

“Not Very Good Wizards”

The Wizard of Oz is a forever favorite that's been revisited and revised again and again. The story keeps changing faces, from Diana Ross as Dorothy and Michael Jackson as Scarecrow in the *Wiz* to the Tony award winning *Wicked* which explores things from the witches' point of view. The tale keeps getting repeated, as though we can't quite put it down.

The MGM movie starring Judy Garland turns seventy this month, with the biggest anniversary festivities planned for New York City, featuring hot air balloon rides and five of the original munchkins. I remember waiting as a child each year for Oz to re-appear on my TV screen, though because we owned a black-and-white set I didn't realize at first the yellow brick road really was yellow in the magic of Technicolor. But it's interesting that the film was a box office flop when it first hit the screen back in 1939 and barely paid for its production costs. The movie would never have become such a popular classic, except for the fact that it was based on such an unforgettable book.

Frank Baum, who wrote the *Wizard of Oz* back in 1900, was a colorful personality and original thinker, married to the daughter of the famous Unitarian feminist Matilda Joslyn Gage, who along with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton helped found the National Women's Suffrage Association and whose home in upstate New York was a well known stop on the Underground Railroad. Frank himself was also a bit of a renegade, publishing a paper in the small town of Aberdeen, South Dakota, where he championed women's rights and veered from religious orthodoxy, instead embracing a personal doctrine that he called “Unfaith” — “an eager longing to penetrate the secrets of Nature,” as he said, “an aspiration for knowledge we have been taught is forbidden.” With a creed like “Unfaith” lurking behind the pages, it's no surprise that this book about warmhearted wizards and plucky heroines has frequently been banned as unsuitable for children—most recently in 2004, when Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson tried to get the film scrubbed from broadcast as insufficiently Christian.

So the questions I'd like to reflect on this morning are two. First, what makes this tale so enduring? And second, what makes it so subversive? The answer to the first question seems clear, namely, that the *Wizard* deals with timeless religious themes of wandering and homecoming, exile and return. Here's how the tale begins, with Dorothy living in a small house in the midst of the endless plains:

When Dorothy stood in the doorway and looked around, she could see nothing but the great gray prairie on every side. Not a tree nor a house broke the broad sweep of flat country that reached the edge of the sky in all directions. The sun had baked the plowed land into a gray mass, with little cracks running through it. Even the grass was not green, for the sun had burned the tops of the long blades until they were the same gray color to be seen everywhere. Once the house had been painted, but the sun blistered the paint and the rains washed it away, and now the house was as dull and gray as everything else.

I suspect that sooner or later, all of us find ourselves in bleak environments like that, flat and featureless, when life seems to have lost its luster. And I suspect that, as for Dorothy, there are moments in our own lives when everything that seems firmly anchored and dependable—our health, our livelihood, our families, our faith—becomes unhinged and hurled sky high as though in a great storm. We find ourselves falling, toppling out-of-control through the air and landing in a territory we don't recognize, where none of the landmarks seem familiar. We've lost our bearings. Or as Dorothy says to her little dog Toto, "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore!"

And it's there, in that strange, disorienting, topsy-turvy wilderness of Oz that the journey begins, the search for a spiritual path that can lead us safely back to wholeness and hope. And that path is filled with dangers, like the poppies that lull us into a delirium of drowsiness. That's a simple fact, I want to suggest. Life really is like that, full of trials and temptations and crises that leave us feeling like lost children, searching for the way home. *The Wizard of Oz* is an enduring book because it is a true book. It describes the universal human experience of being far away from those we love, feeling lost even to ourselves, the yearning to once more be held and cradled in comfort and security and peace.

And what makes Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz* so subversive--why a song like "Over the Rainbow" has become a gay anthem and a hymn for visionaries and dreamers of all stripes and why a famous Unitarian like Matilda Gage would be so proud of her even more famous son-in-law—lies in the lesson that you hold the key to your own salvation. Like Dorothy, who on every step of the long trip to Oz wore the ruby slippers that could have whisked her back to Kansas, like the Tin Man, who because he had no heart took greater care than others never to be cruel or unkind to any living creature, we already possess the strengths we need for our own deliverance. As the wizard explains to the Cowardly Lion when he comes to ask for courage,

You have plenty of courage, I am sure, answered Oz. All you need is confidence in yourself. There is no living thing that is not afraid when it faces danger. True courage is in facing danger when you are afraid, and that kind of courage you have in plenty.

And that also is a truth, I want to suggest. In fact, it is specifically our distinctive truth, our saving Unitarian Universalist message to the world. It won't protect you from the storm when the tornado comes hurtling toward you. And it doesn't preserve you from having to take the long, difficult, dangerous journey over unknown terrain. Those are inescapable parts of being human. But it means that you carry the goal inside yourself. The boundless love, the radiant intelligence, the unconquerable resolve that some call God isn't to be found seated on a throne, hidden behind a curtain, disguised as a great ball of flame or rendered inaccessible inside a walled palace. It's inside you, all along--as kindness, as wisdom, as valor and heroism are capacities within us all.

So welcome to the Emerald City, and welcome home to this gathering of travelers on life's yellow brick road—none of us very good wizards, but all of us the best of

companions. And remember this, that if you can't find your heart's desire right here, in this place and among these people, maybe you never really lost it to begin with.