

Surprise!  
A Sermon offered at  
Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist in Palatine, IL  
by the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia  
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***Reading***

Words of Michael Lipson, from *Stairway to Surprise*

How often do your friends surprise you? Our children and our spouses, and we ourselves, react to most situations with deadening predictability. We read the newspaper and learn that everyone the world over is doing just what they tend to do. The students in the classroom, the pundits in the paper, nearly always make the same kind of point. And while the world's hot spots vary a bit, human aggression and self-interest, the destruction of the planet, seem constant. Somehow, though, and in spite of everything, we can't quite shake off the inkling of potential freshness. It is just barely possible that we could surprise the world. Humans are, ultimately, the least predictable element in all creation, since they are potential creators as well as creatures. Somewhere under all that ash, there still lurks the gleam of living fire. New creating depends on new seeing. So our first task in opening is to overcome the closedness in our perception, the fixed and finished quality of the world we imagine around us. For us to surprise the world, in other words, the world has to surprise us.

***Sermon***

There are good surprises and there are – well – surprises which aren't so good. Like this one – from second grade. My parents had taken me to the circus. At a certain point in the program a flock of clowns burst into view and occupied all three rings. In the ring closest to me, a gaggle of clumsy clowns had wheeled out a washer and dryer. They threw some laundry from the washer to the dryer and began to dance around when – with a sudden, very loud bang – the dryer exploded. The noise made one of the happy faced clowns leap into the air in great startlement and made me drop my ice cream in shock. Then the dryer door blew open and out flew the laundry, along with a large rubber chicken.

This was, to my seven-year-old eyes, really gross. It made a lasting and deep impression on me. The shocking nature of the event caused me to think about some things for the first time back then – not the least was the question why did people find pratfalls, big messes, and explosions entertaining? And why did people want to look at someone whose smile was painted on and who was defenseless to express other real feelings – like fear. The circus had interrupted my ordinary perceptions and expectations and startled me into a larger reflection. Not necessarily profound or life changing reflections – but, as it happened, I hid from clowns and avoided circuses until many years later -- I think 1990 or 91 when I went, a little reluctantly, to see Cirque du Soleil's Nouvelle Experience in Atlanta.

Cirque du Soleil was a surprise to be sure. When the house lights went down it was like falling asleep and then waking up in a world of pure magic. And all around were strange clown faces. I wish I could show you, in case you have never seen them – but imagine that your dreams could come alive and all the angels and demons that lurk in the subconscious could rise and dance and fly and sing in your presence. The world would be inside out – but then -- and just for that time – all the riches of the dream world would be there for you – all the stuff of which art and beauty and peace are made – all the things that haunt and halt us could be seen and swept away. The clowns of the Cirque du Soleil, while scary to look at on one level – were not demons but daemons. A daemon is the creative spark or the genius that lives and sometimes hides inside us. As the Cirque unfolded the daemons watched and seemed to urge the creative spirit to emerge – there before our eyes – and, I could feel, within me as well.

It was the essence of surprise. Surprise has power – it disrupts the drearily predictable flow of time and habit and for a moment anything might be possible. That sense of sometimes nerve-wracking possibility is always there – for me – on April first.

When April Fool's Day first occurred isn't known and it has many permutations. It's connected in 1582, in France, with the change of the calendar year from a seasonal cycle that ended at the end of March, was celebrated for eight days and then began again on April 1. In the reign of Charles the 9<sup>th</sup> the Gregorian calendar was introduced and New Year's began on January 1<sup>st</sup>. Unfortunately for some – the news didn't travel as fast it does now and so there were folks still celebrating the new year on April 1 – when – April Fools! It turned out that they had already missed the new year by three months.

Because of this, with the characteristic tenderness and mutual respect that humanity has shown over the millennia, the day became a time to harass and shame people – a time for ridiculing others.

