

It's Magic

a sermon by

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The Humboldt Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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Chalice Lighting

These Chalice Lighting Words come from UU Minister, the Rev. Robert Fulghum:

“I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge and that myth is more potent than history. I believe that dreams are more powerful than facts and that hope often triumphs over experience. I believe that laughter is the only cure for grief and that love is stronger than death.”

Spoken Reflection

These Words of Reflection are inspired by the late German Jesuit Karl Rhaner:

For many years I have tried to be open to many layers of meaning in every moment. I've tried to be mindful and awake in everything I do.

Of course, I have not always succeeded, but because my approach has been open, I have found in many experiences, people, theological approaches, spiritual practices, poems, songs, scientific insights and philosophies – beautiful pebbles of truth.

I have found nearly everything in my life can lead me to fuller understanding

I have found myself in an ongoing, imaginative conversation with the Mystery that makes me and it has brought me joy and peace.

I know this is not the only way to live. But I will tell you, it has made my heart grateful and glad.

- So in our own unique approaches – may each of us find ways to make our hearts grateful and glad. And may our gratitude and gladness make us just a little easier to live with.

For that is how we will be blessed – Be a blessing to others – And in truth be able to say: Blessed Be! And Amen.

Sermon

For many of us Halloween is one of the best holidays ever. And I have heard from many people here, both members and non-members, that the Humboldt UU Halloween Festival is a particularly wonderful event.

I know it takes a lot of energy to stage this event, and I know those who are organizing it can use all the help they can get. But I want to assure you I am not here today in order to persuade you to help.

What I want to do is to think about the role of imagination and mythology, metaphor and magic in our lives.

We cannot kid ourselves. Being alive and conscious in the universe is often a powerful experience that defies our desire to have everything ordered and neat.

As the poet G.K. Chesterton says –

It is something to have wept as we have wept. It is something to have done as we have done. It is something to have watched while others slept – and seen the stars that never see the sun.

It is something to have smelled the mystic rose – although it breaks and leaves the thorny rod. It is something to have hungered once as those must hunger who have ate the bread of Gods.

In the presence of the awesome and sometimes fearsome Power of Life – what you Humboldt UU folks have done is affirm your full, multi-dimensional humanity. In your Covenant you say:

We join together to further our spiritual, rational, emotional and aesthetic natures drawing from inner and outer sources of truth.

You affirm that reason is important but that life contains more than our reason can define and when we open our minds to multiple ways of seeing and looking at the world, we find our spirits enlivened, refreshed and re-filled with a love for living.

Using dreams and art, using intuition and myth and metaphor can be tricky though.

Because of our history, we Unitarian Universalists have inherited a certain mistrust of myth, metaphor and the magic they sometimes bring about. Our forebears experienced the misuse of religious stories. And we, ourselves, have surely seen the myths and metaphors of Jewish and Christian scripture misapplied.

So the Book of Revelations is often misused to predict the imminent end of the world. The Story of Sodom and Gomorrah is often misused to condemn homosexuality. And the ancient stories in the Book of Genesis are often misused as if they were scientific fact.

But we don't just see Christianity misused. We've seen new age snake oil salesmen sell crystals and Ouija Boards and any number of elixirs and incantations.

So – if we Unitarian Universalists have a bit of a struggle around myth, metaphor and magic – it is no surprise.

But we are still alive in an awesome and fearsome universe that defies neat linear logic. And in my experience, the real trouble does not lie in the creative use of our imagination. It lies in the literal, rigid, hyper-controlling, narrow-minded use of anything – including science.

Post the horrors of World War II, when I was growing up in the San Joaquin Valley, we farm families hoped that science, which brought us the Atomic Bomb – was also going to somehow save us from ourselves in every way.

So in my beloved Valley big fertilizer and pesticide companies sold science like snake oil. – Their mantra was better farming through chemicals. My dad and my friends' dads put tremendous trust in the magical results those companies' products brought about.

