

8 April, 2007 ☞ Easter Sunday

"Lessons in Redemption from a Purple Plastic Bracelet" ☞ Rev. Erika Hewitt

I'm glad to see all of you this morning – new faces, familiar faces, and everyone in between. We're fuller than usual, this Easter morning. Some of you, I'd wager, are here out of curiosity, others out of duty born of your religious or cultural hard-wiring, and still others of you are here because you felt compelled to be in this holy space on this Holy Day. All of you are welcome, whatever calls you here, and just as welcome to return, to make this your spiritual home.

You'll find that what we do here, as Unitarian Universalists, is simple but not particularly easy:¹ We engage in deep caring for one another, remembering to look at the insides, not the outsides, of people and situations. We find ways to engage the forces that uphold life, so that we might come more alive. And we explore what it means to be human – with all of our funny quirks, our repeated mistakes, our secret struggles and tender hopes – so that, when we return to the world "out there," we bring a little more grace, a little more patience, and a bit more compassion to the rest of our human family.

Today, on a holy day that celebrates a very superhuman miracle, our being human is what I'm after – not the same thing as our need to be saved, that original sin business that you'd hear about from a more conservative pulpit. With apologies if you've strayed into the wrong church, let me remind you of the twin convictions of our five-centuries-old faith:

- Like our Unitarian strand of history, we affirm that Jesus was fully human, a rabbi ("teacher") who was martyred for his radical insistence that we belong to one another, and are responsible for seeking justice for the least among us.
- Our Universalist legacy stands in defiance of the doctrine of original sin (although I've heard a few of my colleagues insist that they *do* believe in original sin: "the more original, the better"), instead proclaiming that we human creatures are born in deep goodness – born saved, born right the first time. The Holy lives *within* us, loving us despite all imperfections, or perhaps *because of* them.

As a people of faith, then, is it our theological claim that *salvation is unnecessary*? Not quite. It's not enough to rest in celebration and affirmation our goodness. The world that we live in won't *allow* to us rest, in fact – it calls to us, too loudly at times, to take up the work of repair and redemption. In the words of the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, "We have to...recognize the forces, social and personal, that deny the goodness of life and have the power to sever human beings from knowledge of our sacred worth."²

You see, it's not the afterlife we're concerned with, as UU's – it's *this* life, right here: the one you're living, with an unknown number of days ahead of you (either an inspiring or a paralyzing thought!). What matters is who we are becoming in *this* world, not whether we're bound for another, more mythical one. In a spiritual community like ours, made up of people who are simply trying to get the knack of being human, *redemption comes not from an outside savior, but from our courage to recognize what separates us from life, from each other, from the Presence of the*

¹ I'm grateful to the Rev. Victoria Weinstein for inspiring these thoughts.

² Ibid.

sacred.

For we Unitarian Universalists, then, Easter isn't so much about the bodily resurrection of one man as it is about our own awakening, in the wake of separation, to *how we create and sustain our connection to that which is life-giving*. You can call it "resurrection," or call it "rebirth." William Ellery Channing called it "the unfolding of our powers." I've named it by saying "something inside of me was dead, and now it's alive again." All of these phrases are the evidence of our growth and transformation.

You could argue, and I wouldn't disagree, that Lent is an artificial means of pursuing the organic process of transformation. Shouldn't we allow renewal to occur spontaneously, organically, in response to life around us? Flowers, after all, don't need instructions to pop out of their dirtbeds; lizards don't plan to shed their skin. Won't we experience rebirth without our dutiful hovering and our forty-day plans?

I think of Lent as an invitation for transformation, or rebirth – kind of like metaphysical Miracle-Gro. It's hard enough to connect to practices and habits that are life-giving, and so if we're moving toward the lofty goal of rebirth, it only makes sense to me that we take tiny steps – tiny, careful, *human* steps – to get there.

Plus, it's part of my religious hard-wiring. As the product of Catholic schools and Methodist churches, my inner antennae are permanently tuned to the period of forty days stretching from Ash Wednesday to Easter. That's nearly six weeks set aside, a time for mindfulness and devotion to... well, it depends. Mainstream Christians might say that Lent is a time of preparation for the death and resurrection of Jesus, to align themselves more closely with God, perhaps by giving some part of themselves in offering or sacrifice to God (that's why, for some of you, Lent might have abstemious or ascetic connotations).

Here's *my* take on it, just so we're clear: When I enter into Lent – which I don't do every year, but more often than not – I do so in the spirit of observation, turning a gentle inner lens onto a habit that seems to a little too ingrained, a little too "puppet master" to my marionette spirit. In choosing this one area and committing to pay attention to it for forty days, I prepare myself to shed an outgrown layer of skin – just like the tiny lizard skin (or the 10-foot python skin) that I showed the children this morning. It's as if to say, when I take up a Lenten practice, *Forty days from now, I'm going to leave behind this old skin, slither out of it in my new skin, and see what I look like.*

I stress the intention behind the practice because the only way to redeem our most ungodly parts, to rebirth some part of us, is through efforts that are concrete, deliberate, and gentle. "Habit is habit," said Mark Twain,³ "and not to be flung out of the window by any man, but coaxed downstairs a step at a time."

