

## “Practice resurrection: Musings on a Manifesto” - April 16, 2017

Preached by Ministerial Intern D. Scott Cooper  
at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento.

**Reflection:** by Worship Associate Ginny Johnson

**Reading:** “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front” By Wendell Berry

Bunny-themed merchandise and egg-shaped candy are two ways you can predict the coming of Easter. White plastic, cross-shaped yard signs, proclaiming in a purple script font: “He is Risen!” are another indicator back in Texas.

As a little kid growing up in Kentucky, I was excited when Easter rolled around. I would like to say it was because this future minister was intrigued by the theological implications of the phrase “He is Risen” but it was the candy. And new clothes. I remember the annual purchase of plaid or checked sports coats in springtime colors, new dress shoes with a buckle instead of laces, and of course, a clip-on tie.

Just as I had associated Easter with candy and new clothes rather than Theology in my youth, people tend to associate Kentucky with fried chicken rather than spirituality and activism. But, like the Easter baskets, they are there if you search. I learned from my Disciples of Christ friends in seminary that they point to Cane Ridge, Kentucky for the beginnings of the American Restoration Movement during the Second Great Awakening. These pioneers sought “the unification of all Christians in a single body patterned after the church of the New Testament”<sup>1</sup> and notable for us UUs who espouse a creedless faith, they believed that creeds kept Christianity divided.

Perhaps more familiar to you is the name Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk who lived many years in the Abbey of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Kentucky. He was a poet, social activist, and mystic, and wrote more than seventy books, mostly on spirituality, social justice, and a quiet pacifism. He is the source of one of my favorite quotes, “Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy.” Which reminds me of a line from the Wendell Berry poem Lucy just read, “Love someone who does not deserve it.”

I read another poem of Wendell Berry’s a few weeks back during the cow mooing service. Berry is a novelist, poet, environmental activist, cultural critic, and farmer. And he lives in Henry County, Kentucky.

I will occasionally go back through poems and quotes filed away on my laptop, and re-read things I haven’t thought about in a while. I came across Berry’s “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front” a few months ago. I find it to be a powerful piece of writing that presents something new each time I read it. This last time I read it, the last line, “Practice resurrection” jumped out at me, both because I knew I was scheduled to preach on Easter, and because it wasn’t immediately evident to me what he meant by it. I’ve thought a lot about it the past several weeks.

If you google “Practice resurrection” you’ll find various essays and sermons describing the phrase in a very Christian context, and interpreting Berry’s essay to fit

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<sup>1</sup> Rubel Shelly, *I Just Want to Be a Christian*, 20th Century Christian, Nashville, TN 1984, ISBN 0-89098-021-7

into a very Christian Easter mindset. After reflecting on the rest of the poem, however, I don't believe this was his intent. Also, not to put too fine a point on it, he didn't capitalize "resurrection," which would have made that intention clear.

But I understand why religious writers look for their story in the poem. The writings of skilled poets reveal a deep spiritual reality that resonate beyond the doctrine of any religion. Those of you who take copious notes while I preach will no doubt remember, a few weeks ago, my talking about the big questions that many people ask at some point during their life. Certainly, one of the most formidable is "What happens after we die?"

Resurrection, in one form or the other, unsurprisingly, plays a major role in answering that question in many religions. The idea that there is something beyond this life is attractive.

Last week, Lucy told us about Hindus and their relationships with gods. Hindus hold to the doctrine of reincarnation. "At the time of death, Hindus believe, one's destination is dependent upon one's state of mind at the moment of passing, and the degree and nature of one's unresolved karma. Although [like Universalism] there is no doctrine of hell in Hinduism, practitioners do believe that human beings who pass away full of rage, despair, or hopelessness are capable only of entering a spiritual realm populated by others with similar spiritual obstructions."<sup>2</sup>

"Buddhism comes from Hinduism, and as a result retains, as a formal point of doctrine, its belief in a system of reincarnation. . . . They believe that an individual spirit is reborn, undergoes a series of rebirths, and must continue that cycle until the ultimate, until reaching a position, until reaching a state of enlightenment."<sup>3</sup>

"Within the Islamic faith system, there is no reincarnation and no Son of God. One's reckoning is with Allah alone, and it is for the choices and actions undertaken in a single human life."<sup>4</sup>

Traditionally, Christians observe Easter to celebrate the eternal life they believe is made available by the Resurrection of Jesus after his crucifixion.

While UUs will often claim both Jewish and Christian roots, most of the doctrine and structure our faith is historically based on is decidedly liberal Christian. However, I see a very Jewish attitude in a UU concept of an afterlife; we tend to believe focusing on the good we can do right now is a better use of our time.

"Practitioners of Judaism do not so much 'dismiss' ideas of death, heaven, and hell as they choose to look beyond them and focus instead on the value of human life, which is regarded as sacred. . . . [They believe] drawing conclusions about the specific nature of our relationship with God after our death is not particularly useful or helpful from a theological point of view."<sup>5</sup>

So, Berry uses a term loaded with significance for many when he advises 'practice resurrection.' Resurrection is typically defined as a rising from the dead; and with a capital letter, the rising of Jesus from the dead. But Berry clearly wasn't using the word in this way. To "practice resurrection" in this way: dying, coming back to life, dying, coming back to life, simply strikes me as the height of indecisiveness.

