

RESURRECTION MORN

I want to add my own personal kudos to Nancy Ross, one of the premier partisans and pacesetters of this beloved Fellowship. You and I know well that nobody, and I mean nobody, dead or alive, has resembled the principles of our Unitarian Universalist religion any more profoundly than Nancy Ross. Her story, as you will see by my remarks this morning, truly embodies what it means to grow into our best and fullest selves, indeed, to be resurrected while living. Even Nancy's own autobiography, entitled Changing Myself, bespeaks an incredible transformation of a least likely person becoming a most prominent and powerful leader.

Nancy herself relates what an improbable, bold move it was for her to run, the first time, to become the President of UUFSD, in a contested election at that. I say the first time, because amazingly and caringly, Nancy has served this Fellowship, with dignity and fervor, four times as your President...moving on to become President of the District. This audacious woman was also a founder of DeBenneville Pines as well as Leadership Training School. Nancy Ross also served our precious faith in national capacities. I'm not sure there's anyone in our entire Southern California region who has been more generous of her time and talent and resources than Nancy Ross, for decades.

And, through it all, Nancy also tackled ticklish local posts such as newsletter editing and pledge garnering. She has served upfront, alongside, and behind the scenes. No task has been too menial for Nancy Ross to assume it: why, because she loved herself into fullness while loving her Fellowship! Folks, she has placed San Dieguito on the continental map of Unitarian Universalism.

So, we celebrate you Nancy, with heartfelt appreciation and awe, while you're living...so you can soak in the glory you so deeply deserve.

We Unitarian Universalists are adept at honoring the rites of Spring. We also acknowledge the naturalness of the life-death continuum. And we explore with ease Easter emerging from the egg. Furthermore, we joyfully proclaim the immortality of the human character. And numbers among us believe in reincarnation.

But we seem to have trouble with the resurrection. Oh, we can sing about it on Easter morn, especially if the choir is doing the singing (preferably anthems in Latin), but to talk about the resurrection, well, it makes us squeamish.

We don't have to look far to find out why this is so. As Unitarian Universalists we simply have difficulty in believing in the resurrection of the dead understood in a literal, physical sense. We have difficulty believing that dead bodies rise up out of graves, whether it be Jesus doing so 2000 years ago or any of us rising up today.

We're very similar to the eight-year-old daughter of an undertaker who was puzzled one Easter morning when she heard about the Resurrection. "Do you mean," she asked, "that Jesus really rose up from the dead?" "Oh, yes," the teacher said. The girl shook her head. "I know my dad didn't take care of him after he died," the young girl said, "because *his* never get up again!"

We have difficulty believing that Jesus actually appeared before his friends, invited Thomas to feel his wounds, rose in clouds of glory, and sat precisely at the right hand of God Almighty. And we have particular difficulty in accepting the orthodox claim that *unless* you believe in the physical resurrection...salvation won't be available to you.

Well folks, I don't think that's the case at all. I don't think that belief in a physical resurrection assures much of anything.

On the other hand, I do contend that our lives are greatly impoverished without believing in the possibility of resurrection of the human spirit, not just Jesus' spirit but more importantly yours and mine. I do fervently hold that life is renewable, that the human soul is indomitable, and that a compassionate and courageous existence is stronger than death itself. In other words, love can outlast death! Furthermore, I hold that believing such upbeat, hopeful views *and* practicing them daily...makes life worthwhile and "salvation" possible: here, there, everywhere.

In sum, we can doubt the resurrection as a physical event. But we dare not doubt it as a spiritual reality.

Before I explore further what my Unitarian Universalist version of spiritual resurrection means, let's spend some moments reviewing and interpreting the Christian literature on the subject. What happened anyway? Or, at least, what seemed to happen according to Paul and the gospel writers. We come upon some important learnings in trying to unravel this rather puzzling material.

First, it must be noted that the resurrection experience of the risen Jesus in the early Church, whatever its source and however interpreted, did not itself generate the belief in the resurrection of the dead. Such a belief was *already* an accepted view of the time.

If you study primitive religions, you'll find that survival after death is one of the earliest mystical hypotheses, related probably to some deep biological craving of the human organism. Christianity responded to that craving as well as to the pressing need to

establish an organized religion by proclaiming as doctrine...miracles such as the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Furthermore, the Apostle Paul, whose letters to fledgling churches are the oldest Christian writings, says literally nothing about the details of the resurrection. It's a truism that we have no accounts of the resurrection *per se*, but only of the *events* which followed the resurrection. After all, it's hard to know what an account of the resurrection would look like: I mean, reports of Jesus rising out of the tomb? Or evidence of renewed activity in the brain? Anyway, even Paul talks about the resurrection as a spiritual reality rather than as a physical fact.

Accounts of an empty tomb and Jesus' appearances to the disciples after his death (such as a blinding light to Paul) are contained in later Christian writings. And the accounts of the appearances differ so much from one another that it's impossible to draw any firm conclusions about the nature of those appearances. However, they do tend to suggest that while it was Jesus who appeared, it wasn't the same old Jesus. In Paul's terms it was "a spiritual body." At any rate, Jesus wasn't immediately recognizable as the same flesh, blood, and bones the disciples had known prior to the crucifixion.

In summary, as far as I'm concerned, the evidence for Jesus' bodily resurrection is inconclusive at best. But the evidence for spiritual resurrections is overwhelming. The samples, throughout history, are endless.

The spirit of Jesus lived on through his disciples whenever they preached love and justice, whenever they gave generously and acted compassionately. And the spirit of our own Unitarian Universalist foreparents—such as Margaret Fuller, Michael Servetus, Dorothea Dix and Theodore Parker—lives on in you and me every time we resemble the

ideals that drove their lives. I'm reminded of this fact of spiritual resurrection every time we share a memorial service for one of our fallen San Dieguitans...next Saturday we will celebrate one of our very founders, Sylvia Messin. The very lines we use bespeak a resurrection, a renewal, and a resurgence of the dead person's spirit in our own living.

