

«Confidence Rock and the Universe Coin»

Sermon by Holly Lux-Sullivan, March 15, 2009

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

To mark the winter solstice and the turning of the year, I went to a session of prayer yoga in which the instructor gave each of us two rocks: just plain river rocks, worn smooth, of varying sizes and shapes. She told us to select one rock and focus on putting all the worries and turmoil of the year into the rock; we were giving our troubles up to the earth itself, to its solid safety, and letting them out of our own bodies and hearts, if we could. We each then took those rocks, endowed with our troubles, to the front of the room and created a pile beside a candle. The yoga teacher would carry those rocks – and our worries – away for us, and we gratefully accepted her loving act.

The second rock we got to keep. Holding this rock, the teacher said, we were to concentrate on what we hoped to experience or learn in the coming year, what we hoped the new year would bring to our lives. Set an intention, she said.

I decided that this year I would cultivate confidence in myself, inspired largely by my work as a hospital chaplain. I spent the first few months as a chaplain second-guessing myself at every turn, operating from a very fearful place. I hoped that I could move forward from that fearful state and be a better chaplain as a result. So as I held this simple rock in my warm hands, I put into it the intention to be more confident, to trust myself more. The next day, I plopped that rock into the pocket of my jeans, and I've carried it around with me ever since. When I see it or, even more so, when I touch it, it reminds me to believe in myself.

That same month, I went with my family to a museum exhibition of China's terra cotta army – the life-sized warriors and servants made at the command of King Ying Zheng. He ruled in the third century BCE, and in addition to being king of a province, declared himself to be emperor – not just of China, but of all creation, up to and including the universe itself. His was the Qin dynasty, the first dynasty of a unified China. He used his military might and considerable ambition to unite the Chinese states, and the people he enslaved built the Great Wall.

The terra cotta army I mentioned is the huge force he had made to accompany him in the afterlife. Being a ruthless, seemingly heartless ruler has its costs: He had many enemies during his reign on Earth, so he anticipated death to be no different. He had thousands of people killed or enslaved. Some accounts say he thought he would live for all eternity, but it seems he wanted to hedge his bet and make sure that, if he did die, he would be properly protected from the angry spirits of those whose lives he had destroyed or ended.

One of Zheng's great accomplishments was standardizing money. The museum sold replicas of his coins, with Chinese script telling the money's value on one side and cranes on the other. The coins are round, with a square hole in the middle. The coin is round to represent the entirety of the universe; the square hole represents the Earth. For the emperor, it was symbolic of his rule over, well, everything.

For *me*, however, this coin represents the oneness of Creation and my belief in the natural world as holy. It reminds me that I am a part of that Creation, that I am not an island unto myself and I don't have to try to be. It, too, rides around in my pocket, reminding me that I am not in charge and the responsibility for the world is no more mine than it is anybody else's. Keeping the emperor's delusions of eternal grandeur in mind also serves, sometimes, to keep me humble. Yet by creating his clay army to protect himself, Zheng was doing what I'm doing when I carry my coin: connecting to something larger than ourselves.

Come Tuesday, we'll see people sporting pins and hats and socks and everything else you can slap a four-leaf clover onto and sell to celebrate St. Patrick's Day. Though the crass commercialism of the holidays is a sign of our times, the four-leaf clover's status as a good-luck charm has roots in ancient Druid rituals. The priests believed the rarity of the four-leaf clover gave it power to ward off bad spirits that would do their people harm. Christianity eventually co-opted it, saying the leaves are for the Father, Son, Holy Ghost, and God's grace. Today, if you ask what four-leaf clovers mean, you may hear the leaves stand for hope, faith, love and luck.

I don't consider myself a superstitious person, but I *have* surrounded myself with tokens for protection, courage, reassurance – and not just these two. On my desk at the newspaper is an “evil eye” from Turkey to ward off bad spirits. A turtle reminds me that the weight of the world does not rest on my shoulders because, as the Wyandot Indian legend goes, the earth sits on the back of a turtle. It also reminds me that sometimes it's okay to curl up in my shell and hide.

In my car hangs a medallion of St. Christopher, the patron saint of travelers. You may notice that I'm not Catholic. But a few years ago, when I totaled my truck in a wreck, a friend gave me that medallion to keep me safe on my 25-mile commute, so St. Christopher rides with me still.

More or less since humans started walking the earth, we have believed in the power of things – objects, animals, trees – to touch and affect our lives. Rabbit's feet. Four-leaf clovers. The penny you found heads-up on the sidewalk. Your father's dog tags. Your mother's wedding dress. We wear symbols of faith: stars of David, chalices, crosses – to identify ourselves as believers and to remind ourselves we are not alone. We wear rings on our fingers to symbolize our fidelity to a significant other – and I know at least one woman who refuses to take hers off, ever, even for surgery, because its symbolism is too important to her.

Friday's date was the 13th, the second Friday the 13th in as many months. Christianity frowned on the Norse goddess Frigga, the goddess of marriage and fertility. She was demonized and, the story goes, banished to a mountaintop, where she met weekly with a council made up of her, 11 friends, and the devil: 13 entities. These bad spirits planned awful things to happen for the coming week. It was Frigga's Day, the contraction of which becomes our word, “Friday.”

In Christianity itself, of course, it turned out to be a very bad idea to have 13 people dining at a table because that's how many were at the Last Supper. Personally, this take on the fear of the number 13 itself baffles me because – and I'm no biblical scholar here – I think all 12 apostles and Jesus probably ate together many times before the Last Supper, and at none of those meals did anything upsetting enough occur that it was recorded in the gospels. Nonetheless, some people have feared – and avoided – having 13 people seated at a table together, lest one of them die a horrible, imminent death.

