

Get Resurrected!

-Amanda Udis-Kessler, Unitarian Universalist Church of Pueblo, April 12 2009; reworked June 15, 2022

Be honest: how many of you are just slightly uncomfortable with this whole resurrection business? How many of you would have preferred a nice talk about blooming flowers and the awakening of the earth? I don't blame you – resurrection is a tough nut for Unitarian Universalists to swallow. Today, in what may be the most ambitious thing I've tried to do at this congregation to date, I want to convince you that resurrection can be a valuable concept for us – and not only that, but that we should get resurrected ourselves.

I don't, of course, mean that we must physically die. Rather, I'm envisioning resurrection as the process by which we become more whole people – freer, more joyous, and more open-hearted. Most of us can't just do that by letting go of our addictions, our self-destructive behaviors and our despair in one fell swoop, as though everything we wish to unload were no more than a piece of paper to throw in the recycling bin. Most of us are much too attached to the things that hold us back to have much luck with that. I can't tell you, for instance, how many times I've tried to simply eat healthily and non-self-destructively. That doesn't usually work for very long. I once saw a button that read, "Everything I've ever let go of had claw marks on it." There's also a wonderful line by Stephen Sondheim in his musical, *Into the Woods*: "It takes patience and fear and despair to change." Both of these insights ring true for me; maybe they do for some of you as well. It is deeply challenging to become the selves we might yet be, and sometimes transformation only happens when life cracks us open from the outside.

That may be true, but I will talk today in large part about the role we play in our own resurrections. Getting resurrected, as far as I can tell, is about going through a process of letting the parts of ourselves that are holding us back actually die in some sense, of going through a period of grief, mourning and silence, and then of walking, blinking, into the sunlight giving thanks.

Fortunately, we don't have to do this alone, because we can't. Getting resurrected may be about our willingness to die to certain parts of ourselves, but it is also about drawing on the communities that surround us, love us and hold us accountable - and about inviting the spirit of life, or the mystery, or however you envision the healing force around and among us, to work its power in our lives.

To talk about resurrection in a meaningful way, we need to start by considering the things one needs to get resurrected, namely faith and death.

Often, we think of faith as a matter of assenting to creeds or as the willingness to believe something despite, or perhaps because of, how absurd it is. This understanding of faith places it in opposition to reason. For our purposes, however, faith is the opposite of certainty, not the opposite of reason. We have faith when we are willing to move forward and take a risk despite being entirely unsure of the outcome, particularly when the outcome is very important to us. I have a friend, a theoretical physicist who is a brilliant scholar and not someone who sees herself as a person of faith. However, over the course of her career she has increasingly come to focus on physics from a sociological and a philosophical perspective as well as the scientific perspective in which she was originally trained. She now carries out research and writes about how to make physics departments friendly for women and academics of color, as well as about how scientists and critical science theorists can talk to each other productively. When she first began to share her ideas and findings with communities to which she did not belong, she had no reason to think her insights would be well-received. The fact that she went ahead nonetheless and began to work in

new fields and with new colleagues suggests to me that she is very much a person of faith. And, I might add, one whose faith is increasingly justified by responses to her work.

Faith of this sort may be a nice spiritual quality to have, but when it comes to the death that precedes resurrection such faith is absolutely essential. For if we are to do the hard work of dying with no guarantee that we'll come out the other side in resurrected form, we need the hard work to be informed by faith. More on the relationship between death and faith shortly, but by now you are probably wondering what on earth I mean by dying. I should begin by warning you that much of this sermon uses death as a metaphor. For any of you who may be dealing with the actual deaths of friends, family members and other loved ones, I apologize in advance for any discomfort that the sermon may cause.

There are two kinds of death I have in mind here – one is the case where we are already dead and simply need some resurrection to come along. The other kind is where we go into the tomb willingly because we know that something is wrong with how we are living, something that needs to be gone for us to live abundantly. In the first case, we start by asking what's missing. Does our joy need resurrecting? What about our hope? Our ability to love? To take risks? Where are we dead? Where could we come alive?

Unitarian Universalist minister Sara Moores Campbell describes the tomb of the soul as that place where we carry our secret “yearnings, pains, frustrations, loneliness, fears, regrets, [and] worries.” When our souls are entombed in this way, we may be surviving, but we are not living deeply. My impression of the tomb of the soul is that it is an image of the death we already find ourselves living, not the one we choose to gain deeper life.

Here's a gardening analogy: one summer's greenery has to die to enable the following summer's blooms. Or consider deadheading. If a gardener repeatedly trims off spent flowers, a plant will go into overdrive, putting out more and more flowers in an attempt to reproduce – at least according to E-How, my new substitute for Wikipedia. When my partner Phoebe deadheads flowers, I always wince to see the beautiful flowers broken from the stem, but I have to admit that the practice keeps the plants flowering very effectively.

