

Kiss the Frog **Presuming there's Beauty in Everyone**

By
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Someone told me a good joke yesterday about an old man who walking down the street when he hears a frog say, “Hey pal, if you kiss me I’ll turn into a beautiful princess.” So the man picks up the frog, puts it in his pocket, and continues walking. After a few minutes the frog says, “Hey, what’s the problem? I told you that if you kiss me I’d turn into a beautiful princess!” The old man responds, “Yeah, but at my age I think I’d rather just have a talking frog.”

It’s a pretty good joke, and the perfect way to introduce today’s topic about one of those rules to live by that most of us probably learned as children but may have forgotten about as we’ve grown a little older. A few familiar adages and cliché’s still hover about to remind us, “Don’t judge a book by its cover,” “Big things come in small packages,” and, “Expect the unexpected.” But it’s difficult to always remember these adages, let alone to live by them, in the wake of all we’ve seen in our lives. Sometimes, it seems, people can be so unworthy of the “benefit of the doubt.” When we read the newspapers and watch the headlines, we seldom see anything but misery upon misery inflicted upon others and ourselves by our fellow human beings. There are rapists and murders and kidnapers; along with rampant corporate greed; callous disregard for the environment; intolerance, bigotry and ignorance seem to exist as the moral foundation of our major world religions; and international governments continue their futile attempts to resolve their differences through violence and war. So we forget those fables about kissing frogs and transforming them into princes and princesses because experience has taught us it is better not to talk to strangers, that people can be dangerous.

But it is not only the strangers who let us down; it is often those who are closest to us—our friends and family members. We’ve all heard the frightening statistic that children are more likely to be kidnapped or abused by a family member than a stranger, and there are more people murdered by acquaintances than by strangers. In his book, *Dear Dad*, comedian Louie Anderson writes, “A few hours ago I was at the bank, and a nice woman came up to me and said, ‘Oh, you’re the comedian who doesn’t use the F-word.’

‘I use it all the time’ I said, ‘Family.’ It’s the dirtiest word I know.”¹

And in addition to our experience, our cultural paradigm, which has been largely influenced by Augustinian Christianity, has taught us to believe that all people are fundamentally flawed and fallen creatures; that every child is born evil and marred with original sin, and if it were not for a modicum of religion holding our inner wolf at bay,

¹ Anderson, Louie, *Dear Dad*, Penguin Books, New York, NY, 1989, 1991, p. 21.

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we would all give sway to our most savage inclinations and perverse desires. As the Apostle Paul put it, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”²

And after more than a hundred years since Freud, we have all come to understand that people are often motivated by hidden desires and repressed emotions of which even they themselves are unaware. So how can we trust the motives of others when we can no longer even trust our own motives?

And so we have learned, wisely at times, to use some discernment when it comes to judging people. But such discernment, such judgment, too often becomes prejudice, and we become prejudiced because of it. That is, we come to dismiss the strangers in our midst before ever giving them a chance. Today there are many countries that still institutionalize poverty through a caste system promoting the notion that some people are more worthy and noble than others, promoted by religions that blame the marginalized, and in which the marginalized blame themselves in the belief that their plight is a result of their own karma; that their misery is exactly what they deserve. But such prejudice is still rampant here in the West too, especially, in the U.S., a nation that got its start by justifying the extermination and genocide of its original inhabitants by dismissing them as godless heathens and savages. Since then it has been built upon the beaten backs of slaves, and the oppression and exploitation of desperate immigrants dismissed as micks, spics, slanty eyes, wops, gooks, and a slew of other slurs that have been used to justify the discrimination of others. Just this week our nation’s First Lady, Michelle Obama, made headlines by breaching royal protocol when she placed her arm around the Queen of England, a woman who is considered to be of such high nobility that she is not to be touched by others.

So how, with all this working against us—our history, our culture, our religion, and especially our own experiences of others—can we be expected to *kiss the frog*? Like the old man in the joke, sometimes it seems like we’d rather just have a talking frog than take the chance on being disappointed. And yet, despite all of this, there is something in us, something deeper and more profound than all our fears and prejudices that urges us to kiss the frog, to give it the benefit of the doubt, to not judge a book by its cover, and to expect the unexpected. Like Michelle Obama, there is something royal in us that commands us to embrace the royalty in others, even if it breeches protocol and public opinion.

In the original fairytale of the Frog Prince, it was the King who insisted that his daughter fulfill her promise to the frog, which she committed to befriend if it would fetch her golden ball from the bottom of a well. But afterward, she ran away from the frog as fast as she could, completely forgetting her promise to it.

