



### **Teig O'Kane and the Corpse: An Irish Folktale -**

There was once a young man in county Letrim named Teig O'Kane, strong in the arm quick on his feet and handsome enough to turn heads wherever he went. He was the only son of a rich farmer and sure, wasn't he spoiled from the hour he could walk. Money never stuck to Teig's fingers. He scattered gold like another man would scatter oats to the hens. Work bored him, but sport delighted him, and if there was a fair, a race, a dance or a gathering within 10 miles, you could swear before a court of law that Teig O'Kane would be there laughing loudest, drinking deepest, and going home with the dawn.

The girls loved him, too much some would say. It was said of him that the love of every girl lay folded in the breast of his shirt and Teig never denied it. Now his father saw all this and said nothing for a long time. He loved the lad and he told himself youth would pass, but one day a word came home that could not be ignored. A decent girl, a neighbor's daughter had been led astray, and the old man, quiet though he was called his son before him and said, "Teig, I never crushed you before this day. I never kept money from you nor stopped you from your own ways, but what I heard today has turned my heart. You will marry that girl or I leave house, land, and all I own to your cousin. Choose by mourning."

No shouting, no curse, just cold truth. Teig laughed at first, called it foolish talk, but once he was alone, the laughter drained away. His pride rose up angry. Who was his father to command him? And yet beneath that anger, there was fear. So he lit his pipe and took to the road walking to cool his blood. The night was calm. The moon hung half full in the sky. No wind stirred the hedges. He walked for hours. Then suddenly voices. Feet on the road ahead. Many voices all talking at once, but in no

language he could understand and out of the moonlight came a band of little men, no taller than a child of seven, some gray and ancient looking and between them they carried a dead body. Every hair on Teig's head rose like the hacks of steel. One little gray man stepped forward and said, "Soft and sharp as frost. Isn't it lucky we met you, Teig O'Kane?"

Teig tried to speak but no words would come. The little man smiled. "Since you wouldn't answer, we can do with you what we please." Before Teig could move, the corpse was thrown upon his back. Its arms locked around his neck, its legs clamped his hips like iron. He cursed and struggled but could not free himself. Then the command was given. "You will carry this man until dawn from church to church and bury him where you are permitted. Fail and you are lost." And with laughing and clapping, the good people drove him forward. All that night Teig walked through the mud and stones through crooked borings and broken paths. Sometimes the moon shone bright and he saw the little folk behind him hopping and darting like birds. Sometimes clouds swallowed the light and he fell hard upon the road only to be kicked up again.

At the first church yard, corpses rose shouting from the graves to scare him off. At the next, ghosts filled the walls so thick he could not pass at another unseen hands lifted like a rag and flung him into a ditch. Still the dead man's grip tightened. Time after time, Teig prayed, swearing to mend his ways to marry the girl to give up drink and cards if only he might live to see daylight. At last, cold and shaking with the sky turning pale behind the hills, he reached a small graveyard on the bare side of land. There was already a grave dug at its bottom laying empty coffin. The corpse loosened its arms. For the first time in eight hours, Teig could breathe and the dead man slid into the coffin and laid still. Teig fell to his knees and thank God aloud. Then with his own hands closed the lid and filled the grave and stamped it firm and fled.

When he reached home, the people scarcely knew him. His face was hollow. His eyes were older, but from that night on, Teig O'Kane was a changed man. He drank with measure. He left gambling alone and he never walked the roads by himself at night. Within a fortnight, he married the girl he had wronged and they made a good life together, and they say that as long as Teig lived, he never doubted this, that a wildlife always sends for payment and it's better to settle before nightfall."

### **Sermon:**

Well, I first heard the story of Teig O'Kane and the Corpse, him carrying the body through the Irish night, looking for a place to bury it at a Unitarian minister's retreat in Puerto Rico. A young colleague of mine was from Wisconsin was telling the story. We stared out at the waves crashing on the small island. I don't remember exactly what my colleague's conclusion was, something about carrying the lines of ancestry, but I remember feeling touched by his telling of this folktale.

I remember the pina colada I had later that day better, but so be it. When you're on retreat at the beach with ministers, a lot of things happen. Mostly good conversations. I remember a colleague confiding in me that she was leaving the ministry to be a counselor, that she now has left and gone on to good work helping LGBTQIA folks in a counseling center, and she isn't like Teig O'Kane at all,

except that she felt at some point she wasn't living an authentic life as a minister. She had other things to do to orient her life in a direction it needed to go and had been living in some ways what Socrates would have called 2,400 years ago, the unexamined life. What he might have meant by that was that we live without self-reflection, without critical thinking, without the pursuit of wisdom, making life essentially meaningless.

