

## **Why Not Be Changed Into Fire?**

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January 9, 2011

*a reflection at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Andover*

About a week before Christmas I saw a very interesting segment on the TV news magazine *60 Minutes*. It was a segment on people with a condition known formally as hyperthymesia – but more commonly called “superior autobiographical memory”. Superior autobiographical memory is an amazing ability that just a handful of people have to remember just about every day of their life. People with this condition are just like the rest of us, except that they can recall – off the top of their heads – what happened on January 9, 1985 (or any random date you throw out) what they ate, wore, what they did... even what happened in the world that day in great detail. If you go back to fact-check it, the things they remember and describe turn out to be right.

At the very end of the segment, neuroscientist Dr. Larry Cahill asked a very good question. Dr. Cahill said, “As you watch these remarkable people, and as you think back on [for instance] my three children, how little I can actually remember from when they were four, five, six. You start to wonder, why are we the default state? Why are we normal and they’re the unusual ones? Why didn’t we evolve such that most of us are like them and [it’s]... unusual... [to be one of] the people who can hardly remember anything?”<sup>1</sup>

It’s a great question. Why on earth is it “normal” that we remember so few details of our lives? I’ve been thinking about it the last couple of weeks, and actually, it has given me a great sense of hope. Why? Because to me, if we have evolved so that forgetting details from our autobiographies is common and “normal”, then clearly it wasn’t crucial for human survival and progress. And I believe that means that to be a successful human, it is more important to be able to keep your focus on the present moment, and perhaps to look ahead to the future. Sure, it might be nice to remember more details of one’s life... but looking to this day and to the future is more important. The proof is right there in the evolution of our autobiographical memories.

And that’s a very hopeful thing as we begin a new year. What a great opportunity to leave the past in the past, focus on the present, and look ahead.

Of course, two things complicate this. The first is, though most of us cannot remember the little details of this past year, some things are harder to forget. Pain and hurts are hard to forget. Loss is hard to forget. Disappointments, betrayals, failures and mistakes... hard to forget. That’s complication number one.

Complication number two? While we look back and remember the bigger, more consequential things, we have a funny habit as a culture of making very detail-oriented, nit-picky resolutions for the new year. What are the most common resolutions in our culture? Probably resolving to eat better and exercise more. Both are fine resolutions – that’s why I make them year after year. But why not think even bigger? Why not resolve to make a complete transformation in 2011?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/12/16/60minutes/main7156877.shtml?tag=contentMain;contentBody>

For this morning's opening words, you heard a saying of the Desert Fathers. The Desert Fathers were early Christian monks and mystics who lived in the Egyptian desert in the third and fourth centuries of the Common Era. The story you heard earlier is short enough that I'm going to re-tell it right now:

Abbot Lot [the young monk] came to Abbot Joseph [an elder monk] and said: "Father, to the limit of my ability, I keep my little rule, my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and to the limit of my ability, I work to cleanse my heart of negative thoughts; and I still have not found what I seek. What more should I do?" The elder rose up in reply, and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: "Why not be utterly changed into fire?"

Indeed, why not? Why not be totally transformed by the spirit of truth and mystery and beauty? Why not be totally transformed into one engrossed in a life of meaning and service? Instead of focusing on your "little rule", why not be totally transformed by your vision of the Divine? Why not seek to become like the Phoenix, the mythical bird that is reborn in the flame, rising up from its own ashes? Why not radically leave behind mistakes and failures and hurts? Why not be utterly changed into fire? [Note: At this point, I used flash paper to create extra flame from the chalice.]

Fire is used as a symbol in all of the world's major scripturally-based religions, and in most indigenous and pagan traditions as well. And of course, the flaming chalice is the primary symbol of Unitarian Universalism. It is often interpreted as it is in our mission statement, as "the light of truth" – and a light which kindles "the warmth of love" (as we say) – and while that fire is lit under you, you are moved, one hopes, to "the energy of action". The flame is meant to conjure up an image of love and sacrifice and service, much like the words we say as we light the chalice. And of course, fire is a chemical reaction – it *is* transformation.

In a short time, we will participate together in the Burning Bowl Ritual, and each of you will have a chance to think about transformation in 2011. But first, I want to share with you one of my hopes for transformation for all of us – for the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Andover, and for the larger community of Unitarian Universalists.

Please bear with me now as I back my way into sharing this hope.... Let me ask you, do you know what I did to create that burst of flame a minute ago? I used a piece of flash paper. Flash paper, I discovered this past week, is not so easy to find. The only place I managed to find it, searching high and low, was at a local magic shop. I walked into the magic shop and asked the man working there (who is a magician) if they carried flash paper. And he said, "Of course!" and then he added [wait for it] "That's a hot item!" (I'm here all week.)

