

Alice in UU Land

presented by the Worship Committee

September 27, 2015

Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Introduction

by Rick Kimball

Good morning and welcome to this first Worship Committee service of the new full-program church year. Recognizing that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was first published 150 years ago this fall, committee members spent part of the summer revisiting the book and reflecting on its content. Some of us were slowed down by such perplexities as the Mad Hatter's asking why a raven is like a writing desk, but when we met earlier this month we caught up with each other, plunged together down the rabbit hole after Alice, and emerged with today's program in mind. We invite you to start things off with us now by joining in the Mad Hatter's version of "Twinkle, Twinkle." In the book, the Dormouse sang it so long that others had to pinch him to stop. But we won't do that. We'll stop after three times through. No need to stand up, as you would so soon be sitting down again. The words are in your order of service.

Lesson for All Ages

by Leslie McConnell

Today's Worship Committee service is about Alice in Wonderland. We are going to explore this book because this year it turns 150 years old. It has been a very popular book for a long time. A lot of people have read it over the years and there are lots of ways to think about it. It is filled with many silly things and a lot of nonsense. In between all the silly stuff, some think there may be some Unitarian Universalist ideas in Lewis Carroll's book.

At Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church we celebrate diversity. That means UUs believe we should be accepting of people's and/or creature's differences. Our first UU principle says every person has dignity and worth. When Alice finds herself in Wonderland, she meets a whole bunch of interesting characters, whom she accepts – even if they are really different and a whole lot silly.

In case you never read the book, this is how it starts:

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversation in it, "what is the use of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?"

So she was considering, in her own mind (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid), whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies, when suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her.

There was nothing so very remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself "O dear! O dear! I shall be too late!" But when the Rabbit actually *took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket*, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.

In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was going to get out.

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(Show picture of the White Rabbit)

One of the next creatures Alice meets is a giant mouse. (show picture)
Alice starts talking about cats and dogs and the mouse swam away.

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Alice said, "Mouse dear! Do come back again, and we won't talk about cats, or dogs either, if you don't like them." When the Mouse heard this, it turned round and swam slowly back to her.

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Alice's adventure continues and she meets a Duck and a Dodo, a Lory and an Eaglet, and several other curious creatures. (Show picture) After they had a race, the animals wanted to give Alice a prize - a thimble she had had in her pocket. (Show picture)

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Alice thought the whole thing very absurd but they all looked so grave that she did not dare to laugh; and, as she could not think of anything to say, she simply bowed, and took the thimble, looking as solemn as she could.

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Imagine a frog and fish dressed up in fancy servant clothes. They are two more of the animals Alice meets along the way. (show picture) Alice tries to ask the frog footman a question.

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He was looking up into the sky all the time he was speaking and Alice thought this very uncivil. "But perhaps he can't help it," she said to herself; "his eyes are so *very* nearly at the top of his head."

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When the Queen asked Alice if she could play croquet, Alice said yes.

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"Come on then!" roared the Queen, and Alice joined the procession, wondering very much what would happen next. (Show picture)

Alice thought she had never seen such a curious croquet ground in her life: it was all ridges and furrows: the croquet balls were live hedgehogs, and the mallets live flamingoes, and the soldiers had to double themselves up and stand on their hands and feet to make the arches.

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And.....

Alice helped take care of a pig baby (show picture)
She watched a Gryphon and a Mock Turtle do a lobster dance (show picture)
And she went to a Mad Tea Party (show picture)
Wonder what you would do if you found yourself surrounded by this curious and curiouser assortment of characters? (show picture of Duchess and Alice) Would you join in their unusual games? Would you be accepting like Alice? We hope you wonder about Wonderland as we now sing you out to your RE classrooms.

