

Bufo Rex
by Erik Amundsen

Presented by Shirley Kinney
To The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock
August 30, 2015

The journey I followed in preparing today's service is kind of a convoluted one—a path I have never followed in writing. That surprised me because generally I have a fairly well thought-out idea of what I want to say. But this time, even though I thought I knew where I was going—I ended up somewhere else entirely. And I learned a bit more about myself in the process.

Here's what happened—we were in Texas, maybe four years ago, camping along the Mexican border. It was evening, and before crawling into bed to read a book of short stories, I looked at the world news on my computer. It was the usual stuff—radical religious elements killing people, beheading journalists, Koreans testing nuclear warheads, debates on global warming, fighting in the Middle East, children shooting other children in America's heartland. Horrible things, really, but the same kinds of stories we hear every night on the news. I was glad to be hidden out in the wilds, so far away from all the madness. Thank goodness that had nothing to do with me!

Then, I turned off the computer and crawled into bed to read. I read the first page of a short story titled “Bufo Rex” by Erik Amundsen. I fell in love with those beginning lines and knew I wanted to share it somehow with you. It was such a wonderful enchanted place in that story—so different from the awful news stories I had been reading. The story of a little frog—or toad—living happily in his bog.

But, as I continued to read, the story started to get darker and more disturbing. And, as it ended, I realized there was no way I could use it here at UUFR. It was ugly and more like a horror story. But, I still loved the first half and I couldn’t forget it as the days went on.

So, finally, I just typed the story on my computer and I simply re-wrote the last two pages. Much lighter—happier ending. That was that. I put the story out of my head, figuring I’d use it someday.

This year, I decided it was time. I thought, that frog talk is all written, no work to be done on it. I’m ready.

A month ago, I pulled out my frog story—or that is, Erik Amundsen’s story with my revised ending—I pulled out the story and reread it. And, surprise, surprise—it wasn’t at all what I remembered. Did I really write that ending? Where was my mind?

I had made the story end so catastrophically. Not at all the happily-ever-after ending I remembered writing. What happened?

Thinking back, I remember reading the news on the computer and being so struck by the death and destruction that was happening everywhere in the world, the lack of hope for any good ending in these awful news events. This must have been the driving force in my writing.

All this confusion in my mind has since led me to re-examine my thinking about what the story was telling me. It’s a story about fighting and religious fanatics and greed and death, to be sure. Ultimately, everyone dies. Everyone. The entire human race is history.

How could that be a happily-ever-after kind of ending? Strangely enough, for me, I guess, it is. We human creatures think of ourselves as important. It all revolves around us.

But, the Planet Earth, to the Universe, we're just another life form—two legged short dinosaurs who will someday be extinct, like the dodo and the T-Rex and the ivory-billed woodpecker. The world, the universe, will get along without us very well. Another life form will surely come along to replace us—perhaps the frog or the toad.

I find that thought surprisingly comforting.

Of course, I realize that not all of you will find comfort in the idea that mankind is well down the road toward total extinction. I understand that.

You may be more inclined toward survival of our human species. If that is your inclination, then, please, accept this story I am about to tell you as a wake-up call. It's time to stop all this senseless violence, put an end to religious extremism, and start living like an intelligent species.

It's our choice. We roll up our collective sleeves, do what has to be done to bring sanity back to the world, or go the way of the dinosaur. It IS about us. We are not allowed to sit here in comfort and the relative obscurity of the Northern Neck and not be involved. We are ALL involved in this world.

So, back to my story of the frog or the toad. You can interchange the word frog with toad in your head when you hear this story. We aren't standing on scientific formalities today.

The scientific prefix that is used for frogs and toads is Bufo—B-U-F-O.

And, for the bullfrogs, it is Bufo Rex. So, the name of the main character in the story is Bufo Rex. He is a frog, or a toad—whichever.

Before I get to the story,--now that you know it will be about toads and/or frogs—about bufo Rex,--you need a little background about these slimy, green creatures and some background into why mankind finds them so unpleasant.

