

WHEN SHE LAUGHS
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SERMON

Robert Graves wrote a poem titled “Flying Crooked” which says (in part),

The butterfly, the cabbage white,
(His honest idiocy of flight)
Will never now, it is too late,
Master the art of flying straight,
...
He lurches here and here by guess
And God and hope and hopelessness.
Even the aerobatic swift
Has not [t]his flying-crooked gift.

Rev. Jane Rzepka, commented on this poem in her meditation manual, *A Small Heaven*, published in 1989. She noted that

“Publicly we speak the civilized language of human beings who have things under control. No idiocy, no lurching. ... Other people believe it, and even we begin to believe it...Privately, though, we experience long stretches of turbulence and the occasional sudden downdraft. So many in our church feel alone when things go poorly”.

We can feel alone in trouble, at home or at work. When we feel our age, whether of too many years or too few, or when grief overwhelms us with the endless losses of life. Jane continued,

“So many persons feel alone in their money worries or career problems... they don't always show from the outside; it's hard to believe any ... folks at coffee hour are feeling the same kinds of screaming pain, or emptiness, or entrapment, or panic, or precariousness, or low-grade worry. ... It's a help, I think, to accept "the idiocy of flight," the butterfly flight-pattern so firmly implanted in the human mind and heart”.

So I encourage you to identify with the butterflies and accept the lurching as the course of our normal human experience and remember that we are all fluttering about together, seeding a new world. Yes, we are flying by guess and God and hope and hopelessness. Perhaps it is encouraging to know that those who fly straight will never have our supremely, wonderful, idiotic, gift of crooked-flying.

It is hard news to accept the fragility of life. I am told that Albert Einstein was out in a garden when a woman came by and offered her greetings. “It is a beautiful day”, she said, “what a shame that it can't last”. Einstein replied insightfully, “Madam, Nothing Lasts”. This is the price of living, to experience loss, and grief and endings. According to the book of Genesis, when God said to Abraham “Your people will be as numerous as

the stars,” he said nothing about slavery in Egypt, nothing about Exile, or the Diaspora: nothing about millions being burned, children gassed and buried in mass graves. Likewise, in the Gospels, when Jesus spoke of the way of love and life everlasting, his followers do not seem to hear his inclusion in the way of renunciation, death and loss. Our individual lives are fragile, and we all experience disruption and dissolution. Yet, all things bear marks of the eternal because the universe itself, creation and creativity, hope and joy are all grounded in the eternal. I do not know where this line came from that is the title of my sermon. All I know is that when she laughs: butterflies.

But who is she that laughs? The “She” in the title of this sermon could be a particular woman. She is for each of us someone very particular. It might be a beloved aunt, or mother, or friend. For me she is a woman I have known and lived with for some 22 years. When she laughs it is wonderful. But she does not always laugh. I have seen her angry and I can assure you it is no fun. I have held her when she cried. So when she laughs it is like sunshine and butterflies in the spring. Whoever she is she may be like the ideal Jewish woman of Proverbs 31:25, “She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.” Then again she may not be a woman, or even human at all. She could be spring, or Mother Nature. It could be Gaia, Earth personified. Douglas William Jerrold writing about Australia in his classic *A Land of Plenty*, said, “Earth is here so kind, that just tickle her with a hoe and she laughs with a harvest.”

God appears as feminine in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. I have a book on my shelves on Christian theology titled “She Who Is”. The title is a play on that moment in the Passover story when Moses asks God “Who should I say sent me?” and God replies “I Am.” In Jewish and Christian Scriptures, God also laughs, Psalm 2:4a “The one enthroned in heaven laughs.” In the Coptic, Gospel of Judas, Jesus laughs five times or so. But the Hindu tradition the image of laughter and play as incarnations of the feminine are better developed. In Hindu philosophy is the concept of lila is that the creating and sustaining of the universe by God, the Great Mother or ‘Mahadevi’ is an incarnation of divine playfulness. When she speaks: light and truth, when she moves, more justice, when she laughs the butterflies rise, and though moments of happiness fade, the echo of the laughter endures till time ends. She laughs at the surprising beauty of things despite all the tragic foolishness and terror of being mortal.

All laughter comes from the end of tension and discomfort in moments of surprise or release. When we see the suffering we want to end suffering, and when our spirits are released from fear and pain then we laugh. I recently read a story [in *Xenocide* by Orson Scott Card] of a man who went to visit a family in Polynesia. From the moment he arrives he is impressed with how much they laughed. He thought of them as a jovial people. There was one woman in the family he needed help from. When he talked alone with he asked why she was not as relaxed as her family. She said, “We laugh because we are nervous. Everything you do is out of place. You break so many rules, you insult us in so many ways we cannot speak of them all. We know you don’t know what you are doing and so we laugh to break the tension... If we did not laugh we would have to kill you.”

Likewise, life is full of such tragedy and tension if we do not laugh it might kill us. Life is so full of loss the temptation is not to love, not to laugh. We want our stories to all have happy endings, but we know that stories often contain fear and pain and so we steel ourselves against them. The Passover story is full of loss and fear, not just freedom

from slavery, of cries in the wilderness. Laughter, in this sermon is the release of tension, not its elimination. It is transcending with and through sorrow into a deeper joy.

