

SPELLBOUND

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt
BUC, April 3, 2011

For a long time he looked at her in wonder, then he bent over and gave her a kiss. She opened her eyes and smiled. Then she sat up, quite awake. He gave her his hand and she stood up. Together they went down the narrow, winding stairs, along the corridors, down the main staircase, and into the Great Hall.

At that moment, the King and Queen awoke from their sleep. They were overjoyed to see their daughter awake and well, and they welcomed the Prince who had broken the spell. Then the lords and ladies in the Great Hall awakened, and the whole palace began to stir. In the kitchen, the fire began to burn and the meat began to cook. The maid began to pluck the chicken. The scullery boy ran off before the cook could box his ears. In the courtyard, the dogs awakened and began to bark. In the stables, the horses stirred, and the pigeons on the roof awakened and flew away. Around the palace, the high hedge vanished.

The palace had come to life again after its sleep of one hundred years. Everyone in the palace was both astonished and delighted. And a wonderful wedding feast was prepared.

It is, of course, the climax of the tale of Sleeping Beauty, when the long-awaited Prince comes and, with his kiss, breaks the spell which has kept everyone asleep for so long. For one hundred years, the entire palace, including animals and insects, had been spellbound.

Spellbound, the baby sucks her thumb and watches the patterns on the wall cast by mid-morning sun and leaves. Children play around her, and her mother tries to catch her attention with a toy. But she is oblivious to everything save the shifting light.

Spellbound, the boy watches a fast-breaking game of basketball. He would like to play himself, but he remembers the voices of parents and peers and teachers that have told him he is clumsy and slow. So he watches instead, unable to participate even when a replacement player is needed.

Spellbound, the teenager dreams of prom. Visions of flowers and formal wear and high romance dance through her head. But her parents have forbidden her to go, because she is too young and boys are unpredictable and proms are expensive and grades are the most important concern. She dreams on.

Spellbound, he orders another drink. Too many drinks already, always too many drinks, but he craves the wonderful release drinking brings. Drink transforms his inadequacy and loneliness into a far-distant memory, and replaces them with relaxation and peace. Willingly, he surrenders to the spell.

Spellbound, the nation contemplates its dismal state of affairs. Staggering deficits, environmental disasters, job losses, business bankruptcies, home foreclosures: clearly a new message and new leadership is needed. But anyone who tells hard truths or calls for sacrifices is promptly denounced, sure to lose in the next election, vilified by special interest groups, while those promising change without sacrifice, more of everything good, are praised. Spellbound, the nation keeps walking the same path of destruction.

Spellbound, the congregation prepares for its future. A time of transition is ending, new possibilities beckon. But attention seems still caught by old struggles, old fears,

memories of how things were done before. The images of what they might become are alluring, but would mean giving up the comforts of familiar ways, upsetting the usual assumptions of what a church should be and do. What if the wrong choices are made, then what? Unable to see clearly, fearful of conflict and failure, the congregation drifts.

Spellbound, the Israelite people wander through the desert wilderness, unable to find the Promised Land. They should have reached it long ago—the distance is not great—but their attention is always being caught by the cultures they meet, the new people and foreign religious practices. Or they fall into despair and longing for the simpler life they had as slaves in Egypt. Moses tried to urge them on, with threats of divine anger and alluring images of the land they are to inhabit. The Israelites, however, are tempted by less demanding lifestyles, an easier existence than that of the chosen people.

Spellbound: that strange, troubling condition wherein the usual and desirable movements of life are arrested, held captive by a powerful force. Spells were once the common stuff of fairy tales and myths; lovely heroines and handsome heroes forever seemed to be falling under a spell, with their life's progress halted for an indeterminate time. But spells are also the common stuff of everyday, flesh-and-blood modern existence; all about us, perhaps even including us, walk people whose lives are halted, derailed, caught in one phase long past the time they should have moved on. Once spellbound, we can no longer direct our destiny freely. Instead, we answer to the force which holds us captive, do its bidding, until we are set free—or we die.

Can you go about as you please, doing whatever appeals to you—or do you bump against restrictions every time you turn around? Has your life moved through the usual stages of development—or are you stuck somewhere along the way, unable to finish one

life task and move on, broaden out, to the next one? Do you direct your destiny, make the decisions—or do you feel helpless, victimized, excuse yourself with such disclaimers as “I can’t,” “I’m not free to,” “I have no choice,” “I’m too busy,” “It’s not possible”?

Are you free, or are you under a spell cast by some wicked witch or angry magician, some domineering parent or spouse or boss, some image of who you used to be or who you should be, some unknown and fearsome force?

Once upon a time there lived a king and queen who had all they wanted, except for one thing: a child. One day a frog prophesied to the queen that she would soon give birth. And within a year, as the frog foretold, the queen gave birth to a baby daughter. Her parents were so proud that they prepared a wonderful christening feast. Everyone in the kingdom was invited, as well as rulers of other kingdoms. Special guests at the feast included the good fairies, who would be godmothers to the child. There were thirteen fairies but one was old and had not been seen for many years. As the king had only twelve golden plates, he invited just twelve of the fairies to come to the feast. The old fairy was not included.

When the christening feast was over, the good fairies went up to the baby princess one by one to give her their magic gifts of beauty, love kindness, talent. When the fairies were finished with their gifts, the baby had been promised everything one could wish for.