They literally said: *Oh these companies would not sell us this stuff if it were dangerous.*

During that time, a person could drive from grove to grove in Tulare County and not see a weed. A person could go to the super market anywhere in the country and buy beautiful oranges without a single bug mark.

And now 60 years later women in the Valley suffer disproportionately from breast cancer and men from prostate cancer and Parkinson's Disease.

And now, in the Valley the air in many areas is unbreathable and the ground water is undrinkable because both air and water are saturated with toxic chemicals.

We are alive in a flowing, pulsing, ever-changing interconnected web of being – and, though through science there are many ways in which we can, indeed, live better - there are consequences to everything we do and there still is no cure for aging and death. Pain, suffering and hard labor are still and will always be part of life.

And we human beings are and always will be multi-dimensional in our make up. We are not robots. We are not rational, logical performance machines. We are sacred, living, breathing, sensing, dreaming, imaginative beings – with reason as one of the many tools at our disposal.

One of the misuses of science or of quasi-science that troubles my heart most is place that Standardized Testing has been granted in our public schools. Fortunately, I believe, the tide is beginning to turn on that front – but for years, children have been subjected to testing abuse. Teachers have been demeaned with it. And, in the public square the sacred endeavor of educating young human beings has been profaned.

No wonder Linus waits for the Great Pumpkin.

When the movie Star Wars first came out in 1977 I went swimming one day with a friend. My friend was in full consciousness mode and began communicating with a garden snail he'd found on the edge of the pool. Letting it crawl on his hand, he really examined it – he marveled how it was made and how it moved. He marveled at the universe alive and sentient in snail form.

As I watched him, I could not help thinking about the Space Bar scene in the Star Wars movie. Remember all the amazing creatures there? – But we don't have to have to go to a Space Bar to encounter mind-expanding life forms, do we? We only have to open our eyes and ears, minds and hearts right where we are.

Norbert Capek – our Czechoslovakian Unitarian brother who was martyred in World War II says: *Delicate beings – Lacewing and Sparrow, in field and forest, clover and yarrow – Life within Life – Inner Light gently glowing – Surely we seem to be God's vision growing!*

We Unitarian Universalists surely have seen and experienced myth and imagination misused by rigid, narrow, harmful misapplication. So we are proud of saying “We belong to a way of faith wherein we do not have to park our mind at the door.”

But Capek reminds us – we can also be proud to be part of a faith where we can say “Neither do we have to park our heart or our imagination, our creative use of myth or use of metaphor at the door.”

The late David Brower, founder of the Sierra Club, said when we walk in nature, we can experience times when we lose our separation from it and we can understand that while we are walking in nature, we are walking in our own hearts.

In shadow as well as in light as well – in beautiful forests and in the depressed inner cities as well - we can lose our separation from the web of being. We can understand we are walking in our own hearts. Then in powerful imagination we can understand that we share the mystery of being with other people everywhere and with all things living.

Myth, metaphor, poetry, imagination, art, music – They are not meant to be understood literally. They are, instead, meant to be experienced and felt and integrated into our understanding of what it is to be alive.

G.K. Chesterton again says: *Lo and blessed are our eyes for they have seen. And blessed are our ears for they have heard. Let lightning break on human beast and bird!!! And thunder! It is something to have been.*

It is impossible for any of us to fully express what living feels like and means to us, but in art and dance, in poetry and myth, in metaphor and music, in architecture and dance we try. And in your Humboldt UU Covenant you affirm that attempt. You say:

We join together to further our spiritual, rational, emotional and aesthetic natures drawing from inner and outer sources of truth.

What does that mean in practice? Well, at least in part it means when some other religious traditions won't go near Halloween because they fear it might lead folks to the devil – You have a gentle little festival.

You open your hearts and minds to metaphor and fancy and non-linear ways of knowing and experiencing things

Years ago at the UU Church in Berkeley there was a big UU Psychic Symposium. I was in seminary at the time and Edie and I were serving as the Berkeley UU custodians.

As I was cleaning up after the event one of the presenters asked if I would like it if she read my aura.

