

“THE TREASURE CHEST OF GREEK MYTHOLOGY: 5) STAND UP TO THE GODS!”

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February 20-21, 2010

Call to Gather from Charles L. Mee (a contemporary playwright)

You take a Greek play and stick things on it and then you remove the Greek play, the way you remove the scaffolding from a building after its construction, or the mold from a sculpture, and you are left with something you've made. The Greek scaffolding or mold remains as the invisible structure. The characters and themes resonate with both past and present.¹

Reading from Salman Rushdie's Commencement Address at Bard College, May 1996
The novelist Salman Rushdie delivered the commencement address at Bard College seven years after Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini issued a fatwa calling for Rushdie's death. In his speech, Rushdie shared how he almost missed his own undergraduate commencement—initially because he was (unjustly) blamed for someone's hurling brown gravy-and-onion sauce all over his dorm room and then because he wore brown rather than black shoes to the graduation ceremony. Threatened with not being allowed to graduate, he paid for the damage to his room and sprinted back to his room to change into black shoes.

Hubris, according to the Greeks, was the sin of defying the gods, and could, if you were really unlucky, unleash against you the terrifying, avenging figure of the goddess Nemesis, who carried in one hand an apple-bough and, in the other, the Wheel of Fortune, which would one day circle round to the inevitable moment of vengeance. As I have been, in my time, accused not only of gravy abuse and wearing brown shoes but of hubris, too, and since I have come to believe that such defiance is an inevitable and essential aspect of what we call freedom, I thought I might commend it to you. For in the years to come you will find yourselves up against gods of all sorts, big and little gods, corporate and incorporeal gods, all of them demanding to be worshipped and obeyed - the myriad deities of money and power, of convention and custom, that will seek to limit and control your thoughts and lives. Defy them; that's my advice to you. Thumb your noses; cock your snooks. For, as the myths tell us, it is by defying the gods that human beings have best expressed their humanity. The Greeks tell many stories of quarrels between us and the gods. Arachne, the great artist of the loom, sets her skills of weaving and embroidery against those of the goddess of

¹ Introduction to Charles Mee, "True Love" from *Divine Fire: Eight Contemporary Plays Inspired by the Greeks*, Caridad Svich, ed. (New York: Back Stage Books, 2005), p. 211.

wisdom herself, Minerva or Pallas Athene; and impudently chooses to weave versions of only those scenes which reveal the mistakes and weaknesses of the gods - the rape of Europa, Leda and the Swan. For this - for the irreverence, not for her lesser skill - for what we would now call art, and chutzpah - the goddess changes her mortal rival into a spider. Queen Niobe of Thebes tells her people not to worship Latona, the mother of Diana and Apollo, saying "What folly is this! - To prefer beings whom you never saw to those who stand before your eyes!" For this sentiment, which today we would call humanism, the gods murder her children and husband, and she metamorphoses into a rock, petrified with grief, from which there trickles an unending river of tears. Prometheus the Titan steals fire from the gods and gives it to mankind. For this - for what we would now call the desire for progress, for improved scientific and technological capabilities - he is bound to a rock while a great bird gnaws eternally at his liver, which regenerates as it is consumed. The interesting point is that the gods do not come out of these stories at all well... Who could prefer the rule of such cruel gods to self-rule, the rule of men and women by men and women, however flawed that may be? Once again, the gods are weakened by their show of strength, while the human beings grow stronger, even though - even as - they are destroyed...

It is men and women who have made the world, and they have made it in spite of their gods. The message of the myths is not the one the gods would have us learn - that we should behave ourselves and know our place - but its exact opposite. It is that we must be guided by our natures. Our worst natures can, it's true, be arrogant, venal, corrupt, or selfish; but in our best selves, we - that is, you - can and will be joyous, adventurous, cheeky, creative, inquisitive, demanding, competitive, loving, and defiant.

