

The Lucky Life
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OPENING READING:

Preparing for the New Year: Traditions from China

Tomorrow, January 26th, marks the start of the Chinese New Year, the year 4707, the Year of the Ox. Chinese New Year celebrations will take place in cities around the globe, along with a host of traditions and rituals that accompany this important festival. It's a 15-day holiday, ending with the Lantern Festival on the night of the first full moon. It is a time for debts to be settled, houses to be cleaned, new clothes to be bought and families to gather around a feast of special foods, like Lucky Dumplings, tangerines, long noodles, and special sweet, sticky rice cakes.

Decorations, like some of the ones you see here, are hung inside and outside homes and businesses. The character for good fortune, "Fu," which is printed on the cover of your order of service, appears everywhere. Red is considered the most auspicious of colors, and signifies good luck because of its association with fire and the sun, with lifeblood and energy, and its power to drive demons away. Fresh flowers symbolize the unfolding hope of the New Year, and firecrackers are said to frighten away any evil spirits that might threaten your chances for a healthy and happy New Year. Children and unmarried youths are given red envelopes of "Lucky Money," usually in even amounts -- however, never the number 4! The word for "4" sounds similar to the word for "death," making it among the unluckiest of numbers.

During this time, it is only natural to think about the changes you hope the New Year brings. In "The Good Luck Life," one of the sources I used today, the author is careful to make a distinction between making "wishes" and making "resolutions" in the New Year. If the wishes you make are not granted, well, it was the gods who denied you who were at fault. However, if a resolution fails, you have no one to blame but yourself. And so, prophetic wishes for happiness, prosperity and fortune are written on "Lucky Papers" and hung inside and outside the home.

Jason Liu tells this story about the custom of hanging two-line poems, called spring couplets, for the New Year:

During Chinese New Year, Chinese families follow a tradition of pasting New Year scrolls, called *duilian*, or spring couplets, around their front doors and other doors inside their homes. The content of traditional *duilian* poetry expresses a person's spiritual aspirations, feelings and thoughts of hope, faith, and respect towards the divine. Others are prayers for good health and good luck for the coming year.

When I was little, during the Cultural Revolution, my father, who was a professor, was labeled as an “intellectual,” and as punishment we were sent to live in the countryside in the northeast of China. The villagers there did not have much education, so it was hard for everyone to get help creating their New Year duilian. ... [P]eople would flock to our house, bringing their red paper, to request my father to write their duilian for them.

From the time I was 7 years old, I would assist my father in creating duilian. Every time I wrote a duilian, I felt as if it became a part of my being. It woke in me reverence for God or Buddha and values of goodness, as well as a love for poetry and ancient Chinese tradition.

I always enjoyed watching the villagers’ faces light up when they came to pick up their scrolls. I think pasting the duilian around their doors put warmth into their hearts. It chased away the evil spirits, and also made winter seem less cold, as the New Year had finally arrived -- and with it the beginning of spring and all good things.¹

Honoring our past/Wishes for our future

In many Chinese homes, there is a shrine dedicated to the ancestors of the family. During the New Year celebrations, one of the first things that must be done is paying proper respects to your ancestors. This includes offerings of food and sweets, tea and wine and burning incense.

To quote one source, “One has to pay respect and homage to the ancestors, honour the deeds and memories of the deceased, since the ancestors are the ones who have brought the descendants into the world, nourished them and prepared the conditions under which the descendants grew up -- hence ancestor veneration is a pay back of spiritual debts.”

I have been very mindful this week of the debt owed to the men and women who made the recent presidential inauguration possible. The holiday dedicated to Martin Luther King Jr., celebrated last Monday, coincided with the inauguration of President Barack Obama, and those two days in conjunction made for an emotional and thought-provoking time. The many hopes and wishes I have for our country and our world rise up within me, and many of you have shared with me a range of reactions to this past week. Whether with cautious optimism, unbridled joy, or simply a recognition of the historic nature of the moment, I think almost everyone senses that we are entering a new time in the life of our young nation.

Our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors played no small part in the realization of this vision of equal rights and justice for all people, and so I would like to honor some of them here today. Theodore Parker, the Unitarian who preached with a pistol in the pulpit

¹ Liu, Jason. “Writing Chinese New Year Poetry: Recalling childhood memories of an ancient tradition” from *Epoch Times*, Feb. 16, 2007. <http://en.epochtimes.com/news/7-2-16/51783.html>.

lest someone try to arrest the members of his congregation who had run away from slavery. Frances Harper, a free-born black woman who attended a Unitarian church in Philadelphia and worked for abolition and equal rights for women. Julia Ward Howe, who wrote “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” A. Powell Davies, former minister of this church and a staunch civil rights advocate. And of course, Martin Luther King Jr., who was not a Unitarian but has many connections to our movement, including his famous re-phrasing of Theodore Parker, that the moral arc of the universe is long, but bends towards justice. There are many others who could be included here, these being just a few of our ancestors who struggled for equality. This past week, it felt like that arc of the universe, that long, long journey, bent just a little more toward the vision of peace and justice.

