



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Here be dragons

Clay Nelson © 27 October 2019

I've made no secret of my fascination with dragons. I've read a number of stories featuring dragons to the children at "Time for all ages." A film depicting these flying fireballs armoured with scales is certain to entice me to watch. If you were to browse my extensive audiobook library at least one out of three are about the protagonists engaging with dragons. As you will see, these turn out to be theology textbooks. So, it was only a matter of time before I gave a sermon on them. That time is today. What captured my imagination, the required first step in writing any sermon, was encountering the phrase "Here be dragons." It is associated with ancient maps, but before exploring why I realised I needed to learn more about them than the little I had gleaned from one of my favourite dragon movies, *How to train your dragon*.

Dragon tales are known in many cultures, from the Americas to Europe, and from India to China.

The word "dragon" comes from the ancient Greek word "draconta," meaning "to watch," suggesting that the beast guards treasure, such as mountains of gold coins or gems. But this doesn't really make sense because a creature as powerful as a dragon surely doesn't need to pay for anything, right? It's probably more of a symbolic treasure, not for the hoarding dragon but instead a reward for the brave knights who would vanquish the evil beast.

Dragons are one of the few monsters cast in mythology primarily as a powerful and fearsome opponent to be slain. They don't simply exist for their own sake; they exist largely as a foil for bold adventurers.

It's not clear when or where stories of dragons first emerged, but they were described at least as early as the age of the ancient Greeks and Sumerians. For much of history dragons were thought of as being like any other mythical animal: sometimes useful and protective, other times harmful and dangerous.

That changed when Christianity spread across the world; dragons took on a decidedly sinister interpretation and came to represent Satan. In medieval times, most people who heard anything about dragons knew them from the Bible, and it's likely that most Christians at the time believed they literally existed. After all, Leviathan — the massive monster described in detail in the Book of Job, chapter 41 — sounds like a dragon:

"Its back has rows of shields tightly sealed together; each is so close to the next that no air can pass between. They are joined fast to one another; they cling together and cannot be parted. Its snorting throws out flashes of light; its eyes are like the rays of dawn. Flames stream from its mouth; sparks of fire shoot out. Smoke pours from its nostrils as from a boiling pot over burning reeds. Its breath sets coals ablaze, and flames dart from its mouth."

The belief in dragons was based not just in legend but also in hard evidence, or at least that's what people thought, long ago. For millennia no one knew what to make of the giant bones that were occasionally unearthed around the globe, and dragons seemed a logical choice for people who had no knowledge of dinosaurs.

The Christian church created legends around these artefacts preserved in texts of righteous and godly saints battling and vanquishing Satan in the form of dragons. St George being the most famous. Many unusual bones ended up in the hands of churches and cathedrals, like a thigh bone preserved in the church of Crociferi in Venice, Italy, in the 1700s and a giant tooth said to belong to St. Christopher that was kept in Vercelli, Italy.

Most of the actual specimens that these texts describe have been irrevocably lost, with one exception: a mammoth leg bone found in Vienna in 1443 during the construction of St. Stephen's Cathedral there. That bone was carved and preserved at the church as a relic of a giant said to have died in the Great Flood.

Among the most intriguing tales the researchers have found is the myth of the giant Aimon, which dates back to A.D. 1240. Aimon was said to have lived in Wilten, Austria, and killed a dragon that guarded a treasure there. The battle soaked the soil with the dragon's blood, which was said to seep out of the ground in a dark goo (actually, the goo is a mineral tar found in schist rocks in the region). Aimon was said to have cut the dragon's tongue from its mouth as a trophy, and that "tongue" was kept in the monastery of Wilten.

It turned out to be to be the nose of a swordfish. The myth of the dragon remained strong until at least the 1600s, when the abbot of the monastery ordered excavations to search for Aimon's bones, too.

The excavations did not lead to any discovery, but caused the collapse of the entire church building. Oops.

Scholars believe that the fire-breathing element of dragons came from medieval depictions of the mouth of hell; for example, art by Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch, among others. The entrance to hell was often depicted as a monster's literal mouth, with the flames and smoke characteristic of Hades belching out. If one believes not only in the literal existence of hell, but also the literal existence of dragons as Satanic, the association is quite logical.

It turns out that belief systems had much to do with the association of dragons and ancient maps, many of which picture sea dragons, serpents and monsters.

