

## Easter 2024

Today we meet to celebrate Easter and Ostara, an ancient spring equinox festival honoring the Anglo-Saxon fertility goddess Eostre, who (the story goes) carried an egg with her everywhere. Ancient traditions saw the children giving the goddess eggs as a gift in exchange for her persevering the children through Winter and into spring. This so appealed to her that she had rabbits bring the eggs back to the children in baskets, brilliantly colored. In order to nourish a plant, ancient peoples would bury an egg with seedlings as representative of their aspirations for the coming year. They must have had a lot of chickens! It is alleged that Christian clergy told children to look for and dig up the eggs; the Easter egg hunt originated when said “clergy would reward the kids for finding eggs by giving them a tiny gift when they returned them to the church.” (kidsconnect, “Ostara Facts & Worksheets,” pg. 3) In what might have been a precursor to the UU sexuality education unit, “Our Whole Lives,” it is said that “Plays in which a man and woman take on the roles of the spring god and goddess display courting customs that correspond to seed-planting.” (op. cit.) Ostara celebrations parallel celebrations in ancient Rome, Persia, and Central America. Likewise, the Roman or Persian god, Mithras, was associated with light, truth, and purity, and drove the sun across the sky from his birth on December 25<sup>th</sup> until dying and being resurrected in the Spring, thus helping his followers ascend to the realm of light after death.

Unitarian Universalist clergy have gone to some pains over the years to develop a hybrid celebration that combines Judaism, Christianity, and various nature religions into a sort of Carl Jung-Joseph Campbell-ish archetypical soup of essential, deeply spiritual meanings. UU clergy of fifty, forty, and thirty years ago went to some trouble to build abstract bridges between these disparate belief systems. It was hard work. Easter eggs and Easter bunnies have nothing theologically in common with Christian celebrations of Jesus’s resurrection from the dead. This bridge-building demanded a lot of intellectual heavy-lifting to explain universal and largely unconscious patterns of human behavior that reach a culmination in Spring. The comparisons and parallels don’t really work, because these different traditions are distinct unto themselves. If you want to celebrate

Passover as a release from the bondage of racism, sexism, and war, be my guest. If you want to celebrate Easter as a rebirth of hope for peace, be my guest. With or without references to Ostara, the relief of Winter ending and the lovely promise of increasing sunlight are enough to celebrate.

We at FUSW and other Unitarian Universalists are not explicitly Christian in our celebration of Easter because belief in a bodily resurrection is rare among us, nor are we anti-Christian. We are not explicitly Jewish (although Passover and what Christians have called the Last Supper and Christian communion are rooted in Judaism). We as Unitarian Universalists come out of a history that stretches way back in time. For a great example of this deeper view, I turned to the work of J. Robert Smudski, the minister to this congregation for 21 years, starting in 1956.

I knew and respected Bob Smudski during his last years here, and after. I looked up one of Bob's sermons on Easter, where he established his view of the function of religion--across all religious and ethnic labels--and then applied that to the function of Easter. Bob wrote:

Religious belief is designed to foster a specific kind of behavior . . .that which will perpetuate either a specific ethnic group, or a larger group, even the human race. Survival is the long-range goal of the group, and individual behavior is cultivated which will enhance the chances of group survival. (Smudski, "Reframing Our View of Easter," April 15, 1979, page 4)

In sum, the morals and norms of a group promote survival values, or their adherents die out. The values any religion espouses are going to push people toward unity with the group, personal responsibility, and prudent behaviors. The Shakers, for example, felt that they had a good thing going in their devotion to celibacy and spiritual enlightenment through song and dance, but without allowing for the production of children they ceased to exist. Their religion did not support goals which enhanced group survival. Christian churches once thrived as they were seen as an antidote to "godless" Communism, which supported national and denominational survival for decades, but as the socialist threat decreased so did the need for massive Christian commitment and churches have gone into decline.

