

Putting On Our Blue Suede Shoes ©
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When Moses stood slack-jawed in front of the infamous burning bush – the one that was on fire but was not consumed by the flames – the enigmatic Yahweh was surprisingly clear and directive in his instructions. “Moses,” said Yahweh, “take off your shoes. The ground on which you stand is holy ground.” As my UU colleague Lynn Ungar asks, what are we to make of this? How do we interpret this instruction for modern day use? My approach to biblical texts is similar to my approach to dream interpretation. Assume that everything has meaning: every person, every object. So what do the shoes mean? My stream of consciousness thinking goes like this: Shoes. High heels. Pointy toes. Sacrificing comfort for style. Being lured by the temptation that a fantastic pair of shoes will make me look like somebody else. Knowing that our two feet are two different sizes but they only sell shoes in pairs that are the same size. Shoes put us in a bind.

This is a sermon about shoes; shoes as a metaphor for all of those things in our lives that are the wrong size or shape, that are too tight and constricting, that bind us with unreasonable and therefore unhealthy expectations. Shoes as the metaphor for those things that keep us from being our most expansive selves. Shoes as a metaphor for that which keeps us separate from each other and from the ultimate sources of meaning. Shoes – the one piece of clothing that is to be removed before meeting Yahweh face to face, as Moses learned.

But then there are the other shoes – all of the various blue suede shoes in our lives – the ones more emblematic of radical freedom and nonconformity and just plain fun. If the poet Hans Ostrom is right and God wears blue suede shoes, how are we to interpret Carl Perkins’ song, made famous by Elvis? How would you like

to meet Yahweh face to face, like Moses did, and come back with this message: You can do what you like, just stay off of my blue suede shoes? I'd be feeling really careful about where I put my feet for a while! Could a misplaced step get me in trouble with the divine? Even keep me out of heaven?

This isn't really a sermon about shoes. It is a sermon about heaven. Heaven. A place. Up there. Really nice. Little fluffy clouds, angels with harps, everybody happy. Forever and ever. Surveys of religious beliefs tell us that most Americans believe in heaven and hell. Believe that they are literal places where you go after you die – each person's ultimate destination determined by God the judge. Criteria for destination? Either pre-determined by some mysterious scheme or dictated by choices you have made.

I suspect the concept of heaven up there and hell below must come from the very ancient Hebrew cosmology that posited a flat earth sandwiched between two layers of chaos above and below. In Genesis 1, the Hebrew creation story, the Creator establishes boundaries that make the land we are to inhabit safe, stretching a huge canopy over the world so that the waters of chaos cannot engulf us. "And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. God called the dome sky." Then on to the next task, creating another boundary to keep chaos at bay below. "And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas." And it was good; indeed the arrangement still seems to work pretty well all these years later!

I imagine that this three-tiered view of the universe – of a safe place surrounded above and below by chaos under the control of some supreme being - gave rise to the idea of heaven above and hell below. But the ancient Hebrews

themselves did not believe in any kind of literal after-life, nor do practicing Jews today. Judaism is an ethical religion. Like Unitarian Universalists they believe that the demands of their faith are the demands of right living in the here and now.

Contemporary author Kathleen Norris, in her book called *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, suggests that salvation is simply seeking the right path. She relates a story of a friend who turns from a life of crime and violence, seeking salvation. Norris writes, “The Hebrew word for ‘salvation means literally ‘to make wide,’ or ‘to make sufficient.’ And our friend had recognized that the road he had taken was not wide enough to sustain his life; it was sufficient only as a way leading to death. I was glad to learn from *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* that ‘the primary meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words translated ‘salvation’ is non-religious.” The Hebrew words usually come from a military context, and refer to victory over evil or rescue from danger in this life. And in the gospels it is often physical healing that people seek from Jesus, relief from blindness, paralysis, leprosy. When he says to them that their faith has saved them, it is the Greek word for ‘made you well’ that is employed. It seems right to me that in so many instances both in the Hebrew Scriptures and the gospels salvation is described in physical terms, in terms of the here and now, because I believe that is how most of us first experience it.”

Somewhere along the way, the powers that be took this very simple and humanistic idea of salvation and changed it – made salvation into something much more literal and scary, and much more dependent upon those who held worldly power to determine. It is this concept of the afterlife that our Unitarian and Universalist forebears struggled with in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Universalists assailed the idea of harsh judgment and eternal damnation because their primary belief – that we are all the children of a powerful, loving, and forgiving God – did not allow for such a horrible fate for any person. Universalist

theology in the 19th century offered a welcome alternative to those who were looking for something less grim than the Calvinist idea of predetermination (which pretty much eliminated human reason and will from the salvation equation) or the fundamentalist preaching about the tortures and torments of the fiery literal hell (which pretty much eliminated hope from the salvation equation). Universalism had a very simple message: God loves us. All of us. God does not wish for anything for you except for your soul to be united eternally with Him. Or Her.

Those Universalists back then got into some pretty interesting debates about what universal salvation actually meant. Some chose what has come to be called the “death and glory” side. These folks believed that at the moment of death, all sins were forgiven, and your soul found itself immediately and eternally in right relation with God. The ‘death and glory’ school was ridiculed by others, called Restorationists, who believed in a limited time of punishment for sins, the length depending on just how depraved you had been. At the end of your sentence, you would be restored, united eternally with God. Nobody burned forever. However the details were to be worked out, this theology of universal salvation, the idea that we could all look forward to the final union of all souls with God, was so appealing to Americans that for a brief time in the latter half of the 19th century, the Universalist Church of America claimed the third largest membership of any American denomination.