Think of the fairy tales you learned as a child. It is surprising how many of them contain a frog as an important supporting player. There's the Princess

and the Frog and the Frog Bride. Many Germanic fairy tales incorporate frogs or toads in the story. Usually, the frog is either an enchanted prince, or, in the alternative, a frog that wishes it were a prince. The frog is depicted as repulsive, unworthy of love, something unpleasant.

So, of course, every frog living today has that bad reputation to deal with. The frog, or toad, in our story today comes face to face with this bad publicity.

Another fact you may find interesting or disturbing about frogs or toads-- Bufotenine is a halucinegenic produced from dried toad skin, or sometimes, merely from licking a live toad. California outlawed bufotenine in 1970, but it was not until 1994 that someone was arrested and charged under this law. News of hippie toad lickers hit the US press in 1994 with the Toronto News screeching "Licking Toad a Dangerous New Craze". A grave threat to America's future was at hand and state legislators took swift action. "They say these frogs grow to the size of a dinner plate," said Rep. Patrick Harris of South Carolina, explaining his anti-bufotenine bill. "I don't want to see somebody walk across the Statehouse grounds with a frog on a leash and pick him up and lick him." Indeed.

State representative Beverly Langford warned Georgia legislators of “the extreme dangers of toad licking becoming the designer drug of choice in today’s sophisticated society” and asked the state to determine if toad licking should be classed a sex crime.

There is some evidence that the use of frogs and toads for halucinegenic purposes has occurred in the past. Archaeological artifacts, linguistic associations, and folk stories from around the world suggest a hallucinogenic use of toads and toadstools. There has even been a church based on this practice—based in Arizona, it’s the Church of the Toad of Light—which I’m thinking would be a catchy new name for our fellowship.

Actually, the first toad trial, which was also the first witch trial in England, took place in 1566. Elizabeth Francis received from her grandmother a toad that, through black magic, had been transformed into a cat named Sathan.

Elizabeth instructed the cat Sathan to bewitch a certain Andrew Byles.

Unfortunately, Andrew refused to marry Elizabeth. So, the cat/toad killed him.

Compelled once again, Sathan bewitched Christopher Francis to marriage. It didn't end well. The official record tells us that the couple "lived not so quietly as she desired, being stirred to much unquietness and moved to swearing and cursing."

At Elizabeth's bidding, the toad-turned-cat killed their infant daughter, turned itself back into a toad, and hid in Christopher's shoe. Upon touching the toad with his toe, Christopher became incurably lame.

Elizabeth then traded the cat to Agnes Waterhouse for a sweet cake. Mother Waterhouse was, unfortunately, prone to neighborly quarrels and in short time instructed the cat/toad to drown one neighbor's cow and another's geese. Hogs were similarly dispatched and butter curds made to be lost. She was generous to the cat/toad, however, for in each instance he was given a whole chicken that he ate clean and she could find remaining neither bones nor feathers.

Confessing to two murders and a hobbling, Elizabeth Francis, who had her frog kill her boyfriend, was sentenced to two years in jail.

Agnes Waterhouse, who killed a cow and geese, denied being a witch but admitted to conspiring with the cat against livestock and curds. She was hanged by the neck on July 29, 1566.

Did you catch that? Elizabeth confessed to two murders and was put in jail for two years, while Agnes confessed to conspiring with a toad changed into a cat against livestock and curds and was put to death. Though it was not unheard of for medieval Europeans to put animals on trial, this was not Sathan the cat/toad's fate. Upon hearing the Lord's Prayer in Latin, it reverted to a toad and hopped away.

And, I'm sure you all remember the fairy tale about the frog and the princess. The princess lost her golden ball down the well and a kind hearted frog offered to fetch it for her, if she would agree to share her life with the frog—eat with him, sleep with him, etc. The ball is returned to the princess, the disgusting frog lives with the princess and eventually turns into a handsome prince, who is forever after strangely attracted to insects.

So, enough background...

