

A Place for Myth and Fantasy

One of the many things I like about being in the Unitarian Universalist fold is that we can take a joke about ourselves. There is a whole genre of UU jokes, it seems; none of which I'm going to tell today. But I get a kick out of a parody one of our now long retired UU ministers, Rev. Chris Raible, did with the song *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*. The parody is not of the song itself. Instead, the joke is on us and our penchant for factuality when it comes to religious matters. If I could sing this I would, but you're much better off settling for a spoken version. It picks up on some of what I spoke to last Sunday, and it's my point of departure for today.

Anyway, here's goes:

God rest you Unitarians, let nothing you dismay
Remember there's no evidence there was a Christmas Day
When Christ was born is just not known, no matter what they say
Good tidings of reason and fact; reason and fact.
Good tidings of reason and fact.

There was no star of Bethlehem; there was no angel song.
There could have been no wise men for the journey was too long.
The stories in the Bible are historically wrong.
Good tidings of reason and fact; reason and fact.
Good tidings of reason and fact.

Much of our Christmas custom come from Persia and from Greece.
From solstice celebrations of the ancient Middle East.
We know this so-call holiday is but a pagan feast.
Good tidings of reason and fact; reason and fact.
Good tidings of reason and fact.

Chris Raible is being playful here in order to make a valid point—that reason and fact alone are a pretty thin stew when it comes to experiencing any kind of “good tidings” in the Season that celebrates joy and hope and peace and love. These are the four themes, as also noted last Sunday, of the Advent season—and, as I said then, one certainly need not be a Christian desire these four things both in one's personal life and in our world.

I would further point out that expressions of good tidings can just as likely be found in the realms of mythology and mystery and fantasy, than in the worlds of reason and fact. And that realm is one we religious liberals have, as I've long known now, mixed feelings about. One of the oft-cited reasons I hear as to why people join a UU church is "I want to get away from all that mythology I'm supposed to believe in. I like to come to a church where I don't have to check my brains at the door." I can appreciate that. One of the things that does draw some of our members and friends to us is a desire to escape mythology that is offered as fact, or as the basis for dogma. I'm glad we can provide a haven in that regard.

However—and you know there's a "however" coming here—while we don't check our brains at the door, we bring much more than just our brains through the door. I'm not just up here speaking to an assemblage of brains—which, come to think of it, would look pretty weird. No, the truth is we bring our whole selves, our whole lives, here: Our feeling selves, our wondering selves, our selves that are in need of good tidings of comfort and joy and of hope and of healing. I happen to believe there is a place, an important and valued place in our liberal religious community, for legend and stories and mythology when it comes to offering such good tidings.

I'm aware that mythology is powerful stuff; and like a lot of powerful stuff, it needs to be handled with care. In the late 1980s, a television series on this topic—which ran on PBS—became something of a cultural phenomenon. It was a series of sit-down conversations between Bill Moyers and the now late, Dr. Joseph Campbell called "The Power of Myth." Campbell had spent most of his life quietly in academia—a lot of it as a Professor of Religious Studies and Mythology at New York's Sarah Lawrence College. He died not long after the series aired, which still left enough time for him to become something of a folk hero, and close out his life with some flair. The popularity of the series made a very strong statement about the continuing interest in and need for mythology and fantasy even among secularists.

So, let's run with Campbell for a few minutes. His contention was that myths—whatever the particular religious or cultural language in which they're told—are metaphors about human life and the human experience. On the surface they describe supposedly external, and quite fantastical, events: The creation of a world by God or gods; a birth (virgin or otherwise) that comes from the union of an earthly and divine parents; a death followed by a resurrection; a hero or heroine who is also a savior of humanity. These are

common themes or stories in many of the world's religious traditions, present and past.

According to Campbell these are really stories about something going on within us, "in here" right now rather than in some fanciful past. As he put it, "Myths are stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance... We all need help in our passages from birth to life and then to death... Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of life."

