

*The Root Children*  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo  
Sunday, March 18, 2012  
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As the story goes, in the long-ago time of eternal Spring, Demeter, the mother goddess of agriculture and fertility, made all things grow. One day when her daughter Kore was gathering flowers, the earth opened, and Hades, ruler of the Underworld, abducted her. Kore's screams to her father Zeus went unheeded. Distraught Demeter searched wildly for her lost daughter. When she discovered that Zeus had approved the abduction, she withdrew from Olympus in grief and rage, thus causing universal famine. Faced with this ongoing catastrophe, Zeus relented. Daughter was restored to mother, whose joy again unleashed earth's fertility. But because Kore had eaten the pomegranate, food of the dead, while in Hades, and had thus made the transition from innocence to knowledge, she assumed the role of Persephone, Comforter of the Dead, and so must return to the Underworld for part of each year. In her absence, her mourning mother each year weeps the world into winter. Persephone is the seed that splits off from the body of the mother, the ripened grain that sinks beneath the earth, returning in the spring as the new shoot.

That is a most ancient story, the cycling of the seasons through the frozen death of winter to the rebirth of spring, the resurrection of new life. That is the story of the root children, sleeping underground until awakened by Mother Nature. That is the story of the roots becoming the flowers, changing into their bright flower-clothes to dance in the summer sun. They wash and brush, they paint and shine the ladybirds and beetles, the grubs and bumblebees, and together they all come to play on the surface, where everything is bright and beautiful for the season of warmth and fertility.

That is the ancient story of darkness and light, chaos and order, Hades and Olympus, underground and aboveground, the cycles of the earth, the cycles of human lives. That is the eternal knowledge that we will descend again and again into disorder and dysfunction, into the death of despair, only to rise, ever again, into the light of hope and the promise of new beginnings. That is the story of spring.

That is the story, not only of the natural cycles of the seasons, but also the cycles of our human lives, our cycles of falling down and rising again, of sliding into failure and climbing back to success. There come times in every life when we fall short of our own best selves, when we fail to meet our own aspirations, and then we recover our balance, get back on track, and live into the lives we hope for, the lives we achieve at our best. There is nothing easy about it, this constant cycling in and out of the best we can be, and sometimes it drives us close to despair, but again and again, we rise from the darkness and bring ourselves back to the light. As nature lives out the resurrection story in the cycles of the year, we live the resurrection story again and again in our own lives. That is the story of spring.

In the past several weeks we have been exploring together the themes of story and power, of history and evolution in the natural world and in human organizations. We have explored our story of human connection in this beloved community, and the central role of purpose and mission in our individual lives and in the organizations we create together -- the compelling purpose, the positive core, the glowing coal. We have moved toward discovering the central commitments, the noble purpose, that makes this community a welcoming and compelling presence in our lives.

My own call in ministry, the glowing coal in my own work as it has unfolded over the years, is my commitment to health, healing and development -- I have worked for the health, healing and development in individual human lives (including my own), and for the health, healing and development of our collective lives in the communities we create. My service to this Unitarian

Universalist congregation is founded on my conviction that this faith movement of which we are a part has a crucial role in the health, healing and development of the world, the people and planet, at this pivotal time in human history.

There is a strong tendency in our hopeful, humanistic faith tradition to hold what the theologians call a “high anthropology,” to see the positive in human nature and evolution, to believe the best about people, with the rallying cry of “onward and upward forever!” But to see only that side of our lives is to live in some imaginary world of eternal spring, choosing to ignore the darkness, to paper over the roughness and gaps in our nature, to pretend that our ladybugs and beetles are shiny all the time and to deny that they ever get muddy and dirty in their time underground.

That focus on the bright promise can deny part of our real experience, the real pain, sorrow and grief in our lives, the hurts we do to ourselves and to each other. These hurts, when they are ignored, may seem to disappear, but they simply go underground, they do not heal, and their presence may undermine our strength and vitality. Those hurts, our experiences of failure and disappointment, our experiences of falling short, are just as real as our bright successes. Although it may be more comfortable just to paper over the dark areas, ignoring the hurts can create a subtle weakening effect that saps our energy and undermines the power of our lives. This is true both in our individual lives, and in the collective life we create in community, in our congregation.