What does this mean for us? What parts of ourselves should we be deadheading? To continue the gardening analogy, we should deadhead whatever keeps us from flourishing the most. Each of us has different deadheading needs. Maybe for some of us it's a bad habit or an addiction. Maybe some of us are judgmental, arrogant, or impatient. Maybe some of us tend to treat other people badly. You know your own deadheading needs better than I ever will.

Or consider the notion that one can detox from things other than alcohol or drugs. And detoxing, whatever the substance or process, is hell. It feels like death. It is a kind of death. And you do it to live. But most of us could never detox if we had to do it completely alone. This is where that loving community of accountability comes in. We need friends to sit with us, to listen to our sobs, to feed us when we are too fried to feed ourselves, to check in on us and keep us from reverting too readily to self-destructive behavior when the pain of detoxing gets too great. We need people to be proud of us for what we are trying to do, and to keep our faith alive when it wanes.

Twelve-step programs talk about a higher power, and without specifying the nature of that higher power, I do think that the spirit of life about which we sang earlier stays with us in our pre-resurrection moments. When we decide that UUs are wrong about hell, that there must be a hell because we are in it, we somehow hang on with the help of that healing force.

Beyond our willpower, the communities around us and the sacred, however we may envision the sacred, we need faith both to be willing to die and to trust that there is something beyond the hard moments of death. This means resisting the urge to rush into comfortable spaces that we yearn for too quickly. We need faith if we are to be willing to be uncomfortable and fearful without foreclosing the possibility of something greater further on. Those of you who have seen *Jesus Christ Superstar* on stage or as a movie may remember the powerful song Jesus sings to God in the Garden of Gethsemane. He pleads, “Can you show me now that I will not be killed in vain? Show me just a little of your omnipresent brain. Show me there’s a reason for your wanting me to die. You’re far too keen on where and how and not so hot on why. Alright, I’ll die. Just watch me die. See how I’ll die...” Notice the progression here: Jesus doesn’t get his answer, but he is willing to take his leap of faith regardless. He doesn’t know whether God is listening. He doesn’t know if God cares at all or really even whether there is a God. He just knows that he feels called to do this crazy thing that involves being willing to die a horrible, shameful, painful death. And not just the kind of death we are talking about, not just a physical, emotional or moral detoxing. He’s trying to get ready to give up his life, not a bad habit or addiction.

I don’t know for sure whether Yeshua ben Miriam, the one we call Jesus today, was a real person. But I know that the kind of faith described in the moment above isn’t a bad model for what I’m talking about.

The Bible itself actually incorporates one of those kinds of moments as well. Despite appearing second in the gospels Mark’s gospel was almost certainly the earliest to be written, and its original ending is quite stark. If you read the end of Mark in a Bible today, you’ll see that Jesus comes back, appears to some disciples, and commissions all of the disciples to evangelize the world. But none of that stuff is original. Nope. The first version ended without any evidence of a resurrection. The women went to the tomb, found it empty, freaked out and ran away, telling no one about it. I love this because there’s nothing pretty about it. It’s so stark, so confrontational. It asks the reader, what do you believe? What will you do about it? It leaves us hanging, and forces us to decide what we believe. It’s a faith moment. In contrast, the tacked-on ending is nice and neat, loose ends tied up, no more mystery. But sometimes nailing things down kills them.

Perhaps, right about now you are thinking that the tomb of the soul is sort of like this sermon in that they both go on and on. But eventually we have to get resurrected and the sermon has to draw to a close. The tomb of the soul is not without its positive aspects, but it is not a permanent home. Sooner or later, as Sara Moores Campbell puts it, we “push away the stone and invite the light to awaken us to the possibilities within us and among us – possibilities for new life in ourselves and in our world.”

What can we say about that resurrection moment? Nothing, really – it is far too powerful to capture in words. But I think e.e. cummings gets close in his poem “i thank You God,” where cummings celebrates that we who have died are alive again today and the ears of our ears awake and the eyes of our eyes are opened. And how then could we not thank the universe for, as cummings puts it, most this amazing day, for the leaping greenly spirits of trees, for the blue true dream of sky and for everything which is natural, which is infinite, which is yes? What else is resurrection of any sort but the greatest “yes” possible?

So, are we willing to be good gardeners and deadhead ourselves where necessary? Are we willing to go into our detoxes of the soul? Are we then willing to push away the stone, invite that light in, and say yes? If so, I say to all of us – let’s go get resurrected! Amen, and blessed be.