Campbell was both a student and an interpreter of Dr. Carl Jung, and it was from Jung that he got the idea that the deepest, or ultimate, origins of mythology are in what Jung called the "collective unconscious." Some of you may have picked this up in a psych class somewhere, but let's take a quick trip around the track with it. We each have our conscious level, which is what we're aware of, or thinking about, in our waking moments. You are each and all operating on your conscious level right now—unless you're asleep in which case you wouldn't know what I'm saying anyhow; or you're into a really deep daydream. That's OK, just go with it.

Below your waking consciousness—to use a spatial metaphor—is your personal unconscious. This is where you store all your personal memories, experiences, desires, fears, urges, hopes, compulsions, and the like. Some of that personal unconscious you dip into frequently and some you may not want to get too near at all. Most post-traumatic stress, whether from the battleground or other sources, comes from what's been stored in one's personal unconscious—and which needs, in some way, to be set free.

Some of you may remember the now long discontinued comic strip *Outland*. One of the characters in that strip, a fellow called Binkley, had this closet in his room that he was always afraid to open because of all the weird and crazy stuff that came out whenever he did. Now I know it was just a comic strip, but Binkley's closet was really his personal unconscious. It's the place where each of us store our personal stuff. Some of that stuff is pleasant, and a joy to bring back to consciousness; a lot of it is mundane; some of it can be frightful and scary.

Then, according to Jung—and Campbell—there's one more step we take down to what's called the "collective unconscious." This is the Binkley's closet of the whole human race; our common closet as it were, where all the collective stuff of humanity resides. Carl Jung's father was a Lutheran

minister. That was the home setting in which he was raised before pursuing a career, in the very new at that time, field of psychology. And Jung came to notice that when some of his clients would describe their dreams there were certain common symbols, themes, and motifs in them. He further came to notice that some of these same themes, symbols, and motifs were found in the stories and myths of various religions—including the faith in which he'd originally been inculcated.

So Jung concluded that dreams and mythologies are ultimately rooted in this common closet of humankind. The content of myths, as already noted, will vary from one culture to another, but some of the same fundamental motifs dealing with the mysteries of birth, life, death, and certain forms of rebirth and renewal—all the things that we as a human race celebrate and hope for and fear—are common to all of them. Myths then, draw from a common human pool of memory and thought. They tell us about who we are, about how we find meaning, about our deepest hopes, longings, and fears.

So myths are only lies when they are offered as facts. To treat them uniformly as lies is, in Dr. Campbell's words, to get "stuck in the metaphor," rather than looking past the metaphor and allowing it to speak to you about your relationship to yourself and to all the rest of Life—to letting it touch you in some realm of your being beyond reason and fact.

An irony here is that the two types of persons most susceptible to getting trapped or stuck in the metaphor are fundamentalists and hard core secularists: Fundamentalists because they have a need for a myth to be—in their mind—factually correct in order to take any meaning from it; and secularists who dismiss myths as lies because they have little, if any, factual base.

Try coming at it this way: When you stand in front of a painting, done in any kind of style, you probably do not ask "Is this painting true or false?" or "Did this painting really happen?" Such questions miss the point of the artist's work. The relevant questions are: Does this painting touch me? Does it pull me out of myself? Does it give me a sense of connection to the rest of Life and the rest of Being of which I'm but a small part? This is what mythology as well as art and poetry and music and literature all do at their best. They take us out of ourselves and give us greater sense of connection to all that is, to all of Being. And myths are also like poetry or art or music or literature in that some types of each move and inspire us greatly while other

types don't do much for us at all. What catches one person, that is to say, when it comes to mythology or art or poetry or music, does not catch another—which is why we need a wide variety of each and all.

So then, how about some of the more fanciful stories, myths, and legends of this season. Are there ways they might touch us? I can offer a few suggestions, which you may make of as you will.

