

The Zoroastrian Religion Today
by the Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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There are six Sources of our living Unitarian Universalist religious tradition. One of the Sources is “wisdom from the world’s religions, which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.” When it is time for me to select a theme for a Sunday service, I often consult the Multifaith Calendar, which is published by the Multifaith Action Society of Canada (www.multifaithaction.org). On this calendar, the holy days from many religious traditions are marked. The traditions range from A to Z, from Aboriginal Spirituality through Unitarianism and Wicca to Zoroastrianism.

This Sunday falls within the 10-day Zoroastrian period of Muktaḍ, the time for memorializing ancestors. These 10 days are preparation for Nowruz (the start of the new year) for those Zoroastrians who follow one particular calendar instead of the other calendar in which Nowruz (New Year) falls in spring. “The Zoroastrian religion is founded by Zarathushtra in ancient Avestan language or Zoroaster in Greek or Zartosht in Farsi, the Persian Iranian language. Zarathushtra was one of the earliest and perhaps the first prophet to teach monotheism, the belief in one God. He preached a new doctrine of good, evil and retribution. And he gave the world the triple motto of Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds.”¹

“Today there are only about 125,000 Zarathushtis left in the world. 30,000 are in Iran and 80,000 are in India, where they are known as Parsis. (A small band of Zarathushtis migrated from Iran to India in the 9th century to escape Muslim prosecution, much like the Pilgrim Fathers who came to America). The rest of the present day Zarathushtis are scattered all over the world. And about 5,000 of them have come to settle in North America, of whom 1500 are in Southern California.” The two nearest Zoroastrian houses of worship are in Orange County. One is in Westminster, and the other is in the city of Orange near Chapman University. Its grand opening was last month on July 18.

There are contemporary connections between the Zoroastrian religion and music. “Richard

¹ See <http://www.californiazoroastriancenter.org/>

Strauss composed his masterpiece that is internationally known as the “Splendid of God” based on Frederick Nietzsche's book “Thus Sprach Zarathustra”. This was the music made more famous by its use in the soundtrack of the movie “2001: A Space Odyssey.”

Continuing on the musical theme, the “Centering Thought” in today’s Order of Service is from an interview with Mima, who is identified in the Zoroastrian Journal as the first professional Zoroastrian vocalist. That may be true, but a few years ago, there was a well known vocalist who was raised Zoroastrian and who had a Zoroastrian funeral. I refer to Freddie Mercury (the lead singer of the rock band Queen), who was born Farrokh Bulsara in 1946 on the island of Zanzibar to a Zoroastrian family.

According to Rick Sky in *The Show Must Go On: The Life of Freddie Mercury*, “At the age of eight Freddie became a full member of the Zoroastrian religion in the majestic Mayjote ceremony, during which the young initiate was given a purifying bath while the head priest chanted prayers. (The bath symbolizes physical cleanliness, which devotees regard as essential for the cleansing of the mind and soul.) Then in front of one of the eternal fires, he repeated the prayers of the priests, accepting the Zoroastrian religion as revealed by Ahura Mazda to Zoroaster . . . Finally Mercury was showered with rice, rose petals, coconut, and pomegranate and dressed in his new clothes.”

Freddie Mercury died in 1991 of complications from AIDS. He announced that he had AIDS just one day before he died. Rick Sky writes, “As Mercury's oak coffin was carried into the chapel, covered in a satin sheet and topped with a single red rose, Zoroastrian priests, dressed in white muslin robes and caps, chanted traditional prayers to their god Ahura Mazda, also known as the Wise Lord, for the salvation of the singer's soul. Throughout the twenty-five minute service, conducted totally in the ancient Avestan language, the priests used no word of English other than commands to the forty mourners to stand and sit.”²

I am always moved by funerals and memorial services, even by ones that I simply read about, such as Freddie Mercury’s service. Funerals and memorial services remind us to pause now and

² See http://www.adherents.com/people/pm/Freddie_Mercury.html

then amidst the hustle and bustle of our lives. Pause to fully take in the fact that our days on this earth are numbered. Consequently, the choices we make from one moment to the next are important.

In the order of service, I called my remarks a reflection on good, evil, death, and life -- four small topics to cover in a few minutes. ;) One particular image mentioned earlier by Kile J. has stayed with me. It is the Chinvat Bridget (Bridge of the Separator). That is where, after death, we meet our daena. The sum of our good thoughts, words, and actions are weighted against the sum of our evil ones. If the good outweighs the evil, the bridge is wide enough to walk into paradise. If the bad outweighs the good, the bridge becomes razor thin, and we fall into hell. In my mind's eye, this bridge looks like a tense moment from the movie "The Lord of the Rings" -- hobbits, dwarves, and men scrambling across a precarious and disintegrating bridge.

Unitarian Universalists tend not to see evil in themselves or in others. That is unfortunate because human beings are not solely made of sweetness and light. Fear and greed have keys to our hearts, as well as love and kindness. Take a moment to think of your own heart. Who is at home there this morning, sitting in a recliner, feet up, perhaps reading the Sunday paper? To be human is to have roommates in the heart – fear, greed, love, and kindness. Just like any roommates, sometimes they are in conflict with each other. Sometimes they give each other a wide berth.

If those are the worst times, what are the best times? That is when fear, greed, love, and kindness actually talk with one another, actually engage each other inside our hearts. The more often we create opportunities for these "intra-coronary round table conversations," the better. When we encourage the good and evil roommates within our heart to engage with each other, we will be less likely to project onto others what may be, in fact, our own unacknowledged motivations. When we encourage the good and evil roommates within our heart to engage with each other, we will not be surprised by the shape of our Chinvat Bridge, whenever it appears. I say whenever it appears because heaven and hell are here, if they are anywhere at all.

By choosing good over evil as often as possible in this life, we can be at peace as the sand slips through the hourglass of time. By choosing good over evil as often as possible in this life, we can bring inner and outer peace into a world that needs it desperately. May we acknowledge all the roommates in our heart. May we choose good over evil, as often as possible. May it be so!