

Easter/April Fool's Day, 2018
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Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship
Sydney NSW

LIFE AND LAUGHTER INVITE US TO BE STARTLED BY EASTER...

“The universes underpins and permits life,
of which we are a local manifestation”
(Paul R. Fleischman)

‘A pinch and a punch for the first of the month’.
‘Rabbits. Rabbits. Rabbits’.
Or if you are Irish: ‘White Rabbits’.

Today is a ‘first of the month’ day.
It is 1st April—April Fool’s Day—sometimes called All Fool’s Day.
One of the most light-hearted days of the year.
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Though many holidays have cloudy origins,
the history of April Fools’ Day is particularly blurry,
as there are several competing claims for the invention.

Some see it as a celebration related to the turn of the seasons,
while others believe it stems from the adoption of a new calendar.

Ancient cultures, including those of the Romans and Hindus,
celebrated New Year's Day on or around April 1.
It closely follows the vernal equinox (March 20/March 21)
or first day of spring in the Northern Hemisphere,
when Mother Nature fooled people with changing, unpredictable weather.

In medieval times, much of Europe celebrated March 25
—the Feast of Annunciation— as the beginning of the new year.
Then it appears a couple of changes took place...

One such change was...
In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII ordered a new calendar,
the Gregorian Calendar—named after himself—to replace the old Julian Calendar.
The new calendar called for New Year's Day to be celebrated on January 1.

The other related change...
In France, in 1564 Charles IX—that’s Charles IX of the St Bartholomew’s Day massacre—
Charles IX decreed that the new year would no longer begin on Easter,
as had been common throughout Christendom,
but rather on January 1.

Why? Because Easter was a lunar and therefore moveable date.
Things needed to be fixed. Made more stable!

Back to Charles IX... What was the St Bartholomew's Day massacre?
The systematic slaughter of 10,000 Huguenots.
I guess that can make things stable!
Mmm.

According to a popular explanation,
many people either refused to accept the new date,
or did not learn about it, and continued to celebrate New Year's Day on April 1.

Other people began to make fun of these so-called 'traditionalists',
sending them on 'fool's errands' or trying to trick them into believing something false.
Eventually, the practice spread throughout Europe.

Whatever its origins, April Fool's Day appears it received its name
from the custom of playing practical jokes on this day.

One such practical joke occurred in 1957.
The **BBC** current affairs programme *Panorama* hoaxed the nation
with a report about the annual spaghetti harvest.

The report showed Swiss farmers were experiencing a record spaghetti crop
and showed footage of people harvesting noodles from trees
and laying the strands out to dry.

Numerous viewers were fooled.
Among those hoaxed included the then-BBC Director General, Sir Ian Jacob.
Newspapers were split over whether this was a great joke
or a terrible hoax on the public.

Closer to home...

Last year, 2017, **Ikea** unveiled plans to launch the world's first non-stop flight
from Australia to Sweden, as part of its plans to launch a low-cost airline,
aptly named Flikea. "Using a fleet of five custom-fit aircraft," the media release said,
"the single-class airline will launch in 2019 and will use the five dimensions of
Democratic Design unique to IKEA to reduce aircraft weight and fuel requirements,
resulting in a dramatically reduced transit time, lower ticket price, and cutting out the
need for any stopovers."

Not to be outdone, **Virgin Australia** announced it was introducing
a world-first Canine Crew service.

"Hundreds of dogs have been specially trained at a new purpose built canine crew
training facility over the past few months in preparation for their introduction to service
on all Boeing 737, Airbus A330 and Boeing 777 aircraft in the Virgin Australia fleet."

Virgin even posted a video on social media showing the said Canine Crew in training.

And... **Gelatissimo** posted online they were launching the world's first artisan gelato
"that treats sensitive teeth. The company has worked with leading Australian dentists to
create a flavour that is clinically proven to relieve the symptoms caused by tooth
sensitivity."

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April Fool's Day is not a religious festival.

However, some traditions have tried to link the celebrations to medieval Christianity's *Feast of Fools*, which took place each January, particularly in France.

Popular belief holds that the *Feast of Fools* was

“a disorderly, even transgressive Christian festival, in which revelling clergy elected a burlesque Lord of Misrule, who presided over the divine office wearing animal masks or women's clothes, sang obscene songs, swung censers that gave off foul-smelling smoke, played dice at the altar, and otherwise parodied the liturgy of the church.”

