

Wonder Box: Integrated, Meaningful Time for All Ages Rev. Christina Leone – cleone@uannapolis.org

STORY: *The Fairest and the Fork* by Rev. Christina Leone

This is a twist on the Hans Christian Anderson tale “The Princess and the Pea” in which the King (Martin Luther King Jr.) tests fairness (justice) by whether a person grows accustomed easily to discomfort. A fork was in the Wonder Box. A slideshow of images accompanied this story when presented at GA 2012.

A fork! This fork reminds me of a story... We all know the fairy tale about the Princess and the Pea, the story by Hans Christian Anderson that tells us of the Princess, whose royalty was proven when she couldn't sleep on a pea, even though it was covered by several mattresses.

This isn't that story... this one is about a *nearby* kingdom...

This is the story of the Fairest and the Fork.

Once upon a time, there was a **King**. He was the King in a land where some things were fair, and some things were not fair. He decided to hold a contest to see who would be a member of his royal court, to help make things fairer in his land. The King designed a test to find the fairest of them all, and a royal decree was sent throughout the land: ***“I'll open up my castle doors, and let you take a nap. Your dreams will tell me who to choose to join my royal court of fairness.”*** Little did the people know, this test had a twist... **The King had placed a fork beneath the mattress.**

The first person who knocked upon his castle door proclaimed, ***“I am the fairest of them all! I am sure my dreams will prove it!”*** Climbing upon the soft mattress, it became immediately clear that something was wrong. Tossing and turning, eventually the napper fell asleep, and dreamed of a fairer kingdom. Upon waking, the dreams of fairness were told to the King, who opened the door to the castle: ***“You are not the fairest of them all.”***

The second person who knocked upon his castle door proclaimed, ***“I am the fairest of them all! I am sure my dreams will prove it!”*** Climbing upon the soft mattress, it became immediately clear that something was wrong. Calling for servants to bring more mattresses, more blankets, more pillows, piled higher and higher, eventually, the napper fell asleep dreamed of a fairer kingdom. Upon waking, the dreams of fairness were told to the King, who opened the door to the castle: ***“You are not the fairest of them all.”***

The last person who knocked upon his castle door proclaimed, ***“I am the fairest of them all! I am sure my dreams will prove it!”*** Climbing upon the soft mattress, it became immediately clear that something was wrong. Worrying that the dreams wouldn't come, and the contest would be lost, tossing and turning, the napper spent the time lying awake, with the discomfort of the fork beneath the mattress. When the time was up, the King was told the story of an uncomfortable, restless time, a time spent worrying that the discomfort of a bad nap was nothing compared to the discomfort of an unfair kingdom. The King opened his arms and embraced the last person: ***“You, who knew discomfort and never grew accustomed to it. You, who knew discomfort and wondered about others beyond yourself... You are the fairest of them all!”***

STORY: *Why Oil and Water Don't Mix- A Lesson in Fable*, by Rev. Christina Leone

This cautionary legend is an original story, used to illustrate how permanently our differences can be magnified and used to separate us from each other, as in negative political rhetoric or hateful messaging in the guise of religion. Small vials of oil and water were in the Wonder Box, and kids helped me try to mix them before the story.

Once upon a time there was only one liquid. The liquid ran through all the rivers and streams, it oozed out of plants, and it fell from the sky. It nourished the animals of the land, and helped them stay healthy. The liquid had two purposes... One, to keep things wet and to help animals so they weren't thirsty or dehydrated. Also, to keep things smooth and slick, and to help animals grow big and have healthy skin and hair.

This liquid was very, very important.

There came a time, many, many, many years ago, that some droplets of the liquid began to believe that their purpose was the only purpose. Their way was the only way.

Those droplets whose job it was to keep the animals hydrated, so they wouldn't get thirsty... they began to believe they were better, smarter, and more useful than the other droplets... those stupid, slippery, slimy droplets.

Those droplets whose job it was to keep the animals growing healthy skin and hair... they began to believe **THEY** were better, smarter, and more useful than the other droplets, those weak, wet, droplets, you could see right through them!

They began to call each other names. The slippery droplets called out to the wet ones...

