WHY THE STORK STANDS ON ONE LEG

A Sermon Delivered at
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When I was running for President of the UUA, of the things my friends and family had to put up with was hearing me called “the evangelical rabbi of liberal religion.” Which provoked my daughter to send me this card she’d found, with a drawing of guy my age, with a beard, glasses, hair somehow all loved off on top, wearing a well-traveled robe, a prayer shawl, and a yarmulke – under the caption, “The Velveteen Rabbi,” with him asking question: “Ven can I run and play with the real rabbis?” Which is why I love it when real teachers and preachers like John and Carlton and Tina ask me to come visit – and do what rabbis do, which is to tell stories.

Actually, as head of the UUA, I also got to run and play with the bishops and the roshis. All over. For example, One of our most important partners in interfaith work is a Buddhist group in Japan called the Rissho Kosei-kai, whose 6 million members share with us an emphasis on what Channing called ‘practical religion,’ as opposed to more dogmatic or ritualistic religion; on practice that promotes personal spiritual growth in the service of justice, peace, and on cooperation across all boundaries of culture and creed.

On a memorable visit to the beautiful city of Kyoto, they held an elegant banquet for me. Distinguished Japanese religious leaders were present. The food came in almost endless, exquisite little courses, each greeted by an exuberant, if translated toast, and lively talk. In good Japanese fashion, guests found their glasses of beer and sake refilled quickly after each “kampai!” After a while, I noticed that the abbot of Kyoto’s most traditional Zen monastery was showing signs of, well, having absorbed his quota. “Why am I here?” he began to mutter rather too loudly. “All of you, modernists! But I, I am traditionalist.” My hosts began to look embarrassed. So I tried to save the situation. “Venerable friend,” I said, “I am reminded of a koan.” “You know koan?” said abbott.
(Now a *koan*, in Zen tradition, is a question posed by a teacher for a student to ponder. Like, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” Each *koan* does require a good answer.)

“A few,” I replied. “But this one I use in America, especially my modernists who say, ‘Since we are modern religious people, why do we tell stories from ancient scriptures? Why bother with old holidays like Christmas or Hannukah? Passover or Easter? And I reply with this *koan*, ‘Why does the stork stand on one leg?’”

“Why does stork stand on one leg?” repeated the Zen master. Then a smile flashed across his face, and he burst out laughing. “Because otherwise bird fall on rump, right?”

“Right! Otherwise, bird fall on rump!” I then proceeded to tell our Japanese friends some of the history of free faith in America. How there had been other reform movements here -- the Free Religious Association, Ethical Culture, the American Humanist Association -- that simply put aside the Judeo-Christian tradition, rather than offer new interpretations of its meaning. And each flourished for a time, but then had a hard time *becoming* a tradition itself, a community that could endure from one generation to the next.

The genius of Unitarian Universalism, on the other hand, has been to stand with one foot clearly rooted in our Judeo-Christian heritage, and the other, well, somewhat in mid-air, ready to step across any arbitrary boundary, to cross over into another human perspective. My friends in the Rissho Kosei-kai quickly offered that this was their method as well – staying rooted in Japanese culture and Buddhist teaching, using one of its central texts, the Lotus Sutra, while taking a reformist interpretation of its teaching to empower more practical religious living, humanitarian concern, and international, interfaith cooperation.

My one-time colleague at All Souls, New York City, Forrest Church, whose father was the great liberal from Idaho, US Senator Frank Church, once wrote a little book called *God and Other Famous Liberals*. There he said that American liberals have too often shot themselves in the foot – which is expensive if you are standing on only one – by abandoning major icons of our culture to the interpretation of our reactionary opponents.
As though the flag doesn’t have a liberal interpretation, associated with the Bill of Rights. As though we don’t have an understanding of motherhood – based on the simple notion that a woman should be a full moral agent in choosing when and how to have a family. As though “family values” can’t include marriage equality for same sex couples and their children. As though the Bible had no prophetic tradition, challenging idolatries of gender, nation, class, and creed. As though Rabbi Jesus had supported sexism and imperialism, instead of the opposite. As though God weren’t so generous, forgiving, and, well, liberal.

How foolish to let others do our interpreting for us! To keep our own understandings of the Bible at the level of the dumbest Sunday school lesson, or most oppressive sermon, we heard as a young adult! How adolescent! Especially for members of a tradition that claims both the priesthood and prophethood of all believers. Meaning not only that each of us has the right to an unmediated relationship with the Holy, however well or ill we understand it, but also that we each have an obligation to try to live prophetically, reading the signs of the times in accordance with the faithful example of the best who have gone before us, in order to join them in helping to shape a little history, and not just be pushed around by it.

Sure, the Bible has been used in oppressive ways! All the more reason to remember that at its core is a story of liberation, the Exodus. And is it still relevant? Well, no matter when or where you live, if you look around you, and there is still oppression or injustice going on, then its we who are in “Egypt” and not just our Hebrew ancestors. But hold on: what the story promises is that there is a better world, more fair, full of promise and hope. Getting there may not be easy. It lies on the other side of a wilderness, a spiritual desert in which we’ll be tested, tested “to be what we want to see.” We’ll be tempted to retreat; to act out; to worship various golden calves. Not even our best leaders will make it all the way. So we need to covenant with one another, and with the Highest, not to treat any one the way we were treated back there; and not to treat one another that way along the way. Not to worship idols, but to keep the faith, sing the songs, encourage one another.
You do know, I hope, why it took 40 long years for the children of Israel to make that relatively short journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, don’t you? As my wife told me years ago: Even back then, the men were just too stubborn to stop and ask for directions! So we need to pass along the stories of women and men who’ve passed this way before.