So that is what I mean by “when she laughs”. By ‘butterflies’ I mean the adult phase of certain species of insect, the lepidoptera. I don’t really distinguish them from moths. I heard that once a butterfly wanted to go to a dance, but he couldn’t, because they were holding a moth ball that night. More importantly, butterflies are to be distinguished from the rest of the life cycle of their own species. The winged butterfly is so distinctly beautiful. Oh I know that some people find them to be as creepy as any insects, but mostly they are seen as very lovely, all wing and color and motion. They are also so terribly fragile and transient. From what I have read, adults of many most species live only a week or two in their winged stage. Even the famous migrating Monarchs merely endure for eight or nine months. Butterfly wings especially are quite fragile and if you touch them with your fingers scales will rub off, enough to hinder their flight. That is the magic dust mentioned in the story this morning: *Butterflies Under our Hats*. Butterflies literally flutter in and out of our lives.

Thus butterflies are also a perfect image of all the light, fragile, good of life. Some of you may know that this congregation formed from the merger of two congregations. The Unitarian church of the Union built this building in 1917. When the Great Depression hit, the Unitarian Church of the Messiah stood up on Union and Enright. In 1937 they sold that building, but it still stands. I got to see the stained-glass windows there a few weeks back on a brief historic tour. One window in particular impressed me. It is the image of a young girl cradled in the arm of an angel. The angel eyes are open and her face is full of light, the child’s eyes are closed, and the child in shadow. The angel holds bright white lilies in her raised hand; the child holds a small, colorless and wilted bouquet. It is a poignant image, obviously a memorial to a child. The title of the window is from the Longfellow poem, *The Reaper and the Flowers*, which carries the line “They shall all bloom in fields of light, transplanted by my care”. The window itself carries a line from the Gospel of Luke where Jesus says, “They which will be accounted worthy to obtain that world (beyond death) neither marry, nor are given in marriage: [and this is the line on the window] *Neither can they die any more, for they are equal unto the angels...* being the children of the resurrection.” [Luke 20:35,36 KJV] The other windows are mostly of Biblical scenes. One of the first questions asked by the group looking at those windows was “Did the Unitarians undergo some great theological change, since these are not the windows I would expect to see in a Unitarian Church?” Our guide pointed out what Earl Holt had noted to her, the images are biblical but only include images of human beings and two human like angels, all doing good works. So, our language and imagery has changed a little but our values and theology has not.

In Christian iconography, because the larva in a cocoon is like a body wrapped in a shroud for a tomb from which the soul is released to rise to the heavens; butterflies are images of the resurrected soul, transformed into something new. Scientific and this-worldly as we are many of you may share my deep skepticism about conscious personalities being reborn in spirit bodies or resurrected as angels in fields of light. Yet all of us know of transcendence and transformation; any person can feel some brief kinship with the butterflies. You probably heard of the terrible tornado destruction of Joplin, Missouri. When people were recovering from that ruin last year, some noticed that many children had reported seeing guardian angels in the shape of butterflies. One

As part of the healing process they created a mural in the town. You can see it at <http://joplincommunityartproject.blogspot.com>. It includes lines from the Langston Hughes poem, "In Time of Silver Rain"

In time of silver rain
The butterflies
Lift silken wings
To catch a rainbow cry,
And trees put forth
New leaves to sing
In joy beneath the sky

So the butterfly embodies the joyous and spiritual dimension of life. Richard Jefferies wrote of this dimension being not momentary but as enduring as the eternal:

It is eternity now. I am in the midst of it.
It is about me in the sunshine;
I am in it, as the butterfly in the light-laden air.
Nothing has to come; it is now.
Now is eternity; now is the immortal life.

At one level this transcendent quality of life is eternal, it is everywhere and now. Yet we find it fleeting, as hard to find as a butterfly. The resurrected Jesus in the Gospels seems also transient; he comes for a few days then ascends again, not yet to return. But Robert Frost wrote of the transience of goodness and the divine, using the color blue as an icon for joy and love and beauty:

Why make so much of fragmentary blue
In here and there, a bird, or butterfly,
Or flower, or wearing-stone, or open eye,
When heaven presents in sheets, the solid hue.

So by butterflies I mean the light, fluttering, playful spirit of resurrection in each of us. The butterflies of love and joy can not be utterly destroyed. Do not devalue or fear things that are fragile. The pain of their loss is part of their beauty. Remember what the Zen poet Issa said, "This dew drop world is only a world of dew ...and yet."

And the power of life always returns, as an anonymous poet wrote:

"Buds crack into spring's / Butterfly-crowd of flowers; /
Black, leafless branches – / Overnight are heavy with bees. /
There will be a new earth / And a new heaven: /
Something flowing this way – / Like a quiet breeze. /
Unexplainable – Rising, rising."

You might call it resurrection. You might call it liberation from slavery and oppression. You might call it Easter, or just butterflies in the spring. No matter what words you use the fact remains that when she laughs, there are butterflies.