“WAT 'R YOU GOOD FOR? WHO KNOWS!”

The wet ones shot back, “OIL YOU ARE IS A SLIMY MESS!”

“WAT'R you good for?” “OIL you are is slimy!” “WAT'R!” “OIL!”

The shouting continued for a long time. The saddest of the droplets were those who were still friends. Those who didn't agree with the fighting. Who didn't like the name-calling. Why were they only focusing on the negative parts of the other droplets? Couldn't they see that both droplets were needed to keep the animals and plants healthy?

But eventually, even those droplets got pulled in to the fighting. They were called traitors, and wimps, if they didn't join in the name-calling. Eventually, the OIL droplets, as they had become known, got so puffed-up with their own self-importance that they began to hover higher, above the WATER droplets, as they had become known.

The WATER droplets were so convinced of their rightness, that they grew heavy with their own opinions, and sank down below the OIL droplets.

To this day, OIL and WATER cannot mix. They have forgotten how to talk to each other, or even how to listen. No matter how hard we shake them up, the damage has been done. They will remain separated forever. Let's learn a lesson from the story of OIL and WATER. Let's be sure we don't let our differences keep us from seeing the good in each other, and how we each have an important role to play in the world. ...Before it's too late...

STORY: *The Ostara Bunny (this is an amalgamation of several stories I have read from multiple sources on pagan/Germanic tales) -Rev. Christina Leone*
Duck/ Bunny optical illusion image in the Wonder Box

Call up child to open the Wonder Box.

What is today? (Easter!) What happens on Easter? (Easter Eggs!)

So today Rev. Fred is going to talk with the grownups about a man named Jesus, who lived a long, long time ago, and today is an important day for Christians... people who honor Jesus as a special teacher and miracle-worker. Jesus was sadly killed for his teachings. But three days after he died, his followers were so sad and they went to bury his body, and they found that instead he had risen from the dead and was alive again! Now... I don't know if that story actually happened. It might have. It might not have. But it's a powerful story, that has lived for a long, long time. That story is much like our duck/bunny here. It depends on how you look at it, and it might mean something different for you. That's what Rev. Fred is going to talk about today.

So where do we get our Easter bunny? It doesn't seem to have much to do with Jesus and his miraculous rising from the dead, does it?? . I think it has something to do with new life, like the new life we see around us in the springtime. Like seeing birds eggs, and little baby bunnies, and new leaves and flowers and grass. The story I'm about to tell you is a story that may or may not have actually happened. It might have. It might not have. But it's a powerful story, that has been forgotten... But you'll see how it, too, has lived on.

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago... There was a goddess. Her name was Ostara, or Eostre. She was the goddess of springtime. She gave birth to the sun, and helped it shine brighter every day in the sky. She was the bringer of warmth, and color. And one day, while she was going about her very important business, a little girl came to her. The little girl had found a small bird on the ground. Maybe it was a duck. But we'll call it a bird for the sake of our story. The ground was still very cold, because spring was not quite there... Ostara hadn't finished her work yet. The little bird was injured, and very cold... The little bird was dying. "Please!" the little girl pleaded with the goddess Ostara. "Please save this little bird." The goddess was annoyed. "Can't you see that I'm busy here?" But the girl was persistent. "Please, it won't take much. Just help bring the bird back to life!"

So, the goddess did the fastest magic she could do. She quickly turned the little bird into a rabbit. The rabbit was stronger, and could hop a long way, and had a big fluffy coat that could keep her warm, instead of light little feathers like before. So, happily, the bird-bunny hopped away.

Each springtime, that bunny remembers that it once was a dying bird. It remembers the gift that Ostara gave... And it remembers the little child who saved it's life. Each springtime, to return the favor, the bunny remembers that it once was a bird... And it lays eggs. It lays colorful, beautiful eggs to honor the colors of springtime that Ostara brings. It brings those eggs to the children to honor the child who saved it's life. ... Now, I don't know if this story is true in that it actually happened... But it's a powerful story, and it's a story about life, and gratitude, and those are important things to remember. Let's remember the power of life, and gratitude as we sing our children to Religious Exploration.

