

Opening Words

Last year during the Question Box sermon at the end of May, you asked me about this sort of thing a few times. “If we think with our minds, feel with our hearts, what do we do with our souls or spirits?” “What is meant by ‘the soul’?” “What do you believe happens to the soul after death?” And then, one more that held a slightly different focus, “Is there a UU version of Heaven and the afterlife?”

I would have to go back to the video tape from that Question Box Sunday to tell you exactly how I responded, but I recall talking about how there is not a unanimous or even majority opinion about the afterlife among Unitarian Universalists today. Perhaps I spoke about pastoral answers rather than theological answers. I am sure I shared my own conviction that we return to that from which we arose; that in the universe as a whole, I believe, recycling is the rule: our biological/physical components return to the good Earth and the energy of our being returns to be used again in another form. I was cautiously doubtful about anything of a persons ‘personality’ surviving death, and still am – yet there is much I am cautiously doubtful about. There are far too many experiences I have been through and have been told about by people I trust to completely discount the possibility that there is something more going on than what fits in my nicely neat philosophy and science. I have been told many compelling stories of connections, healings, and encounters.

Reflection

I'd like to start this morning by talking a bit about why I chose today's topic or why today's topic chose me. The title "Is this all there is?" came to me first, which I thought would give me the flexibility to talk about a couple of different things that have been on my mind lately – one -- what happens to us after we die or whether there is any type of afterlife and the other, more rooted in life on earth -- the questions of "What is the meaning of life? And "Is this all there is?" "How did I get here?" "What could I or should I have done differently?" that I and many I know are struggling with in middle age. Of the latter topic, I feared that expressing doubts about the goodness or fulfillment of life on earth might be more of a depressing topic than I wanted to share with the congregation, not to mention a bit self-indulgent, considering the many advantages and opportunities I and most of my friends and acquaintances have had in life compared to so many people who are truly suffering and don't have that "first world problem" or luxury of wondering about the meaning of life.

So I decided to concentrate on the afterlife, which in addition to something that I've been thinking about, was also a topic that was suggested in the responses to the worship questionnaire that we worship associates put out during the past church year. Now, this is a pretty big topic, and when I wrote the little blurb back at the end of May expanding on "Is this all there is?" to say that I'd talk about UU attitudes toward the afterlife and how they affect the way we live our

lives, I was trying to further define my topic, but I have to apologize up front.. I won't actually be saying a lot about how UU attitudes towards the afterlife affect the way we live our lives... leaving that instead as discussion for the car ride home or during our post-service gathering.

One of my fortunes in life has been to reach a pretty advanced age without losing a parent or sibling or close friend. So the death of my father early last year really got me to thinking about this question of "Is this all there is?" and wondering or maybe hoping that my father might be floating around somewhere, having a grand time with his siblings, parents, ancestors, and friends who had gone before him and that I'd get to join this party some time in the distant future... In the last months of his life, when he was very limited in his mobility and not all there mentally, he told several stories that involved climbing, and one of the last things he said to me and the aide in the room at the time was "I don't know how we'll get through this." Where was he climbing to? What was he trying to get through? When my father died, I was with him, but I have to say that I didn't experience anything that helped me with answers. People I know and respect have said with certainty that they felt their loved one's passing, that they felt or heard their loved one saying to them that they were at peace at some time after his or her death, that they were okay... In my father's case, he was there and then he wasn't, and I didn't really feel any difference between the former and the latter... I wasn't even completely sure of the exact moment when he breathed his last breath, and I didn't feel or hear any communication from him,

then or any time since, and I didn't really have a feeling that he had gone somewhere else... And all this made me think that I should explore this topic a bit more.

I do have a habit of thinking that I can take things on without thinking too much about the effort and whether I actually am up to the job. This is definitely one of those times, so I hope that my words today give you something to think about, to talk about, and maybe even provide some comfort. If they do, I'll feel that I've done what I set out to do here today.

Being raised as a UU in the second half of the 20th century, I was brought up learning to question, to look for evidence (although I'm no scientist!), rather than believe in things that weren't obviously a fact. I came to a skepticism about God and Heaven and Hell at a fairly early age, identifying as an agnostic, rather than an atheist... I can relate to writer Julian Barnes's statement "I don't believe in God, but I miss him." I recall saying when I was a teenager things like "when you're dead, you're dead ... This life is the only one we get, so carpe diem." And yet, I've also harbored some hope for an afterlife, especially as I grew beyond those teenage years of knowing everything... While death is, in the words that Shakespeare put in Hamlet's mouth "the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns," there are stories of near-death experiences and things happen that some would view as evidence for some type of afterlife.