Performance coach Jim Loehr, from whose book *The Power of Story* I quoted last week, says that the three central rules of telling a powerful story are Purpose, Truth and Action. Last week we introduced the concept of purpose as the glowing coal that lies at the heart of our commitments, the central mission that gives direction and power to our lives. As we weave the story of our lives, or the story of this congregation, we must also attend to the truth in our stories, the truth of our darkness as well as our light, our winter as well as our summer. It is important to acknowledge the ways in which we have fallen short, and in honesty and love to explore how we may heal the hurts and keep from repeating old patterns of failure as we move forward.

I am reminded of the Truth and Reconciliation process that South Africa adopted to heal its society after ending the vicious and deeply painful system of apartheid, or the same process used in Canada to heal the hurt that was done to the First Peoples, members of the indigenous population, when their children were torn from their families, from their cultures and their languages, and sent to the Indian schools to be anglicized. The overall purposes of the truth and reconciliation process include bringing into the open the true story of the events and the harm that was done, helping people reach emotional resolution without retribution, and to restoring a sense of community. This process is a radical example of using the truth of our stories, the dark stories as well as the positive ones, to help restore balance after there has been hurt in a community.

Every congregation has its true stories of hurt as well as healing, of darkness woven in with the light. A church is a human endeavor, and it is in our human nature to fall short of our own best selves, to fail at times to meet our own standards. When you listen deeply to the history of any church, you will find troubled stories woven in the fabric alongside the joyful ones, and often we can see that the people are at the same time amazing and fallible, generous and self-centered. Stories we hear in any church may echo with the use of power for good alongside the misuse of power to satisfy an ego. Although stories of abuse and sexual boundary violations have most famously shaken the Catholic Church, they are not confined to any single religious tradition. Trust is betrayed in many human relationships, and it can and does happen in church. Nearly every organization, including many churches, can tell stories of responsible stewardship right alongside stories of money that disappeared from the accounts. People in a church can reasonably differ about priorities, about policies, about programs, even about the nature

of the mission, or whether a church even needs a mission statement – and often, working in good faith they find common ground and make their way through their differences. And sometimes, sad times, they turn their backs and break relationship, leaving the community for a time, or perhaps forever.

I have heard enough here to know that this church, with its long and complex history, has its share of dark stories as well as light, stories of caring alongside those of exploitation, stories of generous love alongside those of trust betrayed, stories of broken relationship, and of the mending and reconciliation of relationship. It is not so important to tell the specific stories as it is to acknowledge that hurt has been done, to acknowledge that among us are those who carry the scars of betrayal, loss and grief. What is important is to be aware, to be loving, to keep clear boundaries and avoid future harm, reach emotional resolution without retribution, and to work always toward restoring a sense of community, and to supporting healthy patterns of communication and connection toward our common purpose, our vision of what might be.

How do we go forward in our lives, in our human lives as well as in the life of a congregation, carrying this knowledge that there are dark stories as well as light? We go forward in love and trust, we go forward knowing that a congregation is a human creation, amazing and fallible. Remembering and forgiving, with open hearts and generous spirits, we go forward. In this season there is renewal; Spring is coming, and there is work to be done. It is by our love and commitment, founded on understanding the fullness of truth in our stories, and the connection with our glowing coal of purpose and commitment, that we continue to create a church that matters to its members, to its larger community, to the world. As we do the ongoing work of creating church, we usher in the warm winds of spring, we open the way for the warming light of summer, and we enjoy the fruits of a season of plenty. And quite frankly, we need to remember that our beetles and bumblebees do sometimes get dirty underground, and so we need to pay attention, and to do the work, we need to scrub and polish them to restore their brightness.

It is a powerful pleasure to commit to the co-creation of a faithful presence that matters, and it is up to us to do that work, to fuel and replenish the sources of our power, to rise when we stumble and to turn our faces always toward the bright possibility of the future as we create it. And so we come back to our lives yet again in the rising of spring, the rising of spirit, the flame reaching up from the glowing coal. We come back to the positive core that unites us, again and yet again, as we find the inspiration, the breath, together to say yes to life, yes to truth, yes to love. And so may it always be.

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