

We Unitarian Universalists can be quite confused about how to deal with Easter. It's the theology that gets us. The resurrection story creates quite a dilemma for us as we enter into and celebrate the Easter season. The reading today I'll admit exacerbates the issue—but that's not why it was chosen. A reading on atonement, intended to coincide with the Jewish High Holy Days during early fall was chosen as a way to help broaden our theological discussion today as we address the high holy days in the Christian calendar.

The connection for me is the mainstay of that atonement reading: we begin again in love. While we as Unitarian Universalists struggle with the resurrection as literal or myth, and Jesus as divine by nature, divine by appointment or a human model of great moral/ethical character, a new season unfolds for us at this time of year. It's a time of new beginnings, perhaps an awakening and a recommitment to hope.

It seems to me any theology worthy of the name has to contain some notion of resurrection, redemption and hope. In other words, an opportunity to begin again in love, to begin again at least in hope. An opportunity to begin again is an essential element when you're dealing with the frailties of humanity. We will always blunder, fall short of our hopes and aspirations. We will break promises, deceive and do other nasty things because it's in our nature to be less than perfect. We will make mistakes, we will fail and fall down. And have need to collect ourselves, regroup and by grace rise again.

In the Christian calendar, Easter is more than the Sunday on which the Easter Bunny brings decorated eggs in a basket. For solemn Christians, Easter is a season. It begins with Lent, representing, according to the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, the 40 days Jesus spent fasting in the desert, meeting temptation after temptation, before he began his public ministry. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and concludes on Maundy Thursday, the day of the Last Supper.

Good Friday, the day of the crucifixion follows, and three days later, Jesus is resurrected on Easter Sunday. Following Easter Sunday, in the Christian calendar, are the 50 days of Eastertide, the seventh Sunday being Pentecost Sunday. Easter and the Easter season is the most important time in the Christian calendar. It represents the essence of the Christian theological promise of reunion with being whole, the forgiving of sins and life everafter.

The Jewish tradition, in addition to the High Holy days, representing the beginning of a new year and an opportunity for one to begin again, has a grounding story of new life, of a new beginning. It's the story of a people gaining freedom and with it a land of their own and a new beginning for an entire people. Passover, one of the most widely observed holidays in Judaism, is a week-long festival in commemoration of the exodus, when the Jewish people are released from the bonds of slavery by Pharaoh. They were freed to start a new nation under the leadership of Moses.

The feast of the Passover Seder begins the holiday. The seder is a ritual conducted by a community or multiple generations of a family, where the story of liberation from slavery in Egypt is told. It's the story of the book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible. The community of friends or family read from the Haggadah which contains the story of the exodus, along with blessings, rituals, and Passover songs.

The book of Exodus tells the story of when God sent ten plagues upon the people of Egypt in efforts to get the Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery. The tenth plague was to be the death of the Egyptian first born. The Israelites were to slaughter a spring lamb and mark their doorposts with its blood. In so doing it was to identify the homes the spirit of the lord would Pass-over and not take the first born of that household.

The story also tells of how the Israelites, needing to leave the country quickly after Pharaoh finally agreed to free them, left in such a hurry they did not have time to let the bread rise. Hence, unleavened bread is a central aspect of the Passover ritual. And its why Passover is sometimes referred to as the Festival of the Unleavened Bread.

Our third story of new life rather confirms a conclusion I've recently arrived at in answer to the age old question of which comes first, the chicken or the egg? In preparation for this morning's words, I considered the question deeply. It's the egg!

While doing some preparatory reading, I discovered that the Hindus, the ancient Egyptians, Persians and Phoenicians, all believed the world began with an enormous egg. So the association of the egg with fertility and new life has been around for a very long time and occurs in many different cultures.

So too, apparently, is the custom of decorating eggs. Decorated ostrich eggs have been found in Africa that are said to date back 60,000 years. Silver and gold ostrich eggs have been found in the graves of ancient Samaritans and Egyptians as far back as 5,000 years ago.

The custom of decorating Easter eggs appears to have begun in Mesopotamia, with the early Christians. They stained eggs red, in memory of the blood that was shed at the time of the crucifixion. The Church in the early 17th century later officially adopted this custom as a symbol of the resurrection.

The term Easter may have come from the name of a pagan festival held in the springtime, named after the goddess Eostre. Linguistically, the name is associated with the coming of spring and the dawn. It's been argued that the festival had become so entrenched that the Christians chose to simply apply the name to a new rite, in remembrance of the resurrection.

The rabbit's association with spring and fertility may well date back to the time of Anglo-Saxon paganism as well. The rapid reproductive cycle of the hare was seen to symbolize fertility and continuous new life.

I find it interesting to note that in the Western world, both Passover and Easter come at the same time as the longer and warmer days of spring. After the long dark days of winter, spring is a welcomed form of invigoration. That which appears to be dead begins to show signs of life. The shortened cycle of light begins to lengthen and the days grow longer. Animals emerge from their winter homes to greet warmer days.

For me, spring is the quintessential harbinger of renewal. Starting in mid-to-late February, something inside me begins to stir. I start to feel the anxious twinges of anticipation. From February into late spring, I find myself inspecting any bare piece of ground. Looking to see what if anything has poked its head out of the earth.

I find myself sometimes stopping mid-stride, to turn my face toward the sun to let it's warmth soak in. There are times when I delay getting out of my car just so I can absorb the new, yet familiar, kinetic force of the sun's rays.

The renewed intensity of the sun's warmth affects us all. The birds begin to sing again. Daffodils, crocus and periwinkle come into bloom. All, signaling the soon to flower forsythia and spring flowering shrubs.

So it's easy to suggest, that even mother nature has a theology of renewal. Perhaps your personal theology of renewal and new life, coincides with the arrival of spring, longer days and the warming air. Or perhaps, renewal comes for you with the celebration of one of the religious holidays.

It seems to me, an opportunity for renewal, the option to recreate ourselves, the ability to make a fresh start is essential for us human beings. There are so many times in our lives we fall off the rails, take a wrong turn, get mired in false choices. We need opportunities to begin again.

Regardless of how you define your life's fundamental reference point, whether you believe you have a personal theology or not, it seems essential to me, that we all have consciousness of the option of renewal. If we know we have the option of renewal, we don't have live with the feeling of being stuck or out of control.

And better yet, if we have developed an awareness of our personal theology we can fall back on our inner knowing or call on our rituals to help us to refocus our attention; to help pull us back onto the path we have chosen.

Whether you are a Muslim, Christian, Jew or belong to another faith community, you are benefited by established rituals and ceremonies designed to rekindle your spirit, to provide you an opportunity to reflect upon your life so that you can then make choices about what you pay attention to and how you will behave.

So whatever your theology, if it provides and opportunity for renewal, an opportunity to begin anew, then you should nurture that theology, explore it's parameters, become facile with it's workings, so in times of need, you have ready access to what can benefit you.

The opportunity to begin again in love comes in so many forms. Perhaps today on Easter Sunday, the holiest day in the Christian calendar, or during this time of Passover, or as the spring unfolds, you will find within yourself a kernel of renewed life, an opportunity to begin again in love. If so, grab it, cherish it, don't let it go. For you are indeed blessed.

Blessings be upon you.