

Heaven and Hell
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Channing Memorial Church
April 5, 2009

How relevant to the modern world are Heaven and Hell?

More importantly, why preach about Heaven and Hell in a Unitarian Universalist church? This past fall our Small Groups explored great religious questions meeting in members homes to share personal beliefs on subjects such as God, Human Nature, and Destiny. During the session exploring “What happens after death” many participants offered that they did not believe that we go somewhere after death. Most people felt that Heaven and Hell had no relevance in their lives neither did the concept of reincarnation.

Personally, I was raised Unitarian Universalist in a Humanist congregation. I was taught that we expire with our last breath. A deceased person lives on in our memories and through the legacy he or she created during life. This view of the finality of death is positive in that motivates me to make the most of my life. I also reject the judgments of people who say that someone is going to hell for loving someone of the same gender or for not following a certain religion.

Once I experienced significant losses, my conviction that this life is all there no longer holds true. It is impossible that my Aunt Bessie and my brother Michael simply ceased to exist with their final heartbeats. New discoveries in the field of quantum physics suggest that the energy that animates our bodies cannot be turned off like a light switch but undergoes a transformation.

The year following my brother’s death, I preached about immortality; my sense that an essence that was my brother lives on in ways that I can not fully comprehend but a spiritual life greater than the memories of those who loved him. From the pulpit of the UU Society of Martha’s Vineyard, I said, “Death remains a mystery but I have a sense that the individual human soul does not expire. Perhaps the shift that occurs from life to death is so miraculous or so ordinary as to remain indescribable. However, of this I am absolutely certain--- Love is a universal and eternal force.”

Two responses to that sermon have stuck with me to this day. The first was from a man who happened to be carpenter with a long straggly beard. We had spoken about how his belief in a higher power helped him to stay sober. He gave me a hug and whispered in my ear, “Your brother is now all Love.”

The second response was from an older member of the church who had preached on his Humanist convictions. We enjoyed sparring about intellectual subjects. He was a widower and one of his sons had predeceased him. He shook my hand firmly, and said, “Now Amy, I have experienced losses too and yet I do not believe any of that hooley!”

The same range of perspectives exists in this community. Some of you may have a mystical sense of an afterlife. Many of you may reject Heaven and Hell as archaic or part of a religious system that you left behind. However, concepts of Heaven and Hell are found in many cultures, philosophies and religious traditions. More than naïve or wishful thinking, these ideas shape how we live. So, this morning, I challenge you to consider how these teachings from the world's religions influence your actions regardless of whether you believe in an afterlife or not.

Archaeologists assert that our prehistoric ancestors held a belief in life after death because of burial customs. An animal was left to decompose or thrown into a trash heap where human bodies were treated with care. Pervasive evidence of orderly graves suggests a reverence for the human body even when it ceased to live. People were often buried with objects suggesting a belief that tools would be needed in the afterlife.

Time was the Underworld where all living things went below the earth's surface was considered a neutral place. You may be familiar with the Greek Myth of Persephone who goes down to the Underworld to minister to the dead. Her mother Demeter, the goddess of grain and fertility is so bereft that the earth is cold and barren for a season until mother and daughter are reunited in springtime.

The idea that all the dead were destined for the underworld evolved into much more complex cosmology. Many religions hold that there are stages of heaven and stages of hell to which people are sent according to their good or bad deeds during life. Egyptian tomb paintings from as early as 2500 BC show the jackal-headed god Anubis as the gatekeeper of the underworld. Anubis would determine a person's worthiness by weighing the deceased heart against the feather of truth. The heart would be weighted down by bad deeds and lightened by good. When your life comes to an end, how will your heart measure up against the feather of truth?

The idea of judgment after death is found in many religious traditions. In Judaism the Jewish New Year is the time to reconcile your misdeeds so your name will be ascribed into the Book of Life. In Christianity, St. Peter is sometimes depicted as the keeper of Heaven's Gate where people will be interviewed in order to be admitted to Heaven, damned to Hell or sent to Purgatory where they might purge or make up for their sins. In both Hinduism and Buddhism, it is believed that life is a wheel of successive reincarnations. Between reincarnations, people arrive in the hall of the ruler of the dead where people are judged according to their right or wrong actions. People are then rewarded or punished in one of many different heavens or hells before being reborn. Eastern religions emphasize the journey between lifetimes is one of consciousness.

There are many different visions of Heaven. The one commonly depicted in Western culture is a pale blue sky where beautiful angels recline on fluffy clouds. Where the earth is chaotic and unpredictable, human beings looked upward to the wheel of stars as a realm of immortality, order and harmony. The Milky Way is a road of stars which souls took to higher heavens.

However, this is not the only vision of Heaven. Paradise is also portrayed as a verdant garden like Eden located somewhere on this earth. Explorers were driven to discover an idyllic place with a perfect climate and fertile land where people could live in harmony with the world of nature. Some believed it was an island without aging, disease, work, or private property.

Heaven is sometimes depicted as a land of endless pleasure with food, drink, frolicking and music. St. Paul countered that “The kingdom of God does not mean food and drink but righteousness and peace and the Holy Spirit.” Rabbi Rav of the third century AD wrote, “There is neither eating nor drinking, nor any begetting of children, no bargaining or jealousy or hatred or strife. All that the righteous do is sit with their crowns on their heads and enjoy the effulgence of the Presence.”

Where Heaven is a place of bliss and perfection, Hell is the opposite: a place of torment. Some theologians proclaim that a perk of Heaven is that you get to see justice served; a special window to witness those who wronged you get what they deserve. There are all sorts of horrifying images of people subjected to torture and pain.

There are other views of Hell like Sisyphus condemned to roll a boulder up a steep hill only to have it roll back down again.

The famous line “Hell is other people” comes from the existentialist play “No Exit” where three people are locked in a room without windows. The three characters torture each other by probing into each others sins, desires, and unpleasant memories.

In the week ahead, I challenge you to consider your own views of Heaven and Hell. When you say, “Ah, Heaven!” what are you experiencing? Physical pleasure? Beauty? Material Security? Personal Achievement? Peace? Love? A sense of God’s presence? Harmony with the natural world? Here is the really tough question, do you receive satisfaction from the suffering of others especially those who you do not like or may have hurt you in some way? When you say, “Oh, Hell!” what are you encountering? Physical pain? Ugliness? Loss? Failure? Frustration? Hatred? A sense of isolation?

As people of conscience, it is important to be mindful of what we hold as ideal for that is what motivates our actions. It is equally important to consider how sometimes our misplaced striving after that ideal leads to suffering and thereby creates our own hell. The ideal of a Paradise with a perfect climate, trees always bearing fruit, a place without aging, disease or work has not been abandoned. Consider how many modern conveniences, marketing campaigns, and resorts were born from those longings. Super-sized meals deficient of nutrients, people purchasing luxury items on credit, and attempts to mask signs of aging can lead to lives out of balance. Ironically, our desire for vengeance instead of reconciliation weighs on our hearts hurting us more than our enemies.

The mystery of death and the afterlife remains. However, no matter who makes the final judgment whether it is God or karma, our own conscience or our impact on

others—there is one conclusion, our actions matter. Whether or not you believe in life after death or Heaven and Hell among us, all traditions teach the same lesson that our choices have consequences that can give rise to love or pain. The path to healing and wholeness is through nourishing others.

I close with a poem from the Sufi tradition:

I sent my soul into the invisible,
Some letter of that after life to spell.
And by and by my soul returned to me
And answered, I myself am heaven and hell.

- Omar Khayyam, *Rubaiyat*