LESSON with STORY COMPONENTS: *Original Blessing*

Apple in the Wonder Box

Apples get a bad rap in stories.

Snow White is one that comes to mind. I know there are Celtic and Norse stories too, and the apple isn't always the best part of the story.

There's a really, really old story in the Jewish Bible, called Genesis, about a man named Adam and a woman named Eve, and a big tree in the middle of the garden where they lived. God told them they could eat the fruit off of any tree in the whole garden, but not that one in the middle. He told them if they ate that fruit, it would make them wise like God, and God didn't want that to happen, so he told them not to eat it. But a snake came along and talked to Eve. He convinced Eve to eat the fruit... It might have been an apple, but who knows... And she gave some to Adam and he ate it too. Boy, was God mad!! God punished them by making them leave the garden, and making them work to grow their own food, and making it hard to have babies. And, like all stories, this one grew and grew in it's re-telling, and Christians later believed that it was that act, that disobedience to god, that makes humans separate from god, and it's called Original Sin.

That's kind of a bummer story, isn't it?

Well, there were a group of Christians in the last few centuries... They called themselves the Universalists. Sound familiar? Like Unitarian UNIVERSALIST.

They noticed that there's not only one story in the book of Genesis. There are two stories about how the earth came to be the way it is, and how people came to be on the earth. And they noticed that people talked a lot about the story with Adam and Eve and the apple, but not much at all about the other story.

The other story goes like this...

God was in the darkness of the universe before there was anything else in it at all. No speck of dust, nothing. God spoke and there was light, and god separated it from the darkness. Each day, god did something else, he made the sun and moon, the stars, the earth, the land and water, the plants, the fish, the animals, and people. When it came time to make the people God said this... "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness," ...Who was god talking to? Who knows... smart people have been debating that for a long time...

...So God made humankind in God's image, and then blessed them.

Where's the disobedience? Where's the punishment?

This story is not about Separation from God or Original Sin... It's about being made in God's image, being like God, and having Original Blessing. That's what we as Unitarian Universalists believe. Whether you believe in the story or not, we believe that we are born with blessing, not sin. That we start out with good inside us, not bad.

That's why we say we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people. Inherent is a word that means "born with." We are all born good. And we can strive to see that goodness in each other, and work to make the world a better place.

Let's remember our Original Blessing as we sing our children to Religious Exploration.

LESSON: *Wonder Women of our Faith*

This lesson was told using a Wonder Woman comic (found at a local comic shop) in the Wonder Box. After introducing the idea of “Wonder Women of our Faith,” four other pictures were produced from the pulpit with images of those actual historical women. 5 volunteers were recruited to open the Wonder Box that day.

Who’s the big superhero right now? (Let people shout out their favorite) Iron Man? And before that we were celebrating Captain America, and the Incredible Hulk, and SpiderMan... Who else have the movies been about lately? (Superman, etc.)

You know what? I think someone is missing from all this... Let’s see if that missing hero is in our Wonder Box... Can I have... let’s see... FIVE volunteers to help me?

Look in the Wonder Box. → ***Wonder Woman.***

Wonder Woman!!! She is my favorite. Not least because her name starts with Wonder.

We need to talk more about the powerful WOMEN in our lives.

Not only the powerful Men.

Today is Mother’s Day. I know that each family is different... so it may not be a mother you are celebrating... But there are no doubt powerful women in your life...

Who’s your Wonder Woman?

Is it mom, or grandma, or a teacher, or aunt? Someone else?

Did you know that there are heroes in our church tradition... Women and men who were Unitarians and Universalists who made our world better, not by flying around but by working, writing, speaking, and telling the world what was wrong and how to fix it.

Today I’m going to tell the grownups about four Wonder Women in our Unitarian Universalist faith. I’d like you to meet them too!

Here are their pictures... Can you help me hold these?

Margaret Fuller- Unitarian Transcendentalist writer, thinker, feminist, journalist

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper- Free African-American poet, suffragist, abolitionist

Olympia Brown- First female ordained minister ever! Universalist, suffragist

Sophia Fahs- Groundbreaking religious educator, minister, Unitarian

As we sing our children to their Religious Exploration classes with the words in your order of service, I wonder if you’ll help me remember... The wonder women of our church, and the wonder women in our own lives...