But that isn't the only Fool's Day. There was an ancient Holiday called – and I almost hesitate to bring it up – the Festival of Hilaria – which was a Roman holiday celebrating the resurrection of the God Attis – which was celebrated on and around March 25<sup>th</sup>. Attis was a consort of the Goddess in the ancient world before the advent of Christianity. He lived for the cycle of the year – was born on December 25<sup>th</sup> and died and was resurrected in the springtime. There are some things I find too indelicate to mention here about Attis – but I can tell you that his holiday had an interesting resonance with a holiday celebrated around January first – called the feast of the circumcision – or the celebration, eight days after his birth, when Jesus was circumcised. For *some* reason, the Feast of Circumcision became an unusual quasi-religious holiday. It was considered a holiday of misrule in which, often in the church on January first or thereabouts, the subdeacons would get to perform the sacred functions and the priests had to sit it out as lesser folks did. Perhaps this happened not for “some reason” but because there had been a holiday earlier right around the time of the Feast of Attis or the Hilaria that was called the Saturnalia – and during the Saturnalia slaves were the equal of or the superiors to their masters -- all power was turned over – but just for one day. It was a holiday precious to folk in times when class and rank were lifelong assignments and most people were pretty close to powerless. So – in the church, January first was, early on, a day in which power was turned on its head and worship often included ridicule of the holy offices. Masks were donned and songs, dances, and general foolishness filled the church. Over time the two holidays – the one on January 1<sup>st</sup> and the one in April seem to have drawn together.

The foolery of these days is not mere foolery – but a time in which authority is challenged – the expected order is surprised and that which is socially sacred is profaned. Just as jesters could get away with saying hard truths in the courts of kings – the play of the feast of fools allowed the people for a moment to own the church – to take sacred power for themselves. It was, I suppose needless to say, frowned upon by Rome. It was, likely, too ready a reminder that God or the divine does not need a spokesperson – isn't revealed to a select and called few – but a gift inherent everywhere. I wonder how often people might come home from the Feast of Fools Service and feel themselves to be as holy as the priests.

Or, perhaps, with repetition, the power of the fool was lost and people settled in to their assigned roles. Perhaps a moment of surprise and fresh revelation wasn't enough to awaken people to their own ability to commune with the divine. So, there was, instead, an entertaining interlude, after which the people would return to their lives and not resist the social order.

I believe that there are powerful moments of surprise in which we can learn, grow, and be challenged. Or we can be merely entertained and anesthetized. I think the power and possibility lurks in us like a daemon and that's why – as the psychologist Michael Lipson said – we can't shake off that inkling of potential freshness. Why we really have lurking within us the gleam of living fire.

We love surprise because it points us to that spark – a spark we see easily in children - because, in our bones, we know surprise. That recognition that Laurie Anderson put to music so many years ago – has resonance – in so many ways – it's why I return to it again and again. As a child learns to walk the

attainment of balance is a surprise. But even for us, inside each step is the memory of the first steps' stumblings and that first moment of surprise when we defied gravity and stepped forward. Just forgotten in our conscious minds. And all the revelations that preceded it and followed – all those times in which our worlds were enlarged and our minds expanded with wonder – all those times of surprise. The first flower smelled – the first time the music came out right when we played an instrument – the first time the sound of an orchestra moved through our bodies and hearts – surprising and awakening us. All these surprises that suddenly made us aware of a new dimension of being – some small and some large. And all these moments of learning and discovery -- are made of surprise.

Surprise is the result of something – something new – but it is also the catalyst for new awareness. The thing that interrupts and introduces something entirely new to us.

To often we move from moment to moment, as Lipson said, with deadening predictability. There's a YouTube clip that I just saw – though it came out a couple of years ago – of a comedian named Louis CK being interviewed by Conan O'Brien. And he says at one point – maybe we need to go back to simpler times because everything is amazing right now and nobody's happy. He goes on to talk about the way that we used to use rotary phones -- waiting for the dial to tick, tick, tick through the numbers and now we get agitated when we drop calls with our totally rapid and wireless cell phones. And then he talks about our experience on airplanes. Now for me – planes have always been a weird mystery. Like I can't think too much about them when I am flying because -- well – I can't believe I am sitting you know – thirty thousand feet in the air in a giant pointed box of metal. For years I felt kind of the same way about cars. I sit down in Palatine, touch a pedal and two hours later I'm in Madison Wisconsin. Still sitting! Anyway – I've never understood why everyone doesn't walk around just going – whoa – I can't believe I just did that – again – that internal combustion thing! Anyway – No one's ever commented on this sort of thing in my earshot until I saw this clip of Louis CK. And he starts talking about how people come back from trips complaining about the delays and inconveniences and he asks – so – did you partake of the miracle of human flight?!...he says: “everybody on every plane should just constantly be going “OHMIGOD! Wow!” He then says – you're sitting in a chair ... in the sky.” We're so accustomed to things that we take for granted miracles.

But I didn't really want to talk about those kinds of things – but, still – the next time you are flying or talking on the phone or watching a movie – or even moving from here to Atherton Hall – just think briefly about all the wonders that have come together to make that miraculous event possible. I'm convinced that if we're able to be surprised again by the world – we would not only be happier – but we would be open to insights and inspirations capable of serving and changing the world. We would – as Lipson said – be enlivened to surprise the world right back.