To him simply going through the motions of existence without questioning your beliefs, your values and your actions makes you no better than an unthinking animal, he said. The philosophical reasoning behind this idea breaks down to a few core principles, primarily what he called true knowledge. Socrates argued that the only true good is knowledge. That without deep examination you blindly accept societal norms, baseless prejudices or popular opinions without understanding why you believe them. In the original ancient Greek, his exact words translate closer to the unexamined life is not to be lived or is unlivable rather than just not worth living. He believed that introspection is a defining trait of being human, that without it your soul stagnates and you fail to achieve genuine virtue or happiness and you might just end up meeting little men on a dark road who give you a corpse to carry through the night.

Socrates believed in what he called the noble choice. He famously uttered this during his trial in Athens where he was sentenced to death for quote unquote corrupting the youth by teaching them to question authority. He was charged with teaching the youth to question authority and he said it was better to teach them than to abandon his philosophy and conform to the state's expectations. Conformity is the key word here and this happening again 2,400 years ago, remember. To save his life or accept exile, he was told that he had to recant and cease teaching such blasphemy, and he chose death arguing that a life where he was forbidden to question or to seek the truth was not a life he was willing to live.

Socrates challenged his neighbors and us two and a half millennia later to move beyond simple survival, the accumulation of wealth and status, to go beyond easy answers that are given to us by the state or at the time the state religion, that to live was to actively question what it means to live a good, just, and meaningful life. My kind of guy, that Socrates, and while Teig O'Kane and our story for today isn't mostly about this, there are themes that relate and certainly there are themes in this story that stem from what happens when you live an unexamined life. There are also themes of forgiveness and redemption, chief among them coming from the Catholic culture, the Irish Catholic culture, I admit, not to fully understand, but the story ties to this stumbling through life that Teig O'Kane is doing, this life unexamined as the story might say.

While he is carousing and doing whatever he wants, he does it without thought or care for others. He ruins a young woman's life and we know what that means and it takes a bunch of magical little men to stop him on a dark and stormy night to reorient his whole experience, and Teig might sound familiar to you because either your life is like that or someone you know has a life like that. I know at times my life has been like that. I know enough about stumbling through life unaware to know that you and I have or are Teig O'Kane on occasion just doing what we want without the thought of the consequences. Then finally stopped on the road by a bunch of magical small people who hoist a

dead body on our shoulders and send us on a mission to examine what we are carrying. That sounds familiar to me.

Then we finally realize what we are carrying. Think about the corpse in this story as apologies we know we should make but haven't yet. Think of it as guilt we stuffed away because it was inconvenient to address. Think of it as some habit we need to put down to live a more authentic and whole life. If you find yourself somewhere in that story, then you and I and Teig O'Kane are walking down the Irish road at night, and just now a minister stopped you and thrust a body on your back and said, "Go bury it." The good news is that the story says there is a way. There is a grave. There is an empty coffin. There is a place prepared for resolution. You just might have to wander around in your heart and your soul asking yourself if you are doing enough life examining to try to locate it.

To me, the whole story in some way is saying that this is possible. It's possible to put down the corpse. Teig is not evil or damned. He is charming and talented and loved like you are. The story knows that also that good intentions don't cancel bad habits. It takes work to heal from the things we are and do, and the story speaks these truths as we listen to it because we know something about privilege without accountability, delaying responsibility, harm hidden under charm and transformation through crisis. The old story speaks to us through Socrates, and through the Irish particulars, and all the forces that want us to do the right thing and reminds us that it is possible to change, because the good news is that in the end, Teig does change, doesn't he? And not by fear alone, but by choosing rightly one's fear has cleared his eyes.

The story says that no matter how far you've gone, responsibility can still save you, but it will cost you effort, humility, and some endurance. The story in some way is reflecting this old Socratean idea if that's a word. What is the cost of the unexamined life? What happens when a person lives without reflection, without restraint, or self-judgment? And it reminds us that Teig is not malicious. He is just unreflective. He never asks himself, "Who am I becoming? Who am I harming? What will my behavior cost others?" The unexamined life is not livable and reflection does not begin until Teig is physically forced to stop running from himself, and that's a key in this story. To stop wandering around in the dark night, to stop and acknowledge what he is carrying and to whom he owes some attention.

