

GATHERING SPARKS: EASTER AND PASSOVER
THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH
REV. JULIE STONEBERG
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OPENING WORDS *Our Souls Speak Spring* ~ Evin Carvill Ziemer

If we lived in another climate
Our souls might speak other languages
We might speak oasis or permafrost, dry season or monsoon

But our souls speak spring
Our souls speak green shoots pushing through last year's leaves
Our souls speak flower buds stretching to sun
Our souls speak mud puddle and nest building, damp earth and worm castings, tiny
green leaves and frog choruses

We speak spring because spring sings in us

We gather to nurture our faith in our own growing
Our own courage to push through
Our own blossoming in beauty
Our own small part in the spring of this world

Come, let us worship together

A STORY FOR ALL *Gathering Sparks* ~ Howard Schwartz

*(This is the children's version of a creation story told by Rabbi Luria in the 16th century, which tells of
vessels of light that broke and spilled, scattering all over the earth.)*

MEDITATION *Now, in Shared Quietness* ~ Anne E Treadwell

Now, in shared quietness, we shall listen to the wisdom of our inner hearts and minds
as we join in meditation.

Let us be mindful of this special time, as again the feast of unleavened bread draws
nigh, which is called the Passover.

Let us remember the history of this feast, the celebration of beginning a long and hard
journey into freedom and the promised land. We give thanks for our own journeys, our
long and hard learnings, our freedom and our glimpses of the promised land.

Let us be mindful of how closely hatred and fear are intertwined, as they were for the
priests and scribes as they reacted to Jesus. May we never, through our fears, seek to kill
that which is good and true. Let us seek forgiveness for times when our fears have
outweighed our love.

Let us remember how easily evil may enter our hearts, as it entered the heart of Judas.
We pray that we may have the wisdom to recognize evil, and the strength to keep it
away.

Let us be mindful of the greed which so often rules us, as it ruled Judas who

covenanted with murderers for money. May we never betray anything good, or anyone loved, for the promise of selfish gain.

Let us remember the night of the feast, the night of betrayal, the night of love, the night of hate. Let us remember, in silence and wonder.

READING *Easter Again* ~ Lindasusan Ulrich

We live inside paradox. Humans generally don't like to admit it – we much prefer tidy, stable, comprehensible, logical ways of getting through the day – but paradox is woven into the fabric of this particular universe we inhabit.

Light is both a particle and a wave
Imaginary numbers describe the math of physical phenomena
Love and grief are inextricably linked
As are rage and sorrow
Suffering and compassion
Life and death

Time itself is both linear and cyclical
Each person's life traces a single arc, yet patterns emerge and re-emerge
Fear always seems to return
Goodness knows terror finds its way back into the news
We always seem in need of help to roll back big stones that block our way

Yet we also come back to the alleluia,
even if its absence has gone on far longer than the forty days of Lent
We raise each other's spirits when our sacred places seem empty
We anoint each other
We engage in a demanding faith that asks us to love the next world into being today
We are "joyful though we have considered all the facts"
We practice resurrection

It is Easter again, my friends,
And you are surrounded by a multitude who wish you well.

MESSAGE *Gathering Sparks* ~ Rev. Julie Stoneberg

A little bunny humour to begin...

The story is told of a man blissfully driving along the highway. He sees the Easter Bunny hopping across the road and swerves, but unfortunately it jumps right in front of his car. The basket of eggs and candy go flying all over the place.

The driver, being a sensitive man, pulls over, and gets out to see what has become of the Bunny. Much to his dismay, it is dead, and he begins to cry.

A woman driving by sees the man crying on the side of the road and stops. She steps out of her car and asks the man what's wrong.

"I feel terrible," he explains. "I accidentally hit the Easter Bunny and killed it. What should I do?"

The woman tells the man not to worry. She goes to her car, opens her bag, and pulls out a

spray can. She walks over and sprays the entire contents of the can onto the dead rabbit. Miraculously the rabbit jumps up, picks up its basket and the all the spilled eggs, waves its paw at the two humans and hops away. 50 yards down the road it stops, turns around, waves and then hops on about another 50 yards, turns, waves, hops another 50 yards and waves again!!!!

The man is astonished. He says to the woman, "What in heaven's name is in your spray can?" The woman turns the can around so that the man can read the label. It says: "Hair spray. Restores life to dead hair. Adds permanent wave."

If only such restoration of life and hope came in a spray can! Instead, at least for today, we'll have to settle for what is contained within the Easter and Passover stories.

Passover and Easter...two holidays that overlap in myriad ways. Of course there are also differences...Easter baskets bear little resemblance to Passover plates. Matzo is nothing like hot cross buns. Gefilte fish is a far cry from spiral-cut ham.