In addition to possibly fictitious sea monsters, real exotic animals such as elephants, scorpions, and lions appeared on maps in the actual lands where they could be found. Some historians infer that mapmakers thought the sea dragons equally real. Perhaps they were artistic renderings of sailors' actual descriptions of giant squid, octopus, whales, and other amazing creatures never encountered before.

Historians also know many maps were not meant to be accurate representations of real geographical features. Instead, they were to show cosmological and religious ideas. They were intended to be statements of belief. They are symbolic of the worldview of the cultures of their creators, and are reflections of the religious beliefs of the societies of their times.

If we look at early maps through a cosmological lens, the sea monsters in waters west of Europe might represent something more symbolic, though no less real to their makers. These creatures might warn of uncivilized pagan territory where evil awaited.

For literate monks who made many early maps, the geography of the world had to fit with their religious ideas. These maps reflected their faith in a divine order and plan for humanity. Not surprisingly, Jerusalem lies at the centre of their world maps and they are oriented east, towards the Garden of Eden and the Holy Land, not north.

Dragon-filled or not, ancient religious maps and modern travel maps warn us of dangers and guide us through safe passages. We need maps and modern GPS devices to accurately reflect reality and get us from here to there. We need illustrated maps to show us places we might only explore from our armchairs. We also might need or want maps to indicate where our life journeys should take us, which sea channels to choose, and where the safe harbours lie. But unless we believe in oracles and fortune tellers, we must navigate the world without them. Except for the shared wisdom of our parents, teachers, other similar guides, and our own learned insights, the deep, dark waters we travel through each day remain filled with unfathomable mystery and maybe a sea monster or two.

This ultimately is what undergirds our attraction to dragons. They are a challenge we must defeat. They call us to live courageously. We must be like early explorers plying unknown seas, facing unknown dangers. They offer us the opportunity to become the hero in our own stories by being spiritually courageous.

To be spiritually courageous is to be vulnerable; it is to open our hearts and souls to possible pain. Spiritual courage means facing no clear answers to life's many questions. Spiritual courage means taking the time to listen to other people's answers, trying out new solutions for yourself, and even changing course when what you're doing isn't working.

At a minimum this includes taking the risk of accepting a new job or not, getting married or not, or moving from New Zealand to Australia or not. These decisions take courage because they risk unhappiness. Because these choices typically involve limited risk, they don't require overwhelming courage. These decisions can be reversed or might even generate new, better choices.

At most, spiritual courage includes taking larger, more difficult risks like facing our fears. I think the most difficult existential fear we avoid is the fact of our own mortality. Immortal gods we aren't.

It takes spiritual courage for an LGBTQI person to come out of the closet. They connect within to a strength that lets them say to the world, "This is who I am." They connect to their hearts, which enables them to stop living someone else's idea of who they should be.

It takes spiritual courage for someone who has been directed all their life by family members to be a doctor or lawyer to finally say, "No. I want to be an artist or teacher or plumber." That person has faced their fears and also decided to stop living someone else's idea of who they should be.

It takes spiritual courage to ask, "Who am I?" "Does my life have purpose or meaning?" For me, life is made meaningful by ministering to others, by listening to you, by walking with

you through life and death, and by standing beside you as you open yourself to your own answers.

It takes spiritual courage to map out our values. To ask, “Am I living in accord with my values?” “What am I avoiding?” “What am I frightened of?”

Social worker and author Brené Brown agrees that courage means opening ourselves to vulnerability. She said in an interview with Krista Tippett for *On Being*, “To me, vulnerability is courage. It’s about the willingness to show up and be seen in our lives. And in those moments when we show up, I think those are the most powerful meaning-making moments of our lives even if they don’t go well. I think they define who we are.”

How then, do we build up our capacity for greater spiritual courage and vulnerability? It requires training our own internal dragons. I think taking small risks is a start. Tell someone you appreciate their presence in your life. Risk a little embarrassment. If the person responds poorly, it won’t hurt for long. But think what you might gain if you take that risk. Little successes and little failures create resilience, enabling us to bounce back when we experience something more challenging.

I know everyone here this morning has some level of spiritual courage. Unitarian Universalism fosters dragon slayers. It does so by not providing the answers to the spiritual questions I’ve raised this morning, so you must have some level of fearlessness in you. But I trust that you can build up your level of courage. You are not alone. Though we navigate our own ships, we have many companions, riding the waves alongside us.