

“A Prophetic Stirring”

An Easter Reflection – Part I
Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT
March 27, 2016

A labor of love is what we sometimes call a demanding act performed out of deep caring for another. Labor is work. Labor is sometimes painful work, sacrificial even. It happens with no guarantee of a positive outcome. Yet there is a point in such an act where there is no turning back.

Consider the egg that I held earlier this morning as Mother Nature’s Easter Surprise. [Hold up ostrich egg.] How long ago I don’t know, but at some point in the history of this egg, its function was to protect a tiny being that grew and grew until there was no more space to stretch. This tiny being was intent on being born. For this particular egg, an ostrich was that tiny being; and the early manifestations of this ostrich were at some point halted. Otherwise you would see before you an egg that had cracked wide open.

Let’s imagine that you do see here the shell of an egg that cracked, because its inhabitant had developed sufficiently to be born! The egg would have started to move. Then it would have begun to crack. The moments of pre-birth held *a prophetic stirring*. Something was about to be born.

Each of us here this morning began as a tiny egg, quite different in form from that of a barely fertilized ostrich; but from the outset of the fertilization of the egg that was the prime predictor of any of us, *we* were stirring. Were we alive? I don’t think so, though we were part of a living being who was very much alive—that is, our birth mother.

Through the nine months of our pre-birth development, a lot happened. Eventually that fertilized egg developed into a fetus that began to move...rather like what happened inside the ostrich egg, but the egg that we once were was protected by a womb. At about mid-point in our pre-birth development, we started to stir. Our birth mother no longer felt us just as a bump in her tummy, but as a jumpy bump. While we were still all curled up inside, we began to move. The months and weeks before our birth held *a prophetic stirring*. We were about to be born. If we were fortunate, our mother and her partner were excited about this birth about to happen. The wriggly fetus that I was, that you were, was moving closer and closer to that time when we would outgrow that nice cozy warm-water womb.

Fortunately our mother’s womb didn’t crack, though when she gave birth to us, it probably felt like something was cracking. We trust that it was for our birth mother and for us, a labor of love. Certainly we squirmed and stretched until we wriggled our way right out into the glaring light of life. Squinting, flailing, crying our little heart out in deep gulps of air, we were born. For the very first time, we were born.

Everybody here this morning was born. Everybody here this morning once squinted, failed about, cried our little hearts out, took deep gulps of air and moved from a prophetic stirring to a fulfillment of that stirring. We became part of the wondrously interconnected web of all life.

How were we to know that over the span of our lifetime, we would be born again and again—not like we were born the first time, but in ways that would bewilder us, astonish us, and mirror what millions understand as resurrection.

But what about death? Isn't it real? When the life that inhabits us now comes to a standstill, is that it? The story lingers that when Henry David Thoreau was dying from tuberculosis at the not so ripe age of 44, a solicitous aunt visited and inquired if her nephew had prepared himself for the next world. "One life a time," Henry responded. "One life at a time!" Thoreau embodied one who was early on intent to live his life fully. *Walden* was his response to his resolve to do so:

[DRUMMING BEGINS, FAINTLY, MOVING SLOWLY TOWARD THE END OF THIS NARRATIVE INTO A VIBRANT CRESCENDO.]

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. . . . I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a road swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion."

As to the "next excursion" for any of us, might we find the here and now of our living so filled with prophetic stirrings and resurrections from our most perilous passages that we too can say on the threshold of whatever the "next excursion" might be: "One life at a time. One life at a time."

Sources

Henry David Thoreau, *I to Myself: an annotated selection from the journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, edited by Jeffrey S. Cramer, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2007.

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, Edited, with an introduction, by Brooks Atkinson, Foreword by Townsend Scudder, Random House/The Modern Library, New York, 1937, 1950.

“A Great Awakening”

An Easter Reflection – Part 2

Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull

Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden

Meriden, CT

March 27, 2016

“I wanted to ... drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.”

Mean and sublime. Those descriptors of our long ago friend, Henry David Thoreau, hold in their intensity a credible reflection of what we each know over the span of our lives thus far. Thankfully every day does not hold such extremes. Yet have any of us not known them? Who here is a stranger to anguish of body or spirit or both? Who here is a stranger to hope renewed, to life infused with new possibility, joy even?

For some here this morning, a dark and narrow passage is still underway. You may know welcome respites in such a journey—a conversation with a friend who understands, a glance of honest-to-goodness empathy from a stranger, a comforting hand on a shoulder, a strain of music that touches your soul, a cluster of daffodils that turns your head, a winsome child whose laugh soothes the chafing of your broken heart if even for a moment, a reminder in whatever form of the transforming power of love and beauty. Such respites are cracks of light in tunnels that you may not have even recognized as tunnels.