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<sup>2</sup> Toropov and Buckles, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to World Religions*, 189-190.

<sup>3</sup> Toropov and Buckles, 223-224.

<sup>4</sup> Toropov and Buckles, 147.

<sup>5</sup> Toropov and Buckles, 60.

Resurrection also means a rising again, as from decay or disuse. The poet gives us lists of ways we can revitalize and add depth to our current life, transforming it into a new life of sorts. In the words of author Roger Housden, “A new life requires a death of some kind; otherwise it is nothing new, but rather a shuffling of the same deck. What we die to is an outworn way of being in the world. We experience ourselves differently. We are no longer who we thought we were.”<sup>6</sup>

How might we know we are in a rut shuffling the same old deck? If we are not living authentically, it may look something like what Berry describes in the first paragraph.

*Love the quick profit, the annual raise,  
vacation with pay. Want more  
of everything ready-made. Be afraid  
to know your neighbors and to die.  
And you will have a window in your head.  
Not even your future will be a mystery  
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card  
and shut away in a little drawer.  
When they want you to buy something  
they will call you. When they want you  
to die for profit they will let you know.*

When they want you to buy something they will call you. Well, this was written in 1973, now they send an email. You’ve probably seen ads on social media or gotten an email for something you recently googled – your mind hasn’t been punched in a card, but your browser history is available to retailers – much more efficient. Perhaps we do have windows in our heads.

So, what can we do to counteract this? Practice resurrection: Every day do something that won’t compute. Because being your authentic self is not going to make sense to a lot of people.

*Expect the end of the world. Laugh.  
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful  
though you have considered all the facts.*

But why does he tell us ‘practice’ resurrection? Once we are living authentically, why keep changing things up? Our lives are going to change as a matter of course one way or the other anyway. Change is inevitable, except from a vending machine.

Because some of us resist change. I know I do. I had a therapist once who wanted me to break my patterns, and change things up. “You leave the same time for work every day, and drive the exact same way? Change it up!” I insisted that I had configured the drive to carefully avoid school zones and traffic backups, it was the most efficient time and route, and to change it would defy logic. She didn’t buy it.

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<sup>6</sup> Housden, *Ten Poems to Change Your Life*, 14.

And some of us resist even inevitable change. But perhaps if we practice transitioning into voluntary new chapters of our lives, with optimism and authenticity, we will be better prepared when involuntary changes come. Having practiced, when difficult or even devastating challenges arise, we may be able to carry on more successfully.

Being able to authentically stand by the truth of your own life and live it as passionately and as fully as you are able is not self-centered, it is a compassionate act you are doing for the world. If nothing else as a model for others.

So, little wonder Berry's poem immediately spins out into a concern for the world.

*Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.  
Say that your main crop is the forest  
that you did not plant,  
that you will not live to harvest.  
Say that the leaves are harvested  
when they have rotted into the mold.  
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.*

Gardeners know about resurrection. Mary told us about the resurrection of Ginny's rosebushes. And a few weeks ago, Freddy Farmer and Felicia Ferret learned about the value of compost in our gardens. Things dying, returning to the earth, and creating new life.

*Put your faith in the two inches of humus  
that will build under the trees  
every thousand years.  
Listen to carrion – put your ear  
close, and hear the faint chattering  
of the songs that are to come.*

Confucius is quoted as saying, "If you think in terms of a year, plant a seed; if in terms of ten years, plant trees; if in terms of 100 years, teach the people." Berry segues from tending to the rebirth of the earth itself to caring about people; for the wellbeing of women about to create new life in particular. We are to practice the resurrection of nascent humans as well as our planet.

*Ask yourself: Will this satisfy  
a woman satisfied to bear a child?  
Will this disturb the sleep  
of a woman near to giving birth?*

I've heard tell of people who travel many miles to watch baseball practice during Spring Training. People will go to the final dress rehearsal of hard-to-get-into popular music and theatre productions. Many a proud parent and grandparent have proudly listened to a budding musician practice or even practiced shooting hoops or playing catch with an upcoming sports star.

Practice is not an isolated event. Practice resurrection, live authentically into the truth of your own life. Others will see you practicing and enjoy and learn and gather strength from your example. And perhaps learn to practice resurrection themselves.

So, on this Easter Sunday, when so many are celebrating Resurrection with a capital R, perhaps we too can celebrate and practice resurrection with a small r. The resurrection of our own lives, as we work to live more wholly and authentically, the resurrection of the earth, as we work to protect and enhance her ability to be reborn, and the resurrection of the lives of others, as we love them, stand beside them, and stand up for them.

*So, friends, every day do something that won't compute.*

*Love someone who does not deserve it.*

*Ask the questions that have no answers.*

*Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.*

*Practice resurrection.*