As I light this incense in silence, I ask you to think about your hopes for this country in this New Year. Offer up your wishes for the future, and your meditations on the spiritual debts of the past.

(Silence)

As the smoke rises and dissipates, it carries with it our gratitude to those who have come before us, the ancestors who made our lives possible; it carries our many and diverse hopes for the future, and the vision of a peaceful world that we share.

SERMON:

The Lucky Life

I would like to start out with a famous question: “Do you feel lucky?”

Now, I mean this in a larger sense than I think Clint Eastwood’s Dirty Harry did. I mean, do you consider yourself an overall “lucky” person? Do things just “work out” for you? Do you find parking right in front of the restaurant, does your paycheck arrive the day before the rent is due, do you get bumped up to first class on an overbooked flight? Not always, but often enough that you feel “lucky”? I want you to find a firm answer to this in your head.

If you look at the front of your order of service, some of you will find a small gold sticker. Who has these stickers? Will you raise your hands? It’s your lucky day! Dan, will you give each of these fine people one of these candies? They are Lucky Candies, wrapped in red and gold, flavored like sweet strawberries. You may eat them now, or you may save them for tomorrow, the first day of the New Year -- sweet candies for a sweet year, an auspicious start for sure.

The rest of you, well, you’re not so lucky today.

Now, a completely informal and unscientific survey: How many of you who received a gold sticker answered “Yes” to the question “Am I a lucky person?”? How many of the rest of you answered “Yes” to that question?

Well, what happened?

Ah, it’s just the luck of the draw -- unpredictable, quirky, mysterious, mischievous “Luck.”

There’s a famous story from the Han dynasty about the unpredictable nature of luck. It’s from a book called “Huai Nan Zi,” a philosophical work from 2nd-century China. The story goes something like this:

There once was an old man who lived at the northern border of the state. He was very skilled at raising horses. One day, he discovered that his favorite horse had disappeared, probably crossing over the border into the next state. His neighbors felt very sorry for his bad luck, but the old man just said, “Who knows if this will turn into a blessing?”

A few months later, the missing horse suddenly returned, bringing back a fine new horse with it. His neighbors came over to congratulate the old man on his good luck. But the man just said, “Who knows if this will turn into a disaster?”

His son loved riding the fine new horse, and one day, out in the fields, he fell off the horse, broke his legs, and was crippled. The neighbors came to comfort the old man and the boy, but the man shrugged and replied, “Who knows if this will turn into a blessing?”

One year later, the neighboring state invaded, and all the young and strong men were drafted to fight the war -- nine out of every 10 of those young men ended up being killed. The son, being crippled, stayed home and his life was spared.

Blessings can become disasters, which can then transform into blessings. The change is never ending, and its mystery is forever unrevealing.²

What this story seems to be saying to me is that teasing apart the intricacies of “Luck” is difficult. “The mystery is forever unrevealing,” says this ancient text, and we only fool ourselves when we think we know what life has in store for us.

Oh, but we’re human beings, not content to simply let things happen to us, to simply let the universe unfold in inscrutable mystery. There is a famous observation that humans are “meaning-making animals,” that the very nature of our humanity is defined by our predisposition to find meaning in a universe that, ultimately, may have no intrinsic meaning to find. We seek ways to understand the twists of fate that come our way, and look for connections between events that can help us control the wild ride of life. We

² Source: “Lessons in Human Life” in “Huai Nan Zi,” compiled by Liu An (179 - 122 B.C.) in the Western Han Dynasty. <http://en.epochtimes.com/news/6-4-12/40347.html>.

tease out the pattern, and then we do our best to follow the threads that might lead us to good fortune. For some, it is a pattern created by God or gods that send signs filtering down through the fabric. For some, it is a pattern described by scientific law, knowable through our human faculties of reason and experience. For others, it is a constant ebb and flow of energy, action and reaction, and by plucking the right strands, we can weave order out of chaos, separating the good luck from the bad.

Reading through the activities that take place before and during the Chinese New Year celebration, it seems that the vast majority of them center on preparing the way for luck. Plucking the right strands to influence the pattern of our life in the coming year. During the 15 days of the New Year celebrations, red, the most auspicious of colors, is abundant. Cleaning and sweeping is done in preparation, but not on New Year's Day itself, lest you sweep away any of the good luck that is coming in. For the same reason, hair goes unwashed and uncut on New Year's Day, fish is served with head and tail intact, and brand new clothes are worn. Everything -- from the food served to the flowers chosen to the golden dragons that dance down the streets -- is undertaken, in part, because it is setting the stage for an auspicious New Year.

As an outsider to this tradition, I approach this discussion carefully. There is only so much I can learn about the nuances of meaning in these symbols through the layers of translation and cultural interpretation. Any knowledge I have about the Chinese New Year has been distilled and presented to me in a few chapters of a well-written book, augmented by careful internet research and my own limited experience of Chinese New Year celebrations. I am well aware that Chinese culture in America is often interpreted through the entertaining but insubstantial media of fortune cookies and placemats with the Chinese zodiac printed on them. And so I imagine that the meaning of inviting "luck" into your life through these rituals is much more complex than it might seem at first.