Bob Smudski went on to outline the general movement of early Christianity. He wrote:

. . .from the beginning of what later became the Christian movement, there was a division about the need to become a Jew first in order to become a Christian. The struggle was between those early followers of Jesus who saw themselves as good members of the House of Abraham and those Jews who had been exposed to both Greek culture and the Greek world. These latter . . .had a larger view than the ethnic view.

Bob traced the shift from a requirement that you needed to be Jewish to be a Christian into a larger vision:

The Jews continued their old covenant, and in so doing continued to promote the survival of the ethnic group. The Christians, on the other hand, in the spirit of a new covenant transcended ethnic, class and racial lines. . . .the Easter celebration truly memorializes the transformation of the ancient message from a message to a single group into a message for all mankind. In Easter, the death of the old covenant is recognized and the birth of the new is celebrated. The Christian Church . . . becomes the resurrected body of Christ. (Smudski, pg. 6)

Bob was a highly educated, widely read, deep thinker. His ministerial type seldom exists anymore. These quotes are from an eight-page, single-spaced sermon of nearly an hour, and nobody is willing to sit through that now. I should note here that when Bob delivered this kind of sermon on holidays the congregants tended to suffer through them, celebrate his being very smart, and were very glad it was over.

When Bob emphasizes the link of Christianity to Judaism, he is contradicting the current isolation of Jesus as the Christ from the rabbi Jesus, whose words as recorded in the New Testament draw on explicit reference to the Old Testament. Jesus is referred to in the Bible as a rabbi, i.e., teacher. Easter is the culmination of The Last Supper—i.e., Passover. The roots of Christianity are deep in Judaism, but Unitarian Universalism has dug into the loam of human spirituality to champion something more basic, more universally human than those groups. It was the rabbi Jesus who advocated the Golden Rule of “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” kindness to others beyond geographic, sectarian, and ethnic

affiliations, and the importance of a personal, spiritual connection to something beyond this tangible life. The rabbi Jesus speaks to all mankind of kindness beyond labels, of peace beyond recrimination and hate, and Love as an absolute good. Jesus was important but not the first, nor the only, advocate of respecting the human yearning to live in peace.

His timeless recommendations for love and peace are relevant in this terribly dark time when the Golden Rule is being broken blatantly. The brutally horrific invasion of Israel by Hamas that killed and wounded so many has been met with a brutal cataclysm that also kills many innocent people. The totalitarian Russian invasion of Ukraine still grinds on, slaughtering tens of thousands on both sides and splitting the Orthodox Christian Church. The civil war in Sudan waters the earth with much blood. It is hard to pull our attention from these depredations of the blameless, the very young and merely young enough, and the too-old to run away. We are honor-bound to pay attention to such horror. I feel great sorrow for our tender hopes for peace. And yet there are occasional signs of moral Springtime.

Recently, my dishwasher died spectacularly. The certified repairman said he couldn't repair it. The dishwasher company's repairman said it would cost more to repair than it originally cost. Then I remembered my neighbor—a professional engineer--had recently left his corporate job and put out the word that he was available for odd jobs. I hired Gary, my laconic neighbor to repair my dishwasher and kitchen sink plumbing. The dishwasher and the plumbing were not easy jobs; he was splayed out on the floor reaching into places no ordinary human can reach, and got the job done right. When he told me the cost, including supplies, it was ridiculously low. I knew he had recently quit his job, so I looked at him quizzically and asked:

“Are you sure--it is so little?”

He replied, “I don't do it for the money. I just like doing it.” I paid him the little he asked and told him I was deeply grateful. The next day, we hosted a thirteen-member meeting of our program group and we badly needed a

functioning dishwasher. Gary is an example of the Spring of human generosity arising when it is most needed.

I will grant you that celebrating new life, Spring, and bunny rabbits bringing eggs can look like a too-easy, heartless avoidance, a shirking of our duty to worry and contribute and witness to the need for peace. And if you are mourning the loss of a loved one, stuck in the morass of a depression that feels unending, or simply so overwhelmed by the world's sorry state that joyful celebration would feel hollow, that is more than acceptable. I, and others from the congregation, will listen to your pain and empathize. But we also need to go on and gather our emotional strength.

