

## SWEET DREAMS AND FLYING MACHINES

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt  
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I know it best as the “Good Luck/Bad Luck” story; you may know it by another name. As usually told, the story begins with a simple farmer who is out one day plowing his field to prepare for planting, when something startles his horse. The horse breaks free of the harness and runs away into the mountains. When neighbors hear of the incident, they come round to commiserate with the farmer, pitying his bad luck in losing his only plow horse. The farmer replies, “Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?”

The farmer has one grown son, and the son offers to go searching for the runaway horse. To everyone’s surprise, he returns in a few days not only bringing back the lost horse, but with a herd of horses following him, so that the farmer now has additional livestock. Word travels through the area, and soon neighbors are congratulating the farmer and his son on this unexpected turn of good luck. Again the farmer replies, “Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?”

While the farmer is off in town taking care of some errands, the son decides to try riding one of the horses that followed him home. Not a good idea: those were wild horses, never ridden before, never even had a bridle put on them, and the horse rebels, landing a couple of hard kicks that break two ribs, an elbow, and a leg. Neighbors try to help out by bringing food and picking up some of the chores. In response to their sympathetic shaking of heads about this latest bad luck, the farmer only says, “Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?”

There have been stories of tensions rising between kingdoms, so no one is really surprised when war is declared. The king sends his soldiers through all the villages to round up able-bodied men to fight. Many families lose husbands, fathers, sons. The farmer is spared because of his age and physical limitations—and his son is left behind because he has not yet healed from the injuries inflicted by the wild horse. As war continues, neighbors come by to share news, mourn their own losses, and envy the farmer his good luck in not losing his son to war. The farmer replies, “Good luck? Bad luck? Who ever really knows?”

Our culture gives us contradictory messages around the notion of luck and fortune. On the one hand, we do talk of luck when considering events that seem to just happen for no reason, with no discernible cause, usually with little or no input from us. If the events are happy ones, we term them good luck; if they hurt us, we bemoan it as bad luck. Either way, we tend to see ourselves as having no responsibility for experiences that we attribute to luck.

Yet from the time we were small, most of us heard a steady urging to take control of our lives, to go for what we want, to be competitive, to believe that we could be anything, have anything, if we worked hard enough. Luck was not part of this equation; instead, whatever happened to us was seen as the result of our efforts. If things did not go well, then it was our fault and we needed to work harder, work smarter; if things did go well, we could feel proud of what we accomplished.

But those two very different messages intertwine in our lives and get mixed up in the stories we tell of what happens to us, much like the traditional “Good luck/bad luck” story. Live long enough, and it can become difficult to discern where effort ends and

luck begins, where what happens is the result of my own doing and the result of forces beyond my control, mysterious and alternately benevolent and malicious. What happens to any one of us, and how we make sense of what happens, becomes less a matter of choice and rationality and more a matter of spirituality.

When I first walked into a Unitarian Universalist church, many years ago in Houston, I was astonished to be in the midst of a worshipping congregation where the primary emotional tone was not one of fear. By that time in my spiritual journey, I had sampled churches from all the usual denominations, experimented with a few nontraditional churches, had learned something from all of them, but invariably left because I could not affirm the beliefs expected of me. Not until I experienced my first UU service, however, had I realized that apart from the intellectual struggle traditional churches presented for me, I was also thoroughly conditioned to walk into a church and in short order feel anxious—about the future, about my less than perfect past, about my physical self, my body, about my capacity for making good choices. Whether the message was one of sin or salvation, God’s love or God’s punishment, I never left a church feeling glad I had been there, looking forward to returning.

But with the Unitarian Universalists, the experience was utterly different. The tone was optimistic, uplifting, reassuring, positive. Over and over I heard about our inherent worth, our capacity to do good, the promise of growth. It was an experience that I could not get enough of, an experience that for the first time left me feeling “saved,” even though salvation was never part of the message.

And I continue to cherish our spiritual path’s sunny qualities, our refusal to resort to fear tactics to get what we want, to draw people in. We offer a message of goodness and

hope, no strings attached, a message desperately needed in a world where fear and coercion are more often the approaches associated with religious institutions.

But “there is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night” (Camus). Perhaps it is a factor of moving into middle age, or the cumulative result of challenging life experiences, but I confess that these days our UU optimism sometimes grows thin for me. I wonder whether a relentlessly positive message can truly offer all that is needed in a spiritual journey, whether we are failing to take seriously the darker experiences that life invariably brings to all of us. How does our positive message work when a person is struggling with loss, or limitations, or death? To keep responding with upbeat ideas at such times begins to sound heartless to me.