LESSON: *Grace: Undeserved Gifts*

This lesson was used for a service about grace, which was being defined as those things we have but did not earn. How do we respond to grace? Money was in the Wonder Box (You need \$20 in actual one-dollar bills). Five volunteers were called up.

Imagine that you are all sitting at home, watching TV or enjoying the company of your family, and someone knocks on your door. You answer the door, and the person, without a word, gives you \$100. We'll pretend these \$1 bills are hundreds, ok?
(Hand out bills to each person. Each person has \$1.00)

How do you feel? Good? Shocked? Grateful?

Then the next day, it happens again. A knock at the door, and without a word, another \$100.
(Hand out bills again. Each person has \$2.00)

How do you feel? Really good? Confused? Worried? Awed?

It happens day, after day, after day... (Hand out bills again. Each person has \$3.00)

You start to lose that sense of awe and amazement at this gift.
(Hand out bills again. Each person has \$4.00)

It starts to be expected and you even start to work it into your monthly budget.
(Hand out bills again. Each person has \$5.00)

Then, one day, the person doesn't show up. How do you feel? Annoyed? Frustrated?

The next day, they don't show up. Now you're angry!
How dare they rob you of your daily Benjamin? Or, in this case, Washington?

This is what our lives are like. So many of the things in our lives. Our lives themselves, the place we are born, the water we drink, the moments of love and beauty... These are all gifts. They are undeserved... Not because we're bad people. Just because we didn't do anything to earn them. We are so accustomed to them, that we are angry when, even for a little while, they are taken from us. Instead, what if we recognized those undeserved gifts. Life, time with loved ones, health, or the money in your hands... What if we recognized them as grace? As gifts from God, from the Universe, that we didn't earn and have a responsibility to use wisely?

What do we do when we recognize grace? How do we respond?
Hopefully, with generosity. Hopefully, by making the most of the gifts.

As we sing the children to their Religious Exploration Classes, I wonder how are you going to use that money that was just given to you, freely and through nothing you did to earn it? You can keep it, hoard it, give it to someone who needs it, or donate it to the church. It's your choice....

LESSON: *Freedom & Responsibility*
Retractable Dog Leash in the Wonder Box

In the Call to Worship, we talked about Freedom. The title of that reading was called "I Call that Church Free." But it talks about being in covenant, being bound together, belonging to something larger than ourselves.

How can we be BOUND, and FREE?

Let's look inside our Wonder Box to see if it can help us understand this idea... Anybody have any ideas about what's in the wonder box? Let's wonder together! (OPEN)
This is a DOG LEASH for my dog Zoe.
I clip this part here to her collar around her neck, and then she and I are tied together!
We are BOUND, if you will.

But I'll tell you... Zoe gets SOOO excited when she sees this leash. Why do you think that is? Because she knows she's going to go for a walk... she's going to go outside and be FREE to wander, sniff, explore, way more than if she's just in our little back yard.
We are a very flexible faith. Just like Zoe's leash, we aren't rigid, and we allow a great deal of freedom in how you can believe and be in the world. Really, really flexible.

But just like Zoe's leash, we can't really go ANYWHERE we want.
In fact, those limits are what keep us, and others, safe.
If I just let Zoe off her leash, she might run away, get hurt, or cause a car accident as someone tried to avoid hitting her.

In our religion, and in our lives, we are connected to one another, and to our values, so that we don't hurt ourselves or other people. That's what it means that our 4th principle says we are FREE and RESPONSIBLE in our search for truth and meaning.

If what you believe to be true is good for you, and you want to explore that, we say, "Go ahead! By all means!" And we hope what you believe helps you in the world, makes you feel wonder, and awe, and love...

But if what you believe and how you act interferes with another person's search, or it belittles or hurts other people, that is too far. That, our covenant, our little flexible leash, won't allow. That's why we have our principles, and our covenants together... So we can free within the boundaries of our safe relationships.