To coax a new way of being into the world *this* year, my Lenten practice involved this purple plastic bracelet. It's from a program developed by Christ Church Unity in Kansas City;⁴ I latched onto it because its premise resonated with me: most of us complain

³ In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Chapter 6.

⁴ You can learn more about this program by visiting AComplaintFreeWorld.org. Rev. Will Bowen and his congregation have also been featured in People magazine, on

too much (I complain too much), a habit that feeds our negative attention and energy, and diverts our attention from what we ought to revel in, and be grateful for. We also criticize and gossip a little too enthusiastically – the verbal equivalent of eating a bag of potato chips: it feels good at the time, it's hard to stop, but you know you *should* stop because it's not going to enhance your health or well-being in any decent way. To coax that behavior "downstairs a step at a time," I have to *notice* when I complain, and *recall* myself to the intention of outgrowing that habit.

So I got this bracelet, and put it on, and every time I caught myself complaining, criticizing, or gossiping, I was to move the bracelet to the other arm and start again. The stated goal of the program, as outlined by Christ Church Unity – and it's okay to snicker here – is to go 21 days without moving the bracelet. When I threw myself into this practice back in February, I didn't get hung up on that goal. Remember: what interests me is devotion to simply *noticing*: how often do I complain or gossip? What makes me do it? What effect does it have on my mood? What would happen if I tried to outgrow this old skin?

Here, then, are my Purple Bracelet Observations:

1. Using this bracelet instantly raised a series of questions, some of them hair-splitting. For example, isn't there a difference between "complaining" and the kind of prophetic social justice work that, in ministerial language, is "speaking truth to power"? (Yes, I decided, there is a difference.) I also cut myself some slack by deciding that, even though I live alone and can go for long periods of time without speaking to anyone, a "complaint" is only a "complaint" if it's out loud – not if it's inside my head. (Honey, let me tell you: I needed all the breaks I could get.)
2. As I built up an awareness of my whinging patterns, I began to make what I call "the pre-emptive bracelet move": I switched wrists to acknowledge that I was about to complain or gossip. Clearly, I was in denial about the point of this exercise: to *avoid* complaining altogether.
3. The number-one, without-fail trigger for my complaining was drivers. Whether in my car, on foot, or on my bike, nothing forced me to move the bracelet faster than someone behind the wheel of a car.
- 3½. It's not a good idea to move a bracelet from one wrist to the other while you're driving 70 miles an hour on the freeway. In all seriousness, I've learned something from this practice about where I most need to foster extra reserves of compassion and patience.
4. In undertaking any endeavor as delicate as this, it's crucial to tell people what you're doing: any community worth its salt holds us accountable to our aspirations, and gives us strokes when it's necessary. Just a couple of weeks ago I was in the office with Heidi, our bookkeeper, as we tussled with some numbers. With a heavy sigh, I absentmindedly grumbled that my stomach hurt because I'd eaten a handful (okay, two handfuls) of M&Ms. "Umm..." ventured Heidi, raising her eyebrows, "Are you going to...?" as she pantomimed moving the bracelet. And so I did, dismayed and disheartened by how unaware I'd been of my own complaining. She'd reflected back to

the Oprah Winfrey Show, and NBC news. You can also get your own purple bracelet!

me my own voice, when I couldn't hear it.

On the other hand, I recently spent the day with a colleague and I voiced my relief that my "no complaining" practice was taking hold. "I'm pretty pleased," I told her (sliding into that other mortal sin, *pride*). "I felt like gossiping a few minutes ago, but I didn't." "Good for you!" she replied, "Now don't you get a 'get one free' bonus for that?"

5. Throughout these past forty days, I've had to remember *why* I'm engaged in what could appear to be a silly little game. It would have been easy to get lost in the score-keeping, instead of being faithful to The Point – and The Point is this: **What we practice grows stronger.**

If there is to be any promise for us, in *this* life, on *this* Easter day; if we're to taste any of the liberation that we promise and wish for ourselves in *this* Passover season, we can't just wish for the unfolding of our powers – we have to recognize the power we have to meet it half-way.

In this beautiful, difficult life, it's possible for our hearts to die a million little deaths:
When we allow pride to stand between us and an estranged relative,
When we forego caring for our bodies, abusing their sacred worth,
When we focus too closely on what's wrong, not on what's right,
When we bury our fears in the poisonous balm of addiction,
When we incubate cold indifference to people who need us...

I could go on and on, but you know, my dear ones, about those little deaths that chase us from cradle to grave.

This Easter, let us remember the other side of the coin – which is stronger, brighter, in which we have our stake. We bring life back into our souls:
when we notice, and affirm, the goodness of life,
when we take apart a harmful habit and wrestle with it until it serves us,
when we shed an old, outgrown "skin,"
when we take any tiny, human step we can that unfolds our powers a little more,
expands our hearts a little more, brings us into connection just a little bit more.

This spiritual community is a home where we practice this art of being human, but it's also where we find our redemption, our renewal, and our rebirth. You are the resurrection and life. We are the possible. We are the miraculous. Hallelujah!