Cheshire Rick

by Rick Kimball

Good morning. I am Rick Kimball, and I'm here to tell you something I have never before told anybody except my wife Tirrell and other members of the Worship Committee: Some decades ago, I was the original Cheshire cat. Cats have nine lives, as you know, but not all of them as cats. Through chance, or perhaps God's will – who knows? - I, in the form you see today, am a new iteration, a re-incarnation, of Wonderland's Cheshire Cat. In another life, by the way, my name was anonymous. I did a lot of writing in that life, but there lies a different story.

I won't tell you how many of my nine lives I have lived, because I don't wish to make my family nervous. But I will tell you a bit about being the Cheshire cat. I enjoyed the role, and I liked Alice. She accepted me, even though I told her she was mad and even though I made her giddy from time to time. She accepted me, just as she accepted the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle and living flamingo croquet mallets. Alice was the model of Unitarian Universalist acceptance. I think she would have accepted everybody in this congregation, too.

Existing as the Cheshire Cat was perfect for an introvert. When mad tea parties grew uncomfortably loud, I could simply paste a frozen smile on my face and let the rest of me fade away into the sanctuary of mystery.

Which is also what I did when I left that life. Faded away into the sanctuary of mystery and, with a few bumps and detours along the way, evolved into the current me. People wonder what happens at death. Well I am what happens at death. So are you. Life comes out of death, just as death comes out of life.

"Curiouser and curiouser," my friend Alice might have said. And perhaps she will say that today for perhaps she is here among us in her own new form. In fact, I think she is. I won't call her out and give her secret away. But I will at least hint that she's a very accepting lady.

"Curiouser again," my friend Alice might say in her new form, but what might you say? Perhaps the word *nonsense* comes to mind as a useful descriptor for all I have so far told you.

Precisely so. That's the message of *Alice in Wonderland*, which should be high on our list of Unitarian Universalist sources. A sense of nonsense might seem oxymoronic self-cancelling. But in that sense of nonsense lies the key to our acceptance of life. We need not put aside our search through the mystery

for meaning. We need not and should not end our struggles for justice. But we must leave room for nonsense and humor and gryphons and mock turtles and living flamingo croquet mallets.

Sometime when you despair for this country, reconstrue it in your mind as the United States of Wonderland. Look, there in that tree, a Cheshire Trump, fading away, leaving only his gleaming teeth – or is that his hair- to shine upon us. And look beyond the Cheshire Trump to the rushing white rabbit, the one with the Hillary Clinton pin, saying “Oh dear, oh dear, where can those e-mails be?” And sometime when you despair for the state of Maine, reconstrue it in your mind as the State of Wonderland. Look there, in the fiefdom of Augusta, is that the Queen of Hearts? No it’s not a queen, it’s a page, it is Paul the Page, standing with his hands on his hips and shouting “Off with their heads!”

See? Sometimes a sense of nonsense can be our strength and salvation. Thank you. Alice. Thank you, Cheshire Cat. Thank you, Lewis Carroll.

Down the Rabbit Hole

by Erica L. Bartlett

Have you ever gone down a rabbit hole? Not a literal one, of course, unless like Alice you’ve discovered some way to shrink yourself. But perhaps something outside the ordinary has caught your attention, exciting your curiosity enough that you’ve decided to investigate.

Such rabbit holes may relate to anything, from the mundane to the profound. The question is, do we follow Alice’s lead, who went down “never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.”

In some ways this is the easier approach, since when we stop to consider, we may hesitate. What if we *can’t* get out? Or what if we find something dangerous, something that makes us reconsider how we define ourselves? Even with these questions, though, eventually our curiosity and need to know might draw us on.

It wasn’t until my mom went down a rabbit hole herself that I realized just how much courage this could sometimes take. It happened when, in her 30’s, she tackled the thorny issue of spirituality.

To give you some background, she had grown up *very* Catholic, only starting to question some of her beliefs when she married my dad and spent time with his family, all of whom had left their religion far behind. Eventually my parents found Allen Avenue, where they could both be comfortable with their beliefs, and we started coming here before I was 10.

