

Pele and the Dragon,

Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis

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When I was nine years old, my family moved to Hawai'i. Now, I'm the first one to tell you that island living is not for me. I don't like heat, I don't like feeling confined—you can drive around the whole island in a day, if you stop for a long lunch—and I'm not a fan of bare feet, and most people can tell you that in Hawai'i, shoes are very much optional. And yet, there are aspects of Hawai'i that have worked their way deeply into my heart and the core of my theology.

Hawai'i does very little by halves. Other than the afternoon sun-showers, which can't quite manage to commit to being actual storms, my experience of Hawai'i was of a place of fierce and proud beauty. Hawai'i is unapologetically *real*—the cliché is “larger than life,” but Hawai'i is, instead, flush with life, full up and overflowing with bold *being*. My memories of Hawai'i don't really include beaches, except for the time we saw an entire

herd of seals race onto the beach to escape the triangular fins cutting through the water, or the time we accidentally picnicked almost on an oceanside runway. Instead, my memories of Hawai'i are of time spent deep into untouched tropical forests and green mountains. The stunning beauty of hula, the intricacy of fabric arts, or the wonder of a moonbow. Those are the parts of Hawai'i that have stuck with me.

There is a sacredness and fierceness that very much coexist on the islands. From my home, you could hike up through quiet mountain passes, along a trail that still had large sacrificial altars. Hawai'i may be beautiful, but don't mistake its beauty for fragility. There are many examples of this, but perhaps my very favorite is the relationship with and legends around the fire goddess Pele. In many places I've seen or heard of that nest against volcanoes, there can be an uneasy relationship with the destructive power in their backyards. Not in Hawai'i—Pele is both adored and revered. They recognize her power, certainly. They mourn when Pele's fire takes from them. But so many people love their fiery, unpredictable goddess. They celebrate

not only her calm moods, but also her wild rages, because it is on the back of her fiery destruction that the lushness of their island home is built. She is destroyer, yes, but also protector. In one of my favorite stories, Pele sends her little sister to rescue Pele's mortal lover, who has been kidnapped by fire dragons—yep, in this one it's a female knight who slays the dragon!

This duality, this embrace of Pele in all her complicatedness, was on my mind during the Kavanaugh hearings, as I listened to woman after woman talk about having a core of burning lava that they were trying desperately to keep capped. It has been on my mind again more recently, during this particular women's history month and trans week of visibility, as my news feed overflowed with stories of people who dared to challenge the status quo. Women have often been feared for their emotion—the same emotion that toxic masculinity has asked everyone in this country, men and nonbinary folx included, to bury deep under a stoic exterior.

Perhaps we need a few more people like Marsha P Johnson, a trans woman of color who was one of the leaders of the Stonewall riots. Perhaps we need a few more Nellie Blys, to travel around the world learning the stories. More Amelia Earhardts and Grace Hoppers and Marie Curies and that person in your life who just. won't. be. repressed. More of you.

For years, I have loved the oft-shared words by Marianne Williamson about living into our fullness. "Your playing small does not serve the world," she said, and I believed that. And yet. I never really *felt* that idea deep in my soul. I never truly made it mine. In some ways, that's because many of us are taught, through so many small lessons throughout our lives, that small is exactly what we're supposed to be. Small and inoffensive and as bland as possible, if you would please. No making waves, no creating trouble, no living too loud.

Why is the world so afraid of the fire inside our souls? Why are we so afraid of the fire inside our souls? I think it comes down to power and presence. Have you ever been around a

person in the full ownership of their passions? They are stunning, and powerful. I don't just mean the fiery speakers, the singers who belt out big anthems. I mean the accountant who glows when they talk about summing columns, the calligrapher owning their art, the woodworker owning their craft. The protester on the front lines of the cause that grabs their soul.

We talk a lot about the caterpillar and a lot about the butterfly, but less about the moment of unfolding. The time when the butterfly is fully formed, complete, but still wrinkled and folded in on itself. Still hiding the colors that won't become truly glorious until it unfurls its wings from the memory of confinement. We cannot be fully present in the lives we inhabit with our wings curled in on themselves, with our inner fire carefully banked so as not to inadvertently boil over and touch someone else.

Our second principle of justice, equity and compassion in human relations is one that sounds really great, but is perhaps one of the harder ones to live into honoring in real life. Justice –

absolutely, I support that wholeheartedly, until I have to give up my favorite hymn, favorite restaurant, or go-to Halloween costume because they don't display the values I say I hold. Equity, yes! – but if you take away my spotlight and spread it out, the dimmer light might not keep me warm. And compassion, that's our hardest one yet. It's difficult enough when we're asked to hold compassion for those who have disagreed with or even those who have done wrong by us. But we can manage that more easily than the difficulty of letting that critical voice that lives inside so many people's heads just be silent for a little while.

I'm guilty of it. I don't have a right to cast any stones either. I have always spent a lot of time trying to make sure I don't take up too much space, and especially as a fat person that I don't disturb anyone when I walk. But perhaps our world needs a little less tiptoeing and a little more fire flowing and earth shaking to give life to new lushness.

Sometimes our fire is banked for a different reason, though. Sometimes our fire needs to burn low for a while, through grief,

trauma, loss, or just sheer exhaustion. I've heard from so many people who feel less-than because they simply have no more to give just then. To those people I would offer a different create of flame than fiery Pele. I would consider the firebird, the Phoenix, which allows itself to rest for a little while, just a tiny, quiet spark, before being reborn in glorious fire. Sometimes we need to allow ourselves a fallow season, a time of stillness, before we can embrace the flames we create. Rest is just as holy as fire, and it sustains our spirits in the quiet times of laying the groundwork for the next great flame, whether you embrace the gentle hearth fire that warms, the forge fire that shapes new creations, or the volcano that both destroys and creates.

Because that is the side of owning our fire that we don't always talk about, and which brings us back to Pele. Those who revere her don't just love one side of her—they know that in loving their goddess, they take her in all of her moods. We talk about living our passions, and yes, we should. But sometimes those

can be like volcanoes too. Sometimes showing up as our truest, realest selves means that there will be destruction along with creation. The islands of Hawai'i are built from the fiery overflow of Madame Pele. The locals know that she may destroy, but she also creates with the same fiery fingers. Our lives are the same—there may be destruction in releasing our inner fire. We cannot overlook that in the rush to celebrate the life that comes after the fires have faded. They are each a sacred part of the cycle.

I will end with these words by Emily McDowell, who said, "Finding yourself" is not really how it works. You aren't a ten-dollar bill in last winter's coat pocket. You are also not lost. Your true self is right there, buried under cultural conditioning, other people's opinions, and inaccurate conclusions you drew as a kid that became your beliefs about who you are. "Finding yourself" is actually returning to yourself. An unlearning, an excavation, a remembering who you were before the world got

its hands on you.” So go out, light a few fires, and see what you can create.