

Wind on the Water

A Viewsletter To Encourage Unitarian
Universalist Theology and Spirituality

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All Gifts

The story of Pandora is almost always told as an anti-feminist fable, but Padraic Colum, in his book *The Golden Fleece and the Heros Who Lived Before Achilles* [Macmillan, 1921] gives the story a different thrust entirely. The following is a version inspired by Colum's:

Prometheus, whose name means forethought, had helped the humans against the interests of Zeus. He had shown them how to trick Zeus into accepting the less appealing portions of the sacrificed animal, and he had stolen fire from the gods and given it to the humans to heat their homes, forge their tools, and prepare their foods. As punishment, Zeus had Prometheus chained to the dark, high crags of the Caucasuses, to suffer the blazing sun and piercing winds. There every day a vulture would come to tear out his liver, and every night it would grow back.

Zeus then contemplated how to punish the humans for their part. The heavens darkened as Zeus pondered his revenge. Then Zeus's laughter thundered, for he saw a way to bring punishment by way of Prometheus's brother, and in such a way that the humans would have to

admit that they had had a chance, and if they now suffered, it was their own fault.

Hephaestus was commissioned to construct a woman from gold, with creamy skin and flowing blond hair, and gentle curves of body. Hermes gave her flowing, melodious speech. Apollo gave her musical talent. Athena gave her domestic skills. Aphrodite placed a love charm about her eyes and lips. And so all the gods and goddesses gave her all their blessings.

One blessing alone they could not give, for when they tried to endow her with it, it slipped from her. And then they realized that with all the other gifts, this one was unneeded, so Hephaestus tossed it in an urn.

Then the gods and goddesses poured their curses in the urn: disease, infirmity, famine, envy, greed, hatred, torture, and all the afflictions of body, mind, and society. They placed a tight-fitting lid on the urn.

Epimetheus, whose name means afterthought, was lounging in one of his sacred places when Hermes came to him with a most beautiful woman in one hand and an urn in the other. "Epimetheus, this is Pandora. Zeus sends her to you so that you can be reconciled. This urn contains her dowry." Epimetheus took the woman's hand, gazed at her eyes and lips, and paid no attention to the urn.

After months or years, he cared not which, Epimetheus thought to

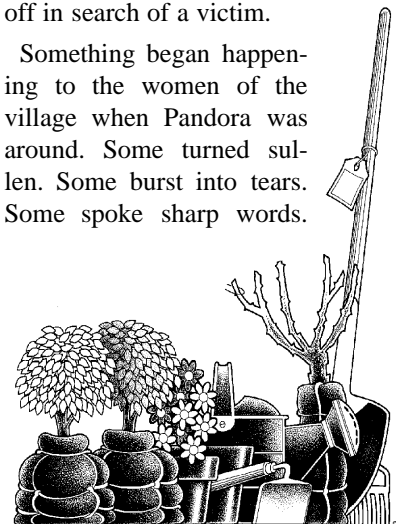
take Pandora to the dwellings of the humans and show her to them. He gathered her things, the urn included, and led her down from the mountains.

When the humans saw her, they were as taken as Epimetheus was. They gazed on her and listened to her, and one man said, "Her name says it all, Pandora, all gifts." At this point the dwellers of Olympus leaned forward. Here was the humans' chance.

"Yes," agreed another, "she does have all good gifts." But none on the humans thought any more of it, and when the moment passed, the gods and goddesses leaned back with satisfaction.

And so things stood for a while, but the urn had been jarred as it was carried down from the mountains, and finally one dark thing crawled out from under the lid, spread its gossamer wings, and flew off in search of a victim.

Something began happening to the women of the village when Pandora was around. Some turned sullen. Some burst into tears. Some spoke sharp words.



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All Gifts, continued

And the women began to complain to each other that their husbands took no notice of them any more, but cared only for Pandora. "How does she do it?" they asked. Suspicion rested on the urn. What lotions and cosmetics might it contain? If they could have them too, their men would no longer be filled only with Pandora, Pandora, Pandora.

The women went to the urn. It was taller than the tallest of them, and in their hurry to find its contents, they tipped it over. The lid fell off, and the contents spilled. Disease and strife spread quickly, and the suffering of the humans grew a thousandfold.

When Epimetheus came again to the dwellings of the humans, he was bewildered; he heard sobs and moans; he saw deformed people cast out of their homes and begging for food. He was challenged with suspicion as a stranger, and when he said he was Epimetheus, the brother of Prometheus who had brought them fire, they told him they did not know any such person, and they drove him away.

Later one woman looked in the urn and found the final gift, the blessing the gods had been unable to give Pandora. It was hope, which one who has all other blessings does not need, but which made life sufferable for the humans thereafter, whatever their afflictions.

Pandora wandered away, among meadows that were always sunny and blossoming in her presence. Hermes later found her and guided her to Olympus, where she now dwells, with creamy skin and flowing blond hair, and gentle curves of body; with flowing, melodious speech; with musical talent and domestic skills and a love charm about her eyes and lips; with blessings from all the gods and god-

The Problem of Pain

The problem of pain is considered to be one of the most perplexing in Christianity. Needless suffering may be considered evil, and if God is good and all-powerful, how can He allow such suffering in the world? In particular, how can He allow good people to suffer? How can He allow innocents to suffer?

Some pain can be excused as merely in the nature of physical bodies. Pain tells us when our bodies are being damaged so we can take care of them. But that does not excuse the suffering that people inflict on each other. An excuse given is that God grants us free will, which is a supremely valuable gift, and if some people use that gift to harm others, that is evil, but the nature of the gift requires that they be able to so choose. Some go further and say that there is a power lesser than God, but a power nonetheless, who exploits this aspect of free will in order to bring evil into the world.

The ways of God are not the ways of Man, and although our society highly values individual liberty, it finds no theoretical difficulty with restraining those who would inflict needless suffering on others. Moreover, one who could prevent such suffering, and chooses not to do so, would be open to legal action. God

excepted, of course.

Is there a problem with monotheism here? The Greek gods had both their good and bad aspects, their blessings and curses. With many gods and goddesses, we can always seek solace with some for our problems with others.

But if there is only one God, do we feel the need to ascribe only the good to Him? Perhaps we dare not speak ill of Him. Perhaps we feel that if we praise Him often enough, we will convince Him to live up to our praises.

But doesn't a single God call for a Satan? If we put all good in one place, we are tempted to put all evil in another. True, there is the ancient Christian concept of *privatio boni*, that evil is simply the absence of good, but it is difficult to make that jibe with the active cunning with which some evil is practiced. Was Himmler simply not being good enough?

There are consequences of dividing life into good and evil, God and Devil. We can believe that good can defeat evil, and we can wholeheartedly throw ourselves into the fight. If we believed good and evil were intertwined, both gifts of the same god, we could not fight the battle with such abandon.

But no person is completely good, and in destroying evil, there is no person who can escape judgement. A final victory in the battle against evil can leave no human alive; so the victory of good over evil will be a genocide, and thus the ultimate victory of evil over good.