But, they hold equal gravitas in their respective religious traditions. They are both scheduled around the lunar calendar and the vernal equinox, so happen at the same time of year...in the spring, just as new life is breaking out all around. Passover is a time to refrain from eating any leavened bread, and Easter is preceded by lent...a time of sacrifice. Both encourage children to hunt for a treasured prize. Both are cause for bringing family and friends together for big meals. Both are celebrations of life's victory over death.

You may be more familiar with Easter's story, so let me give you a brief recap on Passover. One of the most important Jewish holidays of the year, Passover is a time to remember, through the telling of stories, the exodus of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt more than 3,000 years ago.¹

According to the Torah, the Hebrews, in their suffering, called out to God to save them, who then inflicted ten plagues upon the Egyptians, to force them to release the Jews. The final and most devastating plague involved God promising to kill every firstborn son. So that Jewish sons would not be killed, God agreed to "pass over" those homes where the blood of lambs had been painted on the door's lintel post.

And then the Hebrews fled...in what is known as the Exodus...you know, the story where Charlton Heston (Moses, I mean) miraculously leads the Hebrew people across the Red Sea to safety, and eventually to a new life in the Promised Land. Are you aware that you experience this story in the architecture of this building?...the red gates into the courtyard symbolize the reeds of the Red Sea...gates which are parted for all to enter.

The message of Passover is the obligation of Jews to recall what God has done for them,² and to have empathy for all who are oppressed. They are therefore obliged to be a source for good...to go into the world and repair it...a responsibility known as tikkun olam.³

¹ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2019/04/19/passover-2019-what-you-need-know-jewish-holiday/3518927002/>

² <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-profound-connection-between-easter-and-passover-1492173908>

³ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/easter-and-passover/>

When Jesus entered the gates of Jerusalem, it was to celebrate Passover. The dinner party which has come to be known as the Last Supper was probably akin to a Seder, and as was the custom, those gathered might have shared a meal of sacrificed lamb, recalling the resurrection of the people of Israel. (Hear anything that reverberates with the Easter story?)

The culmination of the Easter story the three days from the time Jesus is crucified to the time he is risen. For those who take Easter as something more than a celebration of spring, the time between those events is a time to relive the darkness of a tomb...to know complete spiritual emptiness. They might gather in the pitch black for Easter vigils to feel the weight of death, and then to wait, and to eventually, be reminded that love is a greater force than death, and that light does overcome darkness.

And that's like the message that Rabbi Luria, in the 16th century, wove into his retelling of the creation story, Gathering Sparks, the one we read earlier. Rabbi Luria created this midrash following the Spanish expulsion of the Jews in 1492. You see, Jewish exiles, now scattered to new homes, found themselves isolated and unhappy, and by embellishing an existing creation myth, Gathering Sparks re-defined tikkun olam to explain why God had allowed the exile to happen. It helped the Jews to see they were part of a larger story. Suddenly they had a purpose⁴...to do the work of tikkun olam...to gather up the holy sparks that had fallen. In gathering up what is broken, each person is restored, and the world can be repaired...that is, made whole.

So, why should we pay attention to these stories? Well, we are made of stories, aren't we? It is with stories that we shape our lives. The more we tell them, the greater impact they have. The way that we tell them is the path to creating meaning.

Not everyone, maybe no one else, would tell the Easter and Passover stories the way I do. You'd tell them another way. That's how it goes. Through the centuries, stories are told and re-told and layered with new meaning. And as the current generation, this is our task...to choose and to tell the stories that matter, to layer and connect them with the stories of others and from other times, and to imbue them with new life, that they might serve us on our journey....a journey to know our purpose.

What gives you reason to get up each morning and go out into the world? What stories sustain you and bring meaning to your life? Can you find, or create, a story that gives your experience some meaning, and shows you a purpose that will move you back toward center, into wholeness, into the light?

Now, as a creation story, Gathering Sparks may not seem to have much of a connection to Easter and Passover...except that it also speaks of creating new life. The connection that interests me is the similar purposes, or morals, of these stories. I believe they are stories that offer us a way to see our lives through the lens of spring.

All of these stories tell of hard stuff, broken stuff, dead stuff. In Gathering Sparks, the beautiful vessels of light became fragile and break, spilling and scattering their wholeness to the corners of the earth. As we enter the Passover story, a people is enslaved, and are teetering on the edge

⁴ <https://www.tikkun.org/how-the-ari-created-a-myth-and-transformed-judaism>

of hopelessness and extinction. At the beginning of the Easter story, an innocent and beloved teacher is scapegoated and railroaded to a violent death.

Can you locate yourself in any of these stories? Do you ever feel that your wholeness has been irreparably damaged? Is your sense of identity, your very being, slipping away? Have you witnessed losses that are senselessly tragic? Does the darkness seem that it will never end?

