

OPENING WORDS – 16 Oct 2016
Robert T. Weston – Singing the Living Tradition #538

Autumn, we know,

is life en route to death.

The asters are but harbingers of frost.

The trees, flaunting their colors at the sky,

In other times will follow where the leaves have fallen,

And so shall we.

Yet other lives will come.

So we may know, accept, embrace,

The mystery of life we hold a while

Nor mourn that it outgrows each separate self,

but still rejoice that we may have our day.

Lift high our colors to the sky!

and give,

In our time, fresh glory to the earth.

A Matter of Degree
 First Parish UU of Medfield – 16 Oct 2016
 Rev. David W. Chandler

“Mary, Don’t You Weep” – it’s an old song known in the world of black gospel music as a “house-wrecker.” Get it on a live recording if you can – Marion Williams with organ and gospel choir in her home church, Aretha Franklin on her “Amazing Grace” album from 1972 – also in a packed church. They do bring the house down.

Bruce Springsteen’s version in “Seeger Sessions” is fiddles and guitars, drawing on the folk music settings invigorated by the Civil Rights era. He nails the chorus:

O, Mary, don’t you weep, don’t mourn,
 O, Mary, don’t you weep, don’t mourn.
 Pharaoh’s army got drowned.
 O, Mary, don’t you weep.

“Pharaoh’s army got drowned” – it’s not Standard English, but it is far easier to sing this way – to drag the “drown” and then nail that hard and emphatic “dead.”

“Dead,” is what Pharaoh’s army got – not their feet wet or their clothes muddy. The Red Sea crashed over them. They were swept away and utterly destroyed.

Or so the story tells us. Is it true? To modern, science-oriented people true or fiction seems the ultimate question. “True” or “not true” looks like a binary proposition – if one, than not the other. Yes or no. But why does that really matter – for a story?

We can now understand truth and falsehood, like good and evil, to lie along a spectrum, to travel around a circle that inextricably links them, making them at times difficult to distinguish. Truth and falsehood are relative, a matter of context and perspective. Some people loudly proclaim this “relativism” to be the end of morality, a terminal corrosion of standards of right or wrong. It is not. It is a morality not of yes or no, but of multiple choices. We do make them. We are responsible to make the best choices we can, to weigh alternatives and their consequences on all those affected. We make mistakes but we learn from our choices to make better decisions in the future.

This, I suggest, is core Unitarian Universalism. No required specifics of belief or practice, but there are essential values – choices, human agency and accountability to experience. We have a central object: The robust exercise of individual conscience.

It is a matter of degree how far along this path any of us may be at any time, but not a confusion about the goal. Here is where faith enters in: We believe human beings discern the good, and act upon it. In fact, much of history casts serious doubt on this proposition, and so do many philosophers. Ralph Waldo Emerson was famously dismissive. “No better men live today than ever lived,” he argued in his classic essay “Self Reliance.” Emerson championed progress as a possibility, but he distained complacent assumption of its inevitability. To cultivate self-reliance was to assume individual responsibility for a better life and a better world. We must do the same.

So we believe: There is no tide of history, but only you and I. We do the best we can. Our hope and faith is a world made better by our commitment to make it so.

Pharaoh’s army got drowned. It doesn’t matter if it actually happened. This story has been retold for at least three thousand years. People have believed not in every detail, but in the story itself. The Parting of the Red Sea, and the Exodus narrative in which it is one episode, lie at the heart of Judaism and, through the Abrahamic heritage, the heart of Christianity and Islam as well. All three traditions agree on a core confession: God is powerful and indeed does intervene against evil.

Who needs these traditions? African Americans used the Exodus story to endure and subvert and transcend their bondage. It inspired Liberation Theology, the “preferential option for the poor” that continues – despite implacable opposition by religious and political hierarchies – to be a global faith of the poor and powerless.

Along the spectrum of truth and falsehood then, it is the story that is truth. It has flourished against thousands of other stories that did not. A powerful and protective God – a God who fights for us – meets a compelling human need. You and I may not need a God like that one, with a personal and superior place in the cosmic order. Lucky us – maybe. I suggest we do hold another need ultimately just as crucial. We need to know evil can be stopped. It is essential that to be true – by whatever mechanism.

Remember the famous photo of the man outside Tiananmen Square, holding up a column of tanks by standing in front of them? The power of those tanks was the power of evil. Yet what else could that man have believed, even if unconsciously, but that evil could be stopped? And what else could have happened except that the men in those tanks agreed, at least momentarily, not to do evil but to honor the good? It is a matter of degree – he was an absolute hero no matter what his sense of the situation, but the

tank crews also made his heroism possible by acquiescing, no matter their motivation.

Pharaoh's army got drowned because Pharaoh wavered in honoring the good. He agreed to let the People go out of bondage, and reneged. His people suffered the plagues and he agreed again. And then, as the Bible famously phrases it, Pharaoh's "heart was hardened" and he led his army after the Israelites. Put yourself there. You are trapped against the Red Sea. You spy the clouds of dust. You cannot flee or fight. Your family is all around. The least awful possibility is returning to slavery, but the People had no good reason to believe they would not suffer rape, mutilation and death. No outrage was impossible. No constraints were enforceable. Pharaoh's will be done.

Instead, those who had that absolute power of destruction were themselves utterly destroyed. No one knows exactly why or how. The People may not have known themselves, but they knew evil was stopped. Evil has never left the human world, and never will. Is it really any wonder this story has not left us either?

Jews have just observed Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, renewing themselves as a People in a special relationship with their God. You will notice that, although the Egyptian gods of Pharaoh are known, no one is in relationship with them. It is the stories of the God of Israel which have prevailed. Attonement trumps arrogance and bellicosity and mendacity. I have used a verb here to call your attention to this: It matters which God we follow home but it matters very much more which stories we allow to prevail. Millions of people in our country and elsewhere are in thrall to malicious stories – of fear and anger and even violence directed at strangers. Any God can easily take care of God's self, but it is up to us to take care of our humanity – all of it.

The grief caused by evil is perpetual in human life. It is a matter of degree how much we suffer at any moment, but we always need stories that tell us suffering can end. Oh Mary, don't you weep, don't mourn – Mary of Bethany is in agony for her dead brother, Lazarus. Why should she not be inundated in despair? Because *Pharaoh's army* got drowned in the story from her childhood: Evil absolute and overwhelming was utterly destroyed. In her horror and grief, Mary can still believe this about unconquerable evil and unmitigated suffering: It is not forever. And her own story in the Gospel of John is about to take wings – Jesus will raise her brother from the dead.

Is it true? Remember the stories are about *us*. Our truth is unambiguous. When we act for good, overthrowing evil and relieving pain, we hold the power over despair and even death. Helped by powerful stories, we can do this. We must be willing to try.

Amen. Blessed Be. Shalom. Salaam.

CLOSING WORDS – 16 Oct 2016

Nancy Wood: “My Help Is in the Mountain” – Singing the Living Tradition #552
[From Hollering Sun (1972)]

My help is in the mountain
Where I take myself to heal
The earthly wounds
That people give to me.

I find a rock with sun on it
And a stream where the water runs gentle
And the trees which one by one give me company.

So I must stay for a long time
Until I have grown from the rock.

And the stream is running through me
And I cannot tell myself from one tall tree.

Then I know that nothing touches me
Nor makes me run away.

My help is in the mountain
That I take away with me.