



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“The Magic of a Frog”

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Centering Thoughts:

The man who was once a frog is now a king. Petronius, ‘The Satyricon’ (1st century CE)

First impressions are always unreliable. Franz Kafka

*To me, beauty is about being comfortable in your own skin.
It’s about knowing and accepting who you are.* Ellen Degeneres

*The evening star is shining bright So make a wish and hold on tight.
There’s magic in the air tonight And anything can happen.*
Randy Newman, ‘The Princess and the Frog’

Reflection (after a telling of “The Little Singing Frog fairy tale):

It’s true confession time now. Like me, how many of you watched the wedding of Prince Harry to Meghan Markle last weekend?

I watched and I admit to enjoying its royal pomp and circumstance. I was particularly drawn to the notion that both Harry and William have found love and happiness despite the tragedy of their mother’s death and their parents’ disastrous marriage. This wedding seemed like the perfect, long-awaited, ‘happily ever after’ ending.

In this modern-day fairy tale, Meghan Markle fits the role of the frog who found her prince. Although she is far from repulsive, she is the ultimate outsider, one not immediately cast as a potential princess. She’s not a British citizen. She’s not an aristocrat born into wealth or entitlement. She’s not younger than her prince. She’s not lily-white. She’s not a blushing first-time bride. Despite these traditional disqualifications (and frog-like attributes), Prince Harry kissed her and made her his princess, the Duchess of Sussex. And we (at least I) cheered their enchantment.

Fairy tales have been told around the world for thousands of years. Fairy tales differ from folktales because they always have a happy ending and they include an element of magic—like witches casting spells or fairy godmothers rescuing damsels in distress. Surprisingly, many tales include a frog or toad being transformed by some act, such as a kiss, which breaks the magical spell and reveals the creature’s true self. Walt Disney Studios has capitalized on similar tales of

transformation in such films as ‘The Little Mermaid,’ ‘Cinderella,’ ‘Beauty and the Beast,’ and more recently, ‘The Princess and the Frog’.

Like Biblical stories, fairy tales and folklore survive the test of time because they continue to speak to the challenges of our lives. They especially offer insight into our relationships and provide moral guidance. More significantly, tales of transformation offer us hope and inspiration. Whoever we are, like Meghan Markel, we can be, and perhaps already are, of regal character.

But why frogs? Why isn’t some other critter chosen for transformation tales?

The butterfly also transforms itself. But butterflies are beautiful. They fly with a lightness of being many find wonderfully enchanting.

Frogs, on the other hand, are lowly creatures tied to wet and muddy land. They begin life as tiny tadpoles swimming about like fish. Then, slowly, their aquatic shape and gills transform into legs and lungs and they move from life in water to one on land. Slightly resembling a human face, with big mouths, round eyes, and smooth skin, it’s easy to imagine a human trapped within its humble body.

Although I admire some frogs for their colorful appearance and their wide-mouth smiles, many find frogs ugly and disgusting. Cold-blooded amphibians, they feel strange to the touch—dry and warty or wet and slimy. Old wives warn that touching a frog gives you warts. That’s nonsense, but some frogs secrete poisons through their skin to deter predators and human handlers.

Frogs have had a bad reputation for ages. You may recall a ‘plague of frogs’ helped persuade Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go out of Egypt [*Exodus 8:6*]. And in Shakespeare’s, ‘Macbeth,’ three witches stir a boiling cauldron while chanting [*Act IV, Scene 1, lines 10-21*]:

Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn, and caldron bubble.

Fillet of a fenny snake,
In the caldron boil and bake;
Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting,
Lizard's leg, and owlet's wing,—
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn, and caldron bubble.

Along with being a possible ingredient in potions, frogs were accused of being a witch’s familiar, a partner in their devilish doings, as were black cats. Given the disgusting and evil nature attributed to the frog, to kiss or promise to marry such a beast symbolizes great courage and hope.

Not all cultures thought the frog evil. In Ancient Egypt, Hekt was a frog-headed goddess of fertility, childbirth, rebirth, and resurrection whose divine breath animated life. The fact that frogs

easily lay a thousand eggs and became plentiful at the time of the Nile River's annual flooding, thus making the land fertile for growing food crops, probably encouraged this fertility worship.

In Chinese culture, the frog symbolizes good luck and wealth. Placing a figure of a frog surrounded by coins encourages prosperity to be yours.

In India, one of the most ancient religious texts, the Rig Veda, has a hymn extolling the spring arrival of frogs and their songs calling down the rains to nourish the fields and gardens.

Whether you love or hate frogs, they remain well established in fairy tales. And whether we live in a fairy tale realm or not, I believe they offer wisdom for our lives.

The first, most obvious message is that beauty lies within; that we need to look below the surface to see one's true nature. Despite its outward appearance, the frog may hide a royal character, but we'll never know if we don't give it a chance. We may think we know this truth, or that beauty is only skin deep, yet how many of us form unshakable first impressions because of some perceived positive or negative outer appearance? Outward beauty may hide a witch, while a frog may hide much inner beauty.

Difference also estranges us from each other. We carry with us learned prejudices about others that make it difficult to see the individual worth of a person. I think this problem plays out in the unequal treatment of blacks and whites in our justice system. It plays out when those who are economically comfortable turn away from a person begging for change or living on the streets. Or when one turns away from knowing someone whose politics, religion, or education differs from their own. It's not uncommon to turn away from someone who is mean-spirited, unhappy, self-absorbed, or even dying. We're repelled and don't look below the surface. We easily fall into a spell of our own making and refuse to give some people a chance to be known or understood. We turn away, refusing to kiss these frogs.

But we may be that frog waiting to be kissed. Don't we all carry inside a host of insecurities? Maybe we think we're too fat, too thin, too ugly, too sinful, too provincial, or too unlovable. Don't we wish for some prince charming to transform our ugly warts into something beautiful? Each of us deserves to be seen for who we are beneath whatever our outward appearance or imperfections.

These tales of transformation also offer us a reminder to keep our promises. The prince, or tsar-to-be, fell in love with the singing frog before he ever laid eyes on her. He offered to marry her, still sight unseen. After meeting her, he kept his promise anyway. He invited her home to meet his father, knowing his future depended on her, but not knowing she would be transformed. And instead of her beautiful voice or appearance, his kept promise and her wisdom earned the pair a future kingdom. Had he broken his promise, that happy ending would not be possible.

Finally, many fairy tales speak to the difficulty of finding true love. I imagine many of you have kissed your share of frogs before you found one wearing a crown. And I know some of you still seek that enchanted frog or feel like a frog yourself, waiting to be released from a spell. For you, these tales offer hope that somehow, some magic will transform you in the eyes of another. Until that magic moment, accept who you are and be happy, just as the little frog was happy singing in the trees. Someday, even if you're showing a few gray hairs and wrinkles, the one who will transform you may appear when you least expect.

As Prince Harry and Meghan proved, fairy tales do come true.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. What helps you to get past preconceived ideas about someone, a difficult personality, or a superficial appearance to see the beauty within another person?
2. What growth or transformations have you experienced in recent years? Are you still recognizable to those who knew you earlier in your life? Share.
3. Describe a time you may have felt a need to hide something about yourself. What prompts such hiding? What helps you reveal your true nature to others?
4. Are you living a fairy tale? What makes your life feel like it is or isn't a dream come true?