Women like Katherine Weigel. She lived in Krakow, Poland, as the Reformation began. When people began to openly discuss what they believed, she was heard saying that like the Jews she did not believe a “trinity,” and neither had Jesus; that no one should be made to believe in doctrines that make no sense to them. And when this reached the ears of the local bishop, he asked her recant, and recite the creed. When she refused, he locked her in a chapel of the city’s main church, bringing her out twice a year to ask her again to do it. He kept her there for a whole decade. This was years before the more famous Servetus. But finally he had this grey-haired woman of 80 taken into the public square to be burned as a heretic. Witnesses say that she went calmly, serenely, citing both Jesus and Socrates as testifying that no one has anything to fear in this life or the next who keeps faith with the truth as they have been given to see it.

So why does the Unitarian Universalist stork stand on one leg? Perhaps because of what we owe to people like her: to all those, known and unknown, remembered and forgotten, who have lived and died as servants of the Highest, helpers of humankind, witnesses to conscience. To people, whose names you may not know, like Hajom Kissor Singh.

You may also not know that you and I today have co-religionists not only in Europe – not only in Britain and Transylvania and Hungary, and in Prague, but also again in Poland – and now in more than 20 other countries, from Indonesia to Kenya, Uganda, and Burundi, from Iceland to Tierra del Fuego, in groups led by people who found us on the internet, and have contacted the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists. We also members of larger, older groups in the Phillippines, and in the Khasi Hills of NE India.

Where the nearly 10,000 Unitarian Khasis, who were never Hindus, look back more than a century to Hajom Kissor Singh as their founder. They were and are tribal people whose
own indigenous faith spoke of Blei, the universal Spirit. And then in the mid-19th century, the British came. They brought soldiers, traders, and missionaries – Welsh Calvinist missionaries, preaching hell-fire and brimstone, but also schools, to convert the heathen.

Young Hajom Kissor Singh was among the first graduates of the mission school. At graduation, he gave a speech in which he said – and here I admit to dramatizing a bit – “We Khasis should probably thank you British for bringing us these profound spiritual and moral teachings of Jesus. After all, if nothing else, they tell us how you tell yourselves you should treat other people! Now, just a few questions: Why do you want us to believe so many things about Jesus that he never talked about? Wouldn’t it be enough just to treat one another the way he said we should, as all children of the one God that he called ‘Father,’ that our tribal religion called ‘Mother’, that the Muslims call Allah and that the Hindus have so many names for? Wouldn’t that be enough?”

And the missionaries, of course, said, “Heretic! And of a kind we have back in Wales! Why, you’re a Unitarian!” To which he replied, “Well, then I have something else to thank you for! It’s always good in this life to know one is not entirely along in one’s thinking. Unitarian – do you have an address for these people?” Eventually he found that in Calcutta there was a Unitarian minister – Charles Dall, who coincidently had served the First Parish in Needham, Massachusetts, where I now serve, before going to India to teach in a school there. With Dall’s help, Hajom Kissor Singh translated Unitarian hymns and prayers into Khasi, and wrote his own, to spread ‘the religion of the one God,’ Blei. With one foot planted firmly in the indigenous monotheism of his own culture, the other other suspended, well, transcendentally, universally, a la Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Charles Dall, both to interpret the missionaries’ Bible, and to welcome the stranger.

May the spirit that was in him, in Katherine, and in that dinner in Kyoto, be in us also. And may the universalism of the prophets, of Jesus and the apostles, not be forgotten, even in our particular place and time. Let us not be afraid to re-read and reclaim not the letter, but the spirit, of their witness. For they stood, as each of us must to lead lives of both courage and compassion, with one foot firmly grounded where they knew they had
to stand, and another, well, poised in mid-air, ready to cross over arbitrary boundaries, including the other, even if that cost them rejection by the more conventional and fearful. Others, all around the world, are eager for this witness. Let us first reclaim it ourselves. Knowing more deeply the ground on which we ourselves stand, within our own culture, with an intellectually and morally important interpretation of its heritage and scriptures. This may seem like an awkward posture to some, this standing on one leg, the other up in mid-air. But let us admit that is ours. Besides, otherwise bird fall of rump, right? Right!

Instead, may we find the wisdom to prove all things and to hold fast to that which is good, the courage to live toward the dream of the Beloved Community, and the love for one another that begins to show that a bit of that dream is already here among us, wherever we love the Highest with all of our heart, mind, and strength, and we truly love one another, in all of our human fallibility.

So may it be. Amen, and amen.

*Hymn 276

O Young and Fearless Prophet
Harlow/ Lloyd

Spoken Benediction

May faith in the Spirit of Life,
Hope for the community of earth,
And love for the sacred in one another,
Be ours now and in all the days to come.