

Slaying the Dragon: what does it mean to be saved?
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough
April 3, 2011
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I've been thinking about dragons lately. This all began several weeks ago when I awoke from a dream which was still vivid in my mind, and I wrote it down because I didn't want to forget it. I won't bore you with all the details, but there is one scene that plays in my mind: I am squeezing water out of the roots of a plant, and as I do this, this little creature – a lizard-like creature – come crawling out of the roots, turns and gives me this "look." It's as I'm writing about this scene that I identify the creature as a baby dragon.

I don't know what the dream means, but it gave me the title for this sermon, so I thought I'd mention it.

A quick Wikipedia search on dragons shows that the dragon is an ancient symbol. It is closely related to the snake, and the symbolism of both varies greatly according to culture. The Greek word that "dragon" is derived from means either "that which sees" or possibly "that which gleams," which some believe refers to its reflective scales. Other references suggest it refers to the dragon's ability to see clearly. In the East, dragons are associated with wisdom. They are benevolent beings, watching over and protecting some kind of treasure. They are sometimes deities associated with bodies of water, revered as representatives of the primal forces of nature.

In the West, on the other hand, dragons are associated with evil, malevolent creatures that live in dark caves or underground. They are closely associated with Satan, and therefore, of course, with the snake that tempted Eve. During the medieval period, dragons were an ever-present danger, and every knight had to test his mettle by slaying a dragon. Usually the poor thing was baited to come out of hiding by tying a young virgin to a rock. After all, what could tempt evil incarnate more readily than the unblemished purity and goodness of a white-gowned virgin?

I am struck by these two images of dragon-hood: the benevolent dragon, the keeper of wisdom; and the malevolent dragon which has to be slain in order that the good can be kept from harm. In the first case, the good is there, available, but guarded and protected. In the second, the treasure has to be taken from the dragon in order to be useful. It is in the battle that the knight comes fully to life and is able to return to his community.

Each of these mythological creatures acts as the gateway to our subconscious minds, and each of these creatures provides a different perspective on what it means to be saved. What do these two images tell us about how two different cultures look at what it means to be saved?

Years ago in my feminist studies at Duke, I remember a conversation we had in class about the meaning of the snake in the Garden of Eden. Some feminist scholars believe that the snake in the story does not represent evil or Satan. The snake is the keeper of wisdom, and, of course, the snake decides to share this wisdom with the woman, but is interrupted. For some theologians, the story in the garden is not about a sin that needs to be atoned. It is instead a myth representing the victory of the Hebrew

tradition of the West over the wisdom tradition of the East. It is a new tradition unable to accept that salvation is already ours. It has to be somehow earned, or redeemed. It is a new tradition that cannot accept that wisdom is available to us without redemption. Adam and Eve are banished from the garden and our history of dragon-slaying begins.

What does it mean to be saved? The Hebrew word for “salvation” means literally “to make wide” or “to make sufficient.” Or even, “to make clear.” What do we do when we recognize that the road we have taken is not wide enough to sustain a healthy life? In our Western culture, to “make wide” means to slash and burn, to slay that which is in our path to what brings us wholeness.

I look back on my dream, and I wonder, why did I not slay that baby dragon? Isn't that what we're supposed to do? I'm still trying to figure out whether the dragon in my dream is a benevolent one with a kernel of wisdom that I need to pay attention to, or something that needs to be whacked, or at least tamed.

We do know that there are dragons, really evil ones, that need to be slain. John sang about several just now – the reasons Jesus wept. In a sermon written by the Rev. Marilyn Sewell, she suggests that we need to pay attention to these, and that, just like the heroes of old, sometimes we need to go on a quest in order to bring our goodness, our gifts into bold relief. She doesn't focus so much on the dragons out there, so much as the dragons *in here*. She says there are baby dragons and mamma and papa dragons that lurk inside us. The baby dragons are things like envy and idleness, overeating or overworking, overcharging your credit cards, or neglecting your friends.

Each of these baby dragons, she says, is spawned by the two parent dragons. The papa dragon is the one called No-Meaning. He tells you that life is just one long series of pains and losses and nothing has any real significance. He tells you your gifts lack originality... that everything you think or write has been thought or written before. The mama dragon is called No-Love. This dragon tells you that you are unworthy of real love. She says that you are never quite acceptable just as you are.

The good news of Unitarian Universalism is that these things are just not true. This is the benevolent wisdom we hold, that we are already whole... already saved.

But if you have either of these dragons breathing their fowl breath down your neck... welcome to Western culture! They do indeed need to be slain. And if you can get rid of them, you've got the whole nest and those baby dragons will disappear on their own. They may give you a dirty look, but they will be gone.

Maybe I don't need to know what the dragon was doing in my dream. Maybe I don't even need to know what the snake was doing in paradise. What I do need to know is, what does it mean to make wide? To make clear? What awakens, heals, comforts me... calls me to my fullest self?

Whatever you disrespect in yourself, stop doing it. Whatever you respect in yourself, nurture it. If you need help, ask. We will stand with you. May it be so, and blessed be.

Story quoted from *Wanting Wholeness, Being Broken: a Book of Sermons* by Marilyn Sewell. 1998. Portland: Fuller Press. pp 149-155.