But while my mom had questioned some things, I don’t think she truly began to shed her old beliefs in exchange for something new for a few more years. After all, even though our UU principles encourage spiritual growth, you might be hard-pressed to define a bigger and potentially more frightening rabbit hole. Giving up the safety of what you have thought all your life, and choosing to explore those deeper questions of truth, divinity, the afterlife, and more, can bring you to as many strange places as Alice.

In my mom's case, as far as I can tell it started when I asked her to bring me here to see a film called *The Old Religion*, presented by a wonderful crone named Nancy Hutchison. I'd been reading *The Mists of Avalon* and various fantasy books that referenced goddesses, and I was curious to learn more.

The film started our exploration of religions that focused on a feminine divine. For me, it felt natural to be questioning patriarchy and all that came with it. I was a teenager – it was my job to question things. But I didn't realize how difficult it was for my mom until she and I took *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven* together. For those not familiar with it, it's a course that explores older, goddess-based religions, and looks at how more patriarchal religions have influenced all areas of our lives.

In our discussions, I began to realize that it was hard, even frightening, for my mom to let go of her childhood religion, to find a spirituality that spoke to her and decide for herself what she believed. At the same time, I know she felt empowered and enriched by this process. I suspect it gave her a different view of the world and greater self-confidence, and I know it gave her strength when she went through her cancer treatments, since she told me about some visions she'd had during those times. I can only hope it also offered her some comfort when she lost that battle to cancer.

Not all rabbit holes go as deep as this, but many do, and I sometimes find myself hesitating on the threshold of going down one, afraid of what I might find. When I do, thinking about my mom helps. Like Alice, she gave me an example of courage and curiosity, a willingness to explore, and an openness to accepting new things. And perhaps, like both her and Alice, if I go down the rabbit hole, I will find something wondrous.

Notes After Re-Reading Alice in Wonderland

by Elizabeth Forrest

Georgette Sampson is a total Anglophile. She is also my mother, the daughter of English parents growing up in the 1930's and 40's. She has always been interested in English culture and literature (she taught it for a number of years) and she has embraced her British roots ever more closely as she has aged. Her parents were in their mid-forties when the stork brought baby Georgette around, and they must have been quite Edwardian in their parenting style, harkening back to their remembered childhoods in the 19-aughts and 1910s, when Alice (remember Alice?) was still a relatively young classic—only 40 or 50 years old. Because they were closer to the book's country and era of origin, I suspect that despite its nonsensical nature, the book probably would have made far more sense to my Nanna and Granddaddy than it did to me.

I first read Alice somewhere around age nine, about 1970, after Mother had 'suggested' it to me so many times I had to at least pick it up and *pretend* to enjoy it. I remember could barely find my way through to the end, my young brain squeezed and squashed by the crowds of confusing characters, disconnected events, bizarre perspective changes and, most of all, the

unfamiliar terms. --Hedgehog? Gryphon? Quadrille? Hookah? Mock turtle? ? (I thought that was a style of shirt collar...) and I distinctly remember pronouncing o the flamingo game as 'Krokwet.'

Reading it again, now, with the deeper cultural and historical understanding of 40+ years, I still didn't like it very much—I have all the same complaints the second time round, and though I have since met live hedgehogs and fantasy realm Gryphons, have a family croquet set and might even be able to dance a quadrille if I tried, the book seems even more culturally remote to me than it did back in 1970. It feels to me as if it is enfolded in stiff Victorian lace and with sickly sweet cherubs smiling idiotically as they drop showers of rose petals from overhead

Having said all that, I must admit that I met many familiar icons and images as I reread it, and I enjoyed the nonsensical songs and poems and greatly admired the cleverness of the wordplay (all of which eluded me entirely at age ten). In fact, thinking back those icons informed my world in many ways.