Birth does not happen without labor. Labor does not happen without effort and usually, pain. So too with rebirth, with emergence from a dark night of the soul. Such emergence begins with the equivalent of an immense stone stirring, like an egg cracking, like a womb opening. Easter speaks to us from the histories of suffering that we share more than we know and from the memories of resurrections from dark nights of the soul that we have known as death amid life.

“Will I ever wake up from this nightmare?” I have asked in my own life. Years ago, between the arrivals of my two birth-daughters, I experienced an ectopic pregnancy. It happens when a fertilized egg is traveling through a fallopian tube—and women have two such tubes—toward the uterus and it doesn’t make it because of a bottleneck. There’s nowhere to go and it’s growing; so the tube bursts. It was the worst pain I have ever known, unlike a conventional miscarriage (if there is ever a conventional miscarriage). I had called my ob gyn late at night. His response? “Take an aspirin and come to my office in the morning!” Oh yes, malpractice! He should have known. I knew I was pregnant; I didn’t know what was going on. I’d never heard of an ectopic pregnancy. There was no reason to know. By morning we barely made it to his office and I was whisked across the street to NYU Medical Center and immediate surgery. By then I had lost six units of blood. There’s not much left.

I remember waking up, slowly, so slowly, in the ICU. I remember gazing at the configuration of spots on the ceiling tiles. They were dots I was connecting to surface back into life. “You have an incredibly strong constitution, Jan,” my physician said as I was recovering. Yes, how dare he “compliment me!” But to minimize blood loss, my involuntary muscles had kicked in, spurred by a stubborn spirit. Some of you know I have a stubborn spirit. It takes one to survive. Some of you know this firsthand.

Easter speaks in countless ways. Dan and I have a dear friend who just passed away at the age of 91. Alicia was a survivor of Auschwitz, along with her sister. They lost their whole family to what was beyond “a dark night of the soul” for Jews, gays, gypsies, and resisters to the scourge of Nazism. But pre-liberation was a living death and for millions, a death without liberation, without resurrection, at least a resurrection that we can all agree on.

How can we understand Easter without tapping our own histories or history itself?

As for the resurrection of Jesus, consider what we know, what little we know, about the historical Jesus. Mark was his earliest biographer. We know from biblical scholarship that Mark’s account was tampered with. That Jesus lived, yes; that he appeared to the women who went to the tomb that morning and found it empty except for a young man who reported that Jesus had risen, yes, according to Mark. But in this earliest of Gospels, there were no appearances, no Jesus they could see and reach out to. Yet something happened that filled those three women and Jesus’ friends and millions after them with hope. Out of their despair, they knew a great awakening of hope and possibility that all was not lost.

We can if we choose cater to the literal dimensions of the Easter story—or stories, since there are more than one. Or we can nod knowingly from the bones of our souls and affirm the cruel reality of death in life and the mystery of what Thoreau called the “next excursion.”

When I do a memorial service, I refer to death as “the great mystery,” though no less mysterious than birth itself. Sometimes I call it “the next great adventure.” None of us knows what happens “next.” We don’t remember what it was like to be inside a womb; but we recall the intimate details of what it was like or is like to be inside a tomb—a tomb where the light of hope shines not even as a crack, where we’re wrapped in a shroud of suffering so opaque that life in its fullness is unimaginable.

How many tombs of body and soul must we know, how many stirrings of stone must we know, how many liberations from death in life must we know before Easter sings for us? Nature doesn’t lie! And we are nature’s offspring!

Hear the lyrics of Alicia Carpenter:

*Entombed within our deep despair,
our pain seems more than we can bear;
but days shall pass, and nature knows
that deep beneath the winter snow
a rose lies curled and hums its song.*

*For something always, always sings.
This is the message Easter brings:
From deep despair and perished things
a green shoot always, always springs,
and something always, always sings.*

May Easter sing for you and for all of us.

May it be so and Amen.

Sources

“A Promise Through the Ages Rings,” Words: Alicia S. Carpenter; Music: Severus Gastorius, in *Singing the Living Tradition*, The Unitarian Universalist Association, Beacon Press, Boston, 1993, 344.

Henry David Thoreau, *I to Myself: an annotated selection from the journal of henry d. Thoreau*, edited by Jeffrey S. Cramer, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2007.