

“Recovering from Deaths of Those We have Loved”

Easter Sermon by Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, March 23, 2008

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

Easter is a difficult holiday for many Unitarian Universalists to appreciate. When I was a boy, Easter bonnets and Sunday finery gave us cover, separating us from the (to us) unbelievable claim of resurrection. To this day some UUs celebrate Easter-lite, a holy day whose roots are Christian. Most UU celebrants of Easter really don't take it seriously.

The revelation that many of Easter's cultural elements were pagan in origin titillates agnostic scoffers who know better what they don't believe than what they do. Recognizing universal (universal at least in the northern hemisphere) celebrations of the annual emergence of spring at this time of year, UU's have de-theologized the holy day until it has become just a flower festival in many UU churches.

Such a holy day is Easter in name only, with no Maundy Thursday, no Good Friday and no Easter Eve or Holy Saturday. When self-defined Pagans (with a capital “P”) began appearing in UU churches in significant numbers, even the Christian roots of the holiday came to be challenged. We now have three-in-one celebrations, the Christian Easter, the Pagan Ostara, and the Humanist flower festival. The partners in this unholy trinity don't always sleep together well. What to do?

I'd like to suggest that our Pagans present an Ostara on a Sunday morning, thick with the symbolism of their rediscovered religion, and invite UU non-Pagans to look on and take part as they can. How about next year?

I like unabashed celebrations of spring. The church will do an intergenerational May Day celebration on Sunday, May 4th, when the religious education folk will have a May Pole. We'll also have a flower communion the second Sunday in June with RE teacher recognition.

But this morning it's Easter. I know that for many of us the Easter story is unreal and distant. I also know that when people we love die it's a difficult time for all of us. Easter is about that. I'm going to talk about the hope and love Easter has engendered for people for 2,000 years, based on what I believe was an understandable confusion about natural grief processes and how they affect people. I'll talk about some of the kinds of experiences many people have that seldom get talked about, and how they help grieving folk cope with the loss of people they loved.

As most of you know, I don't consider myself Christian. However, I have great respect for the Christian tradition, its ethical teachings and how many Christians have been transformed by their beliefs as they try to live in ways that reflect the power, love and courage I also see in Jesus.

The miracles are something else. As a religious naturalist, I don't believe the laws of nature can be broken for spiritual purposes. I believe there was a man named Jesus who had a profound effect on a small band of followers. After he died they went through grief. It transformed them and they emerged with a hope so powerful that it changed the course of human history. I think it was grounded in natural events that often are explained with supernatural color. I don't think the resurrection and other miracles are needed to explain the power and love that emerged.

A few years ago Princeton Survey Research Associates released a poll to Newsweek magazine showing that 84% of Americans believe in miracles. Almost half say they have experienced or witnessed one. Interestingly only 79% said they believe in the reality of the miracles described in the Bible. Some 5% of believers apparently think they happen now but

didn't happen then. Almost all those in America who believe in miracles are Christians (90%). They include 98% of all evangelicals; I'm amazed that 2% apparently don't believe in miracles but hang out with evangelicals anyway. Of the believers, 67% say they pray to God or a saint for miracles, "mainly for a cure or recovery for a loved one in a health crisis."

This great faith in miracles reminds me of a blooper that recently appeared in the newsletter of a fundamentalist church. It said "The sermon this morning is 'Jesus Walks on the Water.' The sermon tonight is 'Searching for Jesus.'" I say they wouldn't have to search for him if he would quit that walking on water stuff. It's risky business.

One of my UU colleagues and friends, the late Rev. Jack Kent, wrote a book 9 years ago titled *The Psychological Origins of the Resurrection Myth*. Published in England, the book now is available for \$16 new or \$8.50 used from Amazon.com. You can read the review I wrote for Amazon.com's website. I recommend it highly. Jack's naturalistic thesis is that all of the appearances of Jesus reported to have happened after his crucifixion were examples of a normal grief process. According to British psychologist Dr. W. Dewi Rees,

contemporary psychological researchers have documented that 50% of all people in serious grief will experience one or more of five grief-related illusions. They are: (1) Seeing an appearance of the deceased and, sometimes, having a conversation with that appearance. (2) Feeling that the deceased is within the person who was close to the deceased. (3) Feeling that the deceased is just around those who are living, for example in the house or in a garden. (4) Hearing the presence of the deceased in one's house or at other places. (5) Feeling that one has touched the deceased or been touched by the deceased.

Jack Kent points out in his book that "four out of the five illusions are either in the Gospels or they can be inferred from the data in the Gospels." He shows how the appearances meet all the criteria used by modern-day psychologists in describing grief-stricken people.

Of course at the time of Jesus, there were no psychologists studying and treating people. Those who reported the experiences of the disciples and the early women followers of Jesus like Mary Magdalene, could only tell about what happened in terms that made sense in their day. They had no way of distinguishing between feelings of grief and the reality of everyday life. Still they did a good job as reporters. The details are there for anyone who wants to read and apply modern standards to their words in order to understand what might have happened.

Interestingly the Bible says Jesus appeared to only some of his followers even in the presence of others--just as about half of all people experiencing serious grief have similar experiences today. If the Gospels claimed all his disciples and followers saw him, the stories would have less credibility. Does the report that many of Jesus' closest followers saw and heard and walked with him after his death mean that it really happened that way? No. It means that they experienced it that way and were influenced by it to become more dedicated followers and preachers.

