

IMBECILE CANDLE IN THE HEART

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Unitarian Universalists – in case you haven't already noticed – can be a rather curious spiritual lot...especially when it comes to celebrating big Christian Sundays like Easter. Let's face it, we're in a bit of a theological pickle when it comes right down to what to do (for heaven's sake) with Easter!

More than a century ago, most Unitarian Universalists moved past the spiritual singularity of our distinctly Christian roots...embracing a far more eclectic, open, and humanistic spirituality. So while we do still have a few congregations in our denomination (mostly in New England) that still proudly identify themselves as "liberal Christian," today most UUs feel pretty uncomfortable with the intricate story and theology that has grown up around the historical personage that was Jesus of Nazareth – especially the dramatic Easter tale of his trial, crucifixion, death, and (most problematically of all) his resurrection.

And yet, despite our Unitarian Universalist spiritual hesitation concerning what most of our Christian neighbors and friends celebrate on Easter, all across the continent on this Easter morning, Unitarian Universalist congregations gather – just like Presbyterian, Methodist and Fundamentalist ones – to sing the hopeful music of the season, have Easter egg rolls, and perhaps put on a bit of special spring finery!! So when it comes to Easter Sunday -- theologically speaking at least – we UUs are “all dressed up, but have nowhere to go!”

The truth is, most of us (as religious liberals) are pretty confused about what metaphors and meanings to take from Easter Sunday, but not as confused as the kids from Mrs. Roger's 4th grade class over at Vero Beach Elementary.

It seems that when Mrs. Rogers asked her eager young students about the meaning of Easter this week, the hand of an eager little Episcopalian boy shot up first. "I know, I know" he said confidently, "Easter is when we put up a pine tree and decorate it with lights, wrap presents for each other and sing lullabies to Baby Jesus." "No," said the teacher, "You've got Easter confused with Christmas...does anybody else know?" With that, a little Roman Catholic girl's hand shot up. "Easter is when you fill the house with the smell of cooking turkey, watch football all day, and give thanks for all our relatives who come for dinner." "No," said Mrs. Rogers, "That's Thanksgiving... Someone must understand the meaning of Easter."

Next, a little Jewish boy in the class thought he knew. "Easter is when we decorate the front of the house in American flags, go to a big parade, and shoot off fireworks all night." "No, no, no," cried the exasperated teacher, "Doesn't anyone know?" Finally, the smart little Unitarian Universalist kid in the class raises her hand. "Easter is when we remember that after a 3-year ministry among the Judean people, Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem on a donkey, was put on trial by the Roman authorities for being a troublemaker, was crucified on a hill with two thieves, and finally buried in a cave." "Yes! That's right, Suzie," interrupted the relieved teacher, but then Suzie finished, "And then after a couple of days the rock gets rolled away...Jesus comes out...and if he sees his shadow, there'll be six more weeks of winter."

All right, I apologize for telling that! But this rather silly joke points to an uncomfortable truth about us. A whole lot of us Unitarian Universalists (sure that Easter can't any longer spiritually mean to them what it means to our devout Christian friends and neighbors) aren't necessarily

any clearer about what it might positively mean to them...other than some vague, cheerful April festival marking the return of Spring.

Now don't get me wrong, celebrating the earth's resurrection rhythms at this time of year is fine as far as it goes. But this Easter morning, this Unitarian Universalist is looking for something a bit spiritually deeper – and more theologically sustaining – to affirm in my heart. This Easter I am personally seeking a meaning for Easter that will make a deep down and sustaining difference in my spiritual life – and last longer on my heart than a daffodil or day lily. So...what reliable Easter affirmation can arrive (like the faithful Spring) to our Unitarian Universalist hearts, and stay with us throughout the rest of the year?

Well, after struggling with this question over recent days, I want to suggest to you that for us Unitarian Universalists, Easter should not be not just another festive day in the Spring calendar...nor one more convenient excuse for a big family dinner...nor should it be about a dubious set of historical facts or fantastic theological suppositions about the end of the earthly life of Jesus. Easter is rather for us a decision...a spiritual decision...a decision of the human heart that is not limited to one Spring Sunday. Easter is the decision to live with hope and purpose and agency...even in the face of death and despair itself. Easter calls us to light an imbecile candle in the heart...like that Herman Melville described in his classic novel *Moby Dick*.