Do not bow your heads. Do not know your place. Defy the gods. You will be astonished how many of them turn out to have feet of clay. Be guided, if possible, by your better natures.²

Sermon

With surprising regularity, the gods and goddesses in Greek mythology are—to put it rather mildly—petty, capricious jerks. They more resemble the authorities at Salman Rushdie's university, making him pay for damage to his dorm room that someone else did and making him change from brown to black shoes, than wise and enlightened beings. They often fall well short of the ethics that we mere mortals strive to live by. They commonly lie, manipulate, dish out punishment far exceeding what is just, torture, and sometimes outright murder people they've taken a dislike to. They have a lot of power compared to humans—power they regularly misuse in shocking ways.

Also in the myths, many of the gods' human victims don't shy away from verbally blasting back at the capricious gods. They don't just lie down and take whatever the gods throw at them. And many of them actively resist the gods, often at great personal cost.

Sometimes in the myths, the part of human victim is actually played by lower gods. These lower gods have so much less power than the high and mighty gods like Zeus that they might as well be human. In the *Odyssey*, for example, the messenger god Hermes is sent by Zeus to free Odysseus from bondage to Calypso. Odysseus has been held captive by the sea

² <http://www.richmondreview.co.uk/library/rushdi01.html>.

nymph Calypso for eight years. Calypso is a god of sorts, but not a very powerful one. Here's the dialogue of Hermes' and Calypso's encounter, from Mary Zimmerman's adaptation:

CALYPSO: Hermes! What brings you here? You hardly ever come!...

HERMES: I was sent. You think I'd come otherwise?
Who would come over all that water
if someone didn't make him? It was unending,
Not a single city on the way, no mortals
to make sacrifices, nothing to do.³
But when Zeus makes up his mind—

CALYPSO: Zeus? What does he want with me?

HERMES: He says you have some man here left over from Troy.
Ten years ago he did something to offend Poseidon
and there's been trouble ever since. Now it seems
Athena wants him home, and Zeus agrees.
You have to let him go and give him transport.

CALYPSO: What monsters you are!

HERMES: Excuse me?

CALYPSO: You gods who live up in the sky!

Calypso gives in, but not before continuing her rant against the higher gods for a little longer.⁴

In Euripides' play *Iphigenia in Tauris*, the gods are depicted as very flawed. In one scene, Iphigenia has a divinely inspired dream in which she learns that her beloved brother Orestes is dead. Well, it turns out that reports of Orestes' death have been greatly exaggerated. In the drama's climactic scene, Orestes and Iphigenia are talking to each other—only neither of them recognizes the other. Orestes tells his sister that he is quite certain that Orestes is not dead.

IPHIGENIA: (But) I dreamt Orestes dead! It was a lie!

ORESTES: Dreams, lies, lies, dreams—nothing but emptiness!
Even the gods with all Their name for wisdom,
Have only dreams and lies and lose Their course,
Blinded, confused, and ignorant as we.
The wisest men follow their own direction
And listen to no prophet guiding them.
None but the fools believe in oracles,
Forsaking their own judgment.⁵

³ What a whiner Hermes is!

⁴ Karen Zimmerman, *The Odyssey* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), pp. 34-35.

Another example of human resistance to jerky gods can be found in the contemporary playwright Karen Hartman's *Troy Women*, a faithful adaptation of Euripides' *The Trojan Women*. *Troy Women* is the story of the very embittered women of Troy after their city's destruction. Queen Hecuba, for example, has seen her beloved son Hector die in battle with Achilles in the battle for Troy, and her husband is killed in the sacking of Troy after its fall. Her house, her city, her family, her life: all in tatters. She has nothing left. "Where are you, gods, and what do you actually do?" she asks accusingly. And then she attacks the gods for their inability to answer prayers: "Prayers are not answered./They tangle in the trees like worthless fog."⁶

But the greatest critic of the gods may be Prometheus. Prometheus' story is vividly portrayed in a trilogy by Aeschylus. Technically Prometheus is also a god—he is one of the Titans, the rulers of the universe whom Zeus and the other Olympians ousted. Prometheus buys himself temporary goodwill by switching sides and backing the Olympians in the battle. But his stature and power are nonetheless greatly diminished by the Titans' defeat. When he steals fire and gives it to the newly created humans who are struggling to survive, he loses everything. Zeus goes ballistic.

