

**“How Shall We Celebrate Easter?”**  
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Easter Sunday 2007 – How shall we – as Unitarian Universalists – celebrate Easter this year?

Now I do recognize that Unitarian Universalists are not wholly satisfied or theologically comfortable with the mere recitation of the gospel accounts which the more traditional faiths ascribe as the origin of the Easter observance.

At Easter, religious liberals stress the universal hope of immortality and the victory of the human spirit over apparent defeat – the latter exemplified by Jesus of Nazareth, crucified, yet victorious of spirit in the hearts of humanity.

The heritage of liberal religion is marked by the constant waging of the theological struggle with the more orthodox over the symbolism of Easter and its resident hope of immortality.

When Unitarian Universalists speak and sing of the renewal and rebirth of Springtime, it is our attempt to emphasize the universality of the signs and symbols of this season – similarly celebrated by humanity long before the time of Jesus.

Unitarian Universalism tells of the ancient symbolic uses made of the decorated eggs at Easter – of the presence of the rabbit as a symbol of fertility – of Spring’s renewal – of the historical significance of the vernal equinox, long recognized by primitive people to herald the hope of immortality resident in the changes of the seasons. Liberal religion treats the accounts of Jesus’ death as part of the celebration of this rebirth of humanity’s spirit to those eternal truths which motivate our actions.

However plausible and rational such an approach is to the observance of Easter, Unitarian Universalists encounter difficulty in our attempts to explain our Easter beliefs to our more orthodox friends.

Given that difficulty, I have often wondered if we succeed in providing an understandable perspective to our Easter observance by attempting to

incorporate the meaning of Easter held by ancient humanity with the later gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Or, are we merely adding to the already existing confusion surrounding this observance.

I am fond of the anecdote about the Unitarian Universalist who inquired of his young daughter: "Jenny, today is Easter Sunday. Do you know what Easter is?" And the young child replied, "Sure I do, Dad. It is the day that Jesus rose from his tomb."

"Jenny, I am so proud of you," responded the father, "I honestly didn't think that you knew the Easter story."

"Oh, yeah, I know all about Easter. Jesus rises from his tomb and if he sees his shadow, he has to go back in again for six more weeks."

. . . Still, the question remains: How shall we celebrate Easter? How shall we attempt to convey our liberal religious awareness of this holiday to our neighbors and friends . . . to our children?

Many answers do not honor us.

Confusion does not, nor does cynicism. Too often we Unitarian Universalists stop at the "*I do not believe*" declarations and do not move forward to elaborate what we indeed "*do believe*."

When our answers halt at this point of unbelief, our faith becomes sterile. We forget the reality that humanity is sustained – not by what it doesn't believe – but by what it *does believe* in.

For example, Springtime.

What healthy-minded Unitarian Universalist does not believe in – rejoice in – the Springtime? Here we join with the ancients in this rejoicing – and this is good.

It is good to ponder the wonder of the seed, the warmth of the sun, the fertility of the earth, the beauty of the first crocus and the budding tulips.

It is good to know – to count on – to believe in – the ever-returning seasons, the ongoing life of Nature.

From ancient times, almost all cultures have celebrated the coming of spring. Coming from the old Norse word “Eostur” designating this the “season of the rising sun.” Primitive peoples relied on the “season of the sun” to make their crops grow again.

. . . Still, Easter is more than just this.

The religious liberal is a questing soul, ever seeking new truths, new understandings. The universe in which we live is always offering the opportunity for new awareness, new insight, new truth.

Time was – and still is with many individuals – when women and men thought of the physical only in terms of what one could actually see with the naked eye.

Not that long ago, a pound of uranium was thought of as a pound of heavy metal. But now, we understand that a pound of uranium, burned in a nuclear reactor, will release two and a half million times the amount of energy produced from burning one pound of coal. – Just one example of something that is far more than it appears to the naked eye!

Scientists, using radioisotopes to study bodily processes, have discovered that our bodies are always engaged in a dynamic cycle of breakdown and rebuilding – that saline solution injected into veins and tagged by radioisotopes leaves the human body in less than a minute’s time in the form of perspiration or sweat.

What it is that gives you and me the “spark of life” – we do not know.

