

## **CELEBRATING REBIRTH**

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St. John's Unitarian Universalist Church, Cincinnati, OH

Today we are invited to enter into a story. You are welcomed into a myth:

A story of renewal; a narrative of revitalization.

A myth of rebirth beckons us.

Myths of nature. Our responsive reading invited us into a story about nature, the cycling seasons, days and years so that we might move beyond the husks grown out of our pain. Blossoming flowers, branching trees. In Spring Nature sings of rebirth.

The poems of Mary Oliver embed us in our natural world, allowing grasshoppers and trees to call to us to let go of ancient hurt and be born anew. And the poems of Wendell Berry:

April Woods: Morning

Birth of color  
Out of night and the ground.

Luminous the gatherings  
Of bloodroot

Newly risen, green leaf  
White flower

In the sun, the dark  
Grown absent.

Nature, spring invites us into stories of rebirth. The ancient Greeks spoke of the Earth Mother, Demeter, and her daughter Persephone. Persephone had been picking flowers when the ground split and Hades abducted her. Life came to a standstill as depressed Demeter searched for her lost daughter. Persephone is freed a few months each year, spring marking her annual return.

Other myths invite us to take them up; other stories offer pathways to meaning in our lives, ways to comprehend the uncertainties and unthinkables challenging us.

Historically, one of the most powerful narratives is being enacted these days by our Jewish friends: Passover, the liberating narrative of the Exodus, the escape from Egypt's hard hearted Pharaoh.

The core celebration of this narrative of liberation is the Seder. Children have an important role in the Passover Seder. Traditionally the youngest child is prompted to ask questions about the Seder. The questions encourage discussion of the significance of the symbols in the meal. The questions asked by the child are:

Why is this night different from all other nights?  
Why tonight do we eat only unleavened bread?  
Why tonight do we eat bitter herbs?  
Why tonight do we dip them twice?  
Why tonight do we all recline?

Often the leader of the Seder and the other adults will use prompted responses from the Haggadha, which begin, “We must obey the command to talk about the Exodus from Egypt. The more one talks about it the more praiseworthy it is.” Many readings, prayers, and stories are used to recount the story of the Exodus. Many households add their own commentary and interpretation and often the story of the Jews is related to theme of liberation and its contemporary implications worldwide.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passover#Recounting\\_the\\_Exodus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passover#Recounting_the_Exodus)

The Exodus has beckoned to many people. Many people have taken it up as a pathway to self –understanding. Do you feel invited into the story of liberation from slavery? Does the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt, the heavy labor of building pyramids weigh upon you?

Our American nation has understood itself in terms of this myth of rebirth, this story of freedom.

One American usage of the Exodus story is familiar to most Americans—those with ancestral roots in Europe and particularly Great Britain, but including all who now take the story for granted. Courageous Puritans, in covenant with God, took their exodus from oppression in Britain (Egypt), crossed the Red Sea of the Atlantic, and entered a new Promised Land where they built a City on a Hill to serve as a light to the nations. Freedom for this new Israel was at odds with monarchy and eventually insisted on constitutional protections against any future Pharaoh as well as security against all potential foreign adversaries who might try to snuff out the flame of liberty—America’s light to the nations. <http://www.cpjustice.org/content/election-series-no-8>

Have you stepped into this story, the myth of the city on the hill, to use Gov. Winthrop of Massachusetts Bay Colony’s metaphor? Is America reenacting this myth?

Yet another group of Americans have found meaning for their experience in a different telling of the Exodus stories. Is this voice, this story one you feel invited into? Listen, listen to this voice:

When Israel was in Egypt's land,  
Let my people go.  
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,  
Let my people go.

R:  
Go down, Moses,  
'Way down in Egypt land.  
Tell old Pharaoh:  
Let my people go.

“Thus spoke the Lord”, bold Moses said,  
Let my people go.  
“If not I'll strike your firstborn dead,”  
Let my people go.  
R.

“No more shall they in bondage toil”,  
Let my people go.  
“Let them come out with Egypt's spoil”,  
Let my people go.  
R.

The Hebrews flight out of Egypt to the Promised Land has been so powerful a myth, so grasping a narrative that many people have walked into it, comprehending themselves by it. Yet someone like the great African American scholar W E DuBois might ask, “Is America Israel or is she Egypt?” This question means nothing if you haven't walked around inside the Exodus story. A question meaningless outside of the story of Hebrew flight from Pharaoh to the Promised Land. A myth fundamental to the messianic identify of our nation.

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Of course there are others stories of revitalization; other American myths of rebirth.

A long time ago in my life I spent a lot of time reading the works of the witch doctor of Zurich, Carl Jung. Somewhere or other he says that any American he treated did not begin to heal until figures of American Indians started appearing in their dreams. I've long looked for that quote and haven't found it. But I think he says it somewhere in his book SYMBOLS OF TRANSFORMATION. In that book he spends a lot of time looking at the symbolism of Longfellow's poem of an Iroquois hero, “The Song of

Hiawatha.” I like that poem, both with its First Nations’ theme and the rhythm of the Finnish folk-epic, [The Kalevala](#). And of course the opening lines:

By the shores of [Gitche Gumee](#),  
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,  
Stood the wigwam of [Nokomis](#),  
Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis.  
Dark behind it rose the forest,  
Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees,  
Rose the firs with cones upon them;  
Bright before it beat the water,  
Beat the clear and sunny water,  
Beat the shining Big-Sea-Water

Longfellow’s poem is about rebirth, and if Jung is correct, a healing experience for him to write it. The Iroquois legends of this figure may in part have involved the impact of the introduction of The Three Sisters to their society. The Three Sisters were maize, beans and squash, which from Mexico to New England were planted together.