In Melville's classic book, one foggy day while working out from their mother whaling ship, the small harpoon boat (under the command of a whaler named Starbuck) is separated from the others, and runs out of luck. Suddenly, a violent storm comes up, at the same time the small craft encounters an aggressive whale, which swamps the boat and its occupants. Suddenly, cold and alone, the crew is fighting for its life...Melville's protagonist describes what happens next:

"There we sat, up to our knees in the sea, the water covering every rib and plank...the wind increased to a howl; the waves dashed their bucklers together; the whole squall roared, forked and crackled around us like a white fire upon the prairie, in which, unconsumed, we are burning; immortal in these jaws of death! In vain we hailed the other boats; as well roar to the live coals down the chimney of a flaming furnace as hail those boats in that storm. Meanwhile the driving scud, rack and mist grew darker with the shadows of night; no sign of the ship could be seen. The rising sea forbade all attempts to bale out the boat. The oars were useless as propellers, performing now the office of life-preservers.

"So, cutting the lashing of the waterproof matchkeg, after many failures Starbuck contrives to ignite the lamp in the lantern; then, stretching it on a waif pole, handed it to Queequeg as the standard-bearer of this forlorn hope. There, then, he sat, holding up the imbecile candle in the heart of that almighty forlornness. There, then, he sat, the sign and symbol of a man without faith, hopelessly holding up hope in the midst of despair."

Holding up an "inbecile candle in the heart of that almighty forlornness...holding up hope in the midst of despair" – that is what it takes, I think, for a human being to make Easter real. Easter is the decision of the heart that a human being makes to courageously seek life and hope and purpose when our lives are threatened by death, despair, or meaninglessness.

In a similar Easter vein...I am deeply moved by E.B. White's description of his cancer-stricken wife Katherine out in her New England garden late one October, "planning" as he puts it, "the planting of bulbs in her garden in the last autumn of her life."

“There was something comical yet touching in her bedraggled appearance...the small hunched-over figure, her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be yet another spring, oblivious to the ending of her days (which she knew perfectly well was near at hand) sitting there with her detailed chart under those dark skies in dying October, calmly plotting the resurrection.”

“Calming plotting the resurrection” as you plant your last autumnal garden...lighting “the imbecile candle in the heart” as you are lost in a vast and cold sea – such are the Easter decisions – the decisions for hope and purpose – we are all free to make throughout our lives...even in the face of death and personal negation itself.

To live with such intentionality and hope, is to understand the promise and possibility of Easter. I have a friend and colleague, the Rev. Bruce Marshall, who draws a crucial distinction between optimism and hope, a distinction it is crucial to understand on Easter Sunday. Listen to his own words:

“A friend whose wife is undergoing treatment for a serious illness told me that their physician advised them to approach it with hope, not optimism, and this makes sense to me. Optimism, as I understand it, is an attitude of expectation that a particular result will occur -- that a person will recover from an illness, that we will achieve a specific goal, that the Publisher's Clearinghouse will pick my number from among the billions submitted. The dictionary defines optimism as ‘an inclination to anticipate the best possible outcome.’

“We are told that an optimistic outlook is a good thing, but I have rarely found it so. Optimism often leads to disappointment. When the best possible outcome doesn't occur, we are let down, we may even feel betrayed. Optimism, then, may become its opposite pessimism, an inclination to anticipate the worst possible outcome. Hope [on the other hand] is more resilient, more enduring, more helpful. Hope is less specific. Hope is an attitude that looks for possibility in whatever life deals us.”

Hope does not anticipate a particular outcome, but keeps before us the possibility that something useful will come from this...hope advises us to look squarely at the realities that confront us while remaining aware of the possibilities.

Hope then is not afraid to “look squarely at the realities that confront us”...hope is the spiritual quality of keeping our eyes and our hearts focused on “the possibilities” that still remain before us. Hope is not blindly and cheerfully believing that “everything will always work out wonderfully” for us, either for the world as a whole or for us individually...rather it is an “attitude” that looks for human “possibility” in “whatever life deals us.”

Let me bring this all a little closer to home this Easter Sunday. A couple of years ago, one of my very best friends in the world – a great guy by the name of Paul Gordon – died at the early age of 62, after a long and valiant four-year battle with terrible, malignant cancer.

Here is a picture of him just weeks before his death, at his daughter's wedding, with a brace the cancer made necessary.