“Life” hasn’t been able to be tagged as radioisotopes have been. The atoms of life – as it were – haven’t been isolated and identified.

In Nature, the processes of life change – they do not end. We are a part of Nature – a part of the complex natural order of life growth and change and process.

What “consciousness” is – what the human mind is – we do not know.

We can wonder how those individuals who know that they are dying – know.

We can wonder how and why great and good individuals envision achievements beyond their physical years to achieve.

About “personal immortality” – we do not know.

Yet, what *WE DO KNOW* is that – both in life and in what we call “death” – we are not separate from – but a part of an ever-changing and ongoing process of life.

With this focus, there then comes an awareness of cosmological immortality.

Liberal religion champions a compatible working partnership between science and theology. In our attempt to better understand the full import of Easter, we strive to understand the new truths and knowledge that scientific experience and discovery offers us about ourselves and about our natural world.

In this context, I would also mention biological immortality.

Its meaning is in us – in our children – in our children’s children.

Here, again, liberal religion bows in respect and wonder.

We have concern that the children of the earth may have a healthy inheritance and an opportunity for their finest possible development – for their own happiness – and for the well-being of the generations yet-to-be.

If we accept that Jesus truly did die on the cross, no liberal religionist can honestly embrace the reputed story of the physical or bodily resurrection of Jesus. The evidence of life – save for CPR resuscitation a short time after drowning or being de-fibbed on an operating table – is otherwise.

Still, as those individuals who have suffered deep sorrow and loss can attest, there is a psychological truth to be found in the resurrection stories. When sorrow comes – particularly when it comes without warning – one may go through all the daily routines with one’s head up, yet filled with unspeakable pain and agony inside. Few have escaped the feeling of “I can not go on,” even though the mind has directed otherwise. So, we should suspect it was also with those who deeply loved Jesus of Nazareth. His death brought shock and the feeling that all was ended.

The Galilean taught and preached a crazy, impossible kind of love – an ethical message of love so wide it could embrace even enemies – so persistent that it could walk two miles when forced to go one – or, give more when some has already been taken away – so far above this world of ours that no one has ever been able to live it. His message was more like a vision than a reality – more like a dream than real life.

. . . Yet, a haunting vision . . . an enticing dream.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are honest enough with ourselves to know that we might not be able to fully live it, but we can still dream it and see just what that dream does to our lives.

I think that it was Jesus' big error to believe that the world was shortly coming to an end. Perhaps it was just this mistaken belief that enabled him to preach such a message of radical love that he did.

Listen to this interpretation of Jesus' life by the Unitarian theologian, Henry Nelson Wieman:

“Jesus declared continuously the blessedness of all encompassing love and yet lived in a world so barren of love. . . .This seeking for a love that is never fulfilled might become so deep and so intense that a man would spend all his life preaching the principles of a kingdom of love – principles that would sound like the beatitudes of madness in a world like this. They could be made intelligible only by attributing them to an illusion that the world was shortly coming to an end and would be transformed miraculously into such a kingdom. Perhaps such a craving for love between people would drive a man to that desperate madness in which he dreamt that by dying on a cross, he could somehow bring this kingdom into existence.”

. . . Love with end? The Jesus dream? Madness? Perhaps.

Still, there may be more sense in this madness than one might initially think.

During the Eastertide when the more traditional faiths are observing the idea of Jesus rising from the dead and conquering Death and Satan and Sin and Evil and proving Jesus' divinity and of his being around for the rest of time to help chosen people get to heaven – while they are celebrating that – we Unitarian Universalists can think about, and reflect on, Jesus' hard words about radical love.

Traditionalists celebrate the resurrection as the triumph over death. Liberal religion celebrates the ongoingness of life as the triumph over death.

The Unitarian Universalist faith stance maintains that no life which has touched another life ever completely ceases to live. Every individual creates an indelible mark in this universe of ours. Like a stone dropped into a river whose rippling moves forever across the water, the life of the world is infinite in the chain of effects it produces. You and I may die – yet the world goes on – and it is not just any world! – it is a world that has been shaped by the footprints we leave to it.