I have to tell you that I had a bit of a flashback (no pun intended) when I went in there to buy the flash paper. I went through a brief period in my childhood – maybe it lasted a year or two sometime in the late 70s (of course I'd remember better if I had superior autobiographical memory) – when I was really into doing magic tricks, and I used to go to the local magic shop in

my hometown all the time. I'd buy some simple trick that I could afford with the change I'd saved. But it was so much fun to go in there. For one thing, the magicians who worked there couldn't resist an audience, no matter how small or how young, so I'd usually get to see 10 or 20 magic tricks for free. And then there was the fun of having the magician teach me how to perform the trick I purchased (a magician's secrets are sacred – they are only revealed once you actually purchase the trick, you see).

In any case, I was amazed this past week to walk into a magic shop more than 30 years later and see the exact same tricks I used to have! In this world of so many changes, it was astonishing to learn that that magic, of all things, is timeless. A little sleight of hand, a little distraction – maybe distract with flash paper, maybe distract with a bad joke – a little suspension of disbelief... or perhaps just a willingness to let the illusion wash over you... and a magic trick can be, well, magical.

Unitarian Universalists are known for our love of reason. And it's a proud tradition, really, that we have reason as our hallmark, rather than, for instance, superstition. But my hope for us – those of us at the UUCiA and for all UUs – is that we don't understate the first official source of our tradition. The first source of our Unitarian Universalist tradition is "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder... which moves us to a renewal of the spirit". I think this congregation has actually been open to direct experiences of wonder – but let's have even more! There could never be too many, as far as I'm concerned.

I want to close this reflection with a story that my colleague, the Rev. Christine Robinson, told during her Berry Street Lecture in 2008. Robinson tells the story of going on a ride at Disney World; the ride was "Journey to Mars". She doesn't generally like to go on rides, but she went on this one at the recommendation of her son, who told her (paraphrasing) "Mom, you have to go". She writes:

"With some anxiety, I strapped myself in to my little cockpit... And then, with much rattle and roar, we were off.

"It was only 2 gs, but it was impressive. My little window flashed ... to an outside view of Mars, which was getting rapidly bigger. There was the inevitable volley of asteroids to dodge, and then, it was time to turn around to land. In my little window, I saw the red planet edge off, and then the vast darkness, and then I saw Earth rise in space, my beautiful, precious home.

"My son was right. It was totally worth it.... I've been to Mars, and I have looked back to see my home from space, and I was touched to the core of my being.

[She goes on:] "I know that the Spirit blows where it will, but I hadn't expected to have a religious experience at Disney World, and it was abundantly clear that it was no accident that I'd had it. They put that little iconic picture of Earth in my window on purpose, and they hoped that it would do just what it did....

[She continues:] "... I have to tell you, the idea that even theme park designers know that it is 'heart' ... and 'meaningfulness' that bring real satisfaction to a human life is humbling, especially after my eyes were opened to how well they can do it. I would have said that 'heart' and ... 'meaningfulness' were what I was supposed to be doing as an ordained minister. But [our] special effects budget is otherwise known as 'flowers and candles.' [We] can't produce 2 gs in [our] sanctuary by any means. There are no seatbelts in [our] seats and no need of them, because the biggest physical thrills [we] can offer are singing, laughter, and the sound of sheer silence.

[Finally, she concludes:] "Why do people come to [a house of worship]? It is not to learn. People don't even go to museums to learn. It's not to be entertained. People don't even go to Disneyland just to be entertained. They come to [a house of worship]... to quench a thirst, find meaningfulness, to have an authentic experience, or, in a more traditional religious language, to connect with mystery and see their everyday lives reflected in the mirror of eternity. [Houses of worship], then, and the lay and ordained people who lead them, are ... sorcerer's apprentices in the art of quenching thirst, filling voids, opening the doors of meaning." [Here end Robinson's words.]<sup>2</sup>

And so that is my hope for this beloved community in 2011 – that we become ever more open, and ever more able to experience transcending mystery and wonder together... that we become ever more open to trying new things. I don't want us to abandon our love of reason – not that there's much chance we would. As a movement, I think it's fair to say that we've never embraced magical thinking. But that's not the same as embracing magical moments that transcend reason. May we ever embrace the magic – timeless magic – and let the magic wash over us. May we continue to open the doors of meaning together, loving and supporting each other. May we fasten our seatbelts for a wonder-filled ride, one not to be missed, singing and laughing and praying all the way.

Blessed be, and amen. [Note: After the reflection, the congregation participated in the Burning Bowl Ritual.]

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<sup>2</sup> (I changed "my" and "I" to "our" and "we" as it fit the sermon's context better. I changed "church" to "house of worship" as the UU Congregation in Andover does not use "church" in its title.) I first heard this story during Robinson's lecture. It was published in a slightly different version in *UU World*: <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/128959.shtml>