I've never seen hard, cold evidence of such, but I'm not willing to dismiss out of hand those little signs of life beyond this one that I've personally felt and that others have related to me. ... Here are a few:

During a transition from one living situation to another while I was in college, I had a strong feeling of a ghostly presence when I woke in the middle of the night in an unfamiliar room in an old house; My husband and I both felt or imagined we felt a presence in the house we'd purchased from his grandmother's estate... I could swear that I was smelling food cooking or cigarette smoke when no one was cooking or smoking, and Earle frequently said "Hi Nana" while we lived there. There was the friend who, upon leaving the wake for a young family member who had died received a Waze notification from someone with the name of the deceased saying that he had arrived. She wasn't following anyone's journey, so she is convinced it was a message from the beyond. Another friend who was ill was twice awakened from sleep by the ringing of a non-existent phone... she connected it to a loved one who had died and she realized she needed to get to the hospital where her life was saved... I once had an extremely vivid dream about being Jewish in the years leading up to the 2nd world war, convincing me at the time that it was a sign from an earlier life... Friends of mine spent an entire summer communicating through a Ouija board with a spirit named Amal... Another friend told me a story about an abundance of fish that appeared during a Memorial fishing trip that had earlier not yielded any... once the name of the memorialized, an avid fisherman, was invoked in a plea for fish – please Charlie, help us out here and send some fish – the fish were practically jumping into the boat. And what

explains the feeling I get every time I stop by the Horn Pond Angel of Hope memorial to children who have preceded their parents in death? I can't call it an out of body experience, but I have a physical, shivering reaction every time.

Are these signs or visitors from an afterlife? Are the common stories of those who have been brought back to life after being clinically dead evidence of an afterlife? What does our UU faith say?

If you do some research on UU beliefs in the afterlife, you'll find something like the following "While there are a variety of views of the afterlife, most Unitarian Universalists consider this life the important one. Some believe in an ultimate unification with God or the universe. Many Unitarian Universalists believe that the only afterlife is the legacy people leave on earth." This sounds pretty consistent with the belief system I'd come to adapt in my life as UU, and I think you would probably agree that many UUs believe something like this even though ours is not a doctrinal faith and we're encouraged to explore the question of an afterlife and come to our own conclusions.

You may know that the Universalist in our Unitarian Universalist denomination refers to the belief in Universal salvation, of the practitioners of Universalism prior to the 1961 merger of the Unitarian church and the Universalist church. I never really thought too much about that belief other than to think "well, yeah... if there is any kind of afterlife, I'm pretty sure there isn't a place of fire and brimstone for the bad people or the people of the wrong religion (me and all the other Protestants, as my Catholic friends told me growing up). But as I thought more about our Unitarian Universalist beliefs in the afterlife, I thought a more in-depth explanation of this belief in Universal salvation would be interesting as would some more exploration of the Unitarian side of the our faith. As explained on uua.org, "The Universalist side of our tradition broke with mainstream Christianity by

rejecting the idea of eternal damnation.” I saw this idea of universal salvation expressed more than once as the belief that all humans will be restored to a right relationship with God. Universalism its early days is frequently referred to as Christian Universalism and the symbol of the Universalist Church in America was an off-center cross in a circle. This was decidedly a Christian faith. Another interesting fact that I found in my research of Universalism and beliefs in the afterlife was the part that Universalists played in the practice of spiritualism -- organized attempts to communicate with the dead -- which had its peak in America in the late 19th century. In the book, The Other Side of Salvation Spiritualism and the Nineteenth Century Religious Experience, John Buescher writes “People from every denomination and from no denomination became spiritualists. Universalists, however, were quite disproportionately drawn to this belief, and no denomination lost more of its leaders to it.” So Universalists believed in an afterlife of salvation for everyone and many were attracted to the practice of communicating with spirits, which they must have felt proved the existence of an afterlife if not necessarily their belief that the afterlife represented salvation for every mortal.

What of the early Unitarians? What did they believe of the afterlife. To attempt to answer that question, I read one of the early definitive sermons on Unitarianism in America “Unitarian Christianity” – a sermon of 131,000 words written and preached by William Ellery Channing in a 90-minute sermon at the Baltimore ordination of Rev. Jared Sparks in 1819. This sermon lays out the Unitarian beliefs

about God, Jesus, and the goodness of man. It's said to be one of the clearest explanations of the faith at that time, and although it doesn't dwell on the afterlife, clearly belief in an afterlife in Heaven was very much a component of the Unitarian faith of our forefathers. Channing explained "We conceive of Heaven as a state where the love of God will be exalted into an unbounded fervor and joy; and we desire, in our pilgrimage here, to drink into the spirit of that better world." In talking about Jesus, Channing states "His resurrection is the foundation of our hope of immortality. His intercession gives us boldness to draw nigh to the throne of grace, and we look up to Heaven with new desire, when we think, that, if we follow him here, we shall there see his benignant countenance and enjoy his friendship forever."

I think it would be interesting to trace these clearly Christian beliefs in Unitarianism and Universalism into the modern day to see when and why they morphed into our current beliefs, but that is beyond the scope of my reflection today and would require a lot more research than I've done so far.

I have come upon some interesting and comforting thoughts in the reading I've done to prepare for this reflection. Writer Julian Barnes, in *Nothing to be Afraid Of*, says "I can imagine all sorts of things more welcome than utter obliteration within fifteen years... why not imagine some version of reincarnation – a mixture of Buddhism and Groundhog Day in which you get to live your life again, conscious of how it went the first time, yet able to make adjustments from that

rehearsal. As we know from the Thich Nhat Hanh selection that Peter read earlier, the Buddhist belief in reincarnation removes the self from the afterlife, but I do like Barnes's version.