The *Haudenosaunee* (pronounced "ho-de-no-SHO-nee"), as the Iroquois called themselves, came into a time needing revitalization following the American Revolution. For hundreds of years the men had roamed, hunting and war-making, out of their central homeland in New York west to the Mississippi and south the Carolinas. After the Revolution, they were shut into reservations in New York.

What changes in their society, their culture were needed? Rebirth was needed. Would the old ways work, were new paths needed? A prophet appeared. Handsome Lake was particularly concerned about the family. With men no longer spending months, perhaps years away from their wives and children, changes in domestic life were causing problems. Domestic disputes. He preached a new way, suggesting that the husband wife relationship is more important than mother daughter relationship.

The traditional *Haudenosaunee* way of life was however matriarchal. *Haudenosaunee* women exercised political power in three main circumstances. First whenever one of the forty-nine chiefs of the great inter-tribal League died, the senior woman of the lineage he represented nominated his successor. Second, when tribal or village decisions had to be made, both men and women attended at town meeting, and while men normally did the public speaking, women caucused behind the scene and lobbied. Thirdly, a women was entitled to demand publically that a murdered kinsman or kinswoman be avenged

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This matriarchy of the *Haudenosaunee* – is this a welcoming story? Does it call to you?

Elizabeth Cady Stanton felt part of this story. Matilda Joslyn Gage became part of this story. So did Lucretia Mott.

Matilda Joslyn Gage and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the major theoreticians of the woman's rights movement, claimed that the society in which they lived was based on the oppression of women. All three suffragists personally knew Iroquois women, citizens of the six-nation confederacy (Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, and Tuscarora).

Living in upstate New York they heard *Haudenosaunee* say things like,

*As an Indian woman I was free. I owned my home, my person, the work of my own hands, and my children should never forget me. I was better as an Indian woman than under white law.*

Living in up state New York hearing these different stories than the ones she heard from the Bible, Stanton published her major work, **The Woman's Bible**, in 1895. She was convinced the oppression of women was not divinely inspired. "The Bible," Stanton wrote,

*makes woman a mere after thought in creation; the author of evil; cursed in her maternity; a subject in marriage; and claims divine authority for this fourfold bondage, this wholesale desecration of the mothers of the race. I do not believe God ever wrote or inspired such sentiments.*

These women found meaning for their lives through the stories told to them by the women of the *Haudenosaunee*. Indeed, Matilda Joslyn Gage was adopted into the Wolf Clan of the Mohawk Nation. "I received the name of Ka-ron-ien-ha-wi, or 'Sky Carrier,' or "She Who holds the sky." <http://www.pinn.net/~sunshine/book-sum/wagner4.html>

In July of 1848 Stanton, Mott and Gage held the First Women's Rights Convention. And it was held in the homeland of the *Haudenosaunee*, Seneca Falls, NY.

American feminists found rebirth, stepping into the stories of American Indian women.

The readiness to step into a story to understand oneself underlies the resurrection story told in the Christian myth. The Last Supper as Christians call it was a Passover Meal. But when Jesus invites them to drink his blood in the form of wine, he has stepped into the Greek myth of the dying and rising god, accepting it as his destiny.

Jesus through out his ministry pointed to the violence of his society, calling his disciples to visit the sick and imprisoned. He spoke against the injustice inflicted on widows and orphans. He spoke against the murders the high priest perpetrated against the prophets..

Jesus knew he was next. He had stepped into that story. He has accepted upon himself the violence of his society.

Spirituality is a response to violence; rebirth a quest for renewal after violence. Such stories lie behind the legends of Hiawatha.

The *Haudenosaunee* had fallen into violence, abduction; injury and death of family members had to be avenged and every violent incident led to a cycle of brutality.

Into this violence emerged Deganawidah, the Peacemaker. He floated from his home village in a canoe made of white stone. Deganawidah had a message of peace, but he couldn't promulgate it because of a speech impediment, perhaps a stutter. Connecting with the Onondaga, Ayenwatha, a great orator, the two men confronted Tododaho, the powerful leader of the Onondaga, a shaman in his own right. And a great warrior leader locked into the logic of prideful violence, regarding peace as betrayal.

In the conflict, Tododaho killed Ayenwatha's three daughters, almost ending the quest for peace. Ayenwatha vowed that no parent would ever experience such a loss again and rededicated himself to spreading Deganawidah's ideas of peace. In parley, Deganawidah took a single arrow and invited Tododaho to break it, which he did easily. Then bundling five arrows together, Tododaho could not break the bundle.

Soon the Great League of the Iroquois was formed, based on its constitution, the Great Law of Peace, in which the Five Nations regarded consensus as a social ideal.

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Persephone freed from the dark of Hades.

English Puritan and African slave enter into the narrative of the Exodus; American feminist into the legends of the *Haudenosaunee*; Jesus into the myths of Jew and Greek.

By stepping into a narrative of renewal, by living myths of rebirth, we too say, *O, Death, where is thy sting? O grave, thy victory?* Accepting the violence of our times, we too may find peace.

For victory is with compassion, and promise ever with peace.