

FOOL ME ONCE: But Don't Throw Out the Baby

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HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Now I bet you're waiting for me to say "April fools!"

But, I'm not.

The true origins of April Fools Day remain unconfirmed though it has been celebrated by many different cultures for several centuries. For one theory, historians speculate April Fools dates back to the late 1500's, when France switched from the Roman calendar which marked the New Year on April 1, in alignment with Pagan observances of the coming of Spring -- to the Gregorian calendar, which moved the New Year to back January 1, by authority of Pope Gregory XIII -- which actually realigned with Caesar's original calendar of the Solar year beginning on January 1. This was after centuries of calendar wars, during which observance of the New Year volleyed from Spring to Winter to Spring again, following Christian holidays -- at one point in history, the month of December boasted Christmas, *and* New Year's.

The calendar we run our lives by now, putting New Year on January 1, wasn't settled in Europe until 1752, after which the newly formed United States followed suit.

Now ... back to the 1500's. When France's Council of Trent moved the New Year from April 1st to January 1st, many of the common folk were either slow to get the news, or when they did get the news, refused to give up their long-held traditions and beliefs tied to April 1st, and kept celebrating the New Year on that day. Which prompted people of the elite and governing classes to call them -- "April ... Fools."

April Fools ... because those "in the know" and in power perceived, at the least, to just not know any better, or, at the worst, to be willfully ignorant. Centuries later, can't we just year them cackling, "Look at those April Fools, clinging to their outdated rituals, their unenlightened traditions, their old and foolish ways -- don't they *know* any better?!" And with that, the old traditions were rendered obsolete, and their communities irrelevant to the dominant culture.

There are other theories about how we got April Fools Day, but this one resonates most for me ... and so, no, I'm not saying "April Fools" right now.

Because you see ... I once did pretty much the same thing as those in this story who considered themselves superior to the common folk. I left my old tradition and its people. I shifted my perceptions of truth, and deemed mine more true. I declared their

beliefs and practices obsolete, and decided their communities were no longer relevant in my life. Well, except to rebel against them. To prove I how progressive I was.

And so I heaved that big ol' tub of religion bathwater out the window, baby and all - because ***I knew better***.

It's possible some of you did something similar with the religious traditions you were raised in, too.

Regrettably, it's all too evident that all too often Unitarian Universalism as a whole has done it as well. Despite opportunities to learn and grow and deepen our understanding, to expand our empathy, to elevate our awareness and strengthen our spiritual lives, to open our minds and hearts and arms wider and wider still.

But, Preacher! I hear some of you saying, I thought we ARE the open ones! I thought we ARE the enlightened exception to the religious rule?! Aren't WE the ones who evolved beyond the old ways? Aren't WE the ones who ***know better***?!

Didn't WE do away with dogma and doctrine and confession and original sin and literalism and superstition and patriarchal hierarchy?!

Didn't we ordain women before anybody else?!

Didn't we proclaim God saves everyone?!

And then didn't we say we didn't even ***have*** to believe in God to be saved?!

And then didn't we say we didn't even ***have*** to be saved?!

Didn't ***we*** declare every person has worth and dignity?!

Didn't ***we*** hang out a rainbow flag?!

And now look, we've got a BlackLivesMatter flag, too!

Aren't ***we*** the guardians of democracy?!

Aren't ***we*** the peacemakers, the justice seekers, the bridge-builders -- aren't ***we*** the LOVE people, for cryin' out loud?!

YES WE ARE ... and, well ... no, not quite.

Oh yes, we've done some ***good*** things. Some ***really*** good things. And still ... we have fallen far short of who we said we would be and what we said we would do. Many times, throughout our history. For we are human beings, struggling toward Light. And, oh, how how we keep proving it.

So it is that in the last week or so, our larger Unitarian Universalist denomination is waking up to the fact we've missed the mark again in a big way. We, meaning the Unitarian Universalist Association of which this congregation is a member, as are each of you, by virtue of of being part of this congregation.

Our greater faith is in a moment of sincere reckoning. Of finding it has once more failed to fully live by the principles it set forth. Study UU history a bit, and you will find our movement has been **to** this reckoning before. But never fully **through** it. Therefore, we find ourselves here again. Partly because in those prior moments of our history, we've not been sufficiently forthcoming or transparent.

So, in the interest of not repeating that history, knowing that if we don't know our history we are doomed to repeat it, your Unitarian Universalist Association and her myriad organizations, its ministers -- and your minister -- are committed to being as forthright and true as we can, that we may be part of redeeming this faith for the promise it yet holds out for us and for the world we share.

Some of you follow the greater UU denomination pretty closely, and many of you don't - and that's fine. Most of you are somewhere in the middle, aware of only bits and pieces, and mostly as it may surface our meetings or in the news. This morning, your leadership -- here and in the greater denomination -- want you to be more fully aware what's going on. Because this movement belongs to its people. Not some council or commission or board up in Boston. Unitarian Universalism belongs to you.

Two separate issues that require our attention and call upon our conscience surfaced in the last week.