Even the English word "luck," on its own, is a bit vague. Is it good or bad? Is it the same thing as chance? Is it fortune? A pre-ordained unfolding or a random coincidence? Many traditional Christian theologians (in the vein of Calvin) would argue that there is no such thing as luck at all, given the nature of an omniscient and omnipotent God who has a predestined plan for humanity.

I think there are several ways that we, as Unitarian Universalists, react when we encounter religious rituals that are designed to influence the flow of luck into our lives. Especially if those rituals come from outside the familiar Protestant roots of our history. At our best, we appreciate the cultural richness, aesthetic beauty and underlying wisdom that are embodied in these customs. UUs have a long history of inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue, and we cast a wide net within these walls. We can relate to the human impulse to whisper our hopes and dreams to our ancestors, to ask for help from powers that are larger than our own small sphere of influence, and to participate in events that root us in a meaningful relationship with our family and our culture. Yes, we say, new clothes for a New Year. That speaks to me, too.

At the same time, there is often a small voice that pipes up. “But...,” it says, “but ... I don’t really *believe* it.” We may be afraid to speak this thought out loud, for fear of giving offense. We may keep this thought to ourselves because the cultural value of ritual outweighs the need to believe in the metaphysical implications. And yet, for many UUs, this underlying disbelief in the ability to manipulate “fortune” is the voice of reason, of “objective truth,” our love of science and realism that whispers “superstition” when confronted with tales of sweeping away luck with a broom. It is part of *our* religious tradition to approach claims of the supernatural with healthy skepticism and a big dose of critical thinking skills. While we might find the cultural aspects meaningful, and enjoy the colorful pageant and the delicious dumplings, the underlying conviction that these actions are *really, truly responsible* for bringing about good luck escapes many of us. They are symbols, intriguing as they may be, and I suspect that many UUs might agree with an assertion made in a book titled “Fooled by Randomness” by Nassim Taleb: “Symbolism is the child of our inability and unwillingness to accept randomness; we give meaning to all manner of shapes; we detect human figures in inkblots.”³ Taleb might assert that all these symbolic actions are really attempts to escape the random nature of things. To control what the old man in the first story knew was uncontrollable -- the vagaries of fate.

Taleb’s focus in his book is more about the role of chance in our financial markets, but his observation about our desire to control what is essentially outside our ability to manipulate is an interesting one. Taleb thinks that if we only admitted how often randomness is the root of our good fortune, we would be in much better shape.

However, I have not met one single person who does not have some irrational quirk, some tiny action that they do to keep bad luck away, or to influence the outcome of a seemingly un-influencible event. Do you have a little ritual, a private sacrifice to the good luck gods? How many people in this country have a lucky item of clothing that they wear only at ball games? Baseball players are famous for not washing any item of clothing when they are on a winning streak. It may seem ridiculous, yet we pay them millions of dollars to put that luck to work on game day. I have rarely met an actor who will utter the name “Macbeth” inside a theater lest bad luck come crashing down on them. Buildings omit the 13th floor. I almost never open an umbrella inside. Why? I don’t really know -- something about bad luck. Out of curiosity, I googled “Good luck charms,” and came back with 1,180,000 hits. Judging by the dollar signs attached to many of these links, there is no shortage of people willing to spend a little money to get some luck in return.

Now, many of us don’t *really* think that wearing our lucky socks on game day will affect how the pitcher throws, but we do it anyway. In some ways, luck is the best of both worlds. As I mentioned earlier, the writer of “Good Luck Life” observes that a person cannot be held responsible for a wish that doesn’t come true. The team may lose despite your lucky socks, but that’s not your fault. And if they win, so much the better! Inviting luck into your life in this way is more about a *feeling* of being lucky, rather than

³ Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. “Fooled by Randomness,” p.xl.

a scientifically observable correlation between action and result. Paving the way for luck is an expression of a desire, a yearning for connection, for power over circumstance. At the same time, luck fills the gap between desire and the fulfillment of that desire. We may invite luck in, we may carry the rabbit's foot, we may wear our brand new red dress, but if fortune does not smile on us that day, well, it was not our fault in the end. It was just bad luck.

There are so many different angles -- good luck and bad luck, chance and fortune, fate and destiny and kismet. There's providence, coincidence, happenstance, serendipity, and celestial alignment. Luck might be a fluke, a statistical anomaly, or just your lot in life. Much to the wise old man's dismay, I think that humans will always try to shape destiny to our will, rather than just letting the mystery unfold. If we can just make the way smooth, twist the dial just so, perhaps we might stumble our way into luck, into that happy relationship of universe and self, and find that our wishes have been carried on smoke to our ancestors' ears, and suddenly, the lost child turns up, Grandmother's diamond ring falls out from the junk drawer, the perfect pitch is thrown, and the day is saved. If not, perhaps Lady Luck will be kinder tomorrow.