It's when we're surprised that we open up. We sense new possibility – a possibility that everything has in it deeper wonder than we'd sensed a moment before. Perhaps the springtime is when we're most inclined to sense that barely veiled possibility as life stretches and vibrates from deep in the earth and emerges in cool greenness.

On the front cover of your order of service is a blurry copy of a piece of artwork by Kenneth Koskela, an artist I stumbled upon this summer. His work – of which I have only prints – brought alive for me a sense of the world that I think that we over look too often – that we're separated from miracles -- just as we're separated from disaster – by only the thinnest membrane. Somewhere just the other side of ordinary perception is not a different – or a better world – but this world – seen more fully – as the unlikely, amazing place we inhabit. In one of the pictures on the wall – entitled “it happened in the old music room” – the wall is bulging – the two people and their cat stare at the bulge and you can see them wondering what may happen next... In the piece on your front cover you can see that what can happen is something huge, unexpected that tears through the center of your world and brings in the wind and force of new awareness. Now I can't be certain that such a thing was what the artist intended – but if I were an artist I could hope for little more than reminding someone of the transcendent wonder around us all the time. Whether it rips through the room or simply fills it – it's there for us to perceive.

Sometimes it's the catastrophes that awaken us and sometimes it is falling in love that does it – and sometimes it's the interruption of our lives by some small or large wonder that opens our senses more fully so that we are – suddenly -- aware of the fullness of the world – instead of the flatness to which we are too often attuned.

As I listen to the news from Japan and worry about the Fukushima power plant, I am struck by the precariousness of life – all the lives swept away by the shaking earth and the cresting wave – and by all that waits – human, animal, and plant – for the outcome of the failure of the power station. It tears into my world and try as I might – I cannot separate my fate from the fate of those in Japan – or Iraq or Libya. Horror and wonder come in tandem – and both have their impact – and their intrinsic meaning. How many people have you known who faced what could have been terminal illness or faced huge challenges and, rather than being crushed by these things somehow became more beautiful, stronger, more present? We are each faced with those choices – whether we are visibly challenged or think we are not. And those choices are there – bulging around us every moment.

We wait, like people at a bus stop, for something to pick us up and transport us to wonder – we wait for surprise – for the unexpected to deliver us to new insight or fuller life.

In a poem written for Merlin the Magician Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote Pass in, pass in, the angels say,  
In to the upper doors;  
Nor count compartments of the floors,  
But mount to Paradise  
By the stairway of surprise.

There are scores of charlatans cashing in on our hunger for surprise to give us paradise. People go to movies that make the skin crawl – I believe we do this out of the attraction for the aliveness it gives us. I heard yesterday on NPR that people watch the overblown histrionics of reality television and then crave lives that are overblown enough to measure up to the caricatures they see – hungering for something – I think something far more powerful that could burst through the wall and bring them reality. Some folks ride roller coasters and thrill to the moment – or so I hear – when a scream rises out of a delight that borders on terror as the next sudden drop appears. We want something to surprise us.

In the Tarot Deck the first card is the card with the Infinity Symbol on it – the Fool. He is walking along not paying much attention. If you look at him you'll see that he is headed over a cliff – all unlooking. Is the fall going to be deadly or a step into flight? Would it be better for the fool to look downward and keep a close watch on his feet? He is the card of possibility – the sort of possibility that only occurs when we are surprised – not dropped perhaps, but when we are open to the next step with the wonder and newness of a child or of the practiced openness of the enlightened. The Fool is innocence and new beginning, the first step, the new step – into what may, in fact, become flight. It is the card of surprise, unexpected developments. In truth – every moment is an unexpected development – every step a miracle of triumphant balance and of possibility.

It can take a surprise – a disruption – to snap us out of routine and into transcendence. It certainly is a disruption to pay heed to miraculous transcendence right in the marrow of the world. It disrupts business as usual, makes us ask inconvenient questions, stop for love, stand for love, live in wonder and insist that the wonder be recognized. It's one of the reasons that you come here – for this precious hour of disruption and – with any luck – something will surprise you into deeper perception and greater transcendence. Or perhaps incandescence is a better word than transcendence – let us be surprised into incandescence -- a state in which the light that shines out of the world is perceived as radiating everywhere. Perhaps as you experience surprise and notice it in every moment – you can become a sacred disruption yourself – a surprise to yourself and others as you burst through ordinary perception to honor and to live in that radiance – that incandescence which is the birthright of every living thing.