

Community, Slavery and Liberation: A Meditation in Preparation for Passover

Amanda Udis-Kessler, Unitarian Universalist Church of Pueblo, April 6, 2008

Today, I would like to do something that I have almost never seen done in a Unitarian Universalist worship service, namely build a sermon on a biblical text. Since it's about two weeks until Passover, my thoughts today draw on the lead-up to the story of God bringing the Israelites out of Egypt that is commemorated by the Passover celebration.

Exodus 1: 8-14, our first reading today, is usually just considered background material, a way to set the stage for what is commonly understood as the important part of the story. I wonder, though, whether it might have its own wisdom for us. According to this narrative, a king oppresses a group of people because he's afraid that there are too many of them and that they have too much power. How many times have we heard those ideas used to support racism, homophobia and xenophobia? The king decides to get these uppity people under control and to get some free labor out of them in the process. They keep reproducing; he keeps exploiting. The cycle repeats. And what originally sets the cycle in process? The fact that the king in question *did not know Joseph*, the Israelite who previously saved Egypt from famine. The Joseph story takes place late in the book of Genesis; by the time the Exodus story gets underway, Joseph, his brothers, and the king he helped, are all dead. Along comes a new king without the historical context, and bam! Slavery for the Hebrews, a term I will use interchangeably with "Israelites."

Some Biblical scholars have made convincing arguments that the exodus never took place, but these seven biblical verses are worth consideration today regardless of the historical accuracy of this story. Sometimes something can be true without being factual. This business of the king not knowing Joseph, and thus not knowing the Israelites, seems to me just such a truth.

If the new king had known Joseph, he would have known that Egyptians and Hebrews could work together on common goals, and that sometimes it's the Israelite who has the gift necessary to save the Egyptian. Joseph had been able to save Egypt from famine by correctly interpreting a royal dream that predicted seven years of crops to overflowing, followed by seven years of poor crops, allowing the country to plan and prepare for the famine so it did not hit them so hard. (Remember the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*?) Hebrews and Egyptians might have been different, but after Joseph's work they were all able to get along, at least for awhile, at least in Egypt. But the new king did not know about this. He could not have known Joseph, who was dead. But he could have known the story. He could have known the Hebrews. Because he didn't, he got paranoid and responded destructively. In the absence of knowledge of a people, hatred and fear of them can thrive, leading to dehumanization. In the presence of knowledge, while it may be too much to say people can all get along, they can at least build trust, build relationships – in short, build community. They can humanize each other.

What does this story have to do with us today? I wonder whether, too often, our mistreatment of other people, our self-destructive tendencies, and our careless disregard of the planet might have to do with just such a lack of knowledge. For today, I'm interested in slavery and liberation in a metaphorical sense. How are we personally implicated in slavery today? How might we become liberators – of ourselves, each other, our planet? Liberation is a way to think about the social

justice about which many of us are passionate. However, experience teaches us that a divine being does not reach down and part the Red Sea to get us closer to liberation. Besides which, UUs would generally rather liberate our oppressors along with us than drown them.

What does it mean to talk of enslaving ourselves? For me, the clearest answer is self-destructive behavior, perhaps physically or psychologically addictive, perhaps not. Some of my most self-destructive behavior has involved overeating, though for awhile I also had a penchant for not working hard enough at my jobs which occasionally resulted in my getting fired. Why would I have chosen to do these things? Here, as odd as this language may sound, I think the answer is that I did not have a good enough relationship with myself. I did not trust myself. I did not know myself well enough. And what I specifically did not know about myself was that I was a good person dealing with some very old stresses and pains for which I needed new coping mechanisms. Put in more spiritual and less psychological terms, I did not know that I was as good, as important, as valuable as everyone else, no more, no less, just by virtue of being part of creation. I completely believed the first Unitarian Universalist principle that all people have inherent worth and dignity, but somehow, I did not believe it about myself. The more I've come to this piece of self-knowledge, the more I've been able to liberate myself – not from eating, which is a delightful and good thing, but from bingeing, from jamming my belly full even when I'm not at all hungry. This is a very slow liberation process, but it has been invaluable so far, not least because it really is a matter of liberating oppressor and oppressed simultaneously. I don't think it's a stretch to say that I am developing a more humane relationship with myself over time.

We can also consider the harm people do to others in the absence of knowledge, humanization and community. History ancient and recent is full of cruelty, violence and dehumanization. If you've heard me talk about hell on earth, here it is. If you've heard me talk about feeding the bad wolf, here it is. Metaphors of slavery aside, actual slavery, from the antebellum South to today's sexual slave trade, is one possible outcome of a failure to know the other person as a human being with exactly as much dignity and worth as the oppressor. The Shoah was another outcome. Then there's war. We can't really go to war with an enemy we know well and respect in humane ways. Philosopher Sam Keen's marvelous book *Faces of the Enemy* provides chilling examples of exactly how countries at war use posters and other kinds of media to dehumanize their enemies, often as vermin, demons and representatives of death. Consider some of the things people have said about Muslims and Islam since 9/11, and I think you'll agree. Indeed, the Unitarian Universalist call for social justice is built on the cornerstone of affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This affirmation is easy to proclaim in the abstract, but hard to live out – not least because of how little most people understand and relate to people in other cultures or who hold other values.

Most of us don't recognize ourselves as oppressors in the examples above. At worst, we might agree that we can be catty, mean, judgmental, gossipy and so on. I know, at least for myself, that I have plenty of hatreds and fears of various groups of people, and it's my business to address these as best I can in my own time, with a community of accountability around me. It's also my business to "keep moving out into the gap," as the pop band The Thompson Twins put it in the 1980s.

Finally, there's our planet. I'm not much of an environmentalist, but the more I get to know the natural world, the more outraged and horrified I am about how little respect it gets and therefore how much damage we inflict on it. My sense is that the people who are most committed to minimizing their human footprints on the planet are the same ones who deeply understand and appreciate nature and have a relationship with it. Like self-destructive actions and like war, we can only abuse and assault the natural world if we haven't seen it clearly and don't care about it very much. Here too, liberation is a multi-faceted process, in which we both develop a relationship with the natural world and make decisions and priorities respectful of it.

I've claimed that to facilitate liberation in today's world, we need to know ourselves, each other and our planet. How shall we do this? How can we build relationships, create community and develop the kind of trust and appreciation that will bring hell on earth to an end? As the responsive reading suggests, we need to look deeply within ourselves and we need to relieve the pain of those who live in the bitterness of slavery today, both real and metaphorical. There are hundreds of specific ways to do these things. What matters here, I think, is doing them with a mindfulness of this larger commitment to liberation in the best possible sense of the word.

Finally, I point us to today's closing hymn as an image of how we might practice liberation. The first verse reads, "Come sing a song with me that I might know your mind. I'll bring you hope when hope is hard to find and I'll bring a song of love and a rose in the wintertime." Are we willing to sing a song, not just with those we already like and with whom we already agree, but with those we fear and perhaps even hate? Are we willing to learn their minds and to open our minds to them that we might come to know each other? The Egyptian king was not inclined to know the Israelites' minds, but we don't need to keep making that same decision today. Finally, are we willing to bring those we fear and perhaps even hate gifts of the spirit like hope, and gifts that are precious and rare, like roses in the wintertime? If so, we have begun the process of liberating both ourselves and them. May we take up this work boldly and joyously. May we strive to understand ourselves and our earthly home. Amen, and blessed be.