In the first play of Aeschylus' trilogy—the only one that survives intact—the action opens with Prometheus facing the music of Zeus' wrath. A god, acting on Zeus' orders, chains Prometheus to a rock in the middle of nowhere. All of the play's action takes place by that rock. Zeus never appears in the play, but his villainous, cruel rage is the drama's epicenter. Aeschylus' portrayal of Zeus leaves little doubt: Zeus is a monstrous tyrant. Here's a taste of Prometheus' condemnation of Zeus:

I call upon you to see what I, a God, suffer
at the hands of Gods—
see with what kind of torture
worn down I shall wrestle ten thousand
years of time—
such is the spiteful bond that (Zeus)
has devised against me...

I know that he is savage: and his justice
a thing he keeps by his own standard.⁷

Prometheus makes no effort to hide his desire to see Zeus destroyed. "I care less than nothing/for Zeus," he says.⁸ And he chooses to speak aloud his outrage. "To speak of this is bitterness," he says. But "to keep silent/bitter no less; ...every way is misery."⁹

Aeschylus ratchets up the drama when Hermes (the same callous messenger portrayed in Zimmerman's *Odyssey*) appears. Zeus has gotten wind that in his ranting, Prometheus revealed

⁵ Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris* in *Greek Tragedies, Volume 2* edited by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 137.

⁶ Karen Hartman, *Troy Women* in *Divine Fire*, pp. 39, 59, 65.

⁷ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* in *Greek Tragedies, Vol. 1* edited by Grene and Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 69, 72.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

that there will come a time when Zeus will need his help. He predicts that an ill-considered marriage of Zeus will bring about the high god's downfall. Prometheus famously has the ability to foretell the future, so Zeus takes this prophecy seriously. He sends Hermes (yes, the same god whom he sends to order Calypso to release Odysseus) to find out the name of the person Zeus will marry. If Prometheus doesn't identify the name, Hermes threatens to accelerate Prometheus' torture—as if being chained to a rock in perpetuity isn't enough! Hermes threatens to prove that Zeus is “not softhearted”—as if that's what Prometheus is thinking of Zeus as he's chained to that rock.

Well, Prometheus refuses to budge: “Hasten away, back on the road you came./You shall learn nothing that you ask of me,” he tells Hermes.

Hermes then describes exactly what the new torture will be:

First this rough crag
with thunder and the lightning bolt the Father
shall cleave asunder, and shall hide your body
wrapped in a rocky clasp within its depth...
Then Zeus's winged hound, the eagle red,
shall tear great shreds of flesh from you, a feaster
coming unbidden, every day; your liver
bloodied to blackness will be his repast.
And of this pain do not expect an end...

Unbowed, Prometheus still refuses to give in. Hermes—like so many henchmen of torture throughout human history—tells Prometheus that he should not blame fortune or Zeus for his calamity. Blame yourself, Hermes tells him. “You know what you're doing.” It's your choice.

The play ends with Prometheus lamenting his situation:

O Holy mother mine,
O sky that circling brings the light to all,
you see me, how I suffer, how unjustly.¹⁰

So what is the lesson of these stories? The high gods generally come out on top, even when they're being capricious, immoral jerks. So is the lesson, as is traditionally thought, that we should give in and always obey the gods? Or, as Salman Rushdie suggests, is it actually the opposite? The mythologist Wendy Doniger notes that a single myth often expresses “the traditional view cheek by jowl with a view that subverts it.”¹¹ In her view, Prometheus and other similar myths demonstrate “that the gods (or those in power) are so vengeful and petty that they deserve to be challenged, and that those who challenge them live forever in human memory—in the myth.” She draws the same lesson as Rushdie.¹²

As I've shared before, I am not sure there are any gods. And if there are, I certainly don't think they running around messing with our lives, or helping us. For me, the real power in these

¹⁰ Aeschylus, pp. 101-106.

¹¹ Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 104.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

myths lies in this: they offer compelling metaphors or prototypes for standing up to people who exercise power tyrannically.

