

The End of Me: What Happens after Death?

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Sunday, July 9, 2017

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Special Music:

“I’ll Follow You into the Dark,” by Ben Gibbon (Death Cab for Cutie), sung by Michelle and Tom.

Hymns:

#21 “For the Beauty of the Earth (revised verse 4),” #86 “Blessed Spirit of My Life,” and #6 “Just as Long as I Have Breath.”

Sermon

What happens after we die—what do Unitarian Universalists believe? That depends on which one of us you ask.

We do affirm the importance of how we live in *this* life. Just as long as we have breath, what matters is the way we treat other people and how we live on this earth. But after the breath stops—we don’t have one answer for that.

Some Unitarian Universalists find this to be frustrating about our faith tradition; others find it liberating. And of course, a few folks from other faiths make fun of us for not having one account of what happens after you die—especially because it’s not *their account*.

Yet such impatience with our diversity ignores the historical diversity of thought that has existed within major spiritual traditions on this question. This includes the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For example, the scriptures of all three share some ideas and images of a Day of Judgment, a final time when everyone’s deeds and faithfulness to God will be measured. As a result of that moral measurement, people will be either punished or given paradise.

Tied to this idea are the concepts of a bodily resurrection of all people, envisioned also as happening at the day of judgment. While all three faiths have developed similar concepts about a resurrection, it is Christianity which has elaborated these concepts and highlighted them the most, and of course it’s been centered around that tradition’s testimony of the resurrection of Jesus.

For example, here’s a glossy brochure that arrived in my mailbox from an evangelical Christian organization. It quotes the Gospel of John, saying Jesus will raise the dead on the last day, when he comes again to earth (John 6:39). It also quotes the Apostle Paul, saying: “We shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised” (1 Corinthians 15:52).

In the United States, at least, it seems that we see and hear about a final judgment and resurrection most frequently from evangelical and other Christians—in the mailbox, on TV

and the internet, on billboards and sometimes knocking on the door. Most Muslims, in contrast, promote living by the Five Pillars of the Faith, and do not emphasize the afterlife very much. Going even further, modern-day Judaism stresses the importance of this life in this world and seems not to make much of historical ideas about resurrections or scriptural images of a time of judgment. The point of Judaism is not a reward in the future; the point is to love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with God right now (Micah 6:8).

Looking just a little bit more now at the Christian tradition, I want to point out a complication. From the early years of the tradition, existing somewhat awkwardly alongside the concept of a bodily resurrection, has been the idea of an immortal soul, the soul in each one of us which lasts beyond this life. I think this is what folks mean when they say someone has gone to heaven—their soul, not their body.

Early Christians inherited this idea from Greek philosophy, especially from Plato. The soul distinguishes that which is alive from that which is not alive. Though invisible, the soul animates us. It is our vital essence. It gives us our sense of who we are, our personality and motivation. We satisfy the soul by doing work that is meaningful, being creative, consuming delicious food, or enjoying a symphony, song or other work of art. We say it is “soul-satisfying.”

It can be hard to imagine that something that motivates us, enlivens us and connects us to others would merely vanish when our body stops working. Human consciousness is a miracle to me, and human love is a blessing. Both are so powerful that it’s hard to imagine they don’t continue after the body stops. Hence the appeal to some early Christians of the Greek idea of that immortal soul in everyone.

Centuries before that, however, Hinduism developed the full-scale philosophy of the transmigration of souls. This means that each of us, indeed each living being, is the home to a soul, and we are the manifestation of its existence while we are alive. But your soul had other manifestations before you, and your soul will go on to another being after you are gone.

As I understand the doctrine of Karma, the choices we make in each lifetime will have an effect on our future incarnations. The lessons we learn will go with our soul to help us out in the next lifetime. This is appealing—to take lessons along to our next incarnation! But I wonder, then, why it can be so hard to follow the lessons we learn while we are still in *this lifetime*?

In any case, Hindu ideas of reincarnation were inherited by the younger religion of Buddhism when it emerged in the north of India and in what is now Nepal. The most famous recent example of reincarnation is the Dalai Lama of Tibet. When he was a boy he was identified by leaders as the reincarnation of the prior lama—actually, of every earlier Dalai Lama.

Now an older man, this modern lama has said, with a subversive twinkle in his eye, that quite possibly the lama’s next reincarnation will be the very first one to be in the person of a little girl. Well, our religious denomination [the Unitarian Universalist Association] has finally elected a female president, so why not!

By now, a curious questioner might insistently ask: So, what does Unitarian Universalism say about death? Where do we end up after this body and brain cease to work? What happens to us—is it heaven, reincarnation, or topsoil?

Which answer you get will depend on whom you ask, and we make no apology for that. As I described, historically there has been more diversity in Christian beliefs on such questions than we might be led to think these days. How about this answer: We. Don't. Know.

We can't know for sure what happens. I am curious to find out, but not so curious that I can't wait for a few more decades. Maybe I won't find out—nothing to find out! Or maybe I'll have a big, unpleasant surprise. But we don't know.

I have not taken a survey of Unitarian Universalists and our beliefs on this, but I have some guesses from conversations here. Some of us believe in heaven, some believe in an immortal soul, some in reincarnation. Probably very few, if any, believe in hell or the resurrection of the body. I bet many UUs would choose my third answer: topsoil. Earth to earth—a natural body reclaimed by nature. After we die, we exist only by what we have done, what we have given away, and the lives we have touched—we exist in beloved memory and through our legacy. But the majority would say: We don't know.