I have listened to storytelling near the sculpture of Alice in Central Park. I grew up with all the controversies about "Go Ask Alice"-- the drug-laden book, and the somewhat later popular songs that included many references to both the book and the Drug culture. I have encountered cartoons concerned with caterpillars seated on mushrooms, and have, countless times, recited the Disney White Rabbit's theme song "I'm late, I'm late for a very important date..."

I learned this song listening to our 1962 vintage 'Danny Kaye for Children' record while bouncing wildly on the living room couch (though only while my mother was in the kitchen, out of sight)

I have read and heard so many other references to mad tea parties and mad hatters, and have at times felt my own world growing 'curiouser and curiouser' in ways that made me wonder "Was it something I ate, or did I fall down a rabbit hole without knowing it?" So I can see why it has survived this long, despite it's Anglocentrism and sappy finale (oh, sweet, fleeting imagination of childhood...) The images and imagination (not to mention the randomness) of the characters and Alice's adventures have definitely been part of my life late20thCentury life.

I will tell you though: I will not force this book on my kid—it is a very rare 'classic' that keeps its relevance forever (ask any children's librarian about this—they will all show you shelves of untouched Newbery Award books from eras past). Personally, I think Alice's days on the well lit shelves are probably just about up, but I also wonder which book that is being written today will have the same impact on my potential great grandkids? Perhaps we'd all better get cracking on that book idea we have... cause you never know.

Alice as Role Model

by John Howard

Alice is a role model for moving gracefully through wildly unfamiliar territory, willing to engage with very difficult characters while keeping intact her sense of self. While the dream world created by Lewis Carroll scarcely resembles real life, there are times I wish I had Alice's poise and sense of adventure, especially in my encounters with obstinate or baffling people. It is Alice's active and fearless engagement with everyone she meets that I most admire, and it is worth taking a look at the qualities she exhibits (they all seem to begin with the letter 'c'): courage, confidence, courtesy, compassion and curiosity.

This is not to say that Lewis Carroll intended his two books to be moral tales of the sort so prevalent in his time. They were flights of fantasy written for entertainment in which he indulged his delight in word play and paradox,. But none of this would hang together without a central character that propelled the story and engaged our interest. Carroll was obviously very fond of his character Alice and the young person upon whom she is based, and it is worthwhile exploring why Alice continues to appeal to generation after generation.

I draw most of my examples from the second book, Through the Looking Glass.

Courage and Confidence. Alice moves bravely through chaotic and unpredictable scenes, but I think we can attribute a lot of this to the way dreams are experienced. This story, after all, is a marvelously vivid account of a dream, and those of us who remember our dreams have probably noticed that the weirdness is often taken in stride by our dream-selves. Still, I love the way Alice finds some way to deal with absurd situations by drawing on her skills and experiences, the way young children sometimes do. Her resources at age 7 ½ were limited, but they included a strong sense of how things are done, and no hesitancy in offering an opinion or tossing off a poem.

There is a LOT of poetry in these books. Much of the humor of the nonsense poems derives from the fact that many are based on poems that were well-known by Lewis Carroll's readers. Today we can hear "How doth the little crocodile improve his shining tail" or "Tis the voice of the lobster: I heard him declare, 'you have baked me too brown, I must sugar my hair'", with no idea of the original, but they are still funny. But notice also how Alice yearns to avoid the tedium of endless recitation.

"As to poetry, you know," said Humpty Dumpty, stretching out one of his great hands, "I can repeat poetry as well as other folk, if it comes to that –"

"Oh, it needn't come to that!" Alice hastily said, hoping to keep him from beginning.

"The piece I'm going to repeat," he went on without noticing her remark, "was written entirely for your amusement."

*Alice felt that in that case she really **ought** to listen to it; so she sat down, and said "Thank you" rather sadly.*

Courtesy. Alice was well brought-up – in a time when the rules were a lot clearer than they are today. Rules of etiquette were designed as guides in negotiating with others, even in conflicts and disagreements. Etiquette did not condone falsehood. Carroll gets some humor from this.

