

Jesus: Holy Fool
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Reading – “On Seeing Venus by Day” by Karen Hering (*Writing to Wake the Soul: Opening the Sacred Conversation Within*, Atria Books, NY, 2013, pp. 25-27)

French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss marveled over evidence of ancient cultures where people could see the planet Venus by day. After consulting with astronomers and European navigational history, he found additional references to sailors who could see Venus in broad daylight and concluded that it was made possible by two things - the need to navigate vast waters by day, and a knowledge of the stars and planetary patterns that helped the early sailors know where to look.

Curious about this, I tested this out as best I could. One night, awakening about 4:30 am and unable to return to sleep, I stepped outside to find the moonless sky filled with stars. In the east, Venus was just rising over the horizon, brightest of all. Sunrise was two hours away, so I bundled up in some warm clothes and sat on my deck in the autumn darkness, watching Venus as the sky gradually lightened.

As the grass and trees became visible around me, I kept my eyes on the sky, staring intently at Venus as the tails of light that had made it appear as a star slowly retreated. Just before I lost sight of it altogether, it resembled the tiniest orb of a moon, barely discernible against the brightening sky. Then, with my next blink, it was gone.

Shifting my eyes to the horizon, I saw that the sun was already well above it. It was an hour past sunrise, and I had seen Venus by day!

Spiritual practices increase our capacity for focusing, for paying attention, for noticing patterns, which is what happens in creative work as well, as the poet William Stafford described in these lines from "When I Met My Muse":

‘Her voice belled forth, and the
sunlight bent. I felt the ceiling arch, and
knew that nails up there took a new grip
on whatever they touched. “I am your own
way of looking at things,” she said. “When
you allow me to live with you, every
glance at the world around you will be
a sort of salvation.” And I took her hand.’

Like most forms of spiritual practice, accepting the invitation into creative work and living requires an openness to change – a surrender so complete it reveals a

wide new view to us. But significantly, it is a surrender to our *own* way of seeing as it is in spiritual practice. The muse, too, has a place – and a salvific, a saving role to play – in our lives and spiritual practices. Welcoming the muse is about seeing possibilities already here in this world that have gone unnoticed. As writer asha bandeled said, “The world is so magnificent the way it keeps rebirthing itself to you, if you’re amenable.”

When imagination is called upon and strengthened through the practice of a spiritual discipline – an internal focus on truth and reality larger than oneself – it is less a matter of make-believe than it is one of seeing what already exists in the possibilities lying in wait beneath the surface of things. It is not unlike seeing Venus by day.

Sermon – Jesus, Holy Fool

Anyone else excited that they are doing a star-studded, live broadcast of *Jesus Christ, Superstar* for Easter Sunday this year?

I confess, I am *excited* about it. The fun, campy, silly, and profoundly moving music contains so much for a lover of theater, like me. But for me, and I suspect for many others who have been die-hard fans since it first hit theaters in 1971, the lasting appeal of this show is the way it stands all the popular notions of Christianity on its head. Was Jesus god or human? Prophet or fool? Like any good story, *Jesus Christ Superstar* leaves the questions in the air to linger long after the story ends.

Easter Sunday, the festival honoring the Christian god or prophet Jesus, falls on April Fools day this year. This is a rare event; it hasn’t happened since 1959, and you rarely see it more than once in a century. So I’ve been thinking about this Jesus, who is depicted in the Bible as a great storyteller, and how many of those stories teach their lessons precisely the same way: a common scenario, a surprise twist, and questions lingering after. The classic role of the fool.

In the tradition of Tarot, or the reading of cards to discern one’s future path, the card representing the Fool often looks similar to the one on the front of your Order of Service. I love this picture, because it portrays the Fool as a seer, with his eyes on the heavens while he stands on the precipice as though he hasn’t a care in the world. His traveling bundle is on his shoulder, and he’s ready to make his way onto the next part of his journey. An idealist, taking the risky road.

In the book, *The Witches Tarot*, Ellen Cannon Reed describes the meaning of the Fool card in Tarot: “The Fool stands on a mountain with the world spread before him. He can take any direction he chooses. Nothing is, and everything can be. Plants the seeds of truth in such a way that they can be brushed off on a conscious level, but still take root and may grow at the subconscious level. Holds his seeds in a sack over his shoulder. First day of the rest of your life. To meditate on this card, imagine yourself as the Fool, with all creation stretched out before you. Nothing is hidden. All is possible. You can do anything. What do you choose to do?”

It is often the fool who brings the greatest gifts to the world, because they insist upon seeing things others do not see. And this is how I see the role of Jesus, who is recorded as saying that

his teachings were for those who “have eyes to see,” – not prescriptions, but rather ways of seeing the world that may escape those who won’t or can’t reflect deeply and allow themselves to be surprised by unexpected truth.

Jesus’ stories contained seeming conundrums, such as these – If someone smites you on one cheek, don’t give in: just offer the other cheek, too. Pray for those who do you wrong. The law says you can’t “work” on the Sabbath, but if you are hungry, go pick enough grain for a meal; if someone is sick, go ahead and cure them; if people are waiting to hear what you have to say, go ahead and take that journey.

These teachings were very counter-cultural for the time in which they were uttered. They were considered revolutionary! So revolutionary, they could – and sometimes did – get people imprisoned or put to death. A truly foolish set of teachings.

However, just how foolish and revolutionary they are only become clear when you look at the lives of three men of the past hundred years who took a look at their own society through that lens.

Mahatmas Gandhi in India, Nelson Mandela in South Africa, and Martin Luther King, Jr. in this country, each studied these foolish teachings, really wrestled them down until they understood *to their very bones* how their particular, horrible, oppressive situation looked when seen through that paradigm. Nonviolent resistance, they called it. Each of them went to prison, each of them risked being killed, and one of them actually was killed for their ideals.

They each started a revolution of hearts and minds, touching something elemental, helping more and more people see the world from a different point of view. A powerful, from-the-ground-up cultural shift in each of their countries that eventually made sweeping, real change in how people treated each other. They rallied around them whole armies of peaceful people willing to be reviled, persecuted, arrested, shot at... all the while quietly, defiantly doing what they had every right to do. Holy Fools, all of them. Showing a new way forward.

There are many paths to truth, and Unitarian Universalists honor the good in all faiths and traditions. Whether we engage in wrestling the truth from the stories of Jesus, of the teachings of Buddha, the Torah and Midrash writings, god and goddess myths, native wisdom tales, or all of the above and more, it is my hope that we all will continue to look for the unexpected, counterintuitive, foolish wisdom that can change our point of view and show us a new way out of no way.

I believe that, when we need to see Venus by day, we can learn how. Let’s take courage, friends, and be Fools on the Hill together.

May it be so.