



Children's Story - The Golden Goose

Once upon a time, there was a goose who had beautiful golden feathers. One day, flying in the heavens, the goose looked down and saw a very poor woman with two daughters all dressed in rags. The goose thought about the hard time they must be having and said to himself, "If I gave them a golden feather, the mother could sell it at the marketplace and they would have enough to eat!" So away the goose flew to the poor woman's house.

"What do you want?" said the poor woman angrily. "I have nothing to give you!"

"But I have something to give you!" said the goose, and he pulled out one of his golden feathers and gave it to her. Then away he flew. The woman grabbed the feather and her daughters and off they went to the marketplace, where they bought lots of good things to eat. From time to time the goose returned, and on each occasion he presented the woman with a golden feather, so that eventually they lived in comfort. But one day the woman thought, I do not trust this goose. He may fly away and never come back. Then we will be poor again. We must pull out all his feathers the next time he comes.

When she told her daughters, they cried, "No! No! That will hurt the goose! We will not pull out his feathers!"

But the woman was very greedy. The next time the goose returned, she grabbed him with both hands, and pulled out all his feathers. She didn't know that the feathers of the golden goose were magic, and if pulled out against his will, they turned a dirty white, like soiled chicken feathers.

And that is what happened. The woman could not believe her eyes. She cried in despair.

Her daughters were horrified to see goose feathers scattered around. They gently lifted up the poor plucked goose and went into the woods. There they cared for him until his feathers grew back, shiny and gold. To reward them for their kindness, the goose found them loving husbands. But because of her incurable greed, their mother lived worse off than before and new disasters greeted her every day.

The greatest wealth is the wealth of kindness.

Reading from the Dhammapada "We are what we think"

We are what we think.

All that we are arises with our thoughts.

With our thoughts we make the world.

Speak or act with an impure mind

And trouble will follow you

As the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart.

We are what we think.

All that we are arises with our thoughts.

With our thoughts we make the world.
 Speak or act with a pure mind
 And happiness will follow you
 As your shadow, unshakable.
 "Look how he abused me and hurt me,
 How he threw me down and robbed me."
 Live with such thoughts and you live in hate.
 "Look how he abused me and hurt me,
 How he threw me down and robbed me."
 Abandon such thoughts, and live in love.
 In this world
 Hate never yet dispelled hate.
 Only love dispels hate.
 This is the law,
 Ancient and inexhaustible.

Reflection – Carrie Lang

It is said that the Buddha's last words were "Nothing lasts forever. Strive hard to work out your enlightenment." There have been lots of different translations of these last words, but most scholars agree on the essential message behind them – that everything in life is subject to change and that there is a means of understanding that process and becoming freer and happier.

In this morning's opening Story For All Ages, we learned of a generous golden goose who decided to give his valuable feathers to a poor mother. And how does the mother react to this unexpected gift? Well, first she is suspicious of the goose, then she starts getting used to receiving these golden feathers. It occurs to her that at any moment the situation could change - that the golden feathers could stop arriving, and in fear, she plucks them all out – and in an ironic twist, the once golden feathers turn a worthless brown. Viewed through the eyes of Buddhist teachings, the mother's actions represent a central aspect of the human condition. Desire and clinging create deep attachment and fear of change, which leads to our own suffering. Suffering can come in many forms - illness, anxiety, worry, sorrow, grief.

Although I'd love to tell you about all of the ways I want to be like the enlightened golden goose in the story, the truth is, I can identify a lot more with the mother.

Three years ago, I experienced a life crisis. I was a businesswoman working in the field of finance. I had invested a decade worth of my time and energy into earning promotions, getting big bonuses, and being successful. At some point, it started to feel like torture. I could no longer identify with or find any passion in my career. My work relationships and daily actions seemed filled with negativity and lack of purpose, to the point of creating physical illness. This feeling grew until I could no longer deny it, escalating from a whisper to an all-out yell. I felt "a calling" at a deep level to quit my job and take a very different path. However, I had no idea or plan on what to do afterwards. I was scared of the change... of losing my cushy salary, of losing the respect of peers, clients, and the partners I worked for, and no longer having an easy answer to the question

“What do you do for a living?” Most of all, I was scared of the future and the not-knowing... What would come next? What if nothing came? What if I was leaving all of these traditional vestiges of success behind only to find... nothing?

