

Easter

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The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

Easter has meant a lot of different things to me over the years. When I was a little boy, I celebrated Easter like a happy pagan. Nobody told me about Ostara, the goddess of springtime, but I worshipped the melting snow, green grass, new flowers, and bunny rabbits of the season. The best thing about Easter was the Easter baskets full of candy. Getting together around the bowls of colored water to dye the eggs was fun, too. And then someone would hide them all over the house and we'd search for them in the morning. Along with Halloween, Easter was one of the two candy holidays that held my year together.

I can remember one Easter when I was about six or seven years old. We'd gotten up early to find our baskets full of candy. I ate a whole chocolate bunny before we started the Easter egg hunt. I liked the eggs, too, and ate several. You know, there's just a slight taste of sulfur to a two-day-old hard-boiled egg that's been sitting on the floor behind a television set all night. Then I had some jellybeans. My mother, mindful of the need for a proper breakfast, insisted that I sit down and have a bowl of rice chex. I guess it worked, because then I wasn't hungry any more. Then we all got dressed up and went to church. We must have arrived late because we had to sit up in the front row right in front of where the minister was talking. I didn't feel very good. I can clearly remember him saying, "In the name of the father, and the son, and the holy ---," when my stomach made a special offering of chocolate, eggs and cereal, right there at his feet. I was quickly rushed out the side door and I don't think I went back in.

I didn't think too much about Easter one way or another until I took catechism class in 7th and 8th grades. This was when we were supposed to learn all about our Christian religion so that we would know what to believe in order to be confirmed as a member of the church. Well, I liked the stories about Jesus and all, but I was a little confused about the Easter story because I'd never heard of anyone else coming back from the dead. I said that I couldn't say I believed something that didn't make sense to me, so I never joined the church.

I had one professor in divinity school who said that there are a lot of ways to read the Bible, but only one wrong way: literally. If my church had allowed me to relate to the Bible as a storehouse of powerful myth and metaphor instead of historical facts, I might have joined. I still think that there's a great deal of wisdom in the bible. Sometimes people seemed to be selective about which of Jesus' lessons they considered important. I always wondered why so many Christians didn't seem to pay much attention to one of his main messages, where he said we should love our enemies, that we should be generous and kind and helpful to everyone whether they seemed to deserve it or not.

In college six years later, I had a summer job in a factory that started out OK, but they laid off a bunch of workers, including me. I was angry at first, but then decided I'd make the most of it. I packed my knapsack and hit the road to the high peaks area of the Rocky Mountains where I spent the rest of the summer hiking and camping in the mountains near Nederland, Colorado.

This was quite an experience. The combination of the grandeur of the mountains, the simultaneous vastness and intimacy produced a transformation that I could never have anticipated. It seemed that my mind and heart were as wide and ancient as the Earth herself. Day after day hiking alone through the mountains opened me to new vistas within and without. Flowers, trees, animals, and even the people I sometimes met seemed aglow with their own inner light. I'd sit for hours staring at the horizon, staring at a campfire in the evening, gazing at the stars from an altitude so high and air so clear that they seemed as fat as lemons.

Filled with awe, a sense of timelessness, and a deepening feeling of peace and joy, I began to wonder if I was having a spiritual experience. With more than a little amazement, I realized that's what it was. It was nothing like I'd imagined from reading religious literature – there weren't any visions of gods, voices, or even text messages from heaven – but all the sacred texts started to make a different kind of sense to me after that. I had stumbled into a transcendent experience of something that was greater than myself, and yet as close as my own breath and bones.

Going back to school after that was kind of strange. I was open and vulnerable – all my defenses had been burned away by the intensity of my time in

the mountains. As the intensity of the experience faded, I was overwhelmed by what seemed to be the cruelty and coarseness of the world. I tried to connect with the inner light of people who thought I was just weird. Hurt, rebuffed and alienated, my joy turned into depression. I plodded along, in a world that no longer felt alive.

Then, in the depths of despair, I somehow let go of being sad that I was sad, and just let myself experience my feelings. A strangely bittersweet melancholy swept into me. I looked at the trees and found that nature's glow had returned. I could feel my divinity once again, only this time it was wrapped in sadness instead of joy. I realized that these transcendent feelings weren't dependent on feeling good – they were available all the time. Then I remembered Easter. And then I wrote this poem:

The beauty of now
failed my grasp,
yesterday.
Living and learning
became crying and reaching,
desperately.
The soul of nature lost its glow.
The spirit of humankind lost its flow.
For me,
the Earth was still,
yesterday.

The god of a mountain
took me where
the stars did breathe.
And living a day
a thousand hearts long,
the song was all I could see.

My fear and confusion
made me forget

the strength of my goodness,
and laid me a snare
that strangled the hope
of a wonderful reality.

Today I remembered
the Yes of the world,
the name of my foes
and their crime.
And so if I look at you
and start to cry,
it's because I'm seeing you
for the first time.

The spirit of my mind died
yesterday.
The joy of my life died
yesterday.
Christ was risen in me
today.

Two years later, as I struggled with what appeared to be terminal cancer, the meaning of Easter became stronger still.

It was a staggering blow to face my own death at the age of 21. Anger, depression, denial, grief, bargaining, all swept through me like a storm. But when I accepted that the end was inevitable, the storm was replaced by a transcendent peace like that I'd known on the mountaintop. I was filled with a light that knew no fear of death's darkness and I was surprised by joy once again. I felt I knew what it was like to hang on the cross and be in heaven at the same time. Overcoming my fear of death was what made it possible to live in death's shadow. Hmm. . . Easter.

Although not a Christian in any traditional sense, I was comfortable with my own interpretation of Easter. Later, when my daughter, Cypress, was little, I

looked for a way to convey some of the ideas and values of Christianity without being “churchy.” I decided that C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia* would be a good choice.

We began with *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. There’s the point where Aslan, the mighty lion, permits himself to be ridiculed, reviled, disfigured and murdered by the evil witch in order to save his young friends. The children spend a tearful night with his corpse in utter despair and sadness, cleaning his horrible wounds as best they can, and feeling guilty for their role in his death. By sunrise, however, his mane had regrown, his wounds healed, and his life had been restored, much to their amazement and relief.

Aslan is, of course, the Christ symbol in the story. At this point, reading to Cypress, I was congratulating myself that I’d done a pretty good job when she said, “Well, if he knew he was going to come right back to life, it couldn’t have been a very big deal to let them kill him.”

This stopped me cold. I hadn’t really examined the Easter story, it had just resonated with my own experience. I realized that the problem was with the unique nature of the hero. If Jesus was the only one to ever rise from death, it was about something that had been done for us, not something we had to live ourselves.

In my version of Easter, Jesus is showing us the path we all have to walk. In my version of Easter, death is something that we all face in many ways all throughout our lives. It’s the fear of death that keeps us from living fully. It’s also reflected in the many anxieties and fears we face every day. Fear is the stone that covers the tomb of our spiritual death. The lesson of Easter is that when we roll away the stone of our fear, our spirits can soar and we can be reborn to new hope, new joy, new love, new life.

We can rise again and again. We truly can be reborn, not just once, but again, and again, and again as we live in fearless harmony with the ongoing re-creation of the world in each and every moment.