

By Dennis Perkins
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Good morning. You heard Jon invite you all down for coffee, snacks and conversation later. This is the “service after the service.” Now, I promise you the snacks will be tasty. The coffee refreshing. The energy of friend sharing with friend will be palpable. And the conversation... Well, the conversation can lead anywhere, into avenues you might never expect. I’ll give you an example. A couple of months ago right after the service I headed down to Averill Parlors, looking forward to seeing everyone and chatting about the message, when a friend, I’ll call him a fellow wanderer/wonderer like myself came up to me and asked if I had ever heard of the story of Pandora and her box. Now, to be honest, I’ve actually forgotten what the question was apropos of, but the result was that over the next few weeks, I spent some time finding out more about the story of Pandora than I had at first recalled when my friend asked the question. Probably many of you know this story, but just as probably many of you don’t, since Greek and Roman legends are less a part of educational curricula than they were. So, in a moment, I’ll briefly recount the legend for you.

Before that, though, a question: did you know that science (our 4th UU Principle) and spirituality (our 3rd Principle) share the same parentage? Now, I don’t mean that the same person wrote or even that they from the same religious tradition. No, the ancestry goes back farther than that. Both were born over time out of the story. The story was what earlier—much earlier, thousands of years’ earlier—men used to make sense out of their surroundings, to make sense out of what seemed to happening to them and of why it might be happening. So, thousands of years ago on the Greek peninsula men noticed that the great forces on which their lives depended: the rising of the sun, the falling of the rain, the bounty of the land and the harvest of sea—those elemental forces could be capricious. So tribal and village story-tellers made up stories about these forces, so powerful that they gave these forces names and personalities: Zeus, Poseidon, etc. And incidentally, when men forget over time who the original story teller was, the story becomes a legend and robes itself as truth, Men also noticed that being human seemed to be a hazardous situation: men fought with one another and were killed, women died giving birth, a bone broken while hunting could lead to an early death and even if all these calamities were avoided, the toll of time itself lead to an aging body, infirmity and eventually death. Why? And so, a story.

In Greek legend the precursors to mankind were a race called the Titans. Though not gods, they were immortal and lived near the gods of Olympus. One of these Titans

tricked the chief god by stealing fire and in retribution Zeus devised his own trick. He created the first woman, Pandora, as a companion for the Titans. Zeus also gave Pandora a gift—a jar—filled with all the trials to which men could fall heir: war, sickness, hunger, aging, and death among others. Zeus told Pandora not to open the jar, yet knowing full well the curiosity with which he had endowed her guaranteed that the jar would be opened. And it was. Evil spilled into the world.

Incidentally, this story, first written down in about 700 BC—does this remind you of any other stories from around the same time that you might have read about? You've got it. In the book of Genesis, the same story is told about the first woman, Eve, and the forbidden apple from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Same result too.

But there is one more interesting element in the story of Pandora and her container: after the evil spirits had all escaped, there still remained one small spirit in the bottom of the jar. Smaller, quieter and more fragile than her riotous companions, but an immortal spirit nonetheless. The spirit of hope. What a remarkable addition to a legend of despair! Early men must have noticed this in themselves: that while their curiosity (their thirst for discovery), symbolized by Pandora, would again and again lead them into novel situations fraught with danger. Still, this risk-taking would also engender hope—the hope that all would eventually work out.

Which leads us to two more stories both of which are born of human hope. The first was written in Hebrew at almost the same time as the Pandora legend while the second, similar story was written 800 years later in more modern Greek. The first author was given the name of the prophet Isaiah and the second lived sometime between the first and second century AD and was named John. John lived and wrote on the Greek island of Patmos. His writing was later named the Book of Revelation in the Christian New Testament.

For thousands of years BC Jewish tribes had been attacked, conquered and subjugated by their giant neighbors to the west, Egypt, and to the east, Babylonia and in the intervals when there was respite from that, they fought among themselves. War, famine, disease, enslavement and death—the same as had escaped from the jar of Pandora. Would there ever be a relief from this? Would there ever be a time when their Hebrew Zeus, their God, Yahweh would declare an end to the suffering? Would there ever come a time when the spirit of hope which stirred, though often faintly, in their hearts, would be fulfilled? Their prophet Isaiah assured them it would.

There would, said Isaiah, come a time when the kingdom of David would be restored on earth, when all suffering would be taken away, when a new heaven would be built, making a new earth on which even “the wolf and the lamb would lie down together.” This was the heaven on earth for the Jews.

Later, in Revelation, John tells the same story, only more universally, still using some of thoughts of Isaiah: heaven—that place where Pandora’s escapees would be back in the jar; where the still free spirit of hope would be fulfilled; where Zeus would come down from Olympus; Yahweh would come from Mount Nebo and a new heaven—that land of milk and honey—would come down to a new earth, a “peaceable kingdom.” In John’s vision, even religion passes away, since God and the earth become one.

Stories—stories that preceded what we would call science, but which had been transformed—elaborately transformed—into religion. Nonetheless, there are two aspects which each of these heaven stories have in common. The first is that both describe human existence as becoming “effortless.” The daily struggles of living—of finding food, shelter, safety, good health—no longer exist, therefore no effort is required to satisfy them. The second is that this wonderful place lies somewhere in the future.

So, what (on earth!) does any of this have to do with us today, this morning, in a little UU church in Waterville, Maine? Two questions: Do you sense that those malicious spirits that escaped from Pandora’s jar are still loose in our world? That violence—personal, family, group and national still exist? That many go to bed hungry? That disease, whether from lack of healthcare, nutrition or addiction still wracks millions of human bodies and minds? That fear still begets suspicion while intolerance and ignorance fan the destructive flames of vengeance and false pride?

And can you not also feel that constant, though often faint, stirring of hope within you that there will come an amelioration of these sufferings, that there will come someday an end to war, to famine, to ignorance, to the fear of strangers and the fear of the future itself? Can you feel the hope that there can be at some point –to use phrases of antiquity—a new heaven here on a new earth? New Englander Emily Dickinson described that wonderfully persistent and surprising sensation this way:

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,

And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chilliest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.

I love that last line: “(Hope) never asked a crumb of me.” I was just born with it, an essential part of the human condition. Mankind doesn't have to earn hope or be “worthy” of it.

Isn't that really why we are here this morning—to share in that hope and work for that vision, a future that has been referred to as a “shining city on a hill” toward which all of mankind is drawn? In the “Four Quartets”, a sort of 20th-century version of the four gospels, T. S. Eliot, an heir of stout Unitarian lineage, says “History is now”, by which he means, I think, that heaven is now and here. Heaven is a place of miracles, but not of the kind that we've read about or heard about. Not of the kind where, as a German friend of mine describes in a saying he heard as a child: “Where you snap your finger, hold out your hand, and a plump roasted dove lands there, ready for the eating.” Not a place of fast miracles, but of slow ones: a world of peace secured through decades, even centuries, of cooperation and concession; a population of healthy people achieved through the sharing of medical care with all and the individual efforts of self-denial and education; and the health of the planet won because of an acceptance of shared responsibility and sacrifice. So, if heaven is indeed now and here, then clearly it is not effortless. And rather than a place where men, women, and children lie around listening to harp music and popping grapes into their mouths, heaven is the country of hope, and the work of the UU Principles in our lives is the journey we take toward the city on the hill.

So once again this year as you pick up your stewardship packets and fill out your cards give as generously as you are able. We are all in this together and every single day is the heavenly destination.