I'm thankful that with Jason's support, and a sense of courage I gathered somewhere from the depths, I was able to let go and embrace the change that was waiting for me. Letting go of what was once my path didn't lead me nowhere. In fact, three years later, I am immeasurably more happy and more personally fulfilled, having embraced my passion of teaching and sharing the path of yoga with others. But, I had to let go of my much higher salary, some friendships, and my old view of success.

Now, I'm facing another big life transition. In a few months a new human being will enter my life as I become a mother. Although I'm very happy and excited about this, there is fear of letting go of being so independent and only having to take care of myself – clinging to the way things have been. There is also fear of parenthood and desires of needing to be the "perfect" parent. I look to the teachings of Buddhism to help deal with this next big change. Meditation is helping me become aware of the thoughts, fears, and desires racing through my mind, and rather than judging them – just learning to be present with what IS. When I'm in the present moment, I'm not clinging to my past, I'm not obsessing about the future; I can simply feel the joy of this moment.

Like the Buddha said at the end of his life, as he entered his transition from life through death - “Nothing lasts forever.” Looking to my own life transitions as teachers, I believe there can be solace for us in the idea that nothing lasts forever. When we can truly accept that change is inevitable, and trust that the little and big changes of life will not destroy us, we can let go. We don't have to be like the mother in the story, clinging so tightly, trying to control our future. We can loosen our grip and just surrender to this moment, one moment at a time. Because it's all going to change anyway.

Reflection - Lauren Lyerla

Last summer, on the recommendation of a friend, I tried a class in a particular style of self-defense. I can always use a good workout, after all, and, I had enjoyed taking Judo classes as a teenager.

Sadly, this class was NOTHING like my old Judo class. Judo had been fun – a sport. THIS class essentially told me that people are BAD, and that at any moment, I could expect to be robbed, raped, or murdered. After a warm-up, we broke into pairs, and took turns being attacker and victim. Both roles upset me terribly. I got badly bruised, despite the thick, protective padding, but the worst injury by far was to my spirit. Enacting such aggression, imagining maiming another human, even in self-defense, wounded me deeply. The experience was brutal for this extreme pacifist. I left the class early, in tears.

My first impulse was to come to Emerson. Luckily, I knew people were here remodeling our classrooms. I was offered hugs, sympathy, a mug of tea, and good advice on caring for my contusions.

My friend who loves that style of self-defense is a pacifist, too. But for whatever reason, she is able to kick and punch the hell out of imaginary villains and not have a spiritual crisis. For her, and I think for most people who practice it, this style of self-defense is a practical skill, even a confidence-builder.

I, however, am fairly ridiculously sensitive and soft-hearted. I'm NOT suggesting that people who like the class are hard-hearted: my friend is loving, kind, generous, and warm: She felt horrible when she heard how I'd been affected. I'm just saying that, with my particular quirks, I personally would have had to toughen my heart to continue with lessons. And I can't do that.

I believe most people are good people. Sure, there are a few creeps who might want to hurt me, but common sense, the judicious application of the buddy system, and admittedly a fair bit of good luck, have kept me safe for almost 30 years of adulthood. I can't be certain that my luck will hold, but I choose to remain optimistic and open-hearted.

I don't want to be suspicious and defensive like the mother in the story, shouting angrily at the golden goose to go away, because I don't have anything to give him. I don't want to become callous or cruel, able to even consider ripping out the goose's feathers. I want to keep my heart open, so I can always feel compassion for others, always respond "No, that will hurt the goose, I will not do that." And always show loving-kindness to the injured goose – or to anyone, really, even someone who HASN'T been giving me golden feathers. I want to remain present with myself and with others. And I can't do that if I'm shut down.

Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun in the Tibetan tradition, says that we have a choice. Instead of shutting down when life kicks you in the teeth, you can stay with the experience – stay present with your emotions. In staying vulnerable, you access a Soft Spot – your noble, awakened heart. You remain open, able to be compassionate when others are in difficult situations, because you've been there – and you paid attention.