I'll end with the story of Bufo Rex, with my ending. If it brings you comfort, as it did me, then great. If it is unsettling for you, then roll up your sleeves and get to work.

~~~~~  
I am called Bufo, I grow fat upon insects. I make my board under leaves, upon logs, and my bed lies in the bogs. My throne is the toadstool, and witch's butter is for my biscuits.

I've never put much stock in humanity, despite what stories might have said of me; I am no great lover of human aesthetics, being, myself, so physically bereft. My hide is olive and warted, my fingers pointed and long, my body flat and fat and swollen around, my face a wide mouth and bulging eyes.

Some assume, for all of that, I must want for a human bride, something pink and smooth of limb, soft, mammalian, to balance out the whole of my existence. As if, somehow, this will lighten the aesthetic load I place upon the eye of God. Well, I assure you, when the eye of God tires of looking at a creature such as myself—I suspect I shall be the first to know.

Until then, I've no use for a bride and no means or place to keep her; I've mates by the score and children by the hundreds with no need to have ever met either; beneath the brown waters, my wedding chamber, they leave of themselves, as do I, without second thought. What could I hope to gain by maintaining one of the warm blooded creatures you men pant and yell to possess that I do not already have, save a lifetime of trouble?

That was my testimony in my first kingdom, when they dragged me in chains before the king, and the pink human creatures they sought so to protect swooned and then peeked through half lidded eyes at the monster that was me.

The sentence was exile, and they frog-marched me to the border, and set me loose on pain of death to never return, but I am called Bufo, I grow fat upon insects. I make my board under leaves, upon logs, and my bed lies in the bogs. My throne is the toadstool, and witch's butter is for my biscuits.

I have no treasure, no hall, nor wealth, nor store, save that the world contains everything that I have ever needed: food, bed, cool mud and warm sun. No gold, but the color of my eyes.

But then, there is always some darned fool that must believe that something as swollen and hopping-loathsome as myself must have some use to men, as all things made by God, such as mosquitoes, poison ivy and the clap, are wont to possess.

So, in this second kingdom of grasping merchants and opportunistic peasants, I learned to my sorrow what every darned fool knows: that toads possess jewels in their heads in the space where their brains ought to be.

And because my jewel taught itself to think and learned that God made,

upon the earth, no shortage of darned fools, this time, I showed *myself* to the border.

---

I am called Bufo. I grow fat upon insects. I make my board under leaves, upon logs, and my bed lies in the bogs. My throne is the toadstool, and witch's butter is for my biscuits.

I seek out no company, but I'll accept any which treats me decently and which accepts that it is the nature of the toad to eat insects and to lay in the bog.

The woman was old, and she might not have been quite right, but I also saw the mounds of earth where her husband and little children had years ago gone, and I'd eaten some of the beetles who had crawled in their bones.

Men are a sentimental lot, and sentiment, as any toad knows, rots the jewel. Or the brain, whichever it might be. She called me by her children's names and made me clothing to wear; it was perhaps, inappropriate, but mildly charming. I can only apologize for being a poor conversationalist, but to say we were familiar might be characterizing our relationship a little too strongly.

Some men arrived and set her on fire so they could have her house. I'm not quite sure I understood what it was all about, but they seemed upset that she'd been talking to me, though I know enough of men to see an excuse when it comes riding up the path, torch in hand.

I suspect they would have used me the same way, for sake of consistency, but sentiment is not a burden under which I labor, and I fled, hopping fast and strong.



I am called Bufo, I grow fat upon insects. I make my board under leaves, upon logs and my bed lies in the bogs. My throne is the toadstool, and witch's butter is for my biscuits. I tore my coat and my trousers that the old woman had made me, but what need have I for the cloth of men?

I came to a fourth kingdom and the people here tipped their hats when they saw me come.

“Please, sir,” they said. “We’ve a terrible time with flies and beetles, worms and slugs, and things like that.”

“Don’t you fear I’ll steal your princesses?”

“Our princesses have faces sweet as buttermilk but have hearts as cold and dark and wicked as the water under winter ice and voices that make the hens lay weird black eggs,” they said. “Take the lot, and none shall miss them.”

“I’ll pass,” I said. “What about the gem inside my head, I’ve heard that all toads have them.”

“All men know that only fools believe that, and we expose fools at birth, by law, in this kingdom.”

“Better still,” said I, “If an old woman talks to me, you won’t set her on fire, will you?”