If you believe in miracles, it's only natural that you might understand the Christian resurrection story in literal terms. I would expect most Americans to understand it that way. If you believe that everything, living as well as inanimate, is subject to the same natural laws that do not allow for any variance, you have to explain the resurrection appearances in another way. The grief process makes sense to me.

Remember, not even the Bible claims that anyone saw the resurrection. It only says that Jesus' followers had experiences of him after he had died, after his tomb was found empty. We would expect them to happen to some of them, given what we know about grief.

This became real to me some years ago when a member of my church who had lost her

husband told me of seeing him and feeling him close to her weeks after his memorial service. “Am I going crazy?” she asked me. “It really felt like he was there.” I told her about the studies by psychologists in grief work showing that half of all people losing someone they loved have experiences similar to hers. She was relieved.

I got her a book by San Diego State professor Stephen Shuchter, *Dimensions of Grief* (1986, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco) that Jack Kent had used in his research for the *Psychological Origins of the Resurrection Myth*. After reading it she said she felt much better.

My step-daughter-in-law Valerie Wilkinson had a similar experience with the appearance of her husband’s father after his death. It had a great effect on her life. She said she woke up in the middle of a night and found him sitting on the bed a few inches from her. Her husband Brian, my step-son, lay asleep at her side the entire time.

Valerie wrote about this in a book, *Whispers from Our Soul* that was subsequently published by Hampton Roads Press. In the book she said her father-in-law Ken spoke to her that night, saying he “came to tell me of his pride at [my husband’s] accomplishments and his belief in our future. He said many beautiful and comforting things.”

Her experience was more than a year after Ken’s death, later than the usual two months following a death in which people often report visions. She says it happened at a time when she was vulnerable, experiencing a lot of self-doubt and it helped her deal with that.

Shuchter recounted many such reports from people in his book: Amalia, one of his patients, reported that she “frequently felt her husband’s presence. ‘I feel him covering me,’” she said. “At night she was frightened and had her children sleep in her bedroom. ‘I hear him opening the refrigerator at night like he always did.’”

Another patient, Marie, “saw her deceased husband walk into her bedroom and they had a brief conversation with one another. This exchange was so real that Marie could easily have believed that her husband was actually alive,” said Dr. Shuchter. Here’s her story:

Before Oscar died, he had a collection of coins to be given to his children. One night Marie woke to find Oscar in the room putting away the coins. ‘I’ll tell you, Dr. Shuchter, if I didn’t know he was dead, I’d swear to God he was very much alive. It seemed to me he walked in the bedroom and stood in the bedroom door. I looked up and I saw him standing in the door, and he was reaching up like onto this place to get the lighter fluid for his lighter. He looked at me and said ‘Don’t worry, I’m just going to lock it up in the desk.’ I said ‘A lot of people come in here.’ Then one of my kids said, ‘Mom, who are you talking to?’ Now that’s just how much alive he looked to me.

A widower, Earl reported after his wife’s death “A lot of the time, if I’m watching the crowds at a football game or a baseball game, a person looks like her and the crowd is just passing by pretty swiftly, but I know it isn’t her, but it’s a person that looks like her.”

Let me tell you about my experience of the death of my father—a powerful experience that was, however, different from normal grief. One morning I awoke with such a powerful memory of his death that I went into uncontrollable weeping. I cried for hours as my wife comforted me, held me, asked what was happening. This went on for over five hours.

Suddenly I sat upright with a start and remembered that my father hadn’t died yet, at least as far as I knew. But his death felt as real to me as anything I have ever known. My grief doesn’t fit Shuchter’s categories. I know now that I was identifying Dad with another man whom I had been counseling who had died the previous Sunday. Some kind of short circuit in my brain twisted my

experience into the palpable feeling of my father's death. I'll tell you it was very interesting two weeks later when I saw my father next.

Back to Shuchter's explanation of grief processes:

The mind and body of the newly bereaved are so driven to retrieve the loved one who has died that most people, during the early weeks and months of bereavement, have experiences where they believe they have seen, heard, touched, smelled, or felt the presence of their spouses. They may be aware that what they are experiencing is an illusion or hallucination, but that does not detract from the 'realness' of the sensation. The contact takes different forms: searching and waiting for the loved one, experiencing external sensory evidence of his [or her] presence, or sensing [her or his] his presence from within. In other instances the bereaved may talk or write to their dead spouses.... Bereavement is probably the only common experience where these 'symptoms' are not considered particularly pathological. On the one hand, they are distortions of reality and evidence of disordered thinking. On the other hand, in the context of the mental and emotional turmoil of bereavement, they are considered 'normal' experiences--regular and normative (statistically) occurrences among 'normal' people undergoing enormous stress.

Was someone really there? Jack Kent and Steven Shuchter would say no. On the other hand, many people who have had such experiences would argue with them. The disciples who missed Jesus deeply and were traumatized by his death and the temporary challenge to their faith would have said they were wrong.

By the standards of science, such events are illusions, like my experience of my father's death. Is there life after death? That's a matter of belief. Science can't observe it. Does that mean it can't exist in some form? Whether illusion or reality it has the power to change people's lives, reassure them, point them to expectations about their own deaths, and propel them into religions with others who agree with them.

While I see illusion as part of the normal grief process for many people and I welcome it as a means of helping us through one of the hardest experiences of life, I cannot be sure what is happening. After all, 84% of all Americans think I'm wrong. They believe in and expect miracles.

One thing is sure. This experience of the deceased returning, even for only a brief time, isn't just spring welcoming the annual renewal of the earth in the same way that dormant plants come back to life. It's a real Easter event, an experience of the loved one alive again, for those whom grief visits with this remarkable power.

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