

Heaven, Hell, and Life Before Death

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I love humor. I like pithy quotes. Today's sermon topic is a great one for quotes, especially from one of my favorite authors, Mark Twain. Though not particularly known as religiously reverent, he often spoke about Heaven and Hell with great humor in his writing. He wrote in his Notebooks and Journals about a dying man who couldn't make up his mind about which place to go, since both have their advantages – "Heaven for the climate, and Hell for the company."

Since he said that humor and swearing would not be allowed in Heaven, we might guess where Twain would choose to spend eternity.

He is also quoted as saying, "Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you would stay out and your dog would go in."

If you mention to someone that you are a Unitarian Universalist, a common response is often something along the lines of, "oh," accompanied by a somewhat confused look. Then, "Well, what do they believe?" The phrasing of that question sometimes gives us a moment of bemusement, since we know that "they" - those of the Unitarian Universalist persuasion - don't necessarily "believe" a common set of beliefs nor do we "believe in" a set of denominationally proscribed tenets of faith.

Yet, in today's opening words, I acknowledged that when we are asked if we believe, we legitimately respond that yes, we DO believe! Each of us, individually as UUs, does believe in something, and we certainly hold a set of values in common. Additionally, in fact, we challenge ourselves and encourage each other to be constantly engaged in the process of considering, questioning, and examining what it is that we believe to be true in response to life's great questions.

Religions exist to help with life's questions, and in the definition of UU minister Rev. Forrest Church, religion is "our human response to the dual reality of being alive, and having to die." One of life's great questions isn't about what happens during our lifetimes at all, but rather focuses on what may be our fate after the death of our physical body. Religions of all types and kinds have responses to this question, be it cycles of karma and reincarnation, ascension to heaven or descent into hell based on merit, rejoining with ancestral spirits, or passing into the spirit realms.

Historically, Unitarians held to the traditional Christian view of the existence of specific places called heaven and hell. Universalists also believed in a version of Heaven, because they believed in universal salvation, and therefore, that all souls would be reunited with God in Heaven.

Modern Unitarian Universalists hold a variety of views and beliefs. Since there is no way of knowing for sure if we go any place at all when we die, such conjecture being a part of one's belief or faith, there are very few UUs, as you know, who believe in the physical existence of a place called heaven or hell, especially as described in our reading from the Christian scriptures.

Most UUs would probably tell you that they see death as a final and total end to our human existence, both physical and spiritual. Rather than experiencing this with despair or fear, however, this position compels us to live life as fully and richly as possible, to work for justice so that as many people as possible can share in having a

good life, and to take full advantage of the opportunity to live a satisfying and happy life while we are still above ground.

Further, we are not compelled to live this good life because of a fear of God, hell, or eternal damnation, but rather because we have a sense of responsibility to live moral and ethical lives for our own benefit and for the good of others. Seeing our earthly life as finite encourages us to find the sacred in the every day. We see the incentive in creating a more just and peaceful world than the one we live in at present, and we hope to leave a better world as a legacy to our children and our children's children.

Now, what "most" UUs believe about death may or may not be what you believe, and that's okay. Without a denominational creed or standard of belief, there are certainly those among us who hold other viewpoints. We UUs profess to be very open to that! Our concern focuses on how each of us can live in the most humane, most ethical, most compassionate way possible.

So, if believing in Heaven and/or Hell facilitates your ability to be a better person, then, please, by all means, believe! If you find you are more encouraged to take responsibility for creating a better world if you are an atheist or agnostic, humanist or pagan, then feel free to believe that.

All of us are motivated in different ways – some by the carrots, some by the sticks. Personally, I would rather see you trying to be good because you see it as a better alternative for living your life, rather than out of fear of punishment or desire for reward at some future time. But, if you're not going to be good without the threat of Hell or the promise of Heaven, well, so be it. The beliefs that are NOT okay in our congregations are those that lead to harm and hurt for others. We UUs are very open to a variety of beliefs, but we are also very clear that there are things it's not alright to believe.

Unitarian Universalism's own Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "To different minds, the same world is a hell, and a heaven." I think that UUs are more inclined to believe that the potential for living in either lays this side of the grave.