I found many other interesting visions of the Afterlife in David Eagleman's Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives. The UUA website's review of this little gem of a book begins "As people who value both cold, hard facts and the freedom of an unfettered imagination, Unitarian Universalists sometimes walk a narrow path between reductionism and wishful thinking.... "The reviewer goes on... "If bodies are all we are or were or ever will be, then death is the final period at the end of our sentence. But we have countless motives to hope for something beyond that period: the simple pleasures of continued existence, our unwillingness to bid a final good-bye to loved ones, the injustice of lives that end without either the consolations or punishments they deserve, the challenge of finding meaning in a life that will someday come to nothing. Where should we assign the burden of proof: To those who reach beyond the immediately observable? Or to those who would have us surrender our hopes... "

At this time in my life, I'm attracted to the idea of reaching beyond the immediately observable, so I really enjoyed this book... I'll share a summary of some of my favorite imaginings of afterlives and I'd encourage you to look up this book for more.

“Metamorphosis” explains that death consists of three deaths -- The first when the body ceases to function, the second when the body is consigned to the grave, at which point one’s spirit goes to an afterlife consisting of everyone who has ever lived who is still remembered, and the final death when one’s name is last spoken on earth. The afterlife is sort of like an endless waiting area in an airport where one sees fairly recently deceased average people and famous people from throughout history. When one’s name is last spoken, that is really it, and there are many famous people who just wish they were no longer spoken of and could be done with it. Pity the poor farmer who drowned in a river on his property and whose property became a small college...although he’s an average person and none of his loved ones are left with him in this afterlife as they’ve all been forgotten, his name is spoken regularly by college tour guides as they tell his story.

In “Perpetuity” only the sinners in this life have an afterlife, which is in a perfectly pleasant suburb where they all have families, jobs, social lives. They wonder why there are no good people in this heaven, speculating that perhaps God “is keeping the bad ones around like the Romans kept gladiators” and that at some point, God will have them battle to the death for his amusement. But in this afterlife, “the truth is “God lives a life very much like ours – we were created in his image and his social situation. God spends most of his time in pursuit of happiness, reading books, striving for self-improvement, seeking activities to stave off boredom, trying to keep in touch with fading friendships, wondering if there’s something else he should be

doing with his time. Over the millennia, God has grown bitter, envying Man his brief twinkling of a life and those he dislikes are condemned to suffer immortality with him.”

While this afterlife conveys punishment by a vengeful God and the eternal waiting room has some random punishment as well, not all of the afterlives depicted in Sum are so bleak. Ineffable paints more of a UU, semi-scientific view of the afterlife, comparing the afterlives of institutions like a theatre company, a platoon in war, a closing department store and how they live on to the afterlives of humans saying that when you die, you are grieved by all the atoms of which you were composed. They hung together for years, whether in sheets of skin or communities of spleen. With your death, they do not die. Instead, they part ways, moving off in their separate directions, mourning the loss of a special time they spent shared together, haunted by the feeling they once played a part in something larger than themselves, something that had its own life, something they can hardly put a finger on.”

I would like to believe that there is an afterlife, that my spirit will have the opportunity to see my father and others again, that those stories that people tell of near-death experiences symbolize some type of afterlife, that the spiritualists actually were communicating with the dead, that reincarnation is real, that those messages through a Waze message or a Ouija board or a ringing telephone or a ghost in your house are communications from the great Beyond.

I asked my almost 90-year old mother what she thought about the afterlife and whether she had ever had any communication from her loved ones who have died. She said that while she's had dreams and seen signs of loved ones' presence in beautiful coincidences, she believes those dreams and coincidences are her deep subconscious mind talking to her, not the actual departed ones. Even though she didn't realize she was thinking of my father or her parents or siblings, her subconscious mind is reminding her of them. And as for an afterlife, she believes that our afterlife is the legacy we leave on earth... of people remembering us or things we have created or people we have touched, of the good we have done...

Whatever else there is of an afterlife, this I know to be true – that we do live on after death.

May it be so.

Chalice Lighting

We light this chalice as a symbol of the spark of life which abides within us and around us.

May it be as a light in a dark night, a light in a window that welcomes the weary traveller home.

May it be as a light in the hand of a trusted friend, that guides us along the path.

May it be as the light in the face of one we love, bright with joy.

Rev Dr Linda Hart

Chalice Lighting

The chalice is the fullness of life's experiences
And the emptiness of innocent openness to wonder
As we light the chalice flame
Let us explore the empire of the senses,
Let us celebrate experience and experiment:
the twin expressions of freedom, reason and tolerance.

Yvonne Aburrow

Chalice Lighting

When you celebrate, celebrate well, but remember that nearby someone is grieving; and when you grieve, grieve well, but remember that nearby someone is celebrating.

Therefore, as we gather here in this special place, we mark both grief and celebration. For absent friends, and for those whose company we enjoy right now, we light this chalice.

Andrew Usher