One way an individual lives on after her or his death is in all the things that bring back that person's memory. Could it have been that same rationale with the followers of Jesus? After his death, when, with weary footsteps they began to follow the familiar paths of Galilee – treading the same steps where they walked with their teacher – it is then that they “saw” Jesus spiritually and psychologically. For them, Jesus became once more a living presence.

In Antoine de Saint Exupery's The Little Prince, there is a passage that speaks to this sense of the ongoingness of life through memory. A fox is speaking to the little prince before the prince is about to leave. The fox says to the little prince: “look, do you see the grain-fields down yonder? I do not eat bread. Wheat is of no use to me. The wheat fields have nothing to say to me. And that is sad. But you have hair the color of gold. Think how wonderful that will be . . . the grain, which is also golden, will bring me back the thought of you and all that you have meant to me. And I shall love to listen to the wind in the wheat.”

So many things take on new meaning because of the life of a person whom one loves: the sunset enjoyed together, the sharing of a meal – a moment – the glory of gold-colored wheat. And even the lives of those who will never know or remember you will take on new meaning because of the difference you have made in the life of the world.

So, too, young children see and remember beloved grandparents who have died. So, too, adults – ten thousand times and more – have seen and known the companionship of those they have loved deeply.

Time heals – agony finally subsides – and the radiance of love and memory remain to bless – even to help us to carry on.

One who has experienced this sense of remembrance and recollection knows and then can assist others in advance of their sorrows by sharing what is known and felt and understood. Children can understand, in part.

Easter is not the only time when adults can help children become aware of the wonder of life and the natural process of death, but it is certainly an appropriate time to help to do so.

Influential immortality, of course, includes far more than the psychological and spiritual experience of ongoing fellowship with those we have loved personally and lost.

Generations of individuals have never seen nor personally knew the composer Beethoven; he was deaf, he died young, yet his music lives on in the lives of great musicians and in the minds and hearts of those who listen and who love to listen to his works bequeathed to us.

Every single life that blesses another life with love and every single life that makes creative contribution has immortality – whether known or unknown.

The individual who first discovered and used the wheel is unknown. However, his – or her – immortality is real and known.

Humanity is immortal influentially. This is the heritage and the reality of the “ongoingness” of life. The challenge to anyone of us is as to whether our immortality of influence which we leave the world shall be for good or malevolence.

Time remains unending. We are in eternal life now by being in time.

The query naturally raised in such an interpretation of Easter relates to each one of us:

– Are we worth living forever – in terms of the quality and meaning and significance of our lives – that we are living now?

Rhetorically, I reframe my question: How shall you and I – religious liberals – Unitarian Universalists – how shall we celebrate Easter so as to convey the depth of our faith and beliefs in life?

How can we convey the essence of what *we do believe* to others . . . especially to our children and our children's children?

How shall we celebrate this day – Easter Sunday, April 8th, 2007?

Let me suggest – in response to my own query – that for our own information and edification, as well as to help answer the questions of our children, that we learn of the many points of view and traditions concerning Easter as we can, those stories and customs revealed in human history; that we become informed – if we are not – of the continuing scientific insights and discoveries – to know and understand the fresh learnings into human life that they bring; that we inculcate their real truths with our theological and philosophical beliefs – to the end, that we comprehend and understand better life's truths that *we do know*, believe, and embrace.

And, ultimately, to rejoice anew in the renewal of life in Nature;

- That we fall in love with the universe all over again – as to feel at home in it – a part of it – now and always;

- That we celebrate with thankful hearts the facts of cosmological immortality – of biological immortality – and of influential immortality;

- That we ourselves so live *now* as to drink deeply of the glory and beauty and wonder of life;

- That we so live *now* as to be glad of life and of being alive;

- That we so live *now* as to make our lives always a blessing to others.

. . . I believe that observing and celebrating Easter appropriately as a Unitarian Universalist is a task that calls each of us to feel a sense of joy in and with Life – that calls us to sing with our spirits the hallelujahs to life and to life's great renewal, rebirth, hope, and promise.

Allelulia! Alleluia to Easter. . .

May we ever sing praises to the ongoing process and to the gracious gift of Life itself.

Amen – Shalom – So May It Be.

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