

READING ON THE BRIEF HISTORY OF APRIL FOOLS DAY

The origin of this holiday is rather uncertain. No one knows exactly where, when, or why it began. It is generally accepted that the All Fool's Day tradition began in France during the 16th century when the beginning of the New Year was observed on April 1. At that time, the festivities ran for a week, beginning on March 25, and included the exchanging of gifts. In 1582, however, Pope Gregory introduced a revised calendar for the Christian world wherein the New Year fell on January 1. Since it took some time for many people to even hear word of the change, New Year's Day continued to be celebrated on the first day of April in many areas. Individuals who had accepted the dates of the new calendar played tricks on those who had not and referred to the unfortunate victims of such pranks as "April Fools," sending them on a "fool's errand" or attempting to make them believe that something which was true was actually false. Over time, this practice evolved into an annual tradition of April 1 prank-playing, eventually migrating to England and Scotland during the Eighteenth Century and then introduced to the American colonies by British and French settlers.

READING 2 (from a list of famous contemporary April Fools jokes)

-- Burger King, another American fast-food chain, published a full-page advertisement in USA Today in 1998 announcing the introduction of the "Left-Handed Whopper," specially designed for the 32 million left-handed Americans. According to the advertisement, the new burger included the same ingredients as the original, but the condiments were rotated 180 degrees. The chain said it received thousands of requests for the new burger, as well as orders for the original "right-handed" version.

SCAPEGOATING AND LIBERALISM: FOOLISHNESS OR INCONVENIENT TRUTH?

Woodinville Unitarian Universalist Church

April 1, 2007

Today is April Fools Day of 2007. There's no special holiday service nor does America have a marketing strategy for April Fools Day. There are no Hallmark cards nor are there distinctive April Fools Day gifts or candies. It's probably a good thing given the history of pranks and unkind jokes that are associated with this holiday.

I will suggest this is a day we religious liberals might celebrate anyway. I will also submit that we are all fools. I say that realizing that it's probably a little risky for a minister to say such words during a stewardship campaign. I will, however, propose we wear the word fool as a badge of honor and not as scapegoats.

I shared in the reading a brief history of April Fools Day. This morning, though, I am talking about another kind of Fool. That Fool, however, is different than one who does silly pranks. We speak of the Fool who is known also as the Trickster, the Clown, the Jester, and survives to this day as the joker in decks of cards. The joker is wild, we say, and that wildness is the core of what the fool, the joker, and trickster can be.

The Fool or Court Jester in the courts of medieval Europe had an important role of being able to make fun of nobility and to a limited degree had immunity from punishment. He was usually a release valve to warn the nobility of their foolishness and in some ways acted like the comedians of today in disguising criticism as humor and amusement.

Wes Nisker, a Buddhist teacher, musician and author of "The Essential Crazy Wisdom" speaks of the archetypal character that challenges conventional wisdom in several ways.

One is the Clown. The clown has a smile or frown painted on their face. They are always silly or impossibly awkward. The clowns can be Laurel and Hardy or the Three Stooges. The clown is somehow endearing and we know they will fail but in a way to make us laugh and not cry.

The Jester is a wordsmith. They are people who, like the Court Jester, could play with words, make double entendres, sly jokes and make fun of authority in a hidden but sharp-tongued way. Our modern equivalent might be Jay Leno or Jon Stewart as examples.

The Trickster is someone we might associate with Coyote of American Indian tradition. Nisker tells us that the Trickster usually makes a

mess of things while creating chaos and turning the world upside down. They are people drawn to the edginess of ideas and willing to push buttons just to see what might happen even if there's a warning sign.

Finally we have The Fool who is both innocent and very wise. Nisker tells us that there are minor fools who are sad examples of good people gone wrong. Great Fools, however, are in a league by themselves. Einstein might have been one of them. Jacob Bronowski, in the *Ascent of Man*, wrote that Einstein was someone who could "ask immensely simple questions" in a way that would lead to profoundly wise answers.

Great Fools see and experience the world outside the box of common expectations and understandings. Great religious teachers such as Jesus and The Buddha would have been considered great Fools through probably such terms wouldn't go over well in some quarters. Nisker speaks of them as Holy Fools and they were people in the right time and place to change the world with their ideas and examples of love and justice.

What does the Great Fool have to do with liberalism? Liberalism has a bad reputation in this country. Liberals are accused of being baby-killers, supporting of terrorism, unpatriotic, un-American, anti-authoritarian, and many other negative labels. Liberalism has been blamed for almost every social, political and religious ailment in America. It's really amazing how much power people think we liberals have had in the last century or so. And we have no doubt felt maligned, misunderstood, isolated and disempowered.