In that view, we may be more like the early followers of Jesus than we realize. From research and study being done now, it appears that early Christians believed that Jesus' message was about creating paradise on earth, about finding salvation in the life of community, in the face of imperial power, violence, and death. In their book, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love for This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, share that the followers of Jesus in the early Christian movement saw paradise as being of this world, "permeated and blessed by the Spirit of God."

Their focus was on living the best possible life on earth, on finding the spiritual in the everyday, not concern for the possibilities of the afterlife. The shift to a focus on the crucifixion happened later in the church's history, for a variety of other reasons, related to human concerns for power, war, and empire.

The world – people and the planet and all that makes up our existence – needs to be reconnected with this vision of paradise, of the possibility of Heaven created in the present moment. We need to see our home on earth, our day-to-day life, our relationships with one another as sacred, as being a part of holy ground. Our Universalist heritage can help us find a way back to this version of life, of finding paradise in the every day.

One of Universalism's English founders, Jane Leade, wrote about her spiritual vision of paradise as a "realm in which humanity's beautiful diversity flourished." For

her, entering into Heaven meant “being spiritually transformed into a person rooted in love, who was (continually) growing and unfolding as a plant in the Garden of (Eden.)” She preached that Heaven could be now, and our own lives could be a part of the renewal of that paradise. For her, salvation was the restoration of dignity, creativity, and responsibility in all of the diverse ways represented by humanity.

Hosea Ballou carried forward these themes in American Universalism in the 1800s, when he talked about the paradise available now, in our present life, through beauty, and relationships marked by justice and care for one another. He said that Jesus’ crucifixion did not save us, but rather his embodiment of creative love and justice did.

These are themes and visions of life that resonate with us as Unitarian Universalists today, giving us foundation on which to continue to work to create heaven in our present time, paradise in our current world.

I want to share a story with you. Long ago in Japan, a samurai—a warrior of those ancient times—went to visit a monk named Hakuin. The samurai was elaborately dressed in armor, and by his side swung a gleaming, sharp sword. He was a big, proud fellow, used to getting whatever he wanted.

"Hakuin!" The samurai bellowed at the temple door, "I want to have a word with you right now!"

Unruffled, the monk ended his meditation with a slow bow. He rose from his meditation bench and took some time to stretch his legs before turning toward his visitor. The large figure of the impatient samurai blocked the temple entrance.

"Well, monk," grunted the samurai, "If you know so much and are so wise, tell me all you know about heaven and hell!"

Hakuin inspected the fierce-looking samurai closely. Finally he replied, "You disrupted my meditation to ask something every fool knows? What kind of second-rate soldier are you? You look like a tramp in that outfit! Did you steal that sword from a child? It wouldn't slice a cucumber! Leave this temple and never bother me again!"

If you can picture the reddest plum you've ever seen in your life, you can picture the color of the insulted samurai's face. He was furious! No one ever dared to speak to a samurai rudely—they would surely lose their life before they had time to apologize! In a flash the samurai unsheathed his sword and raised it high over Hakuin's head. "You will die for those words little monk!" he roared.

Hakuin looked directly at the warrior. "This is what hell feels like," said the monk calmly.

The samurai froze, his sword poised in mid-air. In an instant he understood that his anger did feel like fire—the fires of a terrible place! The samurai slowly lowered his sword to his side and resheathed it. By the time his gaze met the monk's, his anger had vanished as quickly as it had appeared. He felt as if cool water had extinguished the fire: he was grateful and calm.

"And this is what heaven feels like," said Hakuin, looking at the samurai's peaceful face.

Hell on earth is having a clear vision of what we might have achieved, and knowing that we didn't live up to our potential, personally or collectively as a human family. It's being aware of what might have been, but knowing that we wasted the gifts and talents we were given, and that there was much we might have done, but did not do.

Heaven on earth is when we live with love and compassion, hope and joy for

ourselves and for others. It's when we can look at our lives and see that we have used our talents in service to that which is of importance to us. It's when we know we've worked with what we were given – our talents, yes, but also our foibles and shortcomings, and made the best of what we have. It's when we can point to the ways in which living our life made life easier for others, where we've spoken up for justice and the dignity and worth of all humanity.

Unitarian Universalists don't believe in Hell, we believe in hope and courage. We believe in the Heaven available to us every day, created by kindness and everlasting love. That's our religious heritage. UUs believe that it's never too late to create Heaven on earth.

If you're breathing, there's hope. Keep breathing. Blessed be.