

Born This Way, Again.©

Sunday, April 2, 2017

A Reflection offered by Dan Van Sickle, Worship Leader

A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz

For the Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Appleton, WI

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In order to see the kingdom of God, says Jesus, one must be “born again.” Nicodemus responds: “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

Wow. If there’s ever been a stereotypical Unitarian Universalist response to this idea, that must be it! It’s rational, realistic, and literal.

Surely, if I were in Nicodemus’ shoes, I’d respond in much the same manner: “So, Jesus, this ‘born again’ thing - Can you go into a bit more detail? You mean to say that, in order to really know God, I’ve got to crawl back through the birth canal and visit the womb again? You realize that this process would present a number of physical and psychological challenges, right? I’m not sure that you’ve been present for a birth or not, but let me tell you, it might be pretty tough to get the mother to get on board with this plan. Isn’t there another way? Some sort of ‘spiritual shortcut’ perhaps?”

Before this sermon topic came my way, I’d never given much thought to the concept of being “born again.” I’ve sidestepped the idea, assuming others might have a need to understand it, but that I had no reason to do. My life, however, is in the midst of a transformation. Fifteen weeks ago, my wife and I became parents to a precious baby girl. Three weeks ago, my wife returned to work, and I’ve temporarily become a full-time dad. In two weeks, both my wife and I will be back to our full-time jobs. To top it off, my mother will be moving in with us for two months to care for our daughter. This is a whole lot of change! Is this some sort of “renewal” or “rebirth”? Am I, somehow, being “reborn” right now?

As I’ve been home with Evelyn these past three weeks, I’ve tried to make at least one daily excursion. On Tuesday of this week, Evelyn and I took our first trip to the Appleton Public Library. I headed for the children’s section and selected a

handful of books for us to read together. On the way out, I happened to glance at a separate display for new children’s books. One title caught my eye: *We Sang You Home*. As a musician, the title intrigued me. I opened it. On the first page, there was a man and a woman, sitting under the moon. The woman held a guitar in her hand. The story begins:

“We sang you from a wish. We sang you from a prayer. We sang you home and you sang back.

We give you kisses to help you grow. And songs to let you know that you are loved. As we give you roots, you give us wings. And through you we are born again.”

“And through you we are born again.” That line really hit me. With the birth of my daughter, my life is forever changed. I am born again as a father, with all of the joys, responsibilities, and fears that accompany this new role. I am born again as a caregiver, as a guide, as a lifeguard, as a parent. I am born again as a diaper ninja, deftly managing solid and liquid waste while simultaneously holding a baby AND a burp cloth. Like a newborn, I’ve been thrust into unfamiliar territory. I’m faced daily with the challenge of making sense of this new landscape. Evelyn’s cry could mean she’s tired, or she’s hungry, or she’s bored. Or she needs the diaper ninja. Which one is it? I’m an infant myself, relying on instinct and guesswork, one nap at a time, hoping for the best.

And isn’t that what this one precious life is about? Each sunrise offering an opportunity to begin again, to be born into a new day, a new role, a new direction, a new purpose?

When I got home from the library, Evelyn took a bottle, and then we settled on the floor for some reading time. *We Sang You Home* concludes with these words: “*Our everyday miracle, our everyday smile. Our forever home is inside of you. Thank you for joining us. Thank you for choosing us. Thank you for becoming the best of all of us. We sang you*

home. Thank you for singing back Welcome to the world. We love you!"

My daughter - this everyday miracle - has given my wife and me an amazing gift. I only hope we can return the favor.

Sermon – Rev. Rolenz - It's bound to happen to you at some point in your life. It can catch you off guard at a family potluck or in the office when a co-worker says, "Hey, can I talk with you a minute?" Maybe it's the young men in suits and ties that knock on your door with a Bible in their hands and ask you with all earnestness, "Have you been born again?" If this hasn't happened to you yet, it probably will, because for many an evangelical Christian, convincing another to be born again is the hope of their faith, and if you can accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, and say you are born again, they will have done their job.

Each month we pick a religious, spiritual or theological theme to examine. Those themes coincide with a larger monthly curriculum that we use called Soul Matters. This month's Soul Matters theme is "Transformation," which sounds a lot more friendly to Unitarian Universalist ears than "born again," but that's exactly why I wanted to take up this phrase that we often hear in some circles. In this faith tradition of Unitarian Universalism, nothing is off limits for our exploration and examination. There are no taboos about what religious language we can explore, adopt, adapt or discard. But many Unitarian Universalists come from other religious traditions that have very clear definitions about certain words – there are some words that we just don't like to use – that aren't part of our common language.

Last October, I asked some of you to tell me the words that you never wanted to hear spoken in the Fellowship. "Jesus" was one of them; "salvation" was another; "sin" was another – I suspect everybody wants to sin but nobody wants to hear about it in church – oh "church" was one, but "born again" came up a couple of times. So, at the risk of being slightly heretical, I want to look at the phrase "you must be being born again" not just as another way of talking about transformation, but as something that we do all the time – we can't help but do. Religious liberals have a right to interpret theological language in a way that speaks to us. So

I believe we, too, can unabashedly claim to be born again and I hope to show you how.

