

Seven Holy Words
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Happy Easter, everyone! Today is a joyful day...with Easter Eggs and bunny rabbits and the makings of all things new. All things...even relationship.

I've been reflecting on the meaning of Easter this year and I'd like to share my thoughts with you...as an expression of the Fourth Principle of Unitarian Universalism, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. The truth and the meaning that I have found this Easter has to do with relationship—particularly, with the kind of relationship that needs renewal, that needs new life. The relationship to which I have been drawn for some reason is the relationship between science and religion. I'm really not certain why I have been drawn to this topic. That's unknown to me. I have my suspicions. I think it's because I've really been missing my Dad. Easter brings me present to this for Easter is a time when that which has died away from us can return in a beautiful way. It's the promise and great drama of spring and I am into it this year.

I think about those who rose at daybreak this morning to climb Mount Peg at sunrise and proclaim, "He has risen!" to the earth and sky. It was sun-snowing at sunrise. I've never seen that before. May wonders never cease.

My Dad was an architect, an engineer...a scientist in a way...as compared to hippie-poet-artist son he raised. We were opposites and, as they say, opposites attract. My father liked people Frank Lloyd Wright and Frederick Law Olsted. He respected Albert Einstein.

Albert Einstein, the great scientist... He had a lot to say on the topic of religion. He said,

The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed. It was the experience of mystery—even if mixed with fear—that engendered religion. A knowledge of the experience of something we cannot penetrate, our perceptions of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which only in their most primitive forms are accessible to our minds—it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute true religiosity: in this sense and in this sense alone, I am a deeply religious man.

I respected Einstein too but the coolest scientist that I knew as a child was from a far and distant planet. He was a Vulcan and he served as the Science Officer on the Starship Enterprise. Spock is still my favorite scientist. 'You can take the boy out of the heavens, but you can't take the heavens out of the boy.'

I was always in the heavens. My friends and I played Star Trek all of the time. I was committed. My Mom even bought the Star Trek 'owners manual' and my Dad—ever the architect—he bought me the blueprints for the entire ship. I

think he bought those blueprints for himself...wanting to find a bridge of connection that might excite me about architecture.

My Dad was practical more than poetic. More science than religion but science fiction didn't excite him in the slightest. I miss him so. I miss his near total dismissal of Captain Kirk and Spock and everyone. But this Easter, I remember. I remember him at the sunrise...when mystery pushes away what had been weighing on my heart and when that which had died away from me returns in a beautiful way.

In my free and responsible search for truth and meaning this Sunday morning, I wonder who or what it is that makes this new life possible.

Come! Let us spend this time together.

Seven Holy Words

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, April 17th and the title of this morning's reflection is Seven Holy Words. This title reflects a tradition that dates back to the time of Jesus but I've departed from my plan and I've applied this principle to life as it is today—without irony but with peace and wonder, without disbelief but with joy and hopefulness and hopefully, with a little bit of levity...a lightness for the lifting of the spirit.

If you could write your name on the sky and tell your story in just seven words, what would your seven, holy words be? We don't have to answer this right now. Right now, it is enough to look to the ground beneath our feet for genuine encouragement, for the grasses and the early flowers and the garlic are brave in their rising.

Lo, the earth awakes again

Right now, it is enough to look high above our heads, to the stars in heaven as they gently sing.

Today is Easter Sunday. Welcome, one and all, to the beauty of this good day.

Now, before we begin, I've been thinking about something. I've been thinking about how opposites attract. I saw this science fiction movie years ago. It was called Contact. I wish that somehow, magically, we could all watch it together right now. We could make up a ton of popcorn and eat it in the Sanctuary—quietly, of course, and without dropping even a single crumb. We could draw the shades that we don't have over these great windows that we do have, windows that let in such gorgeous morning light. We could make it dark in here and have a holy movie experience. If we did that, I wonder what might rise in us.

So, Contact is really great. It's based on a novel by Carl Sagan. He was a scientist and an astronomer. So, perhaps ironically, his flight of fantasy is rooted in the reality we face...if that makes sense. Contact stars Matthew McConaughey and Jodi Foster and the story that they weave together is really lovely.

Contact is a story about the mysteries of time and space but, as you might imagine, there is a romantic sub-theme woven in. Now, I won't blow the movie for

you. It's 25 years old but I guess it's fair enough to continue to keep its secrets. For the central part of the film, no spoiler alert is required, even though I'm about to share a key moment of the romantic sub-theme with you.