From the very beginning of his illness – when the doctors, at the initial diagnosis, told him frankly how very aggressive and deadly his cancer was – Paul refused to live with false optimism – with some blind and cheery belief that he would somehow miraculously beat the bad

medical odds that were his. Paul did not live with the false optimism that “everything would turn out all right for him.

But what this brave and purposeful man did was live with was hope...active, intentional, personal hope...a hope centered in the present...a hope imbedded in the heart-belief that his life still mattered. And that he still had a great deal to say about how life was going to be for him and those around him. Knowing full well that someday the cancer would overwhelm his body, Paul nonetheless lived each day with intentionality and purpose. He refused – and this is a key spiritual concept here – he refused to surrender his human “agency,”

He refused to prematurely surrender his human capacity to be a purposeful player in the world. Even as he grew sicker and weaker, as the cancer marched maliciously through his body, Paul actively and intelligently participated in his complicated medical treatment, working with the doctors to fight for his life, and maximize the quality and range of his days. As his health and strength allowed, Paul continued to work in his veterinary practice. He continued to care for and enjoy his family. He stayed engaged (and joyful) with his wide circle of friends. Like Melville’s brave whalers in that little swamped boat, for month after month, my friend Paul held high an imbecile candle in the heart. He was the brave standard-bearer of personal purpose and hope, refusing to allow his life to be over until his body could no longer keep up the fight.

One final story will make the spiritual strength of this man clear to you. It’s about the last time Paul and I were able to cycle together. Paul and I had been cycling buddies for many years, enjoying long and challenging bike rides whenever we managed to get together throughout the year. Our bike rides were always marked by much laughter – and not a little physical competitiveness between us. In any case, just months before he died, just after his latest round of powerful chemotherapy which had profoundly weakened him, Paul and his wife Debbie drove down from New Jersey – as they faithfully did every summer – and joined Collins and me at a rustic home we owned up in the beautiful rolling mountains of West Virginia. Paul absolutely loved cycling there – through the beautiful hills and valleys and hollows of Hardy County – and we always had a wonderful, athletic time in the mountains together.

Well...that last October of his life, Paul was so sick he was just a shell of his former physical self. When he stepped out of their car, as he arrived for the visit, I didn’t see how it would be possible for Paul to join us for a ride the next day, he was so obviously thin and weak. But – bless his brave and stubborn heart – he wanted desperately to get back up his bicycle and spin through those beautiful rolling mountains one last time. With excitement on his gaunt face he said, “Hey, Scott, obviously I can’t do any of the rides we usually enjoy here together, but is there a long downhill run where we could start at the top of a mountain and glide all the way down to the valley bottom?”

After thinking about the local terrain for a moment I said, “By God, Paul, yes there is! There is a beautiful long 10-mile downhill run that will take us through some of the most beautiful scenery in Hardy County!”

And so the next morning, Collins and I biked to the summit and at the pre-arranged hour Paul’s wife drove him and his bike up to join us. And by God we did that long, fast, beautiful downhill ride together, all the way to the Lost River Country Store down in the valley, where the four of us enjoyed a wonderful, hearty lunch. I will never forget watching Paul on that last ride – sick and skinny and struggling – but nonetheless speeding downhill like a 13-year-old boy, with a wide, happy grin on his face, and the wind tussling his hair in excitement.

That was, of course, the last time my dear friend Paul Gordon ever got on a bike...and there is a "Good Friday" sadness in that final memory of biking with Paul that nothing can take away for me.

But the larger spiritual point on this Easter Sunday – the larger spiritual point every one of us as Unitarian Universalists can take into our hearts this day -- is that we, like Paul, are human beings...human beings with agency and freedom! We are purposeful players in this creation who are always free, by God, to hope and to live purposefully and well for as long as we have breath and being. We are creatures of this earth who can always choose and act and be...to refuse to submit or surrender our agency and freedom as human beings...to hold an imbecile candle high up in our hearts.

We are always capable – like my hopeful, stubborn friend – always to remain a positive, purposeful presence in creation, no matter what befalls us. As long as we have breath...we can live...and live with hope and purpose and love. The hope that saves us and makes our lives vibrant purposeful and whole is the hope that comes alive only when we act, when we choose...when by sheer force of human will we live in the present moment with purpose and clarity, even in the face of doom itself.

Some may need more of a theological promise than that this Easter Sunday, but for my heart...that is enough...praise be...that is enough.

AMEN.