We as a labeled group have been made scapegoats for an endless variety of changes in America. One conservative commentator – Mr. O'Reilly - recently said that America would have been a far better country had liberals been the one exception to anti-abortion decisions by mothers.

In fairness, liberals tend to employ some hurtful labels to the conservative community. Conservatives are broadly painted as right wing religious fanatics, loony survivalists, pro-life physician killers, and the like. Such labels are accurate for some but not all of the conservatives in this country. They have their extreme as we have ours. However, in general liberals seem to be more willing to be tolerant, accepting of differences, and are prepared to change our minds if reason is applied.

Then there's Unitarian Universalism as a brand of liberal religion. We are accused of believing anything we want or not believing in anything at all. Jokes abound about question marks on the front lawn and elevator speeches that require 80 story buildings.

We are sometimes a footnote in books on contemporary American religion. We represent a small portion of the American population even though there are probably many people like us "out there" in the world.

There are those in our neighborhoods, our families and our society who would consider us hopeless fools to follow such a bizarre religion.

That's one way to look at us. Suppose, though, that we are carrying on an ages long tradition of being Holy Fools or prophetic voices? Suppose we are helping to warn and prepare the world for a rebirth in the midst of economic and climate chaos? I'll speak more about that at Easter and on April 22.

Our religious ancestors go all the way back to the Jewish prophets of Israel including the prophetic voice of Jesus.

Our Christian Unitarian ancestors were people whose prophetic voices warned of orthodoxy and forced conformity. Bishop Arius in the 4th century, Michael Servetus of the Reformation, and countless others paid a price sometimes of torture and death because they were prophetic voices raised against the religious establishment of the times.

All through the ages, we religious liberals have been prophetic voices with many others who challenged authority and common sense.

Here's a partial scorecard of liberal prophecy.

We joined our more traditional liberal Christian kindred in warning of the inhuman treatment of slaves in the 19th century and how it could destroy this country. We were prophetic voices for the suffrage movement, as women demanded the right to vote.

Each time we were right and those who fought change have healed very slowly and grudgingly. Equality comes slowly and fitfully but it cannot be stopped by fear and scapegoating.

We supported a more strongly regulated federal government in the 1930's as a result of the Great Depression and capitalism run amok. Those who fought change said it would lead to socialism and loss of individual liberty.

For 80 or so years, the government regulated things like mortgages and investment funds and energy companies. The system wasn't perfect but prevented wholesale looting of the American people by depressions and the boom-bust cycle. We were right and now we all pay the price of deregulation gone crazy.

We said that the institution of racism against blacks and other minorities in the United States was a violation of everyone's liberty and inherent worth. Those who fought change responded that separation between the races was the natural order and had everyone in their proper place.

We were right and this generation of youth and young adults in many parts of America are astonished to learn that in the old days people of different colors couldn't date or get married or be friends.

We warned time and time again of wars to support the national ego such as Vietnam and Iraq. Those who closed their eyes and ears and minds said that we were unpatriotic and should shut up.

We were right yet again and now we are counting the dead of all the nations who have tumbled into the tragedy of Iraq.

And now we have the inconvenient truth of rapid climate change that will alter our society and our children's world for years to come.

Tomorrow night is the Jewish Passover celebration. This is part of the story from the book of Exodus. Yahweh said that the last and most terrible plague would afflict the entire first born children in Egypt though the Hebrews would be spared if they prepared a feast and killed a lamb with special instructions. "The blood on the lintel was a sign to G-d so that he knows which house to smite and which not, while he passes over Egypt to afflict every first born..."

I don't often use stories from the Bible here. They are the reminders of how inconvenient truths can force us to free ourselves from slavery to daily life. We then start a journey into the wilderness that is the New World.

None of us here at WUUC is probably a Great or Holy Fool in the way of a Gandhi of our time or the Moses of the Exodus story. But neither are we simply fools who practice a pretend religion.

As a group of religious liberals, however, we are the pioneers, the sangha, the tribe of seekers, or the wanderers in the desert.

We with all our sisters and brothers in Unitarian Universalist churches around the world have chosen not to be driven into the desert as scapegoats but to take our hopes and our dreams and our sore feet on to a long journey with an unknown ending.

Unlike the Hebrew tribe of Exodus, we are not fleeing a pharaoh and his tyranny. We are leading the way to a landscape we cannot see in our lifetime. We do not know what it will contain or who its citizens are to be.

It is not a Promised Land like in the Bible. What we do know is that we are called to create a world of promises we make to our children.

Let us promise them that our choice of roads is not caught between despair and extinction as Woody Allen suggests.

Let us find another way through our work and our laughter and our tears but also our hearts of perfect wisdom.

And above all else, let us be wise people filled with laughter and purpose as we lead the way.