

**Liberation from Bondage  
by the Rev. Ann Schranz  
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation  
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With a theme as broad as “liberation from bondage,” I could begin anywhere. I will begin in the brain (in the world of physiology) and end in the mind (in the world of symbols), sharing some poetry by Leonard Cohen in the middle. Last week I attended a conference on the topic of addiction at the Claremont School of Theology.<sup>1</sup> Its purpose was to help ministers understand the latest scientific research on addiction and to share resources in order to minister more effectively to those whose lives are touched by the bondage of addiction.

Over time, addiction has been understood in different ways by scientists, and approaches to treatment have changed accordingly. Today, said Dr. Ralph Koek, addiction is understood as a particular kind of neuroadaptation in the brain, a particular kind of “rewired” circuitry that reflects a pathology of inhibition and choice. Addiction is now understood as matter of “impaired control” over drug use, even if there is no physical dependence. Dr. Koek is a psychiatrist at the Sepulveda Veterans Administration Hospital in North Hills. The neuroadaptation in the brain results in a person becoming addicted to the process of addiction itself, for the process of addiction itself produces a higher level of a substance called dopamine in the brain. Those who are addicted to nicotine, alcohol, or other drugs are essentially chasing the brain chemical dopamine.

Addicts sometimes say that they need their drug of choice simply to feel “normal.” On the one hand, we want to feel “normal,” that is, to feel the way we *imagine* that other people feel -- at home in their skin and at home in the world. On the other hand, we want to escape from feeling normal; we would rather be enrolled in Hogwarts School of Wizardry than be a “muggle.” Whichever hand beacons to us at any point in time (toward “normal” or away from it), religion stands ready to help us on our way. Religion gives us history, myth, and symbol. We need all three – history, myth, and symbol to move from bondage to liberation.

This is the start of Pesach, Passover. The week-long festival commemorates the departure of the Israelites from Egypt. They left in such a hurry that they could not wait for bread to rise. God saw them safely

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<sup>1</sup> Interfaith Addictions Conference, made possible by a grant from the United Methodist Church, Special Office of Addictions and Related Violence, Board of Global Ministries. Held at Claremont School of Theology on April 10, 2008.

through the Sea of Reeds (erroneously translated as the Red Sea), and God caused their enemies to perish. At the Passover seder, the Four Questions are asked, and they are answered.

According to Robert Seltzer in *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History*, “Passover probably originated in a spring celebration of nomadic herdsmen; its rites and customs, together with those of the first of the three agricultural festivals, the Feast of Matzot (unleavened bread), were early reinterpreted as remembrances of the exodus from Egypt. (The fusion of the festivals of Passover and Unleavened Bread was probably spurred by the Deuteronomic reform that abolished private sacrifices, so that the paschal offering had to be made at the Temple and not, as previously, in the home.” Robert Seltzer continues, “All three Israelite agricultural festivals may have been adopted from Canaanite practices but were transformed into occasions of pilgrimage to YHVH’s sanctuary in order to celebrate his role in bestowing fertility on nature.”<sup>2</sup>

As *history*, the Passover story is weak. As *myth*, the Passover story is powerful. Beyond history and myth, can the Passover story be used as a symbol? Here is where Unitarian Universalists venture within range of a buzz saw. The blade draws blood from people on all sides of controversies concerning cultural appropriation and cultural misappropriation. Does anyone own symbols? Who has a right to use them? As background, there are Christians who object to Unitarian Universalists describing just any ritual involving the distribution of food as “Communion,” especially if participants do not identify as Christian. There are Jews who object to Unitarian Universalists describing just any Passover meal as a seder, especially if participants do not identify as Jewish.

My approach to matters of cultural appropriation and misappropriation is to try to be clear about whether I am referring to history, myth, or symbol. For example, Jews and African Americans both use imagery of the Exodus from Egypt in song and ritual, yet their *histories* remain distinct. Trouble looms if we imply that another group’s history is our own history or is just about like our own history. *Myths* are anchored in a cultural context, and myths can be misappropriated if we pluck them from their context and plop them down elsewhere. As for *symbols*, symbols are treasures of the mind. Symbols are the property of no one. Symbols are available for all of us to use to call greater depth and breadth into our lives.