The next evening, the princess was eating here dinner at the royal table when—
plitch, plotch, plitch, plotch—something came climbing up the stairs. When it reached the door, it knocked and cried:

² Romans 3:23

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Youngest daughter of the King,
Open the door for me!

The Princess rose from the table and ran to see who was calling her. When she opened the door, there sat the Frog, wet and green and cold! Quickly she slammed the door and sat down at the table again, her heart beating loud and fast. The King could see well enough that she was frightened and worried, and he said, "My child, what are you afraid of? Is there a giant out there who wants to carry you away?"

"Oh, no," said the Princess. "It's not a giant, but a horrid Frog!"

"And what does he want of you?" asked the King.

"Oh, dear, Father, as I was playing under the linden tree by the well, my golden ball fell into the water. And because I cried so hard, the Frog brought it back to me; and because he insisted so much, I promised him that he could be my playmate. But I never, never thought that he would ever leave his well. Now he is out there and wants to come in and eat from my plate and drink from my cup and sleep in my little bed. But I couldn't bear that, Papa, he's so wet and ugly and his eyes bulge out!"

While she was still talking, the Frog knocked at the door once more and said:

Youngest daughter of the King,
Open the door for me.
Mind your words at the old wellspring;
Open the door for me!

At that the King said, "If we make promises Daughter, we must keep them. So you had better go and open the door."

And so it is the King, representing the noblest part of us, who reminds us of our obligation to treat the Frogs we meet in life hospitably. This familiar fairytale is meant to help instill this lesson in children, but treating strangers with kindness is also a major principle in many religions. In *Leviticus*, for example, it is written, "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the stranger. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."³ The Prophet Ezekiel complained to his people that, "the stranger among you suffers extortion,"⁴ and, "[you] have extorted from the stranger without redress."⁵ "And in the Christian Scriptures, Jesus is reported to have said to the righteous, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."⁶

But these sayings and stories are not only about people who are strangers to us, but also about people who are simply strange to us. How many times do we misjudge, almost unthinkingly, someone simply because of their physical appearance; their height, their weight, their skin color, or because they are soft spoken, reserved, quiet or simply unattractive? How many times do we gloss over the people we pass each day as

³ Leviticus 19:33-34

⁴ Ezekiel 22:7

⁵ Ezekiel 22:29

⁶ Matthew 25:35

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insignificant, without considering their worth, or that they are worthy of our time and attention, or that they might be a prince or princess in disguise?

[Please watch the You Tube clip at the following link before continuing with the sermon; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEo5bjnJVIA>]

As Unitarian Universalists, we are committed to our first principle, *the worth and dignity of every person*, and, because of this, we do not have the privilege of ignoring the Frogs who come knocking at our doors. We must, as the Kings and Queens in us command, answer the call and meet our obligation, our promise, to treat the wet, ugly, bug-eyed strangers in our midst like royalty.

The only thing the Princess could do was let him in. Again he ate out of her golden plate, sipped out of her golden cup, and again slept at the foot of her bed. In the morning he went away as before.

The third night he came again. But this time he was not content to sleep at her feet. "I want to sleep under your pillow," he said. "I'd like it better there."

The girl thought she would never be able to sleep with a horrid, damp, goggle-eyed Frog under her pillow. She began to weep softly to herself and couldn't stop until she at last cried herself to sleep.

When the night was over and the morning sunlight burst in at the window, the Frog crept out from under her pillow and hopped off the bed. But as soon as his feet touched the floor something happened to him. In that moment he was no longer a cold, fat, goggle-eyed Frog—he had turned into a young Prince with handsome friendly eyes!

"You see," he said, "I wasn't what I seemed to be! A wicked old woman bewitched me. No one but you could break the spell, little Princess, and I waited and waited at the well for you to help me."

The Princess was speechless with surprise, but her eyes sparkled.

And will you let me be your playmate now?" said the Prince, laughing. "Mind your words at the old well spring!"

At this the Princess laughed too, and they both ran out to play with the golden ball.

For years they were the best of friends and the happiest of playmates, and it is not hard to guess, I'm sure, that when they were grown up they were married and lived happily ever after.

How many Frogs are waiting for us by the well spring? Waiting for us to answer our noblest calling to treat them with worth and dignity? To expect big things in small packages? To look beyond a book's cover to see its contents? To expect the unexpected? To kiss the Frog?