And I don't know if this is making sense to you, or if you're doing this, or if you need to hear it, I know I need to hear it because the temptation to numb and hide and run and separate from the world by blaming others for its problems, and blaming others for my problems and to try and hold up my hands and hopelessness for humanity that seems so ill prepared to meet the challenges that we are facing is all what I am fighting every day these days. This week it came home very strongly as I was invited by some Muslim friends to stand with them and speak out against anti-Islamic rhetoric after the governor of our state pressured a water park in a neighboring town to cancel a Muslim celebration day claiming somehow it was un-American to allow this community to rent the park.

This kind of political nonsense at the expense of American citizens is exactly the kind of nonsense that we can give up on the world for. When we stood in Grand Prairie in the city hall and spoke to the cameras in our press conference, a man came in and yelled abusive and horrible Islamic things

claiming somehow that his First Amendment right gave him rights as a Christian to do so and didn't give us rights as American people of faith to assemble or practice our faith peacefully. His lambasting at the press conference with abusive, hate-filled rhetoric that claimed somehow that he represented Jesus and all the Muslims, many of whom were Black Muslims whose ancestry came as slaves, all the Muslims he said should go back to Makkah was enough to make me want to do all kinds of terrible things, the most of which was to give up on society altogether, to despair in the situations we are in.

And I turned to my colleagues during that whole hour of yelling and divisiveness and said, "This man is exactly why we are standing together, why we show up, why we have to examine what's important in our lives. As the world turns on every idiotic next thing like these violent outbursts against peaceful citizens or the political games to have us look away from the real problems we are facing, I want to turn it all off. I want to live the unexamined pina colada filled staring at the waves rolling in life, which I planned to do a little bit this summer, don't you worry.

But to do that every day is not for me because my life means I'm supposed to stand up here and examine life and encourage you to do the same. The thing is that I feel a lot of guilt sometimes when I want to turn off the world and the story has another thing to say about that. It says that guilt weighs us down like the body we carry and constricts our breathing and directs our movement and persists until addressed properly. The story anticipates the later existential questions about how an unresolved guilt shapes the whole posture of our lives.

It asks if an unexamined guilt is a smoldering ember that can cause a fire in the heart. That's me saying that, not Socrates. I know this because I have had to put out such fires. I also have heard enough stories in my time as your minister to know that smoldering guilt, which sometimes has few easy answers, lives in all of us and hangs onto us like Teig's corpse, can be hard to bury because it asks us if we can put it down, we must change. It asks us, do we change or merely just adapt to our inner battles?

And the story has the clues again. It carefully ends with Teig finding a way to bury the corpse before the sun rises. Teig does not become perfect, but he becomes consistent. Moderation replaces excess. Commitment replaces wandering, day replaces night, and philosophically the story reminds us that real change is not dramatic, it is durable. It takes time, and it takes effort, and it takes intention, and it takes examination, and it takes putting things down that weigh us, weigh on us, and it takes conversation, and it takes redemptive acts, and sometimes it takes suffering all of which we liberal, Unitarian Universalists don't like very much. We don't like the answer that sometimes suffering is a way to healing. Sometimes that we have to stand in solidarity as a madman yells abuses at us. Sometimes we have to watch the news careen toward cage fighting on the White House lawn as the 4th of July celebration.

Sometimes we have to carry a body through the night chased by demons and Sprites to finally find an answer to the things we have done, the things we are and the things and way we want to be, and that is why Teig O'Kane and this story endures because like our faith, it refuses easy answers. It asks,

"What are you carrying? Why haven't you put it down? And what road will finally make you stop?" And it asks those questions in a loving way, not in a condemnation. It warns, but it also offers hope that we will endure, that we will examine, that we will put things down that weigh on us to clear the air and the heart and the soul in big and small ways, because it says an examined life requires tangible action. It requires things Unitarians do not like much, like confession, acts of contrition, admission to fault and redemption.

It requires us to humble ourselves to address the heart of who we each are. Socrates' old question is here, "What does it mean to live a good and just and meaningful life? What does it actually mean?" And the answers to these questions are not that there's a one time ascent to a belief or a God that magically gives you redemption. Our answer is that you must trudge through life and at each turn ask, "Will you walk the whole road? Will you carry the full weight? Will you finish the task knowing that honesty gives the story our lives' gravity?" Can we live examined lives to bury the corpse, to unveil the truth as it needs to live, to develop a greater love that can be kindled in us all. Friends, I will walk with you on this road if you wish. This is our road, the road of the examined life and it isn't easy. So be gentle with yourselves and one another. Honor the lessons of our burdens and walk forward, renewed, open, and ready to embrace second chances that make life so meaningful. Amen and amen.