“Sylvia has died. You and I are alive. We meet together this afternoon because of her death to do homage to the spirit of life, a spirit which lives on in you and me with renewed courage and appreciation.” And at the close of the memorial celebration we often share words like:

“And let us remember Sylvia by living with keenness of mind, gentleness of spirit, and compassion of heart. Let us honor her by living with the confidence that her goodness is never lost and that her love, given and received, is worthy to be immortal.”

And thus we carry one another forward; we extend lives. We continue the character of those who have died. The spirit of our companions is resurrected in *our* ongoing existence. Therefore, I'm comforted and blessed by the fact that my resurrection will not be simply a private matter. It will be interwoven with your living and your dying and yours interwoven with mine.

If we believe in one another, if we truly hold one another near and dear, then our resurrections will be mutually reinforcing and sustaining. That's what it means to belong to a beloved community, such as San Dieguito Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. In the Hebrew scriptures, dying literally means “to be gathered unto one's own.” And Paul had this same understanding of spiritual continuity in mind when he wrote: “We do not live to ourselves alone, and we do not die to ourselves alone.” (Romans 14:7)

Friends, we are truly members one of another, from beginning to end and beyond, far beyond. As with Jesus, so also when each of us dies, our spirits can live on in others. That's what I mean by resurrection of the *dead*.

Nonetheless, the most important resurrections I know happen to *living* human beings, to people like you and me, on this earth, during our lifetimes.

We're lost and despairing, yet amazingly, our spirits are restored to fresh hope, and our hearts wear new discipline and direction. Parts of our lives die, yet, miracle of miracles, a new creation emerges from the ashes. We humans know, that in the midst of brokenness, healing can stir; into the darkness of our existence, light can shine; in the midst of death, life can break forth. You and I know, that when all seems desperate or gone, hope can spring eternal.

We know such resurrections to be true, deep in the marrow of our beings. Why? Because every one of us, at one time or another, has personally experienced a profound life-altering resurrection of our inner selves.

Therein, my friends, lies the abiding, universal message of Easter, as far as I'm concerned: the message of the resurrection of our spirits, right here and now...a message of hope that goes beneath crocuses and beyond bodily risings, a message that goes deeper than our sentimental fantasies and endures longer than our tightest theologies. So, on this and every Easter morn, I affirm, with full gusto, resurrection of, by, and for the living!

Another confession though. I confess that spiritual resurrections on this one precious earth are quite sufficient for me. Unlike most traditional religious folks, I don't hanker for bodily everlastingness. All I ask for, all I'm desiring, is one brave, flawed,

loving life of some 80+ years. In short, I hold precious little fascination with life after death, but I still hold plenty of enthusiasm about life after birth.

Unitarian forebrother, Henry David Thoreau once wrote: “I hear a good many pretend they are going to die...Nonsense! I defy them to do it. They haven’t got enough life in them. Only a half a dozen or so have died since the world began. In order to die you must first have lived.”

I sometimes wonder if those most enthralled with and attracted to the hereafter have experienced too little fullness of being in the here and now. No wonder they can’t wait to depart to another realm. Yet, in order to die, you must first have lived. Therefore, when we’ve really lived—richly and compassionately lived—then we’ll be ready to die, ready to let go, ready for the only real and complete rest we’ll ever know: the grave.

I remember, in our Davenport, Iowa congregation, an elder woman who harbored a keen sense of humor. In a nursing home when she had about a week left to live, she whispered in my ear, “Tom, I’m going up to heaven to meet my husband.” A bit taken back, I nervously responded, “But which husband, Esther? You’ve been married three times.” And she replied, “My fourth, Tom, my fourth!”

That reminds me of a related story, the cartoon showing two single leaves on an otherwise barren branch. One leaf says to the other, “Say, why do we fall from the tree and die anyway?” The other leaf begins to expound: “Well, the way I understand it, when Fall comes, changes begin to occur in the cells where our stem is attached to the branch and the vessels which supply us with nourishment become plugged with gums causing us to wither and fall from the tree.” The first leaf responds, “Well, that isn’t going to happen to me, because I jog!”

Oh, the fierce longing of some of us for everlastingness! Well I say, marrying again or not, jogging daily or not, it would be wise for you and me daily to prepare for dying as well as to go on living...abundantly and resourcefully. That's what I'm trying to do: to engage my life to the utmost...without ignoring my inevitable decline and decay.

In summary, here's what I hold clear and dear: I've lived long enough to believe that resurrections are plural not singular, that resurrections are primarily for the living rather than the dead, that resurrections happen here and now...not only back in time or only in some far off date in the future. No, resurrections happen every day to ordinary folk like you and I. Resurrections are earth-sized experiences, available to human beings, anyone who is graced with an open heart and a growing soul.

Yes, I've lived long enough to see children come into their own after seemingly disastrous beginnings as well as parents forgive themselves after performing unspeakable treacheries. I've lived long enough to experience relationships die and relationships rise up...sometimes the very same relationship.

I've lived long enough to go to the barrel with persons, come up empty-handed and void of hope, then see those same sisters or brothers grind out a remarkable comeback.

I've lived long enough to believe that love is truly victorious over death and have come to know that the only question remaining is: will it gain the victory in you and me?

I've lived long enough to experience various and sundry spiritual resurrections, for myself and others, usually unpredictable, frequently unmerited, invariably the gift of grit *and* grace.

And I still have enough juice left in me to enjoy many more resurrections. And so do you and you and you. Starting this very resurrection morn, Easter, 2009.

Tom Owen-Towle
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