I said I don't consider myself a superstitious person. That's really what we're talking about, isn't it? Four-leaf clovers give you luck, Friday the 13th is an unlucky, or even evil, day. Superstition is believing that a circumstance or event or thing holds some power to affect our lives, believing in something despite evidence or reason.

Famed 19th-century orator and agnostic Robert Ingersoll says, in an 1898 address, that superstition is “to believe in miracles, spells and charms, in dreams and prophecies. To believe in the supernatural. The foundation of superstition is ignorance, the superstructure is faith and the dome is a vain hope.”¹

Ingersoll was a minister's son, a lawyer, a Union commander in the Civil War, and the most famous speaker of his time. Contrary to most of his contemporaries, Ingersoll believed in women's suffrage and abolition. He denounced religion, often making fun of it outright, and supported science, free thinking and humanism. For Ingersoll, whose beliefs I would applaud in so many ways, *all* religion was, at root, superstition.

He says: “Superstition is, always has been, and forever will be, the foe of progress, the enemy of education and the assassin of freedom. It sacrifices the known to the unknown, the present to the future, this actual world to the shadowy next. It has given us a selfish heaven, and a hell of infinite revenge; it has filled the world with hatred, war and crime, with the malice of meekness and the arrogance of humility. Superstition is the only enemy of science in all the world.” Elsewhere he calls superstition “the enemy of liberty.”

Ingersoll equates religious faith and superstition, but we actually often make distinctions between them without even realizing it: Superstition is what someone *else* believes that I think is bunk. Faith is what *I* believe, which I know in my heart to be true, even though I can't prove it any more than you can prove your beliefs, right? Yet it comes down to our individual world views: I grew up in a marginally Christian house and a predominantly Christian society, so I would never think of a pilgrimage to see a reliquary as a superstitious act –gross, maybe, but not superstitious. But to someone unfamiliar with it, the idea of paying homage to the bones or hair of a long-dead holy man might seem ridiculous. Whether I see something as a legitimate belief or as superstition relies on how I define myself and my tribe, and who I define as Other.

Ingersoll declares, “We do not believe in any God who can be pleased with incense, with kneeling, with bell-ringing, psalm-singing, bead-counting, fasting or prayer – in any God who can be flattered by words of faith or fear.” And he's right: I *don't* believe in that god. But *I* am pleased by prayer, kneeling, and incense, and that's enough for me.

No, the evil eye talisman has not kept bad stuff from happening at the newspaper. And though I haven't been in an accident since I've had my Christopher medallion, I've also been driving a lot more carefully.

My tokens and charms serve more to remind me of what they stand for than anything. I don't believe the evil eye keeps away evil, but I like the idea that it *could*. I don't believe that St.

¹ <http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=ingersoll&page=museum>

Christopher's spirit is traveling with me to protect me as I drive, but I know the people who love me care about my safety.

Ingersoll would, I imagine, mock my evil eye, confidence rock, and universe coin. For him, the danger is clear: "To believe in signs and wonders, in amulets, charms and miracles, in gods and devils, in heavens and hells, makes the brain an insane ward, the world a madhouse." (As you can tell, he felt pretty strongly about this!)

Stevie Wonder's a bit less doomsday about it, but his message is more or less the same: "When you believe in things that you don't understand, then you suffer. Superstition ain't the way."

There's no inherent power in my confidence rock, but I gave it power, and it gives me that power back. It reminds me of my promise to myself. And when I consider that even stones are, in a way, alive – that rocks have microorganisms living inside them – I think of the power of life itself that we each hold inside our living bodies.

When I first became a UU, I wore a chalice to convince me that I *was* one. I didn't realize at the time that's why I was doing it, but it was: The outward symbol would make my newfound faith more real, I thought. That's why I so wanted to have chalice jewelry, to make myself fit into this new religious life. The distinction I make between Ingersoll's view of belief and my own is this: Now I wear a chalice to remind me of my own faith and to identify me as a Unitarian Universalist to others. It reminds me of who I am when I am my best self.

"There may be a Devil," Ingersoll says, "almost infinite in cunning and power, and he may have a countless number of imps whose only business is to sow the seeds of evil and to vex, mislead, capture and imprison in eternal flames the souls of men. All this, so far as we know, is possible. ... And so there may be a place called 'heaven' ... but of this there is no evidence. It all rests on dreams and visions Back of these mistakes ... was the love of the marvelous. Wonder listened with greedy ears, with wide eyes, and ignorance with open mouth."

Ingersoll was firmly in the school of science versus religion – speaking 40 years after Darwin's "Origin of Species" was published, Ingersoll had to choose a side, and he chose science.

Here's the thing: I don't know about you, but I *want* to believe in the possible, and I *want* to hold on to my dreams, my hope, my wonder, my love of the marvelous. Happily, we don't have to choose between science and faith. We know we can have both, that we can choose to believe in that which we cannot see or touch while also believing that humanity evolved over millions of years. Ours is a faith that says, yes, bring your reason and your intellect – but also bring your wonder at the mystery that is life. Unitarian Universalism doesn't demand that you and I agree about what counts as superstition and what is truly faith.

Ingersoll writes: "In the presence of the mysteries of life and thought, of force and substance, of growth and decay, of birth and death, of joy and pain, of the sufferings of the good, the triumphs of wrong, the intelligent honest man is compelled to say: 'I do not know.'"

No, I do not know, but, to borrow from "The X-Files," *I want to believe.*