Such belief—even fostered by *Encyclopaedia Britannica*—is highly exaggerate if not deliberately misreported.

According to more recent scholarly accounts,

“The Feast of Fools developed in the late 12th and early 13th centuries as an elaborate and orderly liturgy for the day of the Circumcision (1 January). Celebrating the biblical principle that 'God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise' (1 Cor. 1:27), the feast allowed low-ranking subdeacons to assume leadership roles in worship, usually reserved for the bishop or the cantor.” (*Max Harris*)

Yes, there were aspects of merriment, humour, and festivity ‘inside’ the church, even if the clergy weren't getting dressed up and rampaging through the ‘outside’ streets.

Although it is easy to imagine that some did occasionally get caught up in the madness going on in the streets.

After all, if some strange behaviour is banned, it's usually because someone tried it!

More importantly the reversal of power that they did indulge in

“was enough to make their leaders [at the Council of Basel in 1435] crack down on the tradition. People in power don't always have a sense of humor about their power being questioned...” (*Sarah Laskow*)

Which in itself shows just how important festivity is.

To celebrate is to live out “the universal assent to the world as a whole.” (*Josef Pieper*)

A special time when we affirm *all* of life by saying a joyous yes to *part* of life.

“...real celebration, rather than a retreat from the reality of injustice and evil, occurs most authentically where these negative realities are recognised and tackled, not where they are avoided. An antiseptic religion shies away from guilt and terror as well as eros and mirth. Its world becomes flat and anemic.” (*Harvey Cox*)

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An article which I still go to often,

and has in it echos to both April Fool's Day and Easter,

is former Harvard Divinity School theologian Harvey Cox's '*God's Last Laugh*'.

Published more that 30 years ago, one paragraph stands out:

“On the Christian calendar Easter is a feast of gladness. Grief turns into jubilation. Bitter defeat becomes exuberant hope. Even those who walk in the valley of the shadow of death know they need fear no evil. But, without a trace of irreverence, can we not also say there is something genuinely comic about Easter? Could it be God's hilarious

answer to those who sported and derided God's prophet, who blindfolded and buffeted him, and who continue to hound and deprive God's children today?" (*Harvey Cox*)

And again, near the end of the article, Cox suggests;

"Rightly rendered, the comic spirit transcends tragedy. It steps outside the probability tables and enables us to catch a fleeting glimpse of what might be, even of what—ultimately—already is."

Whether any of this aligns with your personal theology or not,
I want to suggest both Easter and April Fool's humour are about affirming life.

To be embraced by life, not scared of it.

In all its particularity.

Because life must be concretely practised.

It must be 'a way of life'.

Perhaps that 'way of life' could be practised, shaped by these thoughts:

- How do we care for each other interpersonally in ways which do not suffocate and oppress?
- How is the well-being of our neighbour pursued in the complex problem of global hunger and threats of international war?
- How are communities developed positively around respect and care for each person rather than around a common enemy?
- How are the systemic causes of non-love eliminated?

To live with these particularities coursing in our veins,
is to live in the spirit of the sage called Yeshu'a/Jesus.

Because Easter in particular is not just a collection of religious stories
about a so-called once-only event in the past.

Easter can and does happen every day when we are

"moved by sacred hope and convinced of the profound significance of each person as an infinitely precious being... [when] we dream and plan and implement positive change to enhance the well being of self, others, and the whole of creation... while also embracing and dealing with the reality of our imperfections and their impact on ourselves, others, and creation." (*Gretta Vosper*)

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Much ink and blood, sweat, and tears, have been spilt over
'what is' and 'what is not' considered to be the real Easter story.

And of course, what is meant by 'resurrection' - aka Jesus' resurrection.

As an aside... the trouble with resurrection is that
conservative forces within church orthodoxy have literalised it, narrowed and constricted it,

"turned it into a creedal belief," to quote Brandon Scott,

"and in the process have forfeited its great claim and hope." (*Brandon Scott*)

So... on this April Fool's Day 'cum Easter Day,

I invite you to consider, either for the first time, or yet again:

- Easter reminds us we are called into deeper community.
- Life invites us to be startled by Easter, not scared by it.
- Resurrection is not an escape from death, but an invitation to live life with zeal.
- We are not alone in this life of faith.

Life is renewable.

The human spirit is indomitable.

A loving, caring existence is stronger than death itself.

Easter is that 'standing up' moment when marigolds
and the laughter of the universe break through.

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