You gotta know – I don't put a lot of stock in that sort of thing – but her invitation offered me an opportunity to stop emptying trash cans for a while so I said "Sure. I'd love it if you'd read my aura."

So I sat in a chair and relaxed and this lady read my aura.

“Wow!” she said. “You have a bright, warm, yellow white light at your center. It is very powerful. But it is surrounded by an almost equally powerful blue band of control. Your light feels like it’s struggling to ever get out. Do you think maybe you are bound pretty tightly by some things?”

“Well,” I told her. “I don’t know about your ability to see auras. I don’t even know if I believe in that sort of things. But I gotta tell you – you have absolutely seen my inner condition. I have a powerful light inside that I truly love and want to serve. And without totally losing form and function – I really hope, I can learn to loosen up and relax and let that light out more and more.”

Loosening up. Relaxing. Opening in gentle ways to let our light out. That’s part of what we’re up to here in the Humboldt UU Fellowship – and part of what the Halloween Festival is about.

Being less fearful. More trusting. More creative.

Myth and Metaphor – Imagination, Dream, Fantasy – those things are not the enemy of our hearts or our minds.

Rigidity is. Hyper-control is. Manipulation of our tender, vulnerable spirits is.

It takes us a lifetime to learn the right balance. But the good news is that the fire of life never goes away. It is persistent.

So I close with a story.

Eddie’s and my daughter-in-law, Michelle, has a scientific mind. She’s a beautiful young woman with lovely, generous heart. She’s a terrific mother. Spiritually, she is a liberal Roman Catholic – so she’s comfortable with myth and metaphor – And... I will mention again – she has a scientific mind

And how (you may ask) does her scientist part work with the mother part?

Well, as it turns out, American mothers and daughters are besieged at this time with Princess imagery.

There’s Snow White and Cinderella to be sure. But also Ariel, the Little Mermaid. Belle from Beauty and the Beast. There’s Jasmine from the Story of Aladdin. And Aurora from Sleeping Beauty.

Princesses, as you know, require an endless number of accoutrements: Tiaras, Wands, Sparkly Shoes, Sequined Gowns, Gloves, Be-jeweled Handbags.

And Princesses behave and talk in particular ways –

They don't say "Hi" – they say "Hello"

They don't do chores – they say "Perhaps the maid will do that."

And they are particularly snotty to their little sisters.

Well, not long ago, our daughter in law Michelle's oldest – our granddaughter Avery – was totally immersed in Princess fantasy. She was behaving and talking like a Princess 24/7 until Michelle had just had it.

So she declared a new rule in the house. There would not be any more marathon princess stuff. Princess Yahtzee was OK. Princess dress up was allowed for an hour every afternoon. But outside those boundaries, Princess behavior and Princess talk was done for. – Not allowed!

There ensued several exhausting days of boundary setting – complete with wailing and protests. But Mom and the boundaries finally prevailed. Several more days went by with pretty solid compliance with the new rules.

And then... after baths and story one evening...as Avery was drifting off to sleep. She looked up at her Mom and said: "You're so beautiful – Your Highness."

Myth. Metaphor. Magic. The Fire of Life. It isn't ever going to leave us alone. Happy Halloween Festival.

Discussion –

Science, Myth, Metaphor, - - Halloween Festival...we have time for a little discussion.

Choir - Elisabeth and the Choir will now grace us with a song.

Extinguishing the Chalice Closing Words and Closing Song

I now invite you to join hands for the Closing Words and Closing Song...

Closing Words –

I heard this past week on KHSU – that new studies show that, contrary to what we previously thought, ancient redwoods, at their hearts, continue to grow faster and continue to sequester more carbon, than we ever thought possible.

Oh may that be true – I said to myself.

May it be true of us human beings too. May all of us redwoods but particularly us ancient old redwoods of the human race continue to grow and thrive and clean the air. May we continue to do our part for the planet and all things living. And at our cores be vital beyond all expectation.

Now as we go....may we go in peace.