

The Myth of Ostara and Her Rabbit
Sunday, March 20, 2022
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snively

Whistlestop:

Some say this story is based on a very old tale. Others say it is a newer story told for today. Both may in some part be true.

Ostara is the goddess of the east, of the sunrise and of spring. For a good part of the year, she sleeps in the earth, but when she hears the rabbits above ground and thumping their feet, she knows it is time to wake up and warm the land. BUT, sometimes Ostara is a bit lazy, and she doesn't get up right away when she hears her rabbit alarm. She hits snooze and sleeps a bit longer. It was one of those years when she had slept in a bit that when she emerged, she discovered a small bird lying on the floor of the forest. She thought at first it was dead, frozen, but then she saw its small chest move. There was still some life left in the small creature. Ostara reached down, picked it up in her hands, held the bird to her mouth and blew her warm breath over it. Slowly the bird revived. Ostara placed it on the ground, but it hopped awkwardly about. One wing had not returned whole from its frozen state. Ostara looked with pity on the small bird who would obviously not be able to fly again. She considered what to do. As she saw it hop, she remembered the rabbits who annually woke her. She turned the injured bird into a rabbit. But since this rabbit had been a bird it retained its ability to lay eggs. As compensation for the bird's loss Ostara gave the bird rabbit the gift of laying beautiful, multicolored eggs. The rabbit was grateful for Ostara's care and gift and became from that day on Ostara's special companion and confidant.

Sermon:

There are some days I think I am just going to find some mountain and live on it like a hermit. The trouble with the world is people. (sigh) Better to live without them. The very next moment, of course, I think what a lonely existence that would be. Mostly I like people. It is just some moments.

Your spouse comes home and tells you they made arrangements for you to go out with another couple tonight. You had already settled into your easy chair all set to binge watch tv with a diet coke and some popcorn just vegging out. Arrgh.

Some bozo runs a red light. You could have been killed if you hadn't noticed that they had no intention of stopping and didn't pull out when your light turned green.

People even tell stories extending our problems with others to other beings. You are a little bird freezing its tail feathers off because the goddess of spring decided to sleep in.

At the beginning of February at our congregational history and heritage event members said there were three things that needed to be added to the Tri-UU history we shared then, a piece about our musicians, a piece about our windows, and a piece about a time of conflict in the congregation. I have chosen this spring equinox service to talk about conflict.

The twentieth century English language poet T.S. Eliot began his poem "The Wasteland" with "April is the cruelest month...." This is Florida so maybe our cruelty comes a bit before April. Two Sundays ago,

it was in the mid-80s in the afternoon, and the pool at my apartment complex was full of children and families. Last Sunday we didn't have our outdoor coffee hour because it was in the thirties in the morning.

I might say we can't control the weather except that we now know that one of the biggest problems helping create our crazy weather is us. We want to be able to jump into a car or a plane and go where we want. We want the inside of our houses to be 70 degrees spring, summer, fall and winter. We don't want 100-year floods every three years or sea level rise or species extinctions. We are even in conflict with the earth and ourselves.

We can't avoid conflict. It is a part of life. A few months ago, I commented that in a couple of cases of conflict at Tri-UU rather than work it out, someone had just picked up their marbles and left. Someone from the congregation said you are all retired, you dealt with conflict your whole work lives, and now you don't want it. Better to just move on and let it be. The trouble is that any time you choose to be with other people- to date, to stay married, to play golf with some buddies, to join a Bridge club, to join a congregation- there is going to be conflict. Like the rotation of the seasons, it is part of life. A colleague at a meeting this week commented that stuff happens she just wants the people of her congregation to be flexible, gracious, and forgiving when it does.

As a part of the interim minister training, we were given some resources on conflict. One handout showed a series of intensity of conflict beginning with a problem to solve- who is going to organize coffee hour, to a disagreement- we need to have homemade baked goods every Sunday, that's too much work- bought cookies are fine- to a contest my bought goodies are better than your homemade ones- to fight or flight we shouldn't have sweets at coffee hour, sugar isn't raised sustainably or equitably I am going to protest coffee hour at coffee hour every Sunday until we change and if we don't change I'm leaving, ending with intractable I am going to come in here every Sunday and upset the coffee hour tables, throw all the baked goods in the trash and threaten to pour hot coffee on the organizers.

Tri-UU's period of conflict included intensity levels from disagreement through intractable. Thanks to Roger Cooper, Joyce Mills and Jerry Slosser I have this narrative of the history.

In 2013-2014, soon after the congregation called Rev. Onnie and moved her from contract minister to full-time settled status, there was a period of conflict within the congregation.

The humanist group gathered in the garden to share their connection with a member of the group who had recently died. The minister was unhappy that she had not been consulted about or included in this event.

A few members of the humanist group did not refrain from making continuous, negative, sometimes untrue remarks about the direction of the congregation and about the minister. One particular member was vitriolic in his comments.

Another member of the humanist group wrote a letter of complaint to the congregation and spoke negatively about two of the congregation's lay leaders to others in the congregation. This person and their spouse met with leaders of a Right Relations Team. What seemed to be a satisfactory conclusion was reached. The couple was asked to take a break from the congregation, and some healing began.

A number of people from the humanist group left the congregation and formed a Humanist Group in The Villages. Not all of the members of the humanist group left TriUU and not all were involved in the conflict.