The myth or legend of the birth of Jesus does carry a message about the birth of hope in the midst of need and want and in rather desperate circumstances. According to Campbell the virgin birth stories that are common to a number of faith and mythological traditions are really about the human need for a spiritual awakening or regeneration at some point in our lives after our natural births have happened. They are about our need for a rebirth of spirit, and have nothing to do with biology.

The gifts borne by mythological magi to a mythological child speak, I feel, to a deep seated human need for generosity and sharing—and of a human desire to see at least some of the wealth of the world made available to those in most need of it, in order that we may truly be a human family.

The legend of King Herod ordering the deaths of infants under a certain age, even with its dubious historicity, is really about some of the deep seated fears that even the most powerful and mighty have of anything they see, however meager, that poses a supposed threat to their power and might; and how they lash at on the basis of those fears of their inadequacy. Think on that one.

I'll return to this theme in my Christmas Eve homily. For today I'll close with a story from our own Unitarian Universalist lore. The story itself, as best I can determine, is historically true. But it's also about what can happen, and what needs to happen, when we can allow ourselves to be touched by certain things that exist somewhere beyond the realms of reason and fact.

It's a story about the 19th century lyric poet, and Unitarian, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. If you've ever visited, or been to a worship service, at the First Parish—Unitarian Universalist—Church of Portland, Maine you can see the Longfellow pew, still marked as such, in their sanctuary where Henry and his family would sit.

The story I tell here comes from a very tragic and desperate time in Longfellow's life.

It was during the Civil War and Longfellow was in a very low state of mind and spirit. Whether or not it was a clinical depression is hard to determine, but he was in a pretty bad place emotionally and psychologically and spiritually. In 1861 his wife had died in a horribly tragic accident after being burned all over when a candle she'd lit to light up their home one evening caught her clothes and hair on fire. In trying to save her, Henry himself was so badly burned that he was unable to attend her funeral. The reason you see most pictures of him with a full beard is because he grew it to cover the scars on his face that the fire had left him with.

Then on the heels of this personal tragedy came the Civil War. Longfellow was a fervent abolitionist, but he was hoping that the slavery issue, as well as the other matters that divided North from South, could be resolved in a peaceful, non-violent way. The violence of the war disturbed him greatly; and this, too, became a personal concern when his son, Charles, went off to join the Union Army. Charles was severely wounded in battle and sent home to his father, not knowing if he would recover or die. It was as he nursed his son—who in time did recover—that Longfellow found himself dealing with his own crises of faith. It was not only about whether or not he could continue to believe in the God in whom he'd been trusting, but whether there was any kind of hope for humanity to turn from its warring ways and seek the ways of peace.

It was in the midst of his emotional and spiritual pain that he heard bells announcing the arrival of Christmas Day in Portland, Maine. On the grounds of reason and fact alone, Longfellow had very little to be hopeful about. But the sound of the bells, and his recollection of the story that promises peace on earth and good will to all, reached him on some other level—those levels I was speaking of earlier. So he did what practically any poet would do in that situation. He wrote a poem, and he wrote it from somewhere in his being that needed good tidings of something other than reason and fact.

The language and lyric style of the poem is that of mid-19th century New England, and it reflects mid-19th century New England Unitarianism as well. But while written within the context of a particular religious faith at a particular point in time, it points to a universal longing that both

encompasses and transcends the bound of any one faith, or any one time or any one place.

The things that drove Longfellow to despair, sadly enough, have not gone away. They continue to challenge us, and challenge our faith stances, today—whatever our faith may be and however we may give voice to it. Longfellow wrote of the reconciled world that all persons of faith yearn for and continue to work for. If we are to keep on working for a more just and peaceful world, we certainly cannot turn our eyes, ears, and minds away from the facts—the often painful—facts of our world, and our nation. But we also need to hear the stories, the fanciful stories, and the poetry and the music that will touch our souls and that will continue to give us hope and courage along the way. With that in mind let's sing together the words one of our spiritual ancestors penned over 150 years ago.

Stephen D. Edington
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