“We’ve plenty of firewood to keep us warm in the cold months; old women are for stories and spinning.”

“I think we may come to an understanding,” I said, and I to my new bog went, and began my work. In a few short years, I and my children and grandchildren had the kingdom’s pests well in hand, and princesses were all

safely married to other countries, to ogres or to pirates, and the people left me to my work.

---

But man has decreed that good things must not last, and, soon, men came from the kingdom next door; you'll remember them as the ones who set the crazy widow on fire for her house. It seems they'd run out of widows.

In truth, I would have missed the whole thing, if not for a misunderstanding. A young man like the one I first met when I came here, was speaking to a knight from the widow-burning country, with his armor and his surcoat and his heavy cross. The knight asked the young man what God the young man served. The young man replied that, like the knight, he served Christ, but the knight could not understand the young man's language.

The knight looked down at the young man's feet and saw me sitting there, resting under the shadow of a nearby log. "Him?" the knight cried out.

"You worship these creatures?"

Now, I have been called a devil before, fairly often. I'm quite certain no one has ever been feeble-minded enough to worship me. But now the knight had

my attention. It seemed to me that this was going to be a repeat performance of what happened all those years ago at the widow's house, but on a much grander scale.

My children and I hopped off to the bog and waited. When the smoke cleared, only men from the widow-burning nation remained, loudly thanking God for their victory over the Devil.

Over me.

---

I am called Bufo, I grow fat upon insects. I make my board under leaves, upon logs, and my bed lies in the bogs. My throne is the toadstool, and witch's butter is for my biscuits. I am an unsentimental being. I was born in a bog and fed first on brothers and sisters.

I sat on my toadstool for days and smelled the smoke of the widow-burning nation. I have been watching you men for a very long time, and I know what you are all about. I turned my bulbous golden eyes to the castle, where the widow-burning king had unfurled his victory flag, and I decided that I was tired of you men and your killing game.

---

I am called Bufo, I grow fat upon insects. I make my board under leaves, upon logs, and my bed lies in the bogs. My throne is the toadstool, and witch's butter is for my biscuits.

For some time I hid in the bogs and marshes, quite happily, mind you. There I could eat the biting mosquitoes and the poisonous crawling creatures. I could watch from a distance the towns on my meager horizon.

I thought now and again of the men, searching for ways to hurt each other. Searching for those who had a bit more than they did. Searching for those who were different—and destroying their differences. But, I made sure they did not search and find me, here in my bog.

But, time being what it is, and man being what he is, there came a day when the foolishness of man became too great. I watched from my bog the horizons where the cities of man grew tall and dark and ugly. Those cities were on fire—all of them. I could hear from the distance the yelling and screaming from those foolish men. And then after a long time it was quiet. The fires burned into nothing.

Now it's quiet on my bog. My children and my children's children and their children can be heard at night, singing sweetly to each other and to the world. The mosquitoes hum and the crickets are tuning up for a long night's concert, letting my stomach know it will be full by morning. The poison ivy and the creeping and crawling things are spreading into the blackened ruins of the cities of man. The cities that once belonged to man. Now they belong to us.

I am called Bufo, I grow fat upon insects. I make my board under leaves, upon logs, and my bed lies in the bogs. My throne is the toadstool, and witch's butter is for my biscuits.

So, does this bring you comfort? The world is better off without us nasty humans?

Or, does it bring you despair? What are we doing to each other and to our planet?

There is always hope. And that hope lies in you and me. It's up to the reasonably sane and caring folks like us to spread the message of love and

tolerance and acceptance of each other's differences. No more burning down of people's homes out of greed. No more killing people who believe in gods other than ours.

Reach out to those who stand alone, support education that turns people away from intolerance and hate, do what you can every day to keep our planet healthy and green. It's up to us, folks.

Watching the evening news can be almost unbearably depressing. But, don't give up hope.

I'll close with something a UU minister from our old church said:

“We UU's live through hope.

Where there is darkness, we wait for the light.

Where there is pain, we anticipate pleasure.

Where there is boredom, we yearn for the arrival of new excitement.

People of self-respect do not welcome despair.

They know that hope is a life-style, not a guarantee.”