At that moment, the thirteenth fairy, the old one, suddenly arrived, furious at being excluded from the festivities. Pointing to the baby, she cried in a loud voice, “When the princess is fifteen years old, she shall prick herself with a spindle and fall down dead.”

Everyone at the feast was horrified. The distraught king and queen desperately tried to

mitigate the old fairy's evil spell, but to no avail. At most, they succeeded in softening it a bit, so that the princess would not die, but sleep for one hundred years.

And on the princess' fifteenth birthday, despite her parents' attempts to protect her, it happened just as the old fairy said. She pricked her finger and fell into a deep sleep, and everyone in the palace slept with her. All life ceased, held in suspension for a hundred years under the spell.

For those of us who do not live in cotton candy palaces in mythical faraway lands, the threat of spells from angry fairies seems remote. Yet the truth is anyone of us can fall prey to spells from someone not invited to our celebrations. If a life that is spellbound is a life that has been arrested, derailed, thwarted in its forward movement toward maturity and wisdom, what could be the cause of such a condition?

Sometimes we have a spell cast on us by a parent transformed into an angry fairy or a threatening ogre by the stresses of life or inner psychological binds, so that our life's natural expansion into independence is limited. "You can't do that; you're too little, too young, too dumb"; "I know better than you, I'm older"; "I don't love you when you do that"; "You're on your own now, don't come to me for help"; "If you want that, then you're no son, no daughter of mine"; "You like him? You want to marry her? You must be kidding!": these are just a few of the better-known phrases from parental spells. Used at the proper moment, such phrases cast a spell over a child, whatever the age, whether infant or adult, and halt the child's growth to maturity. Other relatives, friends, partners, spouses can cast the same sort of spells with similar life-halting consequences.

And then there are spiritual spells that come over anyone of us, even people like us who tend to regard ourselves as having grown beyond any vulnerability to limiting

spiritual pronouncements. Listen to the description of spells from a spiritual perspective. The speaker is Moses; he is attempting to warn the Israelites once more against becoming spellbound and thereby missing life in the Promised Land:

“[This] commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. . . . [It] is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. . . . I call heaven and earth to witness this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live” (Deuteronomy 30:11-19).

“I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life.” Choose life: wouldn’t anyone? Is that not an obvious choice? Apparently not so obvious, or Moses would not have found it necessary to be so insistent. The Israelite people, so it seemed to Moses, were all too eager to choose death over life—not literal death, but spiritual death, a condition devoid of growth and creativity and insight, life under a spell with the spell cast by the forces of death. Centuries later, Sigmund Freud echoed Moses’ concern about our seeming preference for death over life when he suggested each of us is driven by a strong inclination to choose death, which he called *thanatos*, over life, to limit ourselves unnecessarily, to settle for life not at its fullest, to prefer not to grow. Today churches of all kinds everywhere, including our own, settings where one would expect to find abundant life and unceasing growth, are considering the choice of death over life as they struggle to find new ways of governing and worshipping and doing outreach and living in covenant that will end the steady decline in size and resources that is a sure sign of having chosen death, again and again. All around us and among us, wherever injustice is complacently accepted, wherever the marginalized and

poor are excluded from aid, wherever one group wields power over another, wherever power rather than love is the operative force, wherever one of us excludes another or accepts violent solutions to a conflict or exercises power to advance our own standing at another's expense, wherever we settle for life that is not full and free for ourselves or for others—then we choose death, we fall under death's spell.

And the solution? The story of Sleeping Beauty makes it clear that princes who come along at the ideal moment are the preferred antidote to spells. I have known my share of princes and princesses, as have you, who are marvelously adept at breaking spells; unfortunately, they come along too rarely to be consistently depended upon. God is another highly recommended spellbreaker, though somewhat unpredictable and often hard to find when in the throes of spiritual spells. In this congregation, gifted leaders, such as ministers and music directors, are held up as having the skills to life spells that limit the joy and life in our community; while that can happen, such leaders are likely to know only one kind of spell antidote that works only in specific circumstances and cannot be used repeatedly with any hope of success.

My own personal experience with spells has taught me that the most reliable antidote—the hardest to hold onto-- to a spell comes from within. Spells cast by external circumstances, by powerful figures of authority and learned limitations send me into extended detours from time to time, detours that grow longer while I wait for someone to come along and rescue me, lift the spell. Whenever I am able to shift my attention from looking outside myself to looking inside, to honestly assess my strengths and my shortcomings and to work with just that—not something someone else would bring me, not some magical new power, but the entirely good enough package that is me and my

own particular, unique life, then transformation happens. Playing the hand that is dealt me, accompanied by a willingness to ask others for help, does not immediately lift a spell, but over time lessens its intensity, pushes back death and allows more and more of life to enter in.

To lift the spell that BUC has been under during the extended time of transition, I believe we will need to become very clear about who we are and what we intend to do as a congregation. We must ask ourselves questions like, “If BUC ceased to exist, where would I go to church?” or “What would be lost to this community, to the UU tradition, to the world, if there were no longer a Birmingham Unitarian Church in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan?” When we can answer these questions, we will have our mission, a sense of the path we are called to walk, and the transition spell, where we wait for ministers and miracle workers to move us, will be ended.

Then the hedge of thorns that grew up around our building will be transformed into roses that invite people in and make it easier for us to go out into the surrounding community. And the party that we were throwing here, that has been in suspension so long, will resume with all the laughter and music and celebration that comes whenever and wherever people have chosen life and blessing for themselves, for those around them, for those who are yet to come.