In the film, Jodi Foster plays the part of a disciplined scientist whose name is Dr. Ellie Arroway. She's a rugged empiricist. The only things that she believes in are the things that she can verify—with telescopes and radar arrays and incredible calculations. After searching the heaven for years (the stars, the planets, the nebula), she finds conclusive evidence of extraterrestrial intelligence. And not just this because she also receives that architectural blueprints and conceptual plans for the making of a mysterious time-travel machine.

Matthew McConaughey plays a minister with wounds and an interesting story on the basis of which, he challenges Ellie to reveal her own. The minister challenges the scientist to think more deeply about the heavens...in order to wrest from life (and in order to draw from our living of it) the makings of peace and true contentment.

He challenges the scientist. He confronts her with powerful questions. He challenges her to share her views on the universe, on family and on old wounds. As he begins by sharing his own. It's funny but the minister almost confesses to the scientist. He says,

It's an old story. I grew up in South Boston, more or less on the streets. By the time I was thirteen I'd tried my first hit of heroin, by fifteen I'd stopped using but I was dealing full-time. By the time I was nineteen I decided I didn't want to live any more, at least not in a world like that. One day I got on a bus; I got as far as Ohio before my money ran out, and after that I just kept walking. Didn't eat, didn't sleep... just walked. I ended up collapsing in a wheat field. There was a storm... I woke up... [pause] And that's about as far as words'll go.

And Dr. Ellie, the scientist asks him to go further and he does his best. He says,
I had... an experience. Of belonging. Of unconditional love. And for the first time in my life I wasn't terrified, and I wasn't alone.

And Ellie says

And there's no chance you had this experience simply because some part of you needed to have it?

And the minister gets a little angry. He says,

Look, I'm a reasonable person, and reasonably intelligent. But this experience went beyond both. For the first time I had to consider the possibility that intellect, as wonderful as it is, is not the only way of comprehending the universe. That it was too small and inadequate a tool to deal with what it was faced with.

And then, the scientist, taking a beat, shares a bit more intimately. To the minister, she says,

You may not believe this... but there's a part of me that wants more than anything to believe in your God. To believe that we're all here for a purpose, that all this...means something. But it's because that part of me wants [to believe it] so badly that I'm so stubborn about making sure it isn't just self-delusion. Of course I want to know God if is one... but it has to be real. Unless I have proof how can I be sure?

And then, the minister asks the scientist, pointedly, "Do you love your parents?"

Dr. Ellie is taken aback. She almost confesses to the minister, she says, "[You know,] I never knew my mother [] and my father died when I was nine."

And the minister pushes her further, gently and firmly at the same time. He asks again, more sharply, "Did you love him?" and when she shares that she did, he goes for it. He challenges her to face the contradiction that lies at the heart of it all. The minister challenges the scientist by gently saying to her, "Prove it." There was nothing she could do but stand there quietly.

Now, I would like to tell you that they kissed and fell in love and lived on and happily ever yada-yada-yada and all of that but I didn't have time enough to review the before now and I haven't seen it in 25 years and I didn't read through the transcript before rising this morning. So, I don't know. All I can say is that I hope that they did. I'm a big fan of yada-yada-yada and the possibility that they experienced this truly does exist on Easter Sunday, along side many other interesting options.

I'd like to tell you the real ending but I can't. Really and truly, I do not know. All I can share with you is the mystery. I didn't plan it like that but I'm really glad it turned out that way. All I can do is share with you another little story, a story about something that I loved and lost forever in time...until it came back to life somehow when life and I were feeling lucky. I wonder what you'll think of it. It makes sense to share this story today...because it's Easter Sunday and this is a time when miracles and all its blessings are possible.

Now, I used to be more skeptical of Easter. I used to be a lot more fearful of it. I love it now. I used to feel a bit disconnected from the story I learned in Sunday school. In the Gospel, there are the passages that explain how Jesus was crucified and soon after, how there came a Council member, "a good and righteous man." He asked for the body for burial and through Pilate, this was done. The Council member saw that the body was wrapped in cloth and honorably buried...placed in an earthen tomb that was then sealed hard and fast with a heavy stone... with a stone that was a heavy as death itself. Next, we learn that...

Two women [] had come with Jesus from Galilee [they had] followed, and they saw the tomb and how His body had been placed.

We learn that the women spent time preparing spices and perfumes to offer where he was laid to rest...and then, they rested on the Sabbath before traveling. The women visited the tomb with gifts. When they arrived, they were amazed because they discovered that the heavy stone that sealed the tomb had been rolled away.