There was a completely unrelated incident that sometimes gets conflated in congregational memory with “the humanist conflict.” A person who exhibited inappropriate behavior related to mental illness began attending congregational events. On one occasion he interrupted the minister, who was speaking at a Sunday morning forum, by yelling epithets at her. He refused to relinquish the microphone and was escorted out of the building by the president of the congregation and several backup volunteers. He was told not to return and later that same message was sent to him in a Registered Letter, which he refused to receive. Law enforcement was summoned and arrived after he had left the property. Some congregants were very upset by this incident. The man's threats to the president were verbal only and the absence of any physical contact made a Restraining Order impossible to obtain.

Through these events the congregation developed its Covenant of Right Relations and its Right Relations Committee formed, acted, and developed resources.

This time is sometimes remembered as the Humanist Controversy in which all the humanists left the congregation. This is an unfair characterization as a good number of people who identify as humanist remained in and were thereafter welcomed into the congregation.

That is the piece to be added to the Tri-UU history. But just sharing that there is conflict, that there are various intensities of conflict, and sharing some Tri-UU history of conflict does not make a sermon. What do we do about it?

Another resource shared at our interim ministers' training was [The Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory](#). This resource suggests that we have five ways or styles in which we can deal with conflict. 1) We can be directive. My focus on my agenda is high. My focus on my relationship with you is low. We're doing it my way. Let's just get the job done. We'll worry about the relationship later. 2) We can harmonize. My focus on my agenda is low. My focus on the relationship is high. Sure, I'm flexible. Whatever you want is fine with me. 3) We can avoid. My focus on my agenda is low, and my focus on the relationship is low. Forget about it. Conflict? What conflict? Can we talk about this some other time? 4) We can compromise. My focus on the agenda is medium. My focus on the relationship is medium. I'll meet you halfway. Let's make a deal. 5) We can cooperate. My focus on my agenda is high, and my focus on the relationship is high. My preference is And please tell me yours If we each explain what we want, and keep talking, we can find a way for both of us. Each of these different styles may be the most appropriate in a specific situation. It is good to have a repertoire that includes all of them, but most of us have a preferred style. I know mine used to be avoidance. I think I have gotten better about not trying to always avoid conflict as I have gotten older. Perhaps I have come to care more about both my own agenda and my relationships.

That old curmudgeon Ernest Hemingway wrote, “When spring came, even the false spring, there were no problems except where to be happiest. The only thing that could spoil a day was people and if you could keep from making engagements, each day had no limits. People were always the limiters of happiness except for the very few that were as good as spring itself.” Since I do not hold myself to be an old curmudgeon, I believe there are more than a few people as good as spring itself.

But we can come into conflict even with good people. I liked my first-grade teacher, Mrs. Nafzinger. She taught me phonics and thus how to read. But one day she called me and another girl in class up to her desk. Our spelling tests were exactly the same with the selfsame mistakes. She announced that one of us had cheated and we were going to stand there until one of us confessed. I was incensed. I had not cheated, but I was being accused. I was beyond angry, but I was six years old and didn't have the words to explain my feelings. I broke out into a temper tantrum to rival all temper tantrums. At her wits end Mrs. Nafzinger sent me to the principal's office. But I was still angry. The principal told me to go wash my face and get a drink of water, and I announced that I did not like water. He bought me a coke. Eventually I was calmed down and sent back to class. I have no idea what happened with the spelling tests. Apparently, the relationship with me had taken priority over the agenda of figuring out who had cheated.

Sometimes working through a conflict if any of the ways or styles of resolution other than avoiding or directing are used; compromising, cooperating, and/or harmonizing may build our relationships. Some possible examples: I appreciate it that you are willing to go out to dinner with me and friends when you just wanted to veg. I promise I'll give you a veg out night together soon. I know it is going to take the whole world to address climate change. I'm willing for my country to take some fiscal responsibility to address needs of smaller, less developed, poorer ones as well as our own. I don't want to call this building a church, but I get that when you are talking to others that is often the word that makes sense to your family and friends. So, I don't care if you call it a church to them but when you are speaking here or for the congregation then could you please call it Tri-UU or something other than church.

To return to the myth of Ostara and her rabbit. The bird could have blamed Ostara for being late and gone off as a rabbit bitter with her change. Ostara could have blamed the bird for coming back to the forest before she woke, blaming the bird for its own troubles. Instead, Ostara did what she could, the bird rabbit accepted that, and they became inseparable friends. Sometimes getting through conflict is like getting through winter. It gifts us with something as glorious as spring.

Let us pray using words adapted from a prayer by Rev. Krista Taves, [The Deepest Prayers of Our Heart | WorshipWeb | UUA.org](#).

On this day we pray for those things we struggle with. For the conflicts we feel within ourselves and between us and those we love. We pray for guidance, compassion, for the opening of a path.

We pray for those things that give us joy and hope. For those things that we trust in, believe in, will sacrifice for. These are gifts of grace, ...we savor them, rejoice in them, (are) thankful for them....

May we, somehow, this morning be met at the point of our differences and also in the places that we are one...

May we always hold in our hearts gratitude for those (who) bless us with their presence, forgiveness for the ways we have turned from those blessings, and the willingness to open ourselves anew to this beautiful and hurting world.

In the name of truth, compassion and justice, this we pray.

Amen and blessed be.