Having grown up in a thoroughly sin-based tradition, I have no wish to return to a preoccupation with our shortcomings. But we do need some way to acknowledge them and then make something meaningful of them. If we never speak about our fears and our failures, we risk giving them undue power to shape us. One of the troubling trends I have seen in our UU congregations involves the “disappearance” of members when something bad happens in their lives. An illness, a loss, especially something hard to explain such as being laid off or losing a home to foreclosure, the break-up of a relationship, a child getting into trouble: these experiences intrude into a once smooth life, and a person who had previously been a regular church attender stops coming because he or she just cannot deal with all the smiling faces on a Sunday morning, the cheery greetings, the upbeat sermons and happy hymns. That our congregations are more comfortable dealing with positive perspectives is not surprising—but what do we offer the persons who come to church with a broken heart?

Our dilemma, I believe, is rooted in our inability to find ways to talk about experiences that defy our control, either because they happen outside the boundaries of what we can control, or because they thwart our efforts at control. To be caught up in events that one cannot control, to feel helpless; or to see a loss of control when things do not happen as anticipated or planned, to feel that one has failed to do the right thing: we lack the words to talk about these times in our lives, we may feel shame at the sense of helplessness or failure these times inspire, so some of us hide out until the worst is over, or pretend that everything is just fine, or deny that anything is wrong.

When was the last time you remember telling someone about a failure? When were you last part of a conversation here at BUC in which folks shared stories about their screw-ups, their mistakes? Can I listen to someone talk about his mistakes and not try to fix him? Can I listen to someone tell of her failure and resist that inner voice which say, “Well, I certainly would know better than to do something like that!” Can I actually see someone make a mistake and not pounce on it, quick to criticize and judge? Can I be humble enough to admit my own mistakes, to acknowledge that I do not know everything and am not always right?

As long as we persist in taking on the myth of our culture that tells us we are gods, capable of having everything and doing everything, as long as we remain unwilling to see our limits, to know that we are limited creatures, we will not be able to show much compassion, towards one another or towards ourselves. For compassion begins with the recognition that because I am limited, because you are limited, we are bound to fail. And those failures, while excruciatingly painful and often shameful, nonetheless break us open to a deeper place of gentleness and understanding. If I never fail, if I never

acknowledge failing, then I never have the chance to experience the help and support and forgiveness of others.

Now, another story, this time from Jewish midrash, a traditional commentary on scripture. You may remember an episode in the book of Exodus, part of the narrative about the Hebrew people's journey from slavery through wilderness to the Promised Land, when Moses was away on the mountain receiving the law, the Ten Commandments, directly from God. In his absence, the people grew so anxious that they needed a substitute, some way of containing the anxiety. So they constructed an idol, a golden calf, and began to worship it. Moses walks into this blasphemous scene, and is so angered by the people's actions that he smashes the stone tablets that had been written on by God.

Jewish commentary steps into the story at this point with an explanation of what happened to the smashed tablets. Though smashed, they were still considered holy, the product of God's own hand. Something holy, however broken it might be, should not simply be discarded on a trash heap. So the midrash envisions the repentant people, perhaps even assisted by a now calmer Moses, gathering up the shards of the broken tablets and putting them in a safe place. After Moses went back to get a replacement set of tablets from God, the new tablets were placed in a special container, the ark of the covenant, for travel through the desert and into the promised land—and alongside the shiny new tablets were scattered the broken bits from the first tablets. Both sets of tablets, the new ones and the broken ones, were eventually placed in the temple in Jerusalem. The new tablets contained the core teachings of Jewish law, considered holy

to be kept for all time. As for the broken pieces of the first tablets—those, too, became holy.

In a spiritual journey, in our life journey, we are likely to find many of our initial conclusions about God, about faith, about love, about community, about how things should work, shattered when we run head-on into the often harsh experiences with real people in the real world. But the breaking is not simply pain without meaning, not simply disillusionment. The broken pieces are part of the imperfection that is woven into all of creation. Life is not simply light and goodness, meaning is not simply light and good, but includes darkness as well. And that darkness has its own light, its own meaning.

Those of you who are of a certain age will recognize the phrase that is the title of this sermon as coming from a song by James Taylor, in which he laments the experience of having “sweet dreams and flying machines in pieces on the ground.” None of us makes it through life unscathed, however skillfully we maneuver, however well our parents raised us, however smart we may be, however much money we have earned and put away into investments, however faithful we may be in church attendance, in beliefs, in right living. None of us makes it through unscathed.

Yet the broken relationships, the broken dreams, the broken ideals, the broken pieces of our lives, are not merely instances of failure. That brokenness is holy. We gather it up, we gather ourselves up as best we can, and resume the journey—not to leave the brokenness behind, but to carry it with us into the Promised Land as symbols of learning and hope. As many spiritual traditions affirm, where there is brokenness there is also the possibility of redemption.