But first, take an historical excursion with me. We have to remember that the idea of being reborn, rebirth and reincarnation all pre-date this conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus. The ancient Hindu stories of the Dance of Siva and the dreams of Vishnu, the Sumerian figure of Inanna, the Egyptian imagery of the death and rebirth of Isis all were around long before Christians adopted this as a litmus test of faith. This morning's all-ages focus "The Mountains of Tibet" tells the story of another kind of being "born again" well known to Buddhists and Hindus—that of reincarnation. In that tale, the woodcutter dies and is reborn, ultimately as a little girl, in a village, who somewhere in her consciousness remembers one aspect of an earlier life – he/she liked to fly a kite. And sometimes it seems like there can be no other explanation for the experiences we have that, while new, seem utterly familiar. It's like meeting a person that you've never met before, and yet you can't shake the feeling that you know him or her. Some who believe in reincarnation would say that you do – that you have met in a past life – that time is not linear and that our lives are fluid, our energy endless.

Of course this is not what that earnest young man who is knocking at your door is asking you. He would reject the idea of reincarnation because that would require a physical body to be born into. He is asking you if you have been born again, and he's referring to this passage from the book of John. When Nicodemus asks Jesus – what – you mean I'm supposed to crawl back into my mother's womb? – he's being sarcastic of course. He wants Jesus to get real with him. He's not into religious metaphor, he wants Jesus to give him the facts and the road map and the plan towards transformation.

I get that. Don't we all? Isn't that the purpose of going to the gym, getting a trainer, reading self-help books, going on spiritual retreats, meditating for hours, prayer without ceasing – why would we do these things if we didn't have some hope that our lives could change? I'm not just talking about our external life – but the one that's lived inside; the one that causes us labor pains; the one that says "something new inside of you wants

to be born.” The trouble with Jesus is that he was more of an artist than a scientist; he taught in stories and parables and offered these mystic and confusing ideas of being born anew as a changed person, as a person who desires to see and to live their life in a new way.

Being born again used to be a fairly rare and localized experience that happened in faith healings and revivals, but it’s really gotten quite popular, because who doesn’t love a “I once was lost and now I’m found” story? We see politicians and celebrities publicly renouncing their old ways and bad habits and now are changed; it’s a common theme among recovery communities and an important one – to tell the story of how bad life was before recovery and how good it is now. Those are born again stories that don’t have anything to do with Christianity’s version of being “born again”; instead, they are saying something quite significant– something that we need to hear – that our lives are capable of profound change – that we are not predestined to live out a life of dull habit or abject misery.

This is the most important message given to us by our Universalist ancestors, going all the way back to the 18th century. Our Universalist mothers and fathers looked at our human nature and believed that it was not God’s will for humans to live this life or the next one as preordained by some capricious God. Instead, the Universalists relied on human agency and on the belief that human beings were born good, essentially, beautifully and powerfully good. It is that inherent, innate goodness that allows us the opportunity to be born into ever more intricate and exuberant expressions of God’s love. In other words, a modern day Unitarian Universalist might interpret that to say, “Well, I was born right the first time.”

As much as I like that line, I’m not entirely comfortable with it, either. It plays into the charge that Unitarian Universalists don’t believe in the shadow side of our human nature, of our capacity to harm self or others, to fall prey to all manner of what our evangelical friends would call “sin.” It’s as if to say, “Maybe you need to be born again, but I’m too good to change.” That is actually antithetical to the basics of this particular faith tradition. What we say instead about our beliefs is

“revelation is not sealed.” The great 16th century Unitarian reformer Francis David said *semper reformanda*, which means “always reforming.” Always “re-forming,” not only our minds and our religious ideas, but our very spirits, and by spirit I mean that animating life force that compels us towards greater acts of love, beauty, sacrifice and service.

I think back on what Dan said about his daughter, of how he, too, is being reborn as a result of this experience; he, too, is now like an infant, struggling to understand this new world that’s been happily thrust upon him. I think about how people come into our lives and change us sometimes so profoundly, sometimes slowly, and we realize we have been shaped in new ways; we’ve rebirthed a new self. I think about the song that he sung, *As we give you roots, you give us wings. And through you we are born again.*

When someone asks you if you’ve been born again, be prepared in advance to answer. Think about all the ways in which you have grown, not only intellectually or emotionally, but spiritually. How have you been made anew as a result of your relationship with your values, with this Fellowship and/or with your God? I’m not talking about being a nicer person. My colleague Rob Hardies in a sermon on this topic quoted C.S. Lewis as saying, “Religion isn’t about making people nice. That’s just a by-product of religion. Religion is about making people new. Not nice people, but new people...born again. And again...and again.”¹

Our faith as Unitarian Universalists teaches us two complementary truths. The first is that we have the capacity for and, indeed, a requirement, to continue to evolve and grow as religious and spiritual people. That means examining words and ideas that you may have discarded from your childhood or youth as outdated to see what they mean for you NOW, today, as person who is maturing spiritually.

The second truth is that while we have the capacity to do evil, we were not BORN evil. And what’s even more important is that our being – our

¹ Hardies, Rob. “Born Again...and again...and again.” Sermon, All Souls Unitarian, Washington, DC, 2008.

essential nature – is not corrupt, not bad; our sexuality is a gift; our gender identity or gender fluidity is the way we're supposed to be; our skin color is beautiful; our loving is natural; our bodies are perfect whether able-bodied or otherly abled; that this is the message we absolutely need to hear and to shout and to proclaim again and again. When Lady Gaga came out with her hit "Born This Way," it struck a chord because she said, "Whether life's disabilities left you outcast, bullied or teased, rejoice and love yourself today, cause baby you were born this way..." So today, I want you to celebrate the way you were born – the way you were made – in all of your beauty and power and perfect imperfections and sing along with the Band – Lady Gaga's "Born This Way."

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