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<sup>2</sup> *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History*, Robert M. Seltzer, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1980, p. 74.

Visual artists and poets show us how to use symbols with skill. This morning, I will lift up the poetry of Leonard Cohen. He is a 73-year-old Canadian singer songwriter who was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame just last month. (The other Hall of Fame inductees this year were The Ventures, the Dave Clark Five, John Mellencamp, and Madonna. Imagine that!) For five years, from 1994 to 1999, Leonard Cohen lived just 13 miles from here at the Mt. Baldy Zen Center. “In 1996, Cohen was ordained as a Rinzaï Zen Buddhist monk and took the Dharma name *Jikhan*, meaning 'silence'.”<sup>3</sup> He acted as a chauffeur for the senior monk, or Roshi (who by the way, is now 101 years old and is still teaching, as his health permits).

At the Mt. Baldy Zen Center, Roshi and Jikhan often drank together. However, Jikhan never did persuade Roshi that Bordeaux wine was superior to the sake that Roshi preferred.<sup>4</sup> In the senior monk’s company, Leonard Cohen was described as being “like a fish in water, or a non-fish in non-water, or like neither.” Had Leonard Cohen become Buddhist? He said, "I'm not looking for a new religion. I'm quite happy with the old one, with Judaism."<sup>5</sup>

In interview with Bob Edwards on National Public Radio, Leonard Cohen said, “I had an abiding sense of distress. Freud was no solution. I had to look elsewhere . . . Peace, it eventually did come to me. The abiding sense of distress did dissolve.”<sup>6</sup> This morning, as we consider religion’s role in liberation from bondage, especially in the context of addiction, here are a few poems by Leonard Cohen. The poems are all found in *Book of Longing*, published in 2006. [Only the titles are shown here.]

### **The Lovesick Monk<sup>7</sup>**

### **My Life in Robes<sup>8</sup>**

### **Leaving Mt. Baldy<sup>9</sup>**

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<sup>3</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard\\_Cohen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard_Cohen).

<sup>4</sup> See the Bob Edwards interview of Leonard Cohen broadcast on National Public Radio on May 26, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian> article about Leonard Cohen in the UK Guardian, September 17, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> See the Bob Edwards interview of Leonard Cohen broadcast on National Public Radio on May 26, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> *Book of Longing*, Leonard Cohen, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2006, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Book of Longing*, Leonard Cohen, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2006, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Book of Longing*, Leonard Cohen, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2006, p. 22.

The next piece is “The Story Thus Far.” You may recall the story of the baby Moses, spared from slaughter when he was hidden in the bulrushes. The baby was found and adopted by a noble Egyptian family.

### **The Story Thus Far<sup>10</sup>**

The final poem is this one:

### **Historic Claremont Village<sup>11</sup>**

If Thomas Merton, author of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, were still with us, I think he would laugh at the reference to the seven-storey Nissan Pathfinder! If I were as gifted as Leonard Cohen, I would write a poem connecting addiction, bondage, liberation, the urge to feel “normal,” the urge to escape from feeling “normal,” Passover, cultural appropriation, cultural misappropriation, Judaism, Buddhism, Unitarian Universalism, mysticism, Historic Claremont Village, Tent City, and Montclair – since they are all related.

Since I am not that gifted, I conclude with these words: First drag on a cigarette. Who knew it was so good? I am still smoking in another universe. Can’t bear to stop everywhere. Freedom’s just another word for something *else* to lose. “The work of enlarging human freedom is such nice work we’re lucky to get it.”<sup>12</sup> May it always be so!

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<sup>10</sup> *Book of Longing*, Leonard Cohen, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2006, p. 110.

<sup>11</sup> *Book of Longing*, Leonard Cohen, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2006, p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> Words by Kate Millett.