The women entered the tomb but they found no body wrapped and carefully placed. Instead, they found two men who were radiantly dressed. They

were scared but they still listened as the two men spoke. The men asked, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; He has risen!" and the women were filled with wonder.

I love this story now but I didn't when I was younger and I'm very glad that I wasn't required to love this story. I was trusted to find the miracle of seasonal rebirth in a way that mattered to me. That process of discovery keeps unfolding over time. Did you see the dawn this morning? ...how the magical moon lit the clouds from behind? ...and how the birds came to sing with one another? At east, I think that they were singing. They could have been arguing, for all I know. I don't understand their language. I have no idea what they were saying. I just know that it sounded beautiful. It sounded like they knew it was Easter Sunday.

What I love about this faith, what strikes me about the beauty of it is that we trust ourselves to discover the beauty of the world in the ways that resonate most for us. Some of us are deeply touched by the story of resurrection and others of us experience that story differently. The scientist in me...the engineer, the architect... My mind, the practical side struggles so much to believe. My soul is drawn by the mystery and by the miracle but my mind is prone to doubt. I have to remember that the Easter story does not appeal to the doubtful scientist in me. It appeals to the part of me that wonders, the part that is drawn by mystery.

The doubtful scientist in me thinks that resurrection is impossible but there is much more to me than just the doubtful scientist. I'm not down and dour all the time. I don't walk around removing the magic from the waking world. At least, not like I used to. I guess I have to admit that there was a time when I did just that. It used to be that when I got myself going, I became too headstrong. I would weed the miracle from the garden and lose joy in life. Some time ago, I realized that I didn't want to do that anymore. I remembered that part of Eden has always been a bit tameless and wild and part of me is that way too. So, sometimes, you can let the garden grow as she pleases. You never know what's possible until you let that happen. It's amazing sometimes.

Over the last few years, I've been changing. In fact, my garden was a mess last year but—oh, my God!—you should have seen the sunflowers. So, now, I think that I've gone overboard the other way. I'm all about the Easter story now.

I'm changing. Musically, even. I started playing a lot more blues. Jesus shows up a whole lot in the blues, if you know what I mean...and the blues is a whole lot stronger than my tendency to doubt. So, now, I sing lyrics that surprise me...lines like,

You and I've got trouble, oh, there's trouble everywhere
so, I'm calling on the Lord to c'mon
May a brighter day fall across your way, and soon...
But you know I'm a doubter and I like to think I'm right
Still, may it be your will, not my own
Shatter all my bones, then build me up a righteous man

So, who am I singing to? It's not to a lawyer or a therapist. I don't want to think too much about that. It's only a song. I say that knowing that you probably don't believe me...and that's what I want. Unlike Dr. Ellie, I don't want to know for sure. I

don't ask God and Jesus for their state-issued ID. I simply want to be open to the miracle, if it happens.

My friend, Dayna Kurtz, sings a lot about this subject. I think her songs are prayers. I think she thinks her songs are songs. All I know for sure is that she likes to laugh at me. She sings,

I think this Jesus sounds like a great man,
Be as humble and grateful and kind as you can
That hatred and violence breeds hatred again.
I think this Jesus sounds like a great man.

She asks,

What if the trouble came straight to your door?
What if your table knew plenty no more?
With whom would you share and from whom would you hoard?
What if the trouble came straight to your door?

She'd raise this question in Mariopal...where the life-affirming miracle is need now. She'd sing it with her feet right there in rubble. She's brave and dangerous like that...when she dares to be. Just like any and all of us. She sing,

I think if Jesus comes back he'd be shaking his head.
As we searched for the missing and count all our dead.
He'd say, "Did you or didn't you hear what I said?"
I think if Jesus comes back he'd be shaking his head.

They say, if Jesus returns, if he comes back to us, he'll come back as beloved community. What would that mean in Ukraine, in Yemen, in Syria, in Afghanistan? What would it mean for the rights of women in Texas and Oklahoma? ...for the rights of trans-kids in Florida? For the rights of black voters affected by repressive legislation in seventeen states across the country... Dayna's right. If Jesus comes back he'll be shaking his head. But that is hardly all that he'll be doing because there is a wild side in the garden now and beautiful things are growing there. In fact, they have been growing there for some time now.

And something is changing in me. I even freaked out an old friend a little while ago. I hurt her by accident. I was sitting outside with my guitar and I played a song that blew her mind. I played an old country gospel song about the spirit of resurrection and the old-time religion of the lyrics must have triggered her. She became upset and I felt bad about it.