“I know what you’d like!” the Queen said good-naturedly, taking a little box out of her pocket. “Have a biscuit?”

Alice thought it would not be civil to say “No,” though it wasn’t at all what she wanted. So she took it and ate it as well as she could...

“While you’re refreshing yourself,” said the Queen, “I’ll just take the measurements.”...have another biscuit?”

“No, thank you,” said Alice: “one’s quite enough!”

“Thirst quenched, I hope?” said the Queen.

Alice did not know what to say to this, but luckily the Queen did not wait for an answer, but went on.

One might add “truthful” to the list of admirable qualities, though it doesn’t begin with the letter ‘c’.

Compassion. I must turn to the John Tenniel illustrations for this. Here is Alice helping the White Queen with her shawl. Here she is helping to prepare Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum for their ridiculous battle. And here is the Knight head first in a ditch, with Alice bravely reaching to assist, though I don’t see how she’s going to do it. And I recall that in the first book she was so disdraught with the way the Duchess was tossing her baby around in Pig and Pepper that she was given the child to look after. Unfortunately it turned into a pig.

Curiosity. Now at last I think we have come to the chief virtue. Lewis Carroll has put his beloved Alice in some pretty terrifying and bizarre situations, and it’s her curiosity that puts her on top every time. Furthermore, most of the characters Alice meets are impossibly contrary and argumentative. Yet she doesn’t back off or throw a tantrum. She rarely passes judgement. She stays engaged because of her youthful curiosity. In my day to day life it is good to think of this when things are not turning out the way I expected them to, or when I’m shutting out an unpleasant person or experience. A bit of curiosity can help to keep both my mind and my heart open. And that’s when the adventure really begins.

A Technical Contradiction of Nonsense and its Meaninglessness

by Michael Crosby

Good morning. Perhaps you have noticed that, all appearances being to the contrary I am not Michael Crosby is in Lancaster looking at a dog with one brain. “Oh, I know!” exclaimed Alice, who had not attended to this last remark. “It’s a vegetable. It doesn’t look like one, but it is.”

“I quite agree with you,” said the Duchess; “and the moral of that is - ‘Be what you would seem to be’ - or, if you’d like it put more simply - ‘Never imagine

yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise.”

What is Nonsense? A brief history of the nonsense author who writes so far remains a mystery. Edward Lear has an exciting track the nonsense work carried out by Lewis Carroll in a long time. Lewis Carroll, and how not recorded the rate that applied when he wrote a poem, so, no one knows exactly Alice in Wonderland was created how. In the history of writing meaning is not a new word but not to the Nonsense verse just a century to become one of the genres famous leading the world, comparable to those epics and most famous ancient. The ancient Greeks had a word for it: *ἀεροπρογεφυρωμα*, but it was the wrong word. People who participate in the nonsense process teach them from the very careful, otherwise they will heal the sick, become damaged and do not listen to lies.

With that brief history of Nonsense, we move on to meaning. For example: Is it a sin to send two tutus to Tutu too many? Nonsense? Nonsense! Nonsense means non sense and *that* makes perfect sense. It's just silly. Back to Charles Dodgson who of course wrote Jabberwocky.

‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe: All mimsy
were the borogoves, And the mome raths outgrabe.

Carroll wrote it as nonsense but once you define the words which Humpty Dumpty did do, it makes sense and can be illustrated with a most agreeable and sensible drawing as Tenniel, unlike what the Doesburg, Delaunay duo does, does, thus demonstrating the categorizing of Jabberwocky as nonsense, nonsense.

And so the question still remains: What is Nonsense?

Oh!!

Closing Words

Adapted from Lewis Carroll

May we, like Alice, “keep, through all our riper years, the simple and loving heart of our childhood... and find a pleasure in all [our] simple joys, remembering our own child-life, and the happy summer days.”