Friday night, a group gathered to watch TVO's *First Contact* series⁵. The episodes follow a group of six non-Indigenous folks on a 28-day exploration of Indigenous Canada. It was a journey that challenged their perceptions and confronted their prejudices in life-changing ways. Time after time they met Indigenous people whose lives have been affected by colonialism and violence and alcoholism, yet who insisted on framing their experience as part of an evolving story that is moving toward healing and reconciliation. The Indigenous people they met expressed that every moment of connection matters, even if we cannot yet see the change. One of them offered the white visitors a challenge, saying that even though none of us alive today took land away from the First Nations, and that none of us set up the Residential Schools, or masterminded the 60's scoop, we are all a part of the world as it exists today. We all have a choice about whether we will participate in the healing. We can choose to gather up sparks of light or we can turn our backs.

No matter how you are feeling today, this is not the end of the story. If it is night, the day will come. If it is winter, spring is surely around the corner. If you are broken, remember that you are a shard of divine light, and that your task is to shine. As Marianne Williamson has written,⁶

"We are all meant to shine,
As children do.
We were born to make manifest
The glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us;
It's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine,
We unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
As we're liberated from our own fear,
Our presence automatically liberates others."

Rabbi Luria believed that the way to gather sparks and to do tikkun olam was to study the Torah. Today, many Jews believe that the work of tikkun olam is to do the work of social justice and peace-making. If you find meaning in the image of gathering sparks, what does tikkun olam look like for you? What can you do that will contribute to more love, more joy, more life?

Bad happens. Oppressors enslave others. People are unjustly accused and targeted. Big obstacles block our paths. We don't get what we think we need. We drop our favourite china

⁵ <http://www.firstcontactcanada.ca/>

⁶ <https://www.personalgrowthcourses.net/stories/williamson.ourdeepestfear.invitation>

and it shatters. People we love die, and eventually we will too. We run over rabbits on the road, and all we can do is to sit with our heads in our hands and cry.

None of us have that can of hair spray, that magic potion that instantly brings the dead back to life. But, we each have the energy of our own breath...breath that shares and receives oxygen...the air of life. We can breathe out healing and love. Even in the dark, it's possible to look up into the night sky and see that light is out there somewhere.

I know well that there are times when we cannot see the light...and me telling you it's there doesn't make it any more possible for you to see. But I still believe that in every moment we can have some effect on what happens next, even if we can't see any results. For if we want more love, we have to turn, however slightly, toward love. If we want more justice, we must turn, however slightly, toward believing in its possibility. If we want more life and light...well, it is out there. Pick up your shaky little light, take the hands of others, take a deep breath of gratitude, and move in the direction of life and joy.

To be sure, the coming of spring is a boon to our spirits. Nature's blossoming shows us hope of liberation. The rebirth of the earth reminds us that life does overcome death. In nature, we can see that we...we with our beleaguered breath and our doubting hearts...are part and parcel of its ongoing story.

Rabbi Menachem Creditor wrote a song for his daughter, born right after 9/11. He tells a story that I want to keep telling...that this world can be built by love. I'll sing it...and please join in as you'd like.

*Olam Chesed Yibaneh*⁷

READING *Life Calls Us Out of the Tomb* (adapted) ~ Lisa Doege

Rejecting literal readings of what we [may] insist is only a myth, we look to nature and religions close to the earth for alternative stories of the season.

Explaining away troublesome details – the empty tomb, Jesus' appearance to the women and the disciples – we [may choose to] tell a story that appeals to reason.

Surprised nevertheless by the call of the season waking an ancient longing in our heart, we pause from our explanations to ponder the stirring.

Unwilling to quiet the voice crying for rebirth, fresh starts, new life, we remember times we have been as if dead, yet still our hearts beat and we moved upon the earth.

So we set our disbelief aside, if only for a moment, in a day, in a season.

Reason [may] tell us life precedes death and death itself is final. But our experience of second chances, cures, recovery, forgiveness and reconciliation tells a different story.

Even when life-as-we-have-known-it is destroyed forever and hope has abandoned us, somehow Life has held us and breathed us into new being;

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHp-jcPIKIY>

Life has called us to rise in fullness: triumphant, humble, grateful.

Insistent Life [which] will not let us go, [which] even at our most broken, most wretched, calls us out of the tomb.

Now the stories merge, myth and science, history and experience, and we whisper alleluia.

Alleluia that You are. Alleluia that we are. Alleluia life-everlasting.

***CLOSING WORDS** *Life Calls Us On*

As we leave this place, know that even when life is hard and hope has abandoned us , somehow Life calls us to rise in fullness: triumphant, humble, and grateful.

Life calls us to gather the sparks no matter where they are hidden. With every act of kindness, with every outbreath of love, a spark is set free, and we all take a step closer to healing.

Life calls us on, singing of the spring that is you, my friends.

Alleluia that You are. Alleluia that we are. Amen.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME