

ONCE MORE WITH THE DRAGONS, ALREADY!
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock
Shirley Kinney
May 23, 2004 (est)

Reading: Taken from “Dragon on a Pedestal” by Piers Anthony

Prologue—This story takes place in the magical kingdom of Xanth. In this land, almost every child has a mission—to discover his or her magical talent, for every child is born with a magical gift. It might be as simple as being able to throw yellow spots on a wall or as powerful as being able to control the wind.

It is very important to find your gift, for the child who never finds their gift will be exiled—to Fearsome Mundania.

Story—It was darkening now and the pleasant trees were turning ugly. She ran and tripped over a root that had lifted to snag her toe. She skinned her knees in the fall and got dirt in her face.

This was too much. Ivy sat in the path and wailed. She was, after all, only three years old.

Something heard the noise and came toward her, half slithering, half whomping through the underbrush. It had six legs—it steamed and it was hungry.

Ivy heard it and looked up in time to stare into the horrendous countenance of the Baby Gap Dragon.

The Baby Gap Dragon was only a fraction of its adult size and not much more than triple Ivy’s mass. But its primary features were intact—it had six legs, a sinuous tail, a set of fangs too small to fly yet, and a horrendous head full of teeth. Its scales were metallic, a rather pretty green with iridescent highlights, and the tip of its tail was knifelike.

The dragon eyes Ivy. It slavered. Its tongue slopped around its face, moistening its teeth and making them gleam. A jet of pure, clean, white steam issued from its throat. Big creatures were too much for it to tackle, but Ivy was little and succulent. It was ready to feast.

Ivy looked the dragon in the snout. She clapped her hands with girlish glee. “Oh, goody!” she exclaimed in delight. “A playmate!”

The dragon paused. This was not, it suspected, the proper reception according its kind by lone human beings of any size. It was geared to chase down a terrified and fleeing morsel, to steam it into a tasty, half-cooked state, to crunch it into digestible chunks soaked in delicious blood, to swallow the delectable pieces, then to burp afterward and take a pleasant nap. It was also geared to flee anything larger than itself or more

dangerous, such as a man with an enchanted sword. Creatures of approximately its own size and ferocity it would fight, establishing territorial prerogatives. But the dragon lacked experience and instincts relating to friendly receptions. What was the proper response?

Ivy walked up to it fearlessly. “My very own pet dragon!” she cried. “Green, like Mommy’s hair! To be my friend and companion and to guard me when I’m afraid.” She reached out to pat the ugly snout. “What a lovely creature!”

The dragon was not at all reassured. In fact, it found itself athwart a dilemma. Chase, flee or fight? None of the signals matched a pattern. No one had ever called it lovely before or patted it on the snout. So, it remained stationary, taking no action. A nervous waft of steam puffed from its throat.

“Nice steam!” Ivy said. “You’re a steamer, so your name is Stanley.” She had been told tales of strange, funny Mundania, where impossible things existed, such as metal machines that traveled on wheels and people who had no magic. She wasn’t good at comprehending impossibilities, but she had an apt memory for names. “Stanley Steamer,” she repeated. “You’re wonderful!”

Ivy was a creature of love. Her father, King Dor, placed her mother, Queen Irene, on a pedestal that no one else could see or feel. It was a special enchantment only he could perform. Ivy liked enchantment, so she had tried to develop her own invisible pedestal on which she could place her friends. She had, by diligent effort, perfected it, but had lacked a suitable friend for it. Smash the Ogre was really too big to fit on it. But now she had a suitable prospect, so she placed her new friend Stanley on it. He was the very best of all the little dragons she knew.

Stanley, like Ivy’s mother, was not entirely comfortable on that pedestal. But again, like her mother, he was not entirely displeased. There were things to be said for pedestals, and he was the right size for this one.

What made Ivy’s pedestal especially effective was her talent for enchantment. Whatever traits a person or creature possessed in her eyes, because more pronounced, durable and good. When she noted how well her mother grew plants, her mother had grown them even better. When Ivy met the friendly talkative Yak, he had become even more friendly and helpful. Now Ivy perceived how handsome and nice Stanley Steamer was.

Stanley suffered a period of disorientation, as was normal for creatures suddenly discovering themselves on pedestals.

He hadn’t known his name was Stanley.

He hadn’t known he was wonderful.

Certainly he hadn’t known he was lovely.

Then the full power of Ivy's magic power took over, for it was Magician-caliber sorcery, the kind few mortals comprehend, and the dragon became exactly what she perceived him to be—her handsome and loyal friend, playmate and pet.

This is a sermon written by Reverend Byrd Tetzlaff.

One of our popular UU gurus is Joseph Campbell. He often seems to be saying that myths are not just stories, but in reality they are powerful ways of understanding our world and our relationship to it, that each of us have myths within our own lives, and that to understand some of the power and meaning of our own myths is to give us tools which may help us in the very act of living.

Today, I am going to share with you the evolution of a myth in my own life and one particular application of it. I invite you to examine this myth to see if it could be useful in your own lives.

I was raised as a Christian Scientist. For whatever reason, that particular church did not work for me. It felt wrong and the older I got, the more it became an anathema to me. When I grew up, I left that tradition and began to search for a church I could live with.

I found a Unitarian Universalist church. There was not a soul in sight, and yet when I walked in, I had an overwhelming feeling of having come home, at last. In the years that have passed, I've heard many UU's report a similar experience—that feeling of coming home.

Actually, 80-90% of us come out of another religious tradition, a tradition that did not quite meet our needs, or perhaps one where we never felt at home.

Some of us arrive here complete with feelings of anger and frustration at our former church. I believe that such emotions can be a form of self-defense which I understand all too well.

For years after having left my family's church (which was Christian Science), if I found someone who reminded me of it, I tended to do strange things to that person. In fact, in my mind, I would turn them into a dragon. That, you see, is the core myth I offer you now: DRAGONS!

For years, I cringed at the very mention of Christian Science. When someone came up to me and started talking about Science & Health, the major textbook of Christian Science, I would pull back, and then I would notice that person beginning to sprout wings, and then green scales, and sometimes even long, white, sharp teeth. Right before my eyes, they would turn into a dragon, or, more accurately, I would turn them into one in my mind.

Having made this confession, I would like to add that there are times when I realize that I am the dragon. When someone has turned ME into a large green lizard. You see, around every UU church I have ever been in, I hear about dragons. And it's different in every congregation. Some churches have dragons called 'Theist', or 'Christian'. Others have dragons called 'Humanist' or 'Pagan'.

Actually, that's kinda nice. We must be doing something right if everyone has a chance now and then to breathe a little fire.

I have always been attracted to Humanistic-leaning congregations. But since I am a Geo-Pietistic Mystic, sometimes I can seem a dragon to others. And I don't much like the thought of being someone's dragon. I suspect that not too many folks relish the idea of being MY dragon, either. I'm not all too sure what to do about that.

I know that part of my terror comes from having started out in life as a child. And since I was a child, I was in no position to reject things that were being taught which were really anathema to who I was. And that was scary.

Some of it is still with me, some of those messages stay, no matter what. I still often do not trust my own senses, and once, when I was in great pain, I actually found myself saying the Scientific Statement of Being! (That's the Christian Science equivalent of crossing yourself.)

The knowledge that Christian Science is still a part of me can make me feel very vulnerable. So my defense mechanism was to deny the humanity of Christian Science, and instead turn it and its adherents into dragons.

Sadly, I am not alone in this peculiarity. We are a denomination of come-outers. Most of us come from other religious traditions and most of us bring dragons with us as a result. It might be mentioned that this religious tradition, too, can be a dragon. For those of us who do make dragons out of people or philosophies, we have chosen to do so. We have labeled them, but we really have only loaded ourselves down with the burden, for we carry our dragons with us.

And I think that a part of us knows that it's not really the other folks, but only a part of ourselves we don't like very much. We project our past experience onto someone else, thus making them into a dragon. And we carry many different kinds of dragons.

Besides former religious philosophies, there are dragons for each and every experience ever encountered by human beings. If we began to list them, we might be surprised at the number of them, even if we limit ourselves only to the dragons who watch with us now, here, in this room. We all carry dragons with us. It is how to learn to live with them that is the question.

In this part of the world, we take the idea of a dragon and look upon it as a terrifying, horrid beast, to be avoided at all costs. "Let sleeping dragons lie" seems to be a wise motto. Or perhaps, some few of us were taught to face them head on, to fight them, to vanquish them. Like Ivy's Baby Gap Dragon in the opening Faerie Tale, our options on what to do when faced with a dragon are limited: fight or flight, with the outside possibility of devouring the enemy, thus denying it.

In my experience, it has never yet worked, to deny that there is a dragon following you.

But in the part of the world we label “The Far East”, folks talk about their dragons quite differently. In both cultures, dragons are large beasts, probably reptiles, with wings and scales. But in the East, dragons are not villains, they just require being treated with great respect.

In the East, dragons hoard a great treasure, and dragons are wise, wiser than humans, sometimes wiser than the Gods, with an ancient wisdom now long forgotten by all but the dragons themselves. This is a lovely twist to the myth, the idea that we can turn our dragons into husbanders of great wisdom.

Perhaps, sometimes, it is true. Perhaps there is something, some treasure of wisdom that our personal dragons guard for us. Trying to see that treasure is an ongoing struggle, for eastern or western, a dragon is still a dragon and fearsome to behold. Looking beyond our dragons at the treasure still entails seeing the dragon. But I think there is a treasure there!

When we see dragons in specific religious philosophies, we miss the treasure. But some folks truly have the gift of seeing treasure. One couple I know consists of a Buddhist and a Christian. Instead of fighting about who is right, they go out of their ways to find something positive in each other’s messages, without abandoning their own truths. The Buddhist finds joy in the message of love found in Christianity, while the Christian finds practical wisdom in Buddhism.

That encourages me to look at philosophies that I might not otherwise consider, to see what gold might be found there. What is it that I can use?

I find it interesting that in some highly rationalistic UU churches where the very mention of the word “God” is practically a social faux pas, Christmas Eve services might be very well attended. Folks who deny stoutly that such a person as Jesus of Nazareth ever existed sometimes seem to have a need to have a celebration, an affirmation of whatever it is that Christmas has come to mean for them. Some folks talk as if this need they have makes them uncomfortable somehow. But that very need is a treasure! For that ‘need’ opens us up, makes us more tolerant and accepting of others.

Was there maybe one person in your religious past who made a positive difference for you, a member of the church, a minister or priest or nun, a Sunday School teacher perhaps? Someone who was and is meaningful? Then that is a part of your treasure.

Was there some tune or hymn that captured you? Some story that grabbed your imagination and which you incorporated into your personal mythology? A prayer or meditation? Then use it! And the trickiest treasure of all...is there some life-affirming part in that philosophy, anything at all, which now you can look at and say, “Yes, that is good.” For healing comes with acceptance.

No, of course I do not mean that any of us must accept the tenants of our childhood, merely that we must accept the fact that that is what we were raised in and that it played a profound part in making us who we are today.

Remember, we can choose to see what type of dragon it is. For instance, I personally do not believe in absolutes. I do not believe that any religious philosophy is all bad or all good, even ours. I trace this back directly to my own childhood, for my natal church taught that there was nothing but absolutes. I tried very hard to buy that as a child, but it never worked for me. So as I grew, I became aware that I would not accept the premise of anything being an absolute. Thus my past gave me something precious, for by rebelling against it, I came up with something that has served very well!

If nothing else, my dragons are a part of who I am and I would be someone else without them. So maybe dragons aren't always so bad. And maybe sometimes they are.

We poor mortals do not always have the wisdom we need, to get the wisdom we need, safely. And I admit to wondering about the ethics of blithely telling someone else to see their dragon with new eyes. (Other people's dragons are always less powerful than my own.) But I can bear witness that sometimes a few dragons, a very few, have become friends when I wasn't expecting it.

In the final analysis, I offer the opening Faerie Tale to our children, because whether or not we choose to see our dragons as friends, we do have the choice. We have so much more control over our dragons than we can ever imagine. So much more control, and so much less.