So as we sing our children to their Religious Exploration classes with the song printed in the order of service, we wonder what it means to be free... and what it means to have limits... Let's sing them out...

Other Ideas and Examples:

- Laughter as the Best Medicine

- A bottle (safety sealed) of medicine in the Wonder Box
- Talk about stress, and taking ourselves less seriously
- Possible preventive medicine?
- Lead laughter meditation (just get people to laugh for a while!)

- The Three Blindfolded People and the Crab

- A crab (or lobster, armadillo, or other local animal) is in the Wonder Box
- Three people are selected in advance and “prepped”
- People are selected from the audience who didn’t grow up in your area
- They’re blindfolded
- A child opens the Wonder Box and reveals the crab (or other animal)
- The blindfolded people play dumb: “A what? What’s a crab?” “We’re not from around here!”
- They are each allowed to touch only one part
 - Claw: “Oh! A crab is a nutcracker!”
 - Back/shell: “Oh! A crab is a dinner plate!”
 - Leg: “Oh! A crab is a stick or twig!”
- They argue that they are right
- Allow them to remove the blindfold, see the crab in its entirety, and sit back down
- Like the story of the “Three Blind Men and the Elephant” this story is about our limitations in understanding God, or ultimate Reality. We only see a part, and become convinced we’re right. (The original tale is from multiple Eastern traditions, including Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism).

- How a Golf Swing is like Spiritual Practice

- A golf ball is in the Wonder Box. A golf club, tee, gloves, and hat are hidden in the pulpit or behind a curtain, revealed after the Wonder Box is opened
- The person describes how they learned their golf swing
- Pretend to practice on the ball (get dramatic!)
- Repetition, becomes muscle memory
- This is like our spiritual lives
- We have to practice. Eventually it becomes second-nature, makes us better “spiritual athletes” or just, more peaceful or self-aware human beings.

More Ideas and Examples:

- Candle-lighting and Love

- If I had a bowl of popcorn in the Wonder Box, and I started to share it with you, what would happen to the popcorn? It would go away, right?
- But I don't have popcorn in the Wonder Box. What do I have? → Candles!
- Let's light this candle off our chalice flame. (Put in a bowl of sand)
- Now, we have several more candles in here. I wonder what happens if I light this candle of the one we just lit. What will happen to the original flame? Will it get smaller? Will it get used up? Let's find out...
- Light the candle off the flame. Oh! They both get lit, but neither one got smaller!
- (Repeat with several candles, noting each time how the original flames keep their light and just share it so there is more light in the bowl than before).
- This is like love. Love is not like popcorn. Love is like a candle flame. Like our chalice flame. The more you spread love, the more you give it away, the bigger and brighter it becomes in the world. And you don't have any less of it!

RESOURCES:

Invest in collections of stories. Some of my favorites include:

After Aesop: Stories for All Ages by Aaron McEmrys, illustrated by Lisa Hedicker

Three Minute Tales: Stories from Around the World to Tell or Read When Time is Short
by Margaret Read MacDonald

What If Nobody Forgave? And Other Stories edited by Colleen M. McDonald

→ The *UUA Bookstore* offers lots of great options. Peruse their catalog.

Collect Children's Stories (good ones!) Some of my favorites include:

On the Day You Were Born by Debra Frasier - about the Earth, and your miraculous birth

Older than the Stars by Karen C. Fox, illustrated by Nancy David - about the Big Bang

One by Kathryn Ototshi (this one needs to have the illustrations projected) - about bullying

My Princess Boy by Cheryl Kilodavis, illustrated by Suzanne DeSimone - about gender identity

And Tango Makes Three, by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, illustrated by Henry Cole -

about same-gender-parented families

Ferdinand, by Munro Leaf, illustrated by Robert Lawson- about peace and being yourself

See the World as a Box of Wonder

Start to see interesting objects as metaphor.

Allow them to remind you of topics you've been wanting to share, or connections to sermons your preacher usually speaks about, or stories you love...

Google (or Bing, or Yahoo search) is your friend

If you're at a loss, do an internet search for stories or ideas.

Many times, I have Googled, "Stories about _____ for kids." It works!