Which brings me to Neda Agha-Soltan. She is the young Iranian protestor whose callous murder by government forces last June has been seen ‘round the world. Through the most potent weapon Iranians dissidents have right now—images captured on cell phones and then distributed through the internet—millions of people have seen footage of Neda’s death. It is curious that she has become the face of this latest Iranian revolution: though sympathetic to the protest movement, it’s unclear whether she even planned on being at the rally that fateful day in June. According to her fiancé, she and her music teacher got caught in a traffic jam. They left their car to escape the heat. As they walked through the throng gathered to protest the corrupt Iranian election, Neda talked on her cell phone. Perhaps singled out because she was on her phone, she was shot in the chest. The video shows her just after she hits the ground, a large pool of blood already next to her. Her eyes are open, looking for a moment at the camera. She seems to radiate calm even as panicked bystanders desperately try to revive her. A half minute into the video, blood comes out her nose and mouth as the life visibly and quickly drains from her body.

In Farsi, the spoken language of Iran, “Neda” has a spiritual connotation relating to “call” or “voice.” The powerful image of her death has become not only an indictment of the brutality of the Iranian regime; she has become a call to action—a call to stand up to the oppressive government, a call to find the voice of dissent. One songwriter composed a song about her that contains these lines:

You left and thousands of flowers grew,
you left and my patience finished...
Your loving look is full of demand.
Sleep, sweet lady of Iran.¹³

The regime in Iran has cast itself in the role of the tyrannical Zeus in the Prometheus story. It seems evident that there is almost no evil this regime would not sink to in order to cling to power. If they could chain the leaders of the dissent to a rock and have an eagle eat their livers every day, I think they would. Neda Agha-Soltan and the other brave resisters play the role of Prometheus in the drama, standing up to brutal tyrants even though it seems utterly hopeless. Prometheus is a powerful myth of courageous dissent, even in the face of hideous torture.

In Iran, in the face of brutal repression and consequent long odds, the dissenters continue to stand up to the government to the best of their abilities. The jury is out on whether they will ultimately succeed. Horrible regimes do manage to stay in power for a long time (think Burma and North Korea and even China, to name a few current examples). But sooner or later, the will of the people often does finally win out. If it does in Iran, Neda Agha-Soltan will have been a huge reason why.

To bring this a little closer to home, as many of you know, Uganda’s Parliament is currently considering a bill which would criminalize homosexuality. It would prescribe life imprisonment and even the death penalty for gays and lesbians. Allies of bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender people would also face severe punishments. One of the few religious

¹³ The song lyrics and description of Neda Soltani’s death come from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jun/22/neda-soltani-death-iran> and <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/23/world/middleeast/23neda.html>.

organizations in Uganda opposing this horrific legislation is the Unitarian Universalist Church of Kampala. Just a week ago, more than two hundred Ugandans bravely gathered in the shadow of persecution to organize opposition to the bill. They adopted a petition for equality which will be presented to Parliament, and they participated in workshops to further the campaign opposing the bill. The Rev. Mark Kiyimba of the UU Church in Kampala declared to the conference:

I cannot stand by and watch as my community is exterminated...What this work means to me is that my church can take a leading role in liberating sexual minorities in Uganda...People should have freedom of worship and of relationship. The fact remains that BGLT people exist. They are in Uganda. My dream for Uganda is a Uganda that would look like any other country where all people are equal on all sides of the law: black, white, gay, straight, rich, poor.¹⁴

Risking their reputations, their livelihoods, and, if the bill passes, their freedom and potentially even their lives, the BGLT Unitarian Universalists and their allies in Uganda are standing up to injustice. As Unitarian Universalists in this country, I believe we are called to support and stand in solidarity with our Ugandan brothers and sisters as they stand up to injustice. I should share that Dottie Mathews is in regular touch with the Rev. Kiyimba, and that our Fellowship helped fund a Christmas celebration for the Kampala church. And I drafted a letter of solidarity and support from the UU Partner Church Council (of which the Kampala church is a member) and had it delivered to the conference.

