious journey, that “one’s religion is never complete and final, but must always be undergoing modification.”

Second, may we recognize that in our religious journeys we may sometimes have struggles like Jacob’s – wrestling all night – with God? with ourselves? who knows? – wrestling with the human condition, our brief sojourn among the living.

Third, may we feel a kindred spirit in Pentecostals and Hindus, despite our different worship styles and world views.

Fourth, may we learn from Nicodemus’s confusion the importance of both water and spirit – the importance of living, and the importance of looking beyond, and appreciating what is beyond our farthest vision.

Finally, with the Buddha, may we be fully awake.

Amen.