I sang a song that's in the hymnal but I sang an earlier version of the tune. It used to be called Guide Me, O, Thou Great Jehovah. You might know it by a different title. It's been reworded and renamed. Now, Unitarian Universalists know this song as God of Grace and God of Glory. We sing,

God of grace and God of glory
On thy people pour thy power
Crown thine ancient church's story
Bring its bud to glorious flower

It's springtime thing. It's good for Easter. The refrain is more widely known:

Grant us wisdom
Grant us courage for the living of this hour
...for the living of this hour

I had just learned to fingerpick the country-gospel version and I figured my friend Phaedre would make to connection on her own...but she didn't. Something hurt her pretty bad.

The words I sang, I thought, were beautiful. They were clearly Christian words though. That didn't work for her. In fact, she said that she chose to come to the UU church to escape what she'd known in her past. She thought that it was my job to protect her from all of that...and I didn't know any of this because my friend Phaedre never told me. She never told about her wounds and her old stories from the past. I didn't know it at the time but there was an explosive energy hiding just beneath the surfaces of things. I stepped on it in advertently and things blew up with us.

Now, we all have our wounds and stories. I'm learning about Phaedre's wounds and stories and she was learning all about mine. It has turned out to be a rich exchange but it didn't start out that way. I know that we all have wounds somewhere but I really hated it when the song that I was singing found Phaedre's underbelly. I sang,

Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land
I am weak, but Thou art mighty,
Hold me with Thy powerful hand.

I had learned in seminary about the awesome power of submission. It took a Sufi scholar, a seminar class of several months and a crying session to teach me how to lay down my sword and shield, like the old song teaches us. It took a while but my spirit learned how to surrender in a sacred way. I learned how to submit without injury. I have a wound around submission and surrender that is deep. In the past, I was betrayed by people who I trusted and held quite close to my heart. I closed down. It has been hard to open back up again. Over time and as I healed, the Easter story really grew on me...not because of what happened to Jesus back then but because of what happens for us today.

Like I said, I'm changing. I read the Gospel differently. I don't station Jesus at the center of everything but as the means through which we learn about ourselves and find humility.

We all fall short sometimes. Lord knows that I do. When I fall short, I feel so sorry and I try to apologize. Forgiveness is so hard and takes so long most of the times...but when it happens, something rises...like a morning star within us. I was feeling this in the music. I was healing when I sang,

Bread of Heaven...
Bread of Heaven, feed me 'til I want no more

But Phaedre did hear me healing. She didn't hear what I was feeling on the inside of things. She only heard what I was singing and that hurt her for some reason. Something got triggered and she withdrew.

She behaved as if she had lost something that she had come to love, something that she value, something that she believed had been in me that was dear to her. Suddenly, that seemed lost and lifeless...even as I was singing about the opposite. I sang about treading the verge of Jordan and overcoming great challenges. Phaedre felt abandoned and my heart broke. It really shattered. In the song, I had heard the Easter story, the story of overcoming even impossible darkness and terrible odds. Phaedre quietly closed down. She felt alone, that nobody cared for her.

I didn't feel that way, of course, but Phaedre was afraid that she was alone. She had to work through that for a while. We had to work through some things together...and as we did, something that was lost came back to life. Thank God. Thank the mysteries of life. Thank the spirit of wonder within us all.

I don't know for sure but I would like to think that what helped us to restore the power of our connection was our ability to be honest with ourselves and honest with each other. Somehow, that allowed us to overcome so much. Phaedre wanted a blissful escape and I couldn't provide that for her. I wanted to be heroic and guide her through a crisis that was larger than me. Somehow, through some miracle we found our way back to each other.

Now, the craziest thing about this story took place some time later. I was in North Carolina writing a poem about raptors when something suddenly became so clear to me. All of this had been a dream. Phaedre was not a parishioner of mine. She was a long-lost part of myself. It wasn't Phaedre who had trouble with old-school Christian language. It wasn't Phaedre who was afraid of her old wounds. It was alone me. When I realized this, it was as if something that had died away from me suddenly returned in a beautiful way.

I thought about that as the raptors circled high around the sky...as they soared, as they circled like Kansas-upside-down tornados in the sky. Raptors see so clearly, you know...with vision eight times sharper than our own, they say.

Sometimes, we see clearly and other times, clarity is much more challenging. But if we were today to follow the raptors up into the sky, if we opened our heart, our mind, our soul as wide as we possibly could...and with all that openness, if we wrote our name on the sky and told our story in only seven words, what would our seven words be?

You'll have to tell me what you believe but if it were up to me, my seven words would be: Love from the bottom of your heart.

May it be so. Happy Easter. Blessed be and amen.