I am hereby granting us all permission to enjoy Springtime happiness. Call it what you will: Passover, Easter, Ostara--or whatever. I grant you permission to act on behalf of others' need for help, for food and shelter and a comfortable space in which to grow, not out of obligation or grim determination but out of an anticipation that joy may follow us all the days of our life. I grant you permission to enjoy puppies and kittens and little children as a promise to us and the world that life perseveres. Out of our joy at knowing that there is some goodness in the world, and that we may add to it as we can, we might do good things because we enjoyed ourselves. It is enough to simply celebrate Spring as a reawakening of joy that energizes us to spread the joy.

Spring--in my Great Plains childhood--had few colors or joys: gray clouds and rain, or--when the skies cleared--Kelly green John Deere tractors roared and belched dark gray smoke as their four, six, or eight-bladed plows cut furrows into black Platte River bottomland gumbo, cutting down whatever plants and animals had dared to live there. Gray dust obscured blue skies as farmers drove harrows and planters to put down tightly regimented rows of green corn or monoculture oceans of wheat or alfalfa. Crops were the same shade of green or--later--the same brown as far as the eye could see. This was Spring in the service of production and production in the service of a desperate gamble to survive a crushing mortgage. This was Spring overloaded with hard work, boredom with my

dull surroundings, hatred for my deadening never-ending work, and fierce resentment for the banks.

It was early Spring, 37 degrees Fahrenheit, and bright sunshine last week.

I'm recovering from a bad cold, so I'm in Rockefeller Preserve--but not running--so that gives me time to really take in my surroundings. Walking in woods, cold under a cloudless brilliantly blue-sky bowl, the bare, striated gray and brown tree trunks and limbs stretch upward and cast dark shadows on my bland, gray path, shadows crossing and reaching out like tributaries and rivers on a map. By contrast, several groups of about 50 chest-high to 20-foot devil's walking stick stalks are leafing out along the path. The hardwood sticks are covered with tiny needle-sharp spikes and billiard-table green leaves at intervals, topped with one tightly bound brown bud. Vines scramble haphazardly to entwine about them and quickly leaf out lime, Romaine, and pistachio tinted leaves. Gangly, thorned briar bush branches are pushing out darker green leaves from within older leaf clusters to claim some sunlight as well. Bright highlights of their brand-new varying shades of lemon-lime and dark green leaves glow against dark shadows. Massive, softly moldering logs glow topside with chartreuse moss and dark lichen and sprout small, oval white-gray mushrooms at their sides. Neon yellow-green moss crowns gray-black craggy boulders along with white and black mold splotches. In clearings, the tall autumn grasses that heavy snow crushed into a beige, sand-colored carpet cannot restrain spikes of chlorophyll-flooded grass thrusting skyward between old, dead stalks. In a reawakened meadow of low grasses, two brilliantly yellow dandelions bloom. Light orange knee-high swamp grass flows in a carpet down a hillside, interrupted only by jagged, dark cocoa brown ferns' stalks. Birds occasionally chirp; tu-weet, tu-weet, tsputee, tsputee, or tit, tit, tit, tit carries on a soft breeze redolent of yearning.

This is Spring when I do not have to drive that damned John Deere tractor. This is Spring in all its verdant energy. This is Spring when I can calmly, softly enjoy the sweet effulgent fecundity of grasses, bushes and trees just doing what they were always striving to do--be themselves. In this Spring, I can feel free to just be

myself, happily celebrating how the changed weather brought about many colors and many forms of many beings just being. So be it.

It is enough to celebrate with e. e. cummings by turning to the Responsive Reading. *(Congregants read the **bolded** sections)*

**i thank You God for most this amazing  
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes**

(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?**

(now the ears of my ears awake and  
Now the eyes of my eyes are opened)