We never know what will happen to us, any day of our lives. Pema reminds us that the uncertainty is part of the adventure, but it also frightens us. We spend a lot of time and energy trying to control the future, in futile attempts to make the unknowable known.

The mother in the story could not bear the unknown: how many more feathers would there be? But the control she sought was an illusion. If only she could have stayed with the uncertainty of getting one feather at a time, for as long as that good fortune lasted, whether it be another week, or a lifetime!

Pema says that's the main spiritual question: How do you deal with difficulty? How do you relate with the feelings you have and the situations you find yourself in? The challenge is to take the situations of your life and train in catching yourself closing down. And at that point, you train yourself to open further, to soften. "These juicy emotional spots, are where [we gain] wisdom and compassion."

Buddhism offers a toolbox full of practices to help with this training, but mindfulness – continually returning your attention to the present moment – and regular meditation are key among them.

When you stay open, you begin to learn that your noble, awakened heart is vast and limitless, full of warmth and gentleness. The burden lightens. What might feel at first like sadness or fear transforms into a longing to be fully human, to be there for your friends when they need you, to help our troubled world. Along with the longing, the sadness, and the tenderness, there's an immense sense of unconditional well-being, which doesn't have anything to do with pleasant or unpleasant, good or bad, hope or fear, disgrace or fame. This peace simply comes to you when you learn to keep your heart open.

Homily – Rev. Krista Taves

There are times when all of us have been like the mother, grasping at golden feathers until they turn into dust. There are times when we are the ones holding the golden feather. Can we trust that when we pull out a feather and give it away, another will take its place? There are times when we are the daughters, and it is our task to hold those who have had their feathers ripped away until they can grow their feathers back and fly again. In fact, that is often what this congregation is about. Many of you who walk through these doors need a ministry of healing and it is our calling to provide that safe space while those feathers grow back and until you once again have something to give away to our hurting world.

Buddhism is the discipline of non-attachment. Of mindfulness. Of being present to the moment. What I like about this discipline is that it is such a gentle challenge to the dominant way we understand life in the west. We hold up hard work and achievement as strong moral enterprises. Attachment to goals is cultivated, valued, and demanded. We are also so future oriented that often it is very hard to stay in the present moment and be fully open to it. Now I'm not against hard work or having goals or being future oriented, but attachment to these things can often blind us, we get tunnel vision, then we aren't really living into the possibilities of that noble awakened heart that Lauren spoke of so beautifully.

One of the reasons we intentionally chose a low-key canvass this year is because we want to operate on a model of openness to the moment and trust in our people. We didn't want to be like the mother, grasping at golden feathers. We didn't believe that it should take cartwheels, glossy mailings, and pressure to have a successful canvass. We all have so much that screams for our attention and we wanted our request to be different, using neither fear, guilt, or the hard sell. Because really, we all know what we have to do. It shouldn't take any convincing. In Unitarian Universalism, we trust in the goodness of humanity, which means that we should trust each other. Each of us has a golden feather to give and it is our privilege to give it. So, to use Carrie's words, "We loosened our grip and surrendered to the moment." We have trusted that all we needed to do was ask in good faith and sincerity for what we need to live our mission and vision, and that you would hear and respond.

The Dhammapada tells us that we are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. And so when we planned our canvass we envisioned ourselves in a gentle asking and receiving that would result in exactly what we needed. And that is exactly what is happening. I tell you it's been a beautiful thing to see. Some of you include lovely notes when you return your pledge cards and I have the privilege of reading those notes. Our office administrator leaves them in a little pile on my desk and that's how I get to start my day. It has become clear to me that supporting this congregation is a deeply spiritual

discipline that you take very seriously. So thank you for your golden feathers. And when each of us has responded as generously as we can, and we are trusting that you will, we will have what we need.

I think what both Lauren and Carrie have shared with us this morning is a gentle call to live in this ever changing world with grace, compassion, and mindfulness. We can't control this world, but we have choices that we can make in every moment, and Buddhism is about the intentional practice of staying open and fully engaged, perhaps more vulnerable, but much more strength and compassionate than any of us could possibly imagine.

May this be true for you, for this beloved congregation, for our families, our communities, and our world.
Namaste.