

Born and Reborn Again (Lynn Ungar, Minister for Lifespan Learning, CLF)

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)
how should tasting touching hearing seeing breathing
any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

How, in ee cummings words, could we doubt unimaginable you? Well, that's easy. We're UUs. We can doubt just about anything. We are the denominational flip side of Lewis Carroll's Red Queen, who bragged that she could believe six impossible things before breakfast. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead—doubt it. The encounter of Moses with a blazing bush that was not consumed by fire—doubt it. Visitation from a magical bunny who carries around colored eggs—same category, definitely doubt it.

And yet, through all of our highly justified and reasonable doubts there is Easter, come again like it did last year, and all of us here to greet it. Believe in it or not, Easter has its way with us. Eostara, the German goddess of re-birth for whom the holiday is named, calls:

Shake off your winter drowsiness and see. The bushes are blinking open the tiniest of green eyes. Daffodils are starting to stretch their petals as they arise from their winter beds. Wake up! Already the wild geese have started their journeys, following the magnetic pull of the north. Don't you want to follow? Aren't you packing for some journey of your own, if only from the heated security of your house into the open air? Breathe in, can't you smell it? Even the grass understands resurrection. That is how the world turns green.

Oh yes, believe in her or not, Eostara is calling. How can we keep from answering with cummings: “now the ears of my ears awake and now the eyes of my eyes are opened?”

Ah, but that's just metaphor, mythology. There isn't a *real* Eostara, any more than there is a real Persephone returned from the underworld whose joyful mother Demeter gives us spring in jubilation at her daughter's return. It's just a story made up by people who didn't have a sophisticated enough understanding of biology to really grasp the truth of how seeds come alive into plants and trees open up out of their winter dormancy.

“Mmm...” mutters Eostara, “and do you? Do you really know how it all works? If you understand it all so well, let's see *you* make it happen.” She has a point. Metaphor or not, there is a certain magic to this season which people have been celebrating for millennia—not out of ignorance, but out of joy and gratitude and hope. I wonder sometimes if we may have forgotten as much as we have learned.

The less our livelihoods depend on a direct connection to the earth, the less we are likely to remember that the cycles of our planet are the cycles of our own lives. The more our technological accomplishments allow us to take control of the details of our own individual environments, the less likely we are to see ourselves as part of the whole ongoing, cyclical story of the earth. We see our lives moving not in cycles or in the inevitable reenactment of sacred stories through the repeating course of the year, but rather straight ahead, progressing “forward through the ages, in unbroken line,” as one of our UU hymns proclaims.

We live, not in the ancient, circular world of myth, but in the linear world of history, of events unfolding over time. That linear worldview, interestingly enough, is a gift of the Hebrew people, whose earth-centered religion developed, over centuries of nomadic life, into the concept of a single god, not bound to any particular place, who had a covenant, an agreement, with them as a people.

This covenant with God, the notion that people had reciprocal obligations with the divine, led them to look at life as the unfolding of this covenant through time and led them to see their religion as happening through history, from the past into the future. The job of humans in this new scheme was not simply to remember and reenact the divine stories, but also to be part of the creation of religious stories themselves.

Scholars believe, for instance, that the observance of Passover originated in two seasonal festivals, one belonging to sheep-herders who celebrated the birth of the spring lambs with a ritual sacrifice, and the other belonging to farmers who celebrated the new crop by eating the flat, unleavened bread which was the first farmers' food. Reminders of the original spring festival also continue in the tradition of eating hard boiled eggs and greenery such as parsley—both traditional symbols of new life.

But over the top of these ancient symbols the Jewish people lay a different type of story—one based, however loosely, in history, on real human lives. Passover celebrates the release of a people from slavery. It honors the courage of a man, Moses, who dared to challenge authority and lead his people to a new life. It tells of a partnership between the human and the divine, and speaks of both God's longing for people to be free and the necessity of human action in order for that freedom to come about.

It would be, of course, misleading to call this story historical in the usual sense of the word. Clearly, it is nothing like an objective newspaper report of the events of that long-ago time. In a sense Moses is just as mythological as Eostara or Persephone. What his story and the story of the Jewish people fleeing Egypt provides, however, is a reminder that the possibility of re-birth exists not only on the grand scheme of nature, but also on a more human scale.

Passover draws those who celebrate it into remembering primal joy as the year turns once again to spring, bringing new life and the promise of sustenance for another year. However, as much as anything Passover celebrates the reality that people like us make changes; that against all odds, courage and determination can take us into a new land, lead us toward a new home, bring us into a new life in which we are no longer slaves—whether that slavery be to Pharaoh, or to our own prejudices and fears.

Passover is a celebration of Spring, of the joy of new life, but it is a celebration without illusion about the difficulties and dangers which accompany change. The Exodus story is the tale of people who abandoned all they knew for the possibility of a life of freedom. It is the story of genuine, flawed human beings who made mistakes, complained when the going got rough, and spent vast chunks of time lost and wandering. It is a springtime story not in the romantic sense of pastel flowers and sweet bunnies, but in the reality of this unpredictable and shifting season that holds so much of both promise and disappointment.

Spring is a season which demands that we operate by faith—not faith as a passive acceptance, simply giving into things as they are, but rather faith as the ability to see beyond what is immediately present, the courage to trust in the possibility of new life and to make that new life real.

I suppose that kind of faith is, for me, at the heart of these festivals of spring, Passover and Easter alike. For me the Easter story of the resurrection is moving, is real, as a story of that kind of determined faith. Jesus, like Moses, dared to challenge authority, tried to lead people to a new, freer life. Perhaps his task was even greater in that he took on the authorities of his own faith, as well as those of the foreign

government, and given that he was pointing toward a freedom based in justice and compassion in each person's heart rather than in a land far away.

However, the faith of the Easter story is different from the Passover story in another significant detail. Jesus, unlike Moses, lost. The authorities, the ones too attached to the status quo to admit any possibility of change, sent him to a painful and ignominious death.

And yet, like the crocus which springs to life from beneath the snow, Jesus' message of radical love has survived not only his death, but the 2000 or so years which have come in between. Yes, of course I know as well as you do the persecution and narrow-mindedness which has taken place in his name. Human beings have just as great a fear of change now as they did 2000 years ago—perhaps more, since we have had to go through so much of it. It is no easier for a rich man to hear "Sell all you have and give it to the poor" now than it was then. Understanding that your enemy is a neighbor to be cared for has not gotten simpler over time, and perhaps people have not really gotten better at it, regardless of who they claim to be following.

But still, as with the lives of so many others who refused to be intimidated out of their convictions, the Easter story continues to move me with its sense of spring, the power of faith in new life over all obstacles. Perhaps it is Jesus' voice I hear, along with Eostara and Moses: "Wake Up! New life surrounds you if you will only open a place in your heart." They deserve an answer, one which Cummings provides at the end of his poem. "now the ears of my ears awake and now the eyes of my eyes are opened" as new life is born and reborn again.