Let's bring this even closer to home. Each of us in our lives has opportunities to stand up to those who abuse power. This is not just something we can do in the political realm. Sometimes we encounter tyrannies where we work or where we go to school. There can also be tyrannies such as conventional wisdom. But here's the hard part: sometimes tyranny is real and substantive and cries out for our courageous opposition. Other times, tyranny is more imagined than real; it is really little more than a product of our narcissistic imaginations. Such perceived tyranny can be a product of making an idol of individual freedom in a way detrimental to the well-being of community or, more broadly, the common good. Part of living in a community or a democratic society is that not everything goes. There are boundaries of behavior that promote the well-being of the community. So discerning whether a perceived tyranny is real or not is tricky—and plenty of people have done bad things fighting imagined tyrannies. And still other times, tyranny is real but not substantive. In life we have to pick our battles. From time to time we are wise to let petty tyrannies go so we have the energy and focus to work against the larger tyrannies.

When we decide to stand up to tyranny, it is not always easy, either. Sometimes, as with Neda Agha-Soltan, as with our Unitarian Universalist sisters and brothers in Uganda, it involves tremendous risk. Prometheus' bravely stealing fire for the welfare of humanity is symbolic of how much we sometimes need to risk—and of the courage to go ahead and take the risk anyway.

Communities such as this one can help us discern when to stand up and when not to. And they can help support us when we choose to stand up against injustice. In spite of the difficulty of discerning when and how to stand up, in spite of the enormous risks doing so sometimes entails, the world needs us to do this work. I do believe the moral arc of the universe

¹⁴ <http://www.uua.org/news/newssubmissions/158444.shtml> and <http://www.uua.org/news/newssubmissions/158042.shtml>.

bends toward justice—but only if you and I help do the bending. Because, alas, the gods won't do it for us!

We'll end the sermon with an anthem to standing up to the gods written by Bob Marley and Peter Tosh: "Get Up, Stand Up":

Get up, stand up: stand up for your rights!
Get up, stand up: stand up for your rights!
Get up, stand up: stand up for your rights!
Get up, stand up: don't give up the fight!

Preacherman, don't tell me,
Heaven is under the earth.
I know you don't know
What life is really worth.
It's not all that glitters is gold;
'Alf the story has never been told:
So now you see the light, eh!
Stand up for your rights. Come on!

Get up, stand up: stand up for your rights!
Get up, stand up: don't give up the fight!
Get up, stand up: stand up for your rights!
Get up, stand up: don't give up the fight!

Most people think,
Great God will come from the skies,
Take away everything
And make everybody feel high.
But if you know what life is worth,
You will look for yours on earth:
And now you see the light,
You stand up for your rights. Jah!

Get up, stand up! (Jah, Jah!)
Stand up for your rights! (Oh-hoo!)
Get up, stand up! (Get up, stand up!)
Don't give up the fight! (Life is your right!)
Get up, stand up! (So we can't give up the fight!)
Stand up for your rights! (Lord, Lord!)
Get up, stand up! (Keep on struggling on!)
Don't give up the fight! (Yeah!)

We sick an' tired of-a your ism-skism game -
Dyin' 'n' goin' to heaven in-a Jesus' name, Lord.
We know when we understand:
Almighty God is a living man.

You can fool some people sometimes,
But you can't fool all the people all the time.
So now we see the light (What you gonna do?),
We gonna stand up for our rights! (Yeah, yeah, yeah!)

So you better:

Get up, stand up! (In the morning! Git it up!)
Stand up for your rights! (Stand up for our rights!)
Get up, stand up!
Don't give up the fight! (Don't give it up, don't give it up!)
Get up, stand up! (Get up, stand up!)
Stand up for your rights! (Get up, stand up!)
Get up, stand up! (...)
Don't give up the fight! (Get up, stand up!)
Get up, stand up! (...)
Stand up for your rights!
Get up, stand up!
Don't give up the fight!¹⁵

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¹⁵ <http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/Get-up-stand-up-lyrics-Bob-Marley/D79A2DC5A5D85CF848256945000C8598>.