First, through the brave witness of a woman of color in our Southern Region, named Christina Rivera, blatant unfair hiring practices of the Unitarian Universalist Association have come to light. As more and more people came forward in solidarity with Ms. Rivera -- who serves on the UUA Board of Trustees, and is risking her career for this -- it became terribly clear that these hiring practices are historically entrenched in the association, and have proven to perpetuate systems of oppression that privilege white patriarchy.

As you might expect -- or not expect, but ultimately hope for, if we are to be the people we say we are -- controversy erupted around this. Controversy marked by soul-searching on the part of virtually all our leadership, from our headquarters in Boston, to me in my recliner with my foot elevated. Scores of letters, statements of witness, professions of faith, calls for change, and long, hard looks in the mirror as individuals and as the collective that is this Unitarian Universalist faith.

In the midst of this controversy, the international president of our Unitarian Universalist Association -- Peter Morales -- resigned abruptly, on Thursday, effective yesterday.

While we were reeling from the news of Rev. Morales' resignation mid-day Thursday, a couple hours later, our UU community got more devastating news.

I want to pause here a minute to acknowledge that some of us and some of you will receive this news harder than others because of our own particular and often still-painful histories.

Shortly after we learned of Rev. Morales' resignation, we got word that a prominent UU community minister in Oklahoma, named Ron Robinson, had been arrested as part of a federal child pornography investigation.

I know this kind of news can be especially difficult for survivors of abuse and trauma. Know that I am available should you need to talk, or help finding support in the community. You should also know that many people both from the Tulsa area and beyond are there now, ministering to his community, his family ... and to him. And that the UU Trauma Response Ministry is already in motion for us all, with new hotlines going up today. I'll be sending out those numbers in case you need them.

A great number of people of our denomination -- ministers, religious professionals, and members alike -- are suffering greatly at this moment. Many are hurt, and confused, and angry, and grieving. Many of the people directly involved in these issues understandably feel betrayed. You may, too. So many of us left other religious traditions in search of way they thought was higher ground, only to now feel that they may have once more been misled. As do many of those UU born and raised. Fool me once ... as the old adage goes ... shame on you; fool me twice ... shame on me.

Our greater denomination faces a cross-roads of faith. Because the Universe will keep giving us the lessons we need until we learn them. Too often, the hardest way. Many, many meetings have already been taken in the last few days, with many more on the horizon -- including a live-stream of the next Board of Trustees meeting in Boston in three weeks. I'll be sending out a link for that so you can attend, along with me. Congregations all over the world have been asked to commit to participate in what happens now and what happens next -- and we at River of Grass will be part of it.

But what does all this mean for us, here in this Beloved Community?

I can only tell you what it means for me.

A long time ago, I walked away from the religion of my raising. And vowed I would NEVER be involved in any organized religion ever again. I thought I knew better. And called those people who loved me "April Fools."

And then I met you. Literally. Many of you right here in this room this morning. At SUUSI - the Southeast UU Summer Institute -- because Robby Greenberg invited me to come and sing. Soon, because of you, the scar tissue on my spiritual heart softened enough to let Unitarian Universalism in. And, well, the rest is a story of spiritual

transformation, standing right here this morning as your minister. Your **Unitarian Universalist** Minister. With you in this faith -- this faith I love -- this faith I've given my life to -- this faith we share -- this faith **you showed me**.

And I'm not giving up on it. Even in this moment of pain and failure to live by its principles, this moment it has violated its promise.

Be assured, I am not fooled.

I still believe in the religious community described in our reading this morning from James Luther Adams: open to insight and conscience from every source, bursting through rigid tradition, giving rise to new and broader fellowship -- with the goal of the prophethood and priesthood of all -- the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other for the ministry of healing. **The ministry of healing.**

We have a choice how to proceed with this Unitarian Universalist faith. We can choose to throw up our hands, and walk away broken hearted. Again. We can choose to make nice and smooth it over, and work just hard enough to feel enough better to carry on believing we're actually immune to the racism, classism, abuse, and oppression running all around us.

Or ... we can choose to repent and rebuild. And I do mean *repent*. Because we never really have. Even though we've talked about it and around it. For centuries. That's the hard work. So hard we've never truly and deeply done it -- in the world, or in this faith.

I, too, have been searching my soul these days, and found myself wanting ... and willing to try again to do the hard stuff, and do it better, and do it with you. I hope you will join me.

For you see, truth is ... yes, we have decried and denied dogma and doctrine and a hierarchy of belief -- only to then install our own dogmas and doctrines and hierarchies of belief. We've condemned white patriarchy -- and then helped to perpetuate it. We've denounced fundamentalism of every kind ... only to establish our own Unitarian Universalist versions of fundamentalism.

And too often when we've met with difficulty or disagreement, too many of us threw out that muddy old religion bathwater. Got ourselves a new tub we were really proud of, and vowed we'd never muddy it up. Only to realize one day that that one needed cleaning up, too.

But this time. This time, my Beloveds ... I'm not throwing out the baby.

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Amen, Amein, and Ameen. Aho, Ashé, Namasté, Blessed Be ... and It Is So.