

## **Tell Them I Said Yes to Life**

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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Today, here in western Massachusetts, ours is a world poised on the edge of spring. Rebirth is imminent. Resurrection is palpable. The creative, and procreative, juices of life have begun to flow anew. There is a certain purpose to the pairing of the ducks on the pond.

Ancient rituals at this time of the year almost always had something to do with their hopes for fertility – of the land, the trees, the crops, and the people. I'm guessing that the animals were already doing quite well, fertility-wise, and didn't appear to be in need of our, or the Gods' encouragement. If you gaze long enough at your own back yard you'll probably be able to observe some of those feathered and furry mating rituals or their results.

To procreate is something that comes pretty naturally to the living world. It's not quite as inevitable as is death (or paying taxes), but it is essential for the continuation of each species. It's a part of what I am referring to this morning as the "will to live" – *saying yes to life*. We are born with the means and the will to reproduce ourselves. And, as humans, to enjoy it too, which is certainly worth celebrating. Happy Easter!

Easter, in its many forms, has been around for thousands of years before the birth and death of Jesus. Easter had always been about things reproductive, and the return of sunlight and warmth – that is until Christianity began to repress rituals having to do with those things, especially anything that referred to our human sexuality. The Christian Easter story is about atonement for our sins, including our original sin, which definitely has to do with sex (to them, not to me). Yes, the Christian Easter is about also death and resurrection, which could be seen to symbolize the process of coming out of the winter cold into spring rebirth. But the fertility part of the original spring festivals has been severely repressed in Christian teachings.

I looked into some ancient fertility rites. Sometimes they included the scattering of the reproductive parts of animals onto the fields. Sometimes they involved ritual prostitution or just plain general tomfoolery in the woods. Sacrifice, as a fertility ritual, was also common to the ancient world. The spilling of the blood and powerful life force of animals was believed to improve the productivity of the fields or forests where the sacrifice took place. And these ancient festivals definitely were about the creation and public display of symbolic imagery. I'm trying to be delicate with my language here. Let's just say I will never look at a Maypole the same way again!

It's obvious that many of the ancient Easter symbols, like colored eggs and fertile bunnies, have survived the evolution of this holiday through the of years. Perhaps this is remarkable considering the fervor with which orthodoxy attempted to dispel and eliminate what they called pagan customs.

I think celebrating the procreative fecundity of spring and our animal urges in this season of birth and rebirth are ways that we can say yes to life. These are things that come to us naturally – they are a part of our biology, our instinct to survive and continue the species. But there are situations and circumstances for which finding that yes to life involves more than just instinct. Pattiann Rogers, from our reading, wrote: *What is it in the body that wants to stay alive, that itself has no name except keeper, except vigilance, except above all, except undeniable?*

This is the yes for which we have to draw on a source of inner strength we're not always sure we'll be able to find. This is not our instinct to survive, but our will to live. A whole different kind of yes to life.

Easter, for me, is also about finding anew our will to live and say yes.

The first time I sang our Unitarian Universalist hymn that ends "Tell them I said yes to life" was at a church in Meadville, PA. The date was March 28, 1993, just about this time of year, and I could barely sing the words because my husband had just died a week earlier. But those were the exact words I needed to hear that morning. It felt important to recognize that I was very clearly expressing a yes to my own life.

The second time I remember coming across the idea of saying yes to life was at an interpretive dance concert at Allegheny College students, sometime in the mid 1990s. One particular young woman had titled her piece "Saying Yes to Life," and while it may have been difficult to tell from her dancing exactly what it was she was saying yes to, I chose to come away from the concert inspired to find my own creative ways to say a louder and more clear yes to life.

Will you sing the first verse with me? It's number 6 in our hymnal.

*Just as long as I have breath, I must answer "Yes" to life; though with pain I made my way, still with hope I meet each day. If they ask what I did well, tell them I said "Yes" to life.....If they ask what I did best, tell them I said "Yes" to love.*

The phrase "saying yes to life" is a mountain of an expression. It speaks something personal to each one of us, and yet it also speaks more broadly of all humanity. For me it means what I interpret Jesus to have said when he told his disciples that the first great commandment was to love God (maybe he meant the energy of creation) with all your heart and mind and soul. Saying yes is shouting from the highest hill that you know with your mind and feel with your heart the amazement of this life, and of all of interconnected creation, and that you are more grateful than you can ever express to be part of it.

We are more grateful than we can find words for, despite our suffering. Despite cold or lonely winters. Despite lost loves. Pain seems to be inevitable, yet we continue to say yes through it all. This is what Jesus was telling us, by example, with his life. As

Unitarian Universalists, we believe that our salvation is something that can happen in the here and now – while we are alive. Salvation for us is knowing that our lives are complete and fulfilling and worthwhile now – we need not die to find ourselves in heaven. Jesus preached love and compassion, the building blocks of a salvific life.

The message and the power of Easter, both ancient and modern is that life has more power for us than death. What Jesus did with his life was more powerful than stories of resurrection and mass atonement. Jesus died the way he lived – for others. He loved wastefully and selflessly, saying “yes” every moment of the day. Death could not contain the spirit with which he lived his life, and that is what the disciples celebrated as they felt him living on through them.

Where does this spirit or will to live come from? Carl Sagan believes that “our obligation to survive and flourish is owed not just to ourselves but also to the Cosmos, ancient and vast, from which we sprang.” Many scientists feel that there is a pervasive natural tendency for the universe to move away from chaos toward order, and out of this tendency, over billions of years and infinite possibility, life sprang up and spread.

The purpose of life is to continue life. Proverbs 8 tells us that the Cosmos was created through Wisdom, which delights in the creative process. Our will to live is a will to remain part of the creative processes of our world. When we say yes, we bring forth an energy that participates in the ongoingness of creation. Wouldn't we all like to make a difference in the world and have our lives outlive us?

According to Keith Ward, Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford, “Over eons of time [the spirit] moved and prompted the primordial energies until one tiny part of the material order came, for the first moment in that immensity, to realize that it had being.” We know we are alive and what that means, and we like it.

It is our yes to life, the inimitable instinct and will to live of all living creatures, the rising sap in the maple trees, the spring fever that comes over us to clean and prepare for a renewed creation, that will insure that life survives despite the bitter cold and the deep snow. “Easter's power,” wrote John Shelby Spong, “lies not with resuscitated bodies but in the mind-expanding experience of knowing life is more powerful than death.”

These final words, by May Sarton, express the spirit of the season so well. And, besides, I find it hard to resist her gardening metaphor.

*Help us to be the always hopeful gardeners of the spirit, who know that without darkness nothing comes to birth, as without light, nothing flowers.*

Happy Easter. It's a good day to say yes.