Meanwhile, our Unitarian forebears were also busy putting their distinctive stamp on the salvation debate. Rejecting outright the idea of God as arbiter, they offered up the idea of salvation by character. Clearly influenced by the humanistic thinking of the Enlightenment, the Unitarians of the 19th century believed in the gradual but steady evolution of human thinking and behavior towards a point where the threat of an unpleasant afterlife would be irrelevant, as we would have achieved ‘salvation’ by the improvement of our characters. James Freeman Clark’s

famous professed confidence in ‘the progress of humankind onward and upward forever’ sums up that optimistic theology.

Although it hasn’t exactly worked out the way Clark envisioned, we 21st century Unitarian Universalists have managed to hold onto our optimistic view of human nature – placing our faith in our ability to learn, evolve, intuit towards that wider way – the sufficiently broad road that invokes the original Hebrew concept of salvation. The Unitarian side of our faith bequeathed to us a confidence in our ability to save ourselves. Rather than depending on either the grace of a benevolent God or the mood of the moment of an arbitrary and capricious God, we have opted for the ethical, self-guided path to salvation.

This path does not require the existence of an afterlife at all. It does away with the dualistic thinking that distinguishes between now and then, good and evil, God and humans, sacred and profane. It is the ultimate union of all souls with the holy – in this world, at this time.

Unfortunately, it is the 19th century orthodox Christian concept of the afterlife that pervades our culture even today. Many of you were probably exposed to it in your childhood religious homes – the fear of the fiery hell, the promise of the idyllic heaven, and all the complicated rules and regulations you had to follow in order to avoid the one and achieve the other. Even those of us who had no religious training as children absorbed these ideas and pictures from the larger culture. Even our children, being religiously educated in our own Religious Education program, will probably be able to tell you about that other heaven and hell, about angels and devils. Ask them. And then, please, have a conversation with them about your own beliefs and ideas. Give them an alternative to that frightening and ethically debilitating cultural construct.

Most of the folks who lay claim to that orthodox belief about heaven and hell and salvation would probably label Hans Ostrom’s picture of heaven

blasphemous. Emily Dickinson and Elvis Presley sharing a cabin at what is essentially an idyllic summer camp? Loving each other, though platonically? God in blue suede shoes? No way! That is worldly and profane and ridiculous besides. Yet at least one study demonstrated that the majority of people who say they believe in heaven, who say they believe it is a nice and even wonderful place, and who say they believe that they will go there for eternity, who believe that we who would entertain the idea of God in blue suede shoes are going straight to hell – these same people, when asked if they would like to die tomorrow (which presumably means going straight to heaven), say “No!” rather emphatically.

There is something compelling about the here and now, about this profane and beautiful and confusing world, about a worldly and vibrant God wearing blue suede shoes, a divinity present even in rock and roll music.

And that, my friends, is what we have to offer to people who are looking for a wider and more sufficient way as the path to salvation. This isn't a sermon about shoes or heaven after all, it is a sermon about how Unitarian Universalists can save the world by putting blue suede shoes on God.

Our good news is not that different from the news Jesus proclaimed: our faith can save us, our faith can make us well. How? Simply by empowering each of us to live as though we were well, as though we were whole, as though we were already good enough. Simply by reminding each of us to treat our neighbors as though they, too, were well, and whole, and good enough. By freeing us from the fears of judgment and damnation, by freeing us from the artificial dependencies on a divine authority figure who might or might not have our best interests at heart – by setting us free to be fully human, to make full use of our minds, hearts, and souls – we can live our lives in the secure knowledge that we are saved. And that means that every day there is cause for celebration, for thanksgiving, for astonishment.

The genius of Hans Ostrom's poem is not so much that he chooses such unlikely characters to convey his message, though it was certainly the pairing of Emily and Elvis that got my initial attention. The genius of his message is that he constructs a simple and elegant metaphor for a heaven that we can all aspire to – a place where the sacred and the profane are united in one existence. In his heaven, the distinction between culture (read elite and educated and upper-class and WASP) and popular culture (read swiveling hips and loud music and the ethnic diversity that gave birth to Elvis's music) – that distinction is erased.

In the broad and generous way that Ostrom writes of Elvis sings "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed" to the tune of *Love Me Tender*. You heard it here. It works. In this heaven, God wears blue suede shoes. The divine being understands and communicates in the vernacular. And wouldn't we expect God to do that? To appear in a burning bush to Moses made perfect sense. People in that age expected divinity in miraculous and mysterious disguise. Today, to get our attention, a burning bush wouldn't work at all. We would call 911 and have the fire extinguished, probably without ever noticing that the bush was not consumed in the burning. But blue suede shoes, a strong back beat, and music that brings us to our feet? Now, if I were God, that's how I'd appear if I wanted to get somebody's attention today.

The message of this God would be very much the same as the message to Moses. First, remove whatever it is that binds you and inhibits you from being all that you are meant to be. Then, listen carefully for the cries of the oppressed. Know that you, yes you, are called to minister to them. Know further that you, yes you, can harness the forces of justice and compassion to assist you in the work you are called to do. Know further that the God in blue suede shoes does not ask you to work in isolation; this is a call to community. There are no limits to the miracles you can work together. But, there are still boundaries between what is healthy and

life affirming and what is not. The creator in the ancient Hebrew story related in Genesis was a maker of boundaries. Boundaries bring clarity. Clarity is what keeps chaos at bay.

“So,” says my imaginary, blue suede shod God, “go for it with all your heart and soul! Make music! Be bold and creative! Be edgy! Bring the good news to as many people as will listen to you, using whatever medium is most likely to get their attention. Just . . . don’t . . . step on my blue suede shoes.”