I do believe that whatever it is that happens after we are dead—this happens to everyone. All people. There is no sorting of the sheep and the goats among us, no granting of immortality only to those lucky enough to believe the best Bible verse or be in the right religion. Heaven, reincarnation, or topsoil—I don't know, but whatever it is, it's there for you and me and everyone.

I feel the need to point out how privileged many of us are to be able to speculate on such a question, here in the United States in the early 21st century. Speaking for myself, I've grown up with reliable access to health care, food and shelter. Since I was born, many preventions or treatments have been developed for afflictions from which I might have died if I had been born in an earlier generation, or in a poor country or in a zone of conflict.

I've not fought in a war, not had to put my life on the line like police officers, firefighters, or international peacekeepers and relief workers. I've grown up in a society which grants a greater degree of privilege and safety to me as a male than it does to people of other gender identities. I've grown up as a white male person in a social system which has granted me privilege and protection, whereas the majority of people in other categories in our system have lived a precarious existence.

I've not experienced the fear of parents of boys with black bodies, having to tell them to stay away from certain places at certain times of day, lest they be lynched. I've not had to worry that a child of mine wouldn't come home because he was hanging around with a dangerous crowd or he became another story about a young man of color being shot in an encounter with police, in spite of being unarmed or not threatening others. Many people in this land and around the world are far more anxious about getting through *this* life, and I am privileged to be able to imagine a long life and to speculate with you today about eternity.

Some people say that death is a gift. Its finality reminds us how important life is, and how we must appreciate life. To be sure, the arrival of death can seem like a relief at the end of a long life or at the end of a long ordeal of suffering, by disease or the indignities of decline. Yet for too many people in this world, in our own country and in our own communities, death is not a gift but a tragic, unfair, and unjust reality.

This is the hell that is real. The violence that we live in, suffer in, and cause to ourselves, our fellow human beings, and our planetary home. Personal actions that cause harm and a social system that suppresses human potential and snuffs out lives.

This is the only kind of hell that our spiritual ancestors believed in—the hell that we inflict on one another, or the hell that lives in our suffering bodies and minds. The American Universalists of the late 1700s and early 1800s saw the suffering around them, and they took action to mitigate suffering, to feed people, to free prisoners, to care for the sick, to build schools.

The greatest accomplishment of our Universalist forbears was the healing of spiritual suffering. In the late 1700s, the dominant theology of New England was Calvinist Puritanism. Calvinism did have an answer to what happens after we die. *Hell* happens! For all but a few, all but an elect few, predestination meant that we were going to end up in hell. Salvation was an elite gift for an elect few. The doctrine of predestination meant that nothing you can do will save you—no beliefs, no good deeds. The Universalists read the same Bible, and they disagreed. Salvation is universal, they said.

They said the Bible showed “the character of God,” and that character was Love, like the love of a parent for a child. Universalist preachers proclaimed that in reading about the life of the prophet Jesus, you could see that God’s nature is Love. In 1803, nearly two decades before the Unitarians even organized themselves in New England, the brave Universalists built churches, held tent revival meetings, and converted people to this faith of hope.

They even adopted a statement of beliefs. They called it the Winchester Profession. In 1803, this is part of what the Winchester Profession said about God and humanity: “We believe in [the] one God ... who will finally restore the whole family of [humanity] to holiness and happiness.” Holiness means doing good works, being generous and loving, and working for justice. They said that if you do this, you will have happiness, because you will experience the joyful and holy sense of the Love that holds and connects all of us. Your holiness will bring you happiness. Your happiness will make you want to do good works.

The Winchester Profession of 1803 means that in God’s time, all will be reconciled, no matter what. This means that everyone goes to heaven, even those who don’t deserve it.

The Reverend Gordon McKeeman, who died several years ago, was a Universalist minister in several churches and was also the president of our UU seminary in Berkeley, Starr King School for the Ministry. He wrote: “Picturesquely spoken, the image [of Universal salvation] was that of the last, unrepentant sinner being dragged screaming and kicking into heaven, unable...to resist the power and love of the Almighty.”¹

There is no hell, even if someone cuts you off in traffic, or you lose your cool in a heated argument, and you wanna shout, “Go to hell!” You can’t—there’s no hell. God is Love, even for the unlovable among us. I know, it sounds downright unfair, doesn’t it?

¹ Mark D. Morrison-Reed, “Dragged Kicking and Screaming into Heaven,” Church of the Larger Fellowship, n.d. Accessed July 7, 2017. <http://www.clfuu.org/read-mobile/quest/salvation/dragged-kicking-and-screaming-into-heaven/>

But if somebody presses you to explain our tradition's beliefs about the afterlife, remember our history: everybody goes to heaven, because God is Love.

Given that there is no hell, the Universalists wanted us to work as much as possible to reflect the image of heaven in our own lives, here on earth. As one early preacher said, "If we're going to spend eternity together, we might as well learn how to get along down here."

Of course, this vision of love in heaven and love on earth is an ideal vision, and it appeals to folks in other faith traditions. In her book *Amazing Grace*, the religious writer Kathleen Norris writes this: "My favorite definition of heaven comes from a Benedictine sister, who told me that as her mother lay dying in a hospital, she had ventured to reassure her [mother] by saying, 'In heaven, everyone we love is there.' The older woman had replied, "No, in heaven, I will love everyone who's there."²

The vision of a place where all people are welcomed, and where all are fed and held in the arms of love—the vision of a state of being where all injury is healed and all wrong forgiven—such is a vision and a state of being worthy of imagining and hoping for. And whether we can bring ourselves to expect it in another time in a heavenly place, at least we can strive toward that vision here in this place.

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Sometimes we lose a dear person whose heart and mind and love have made a difference; their spirit has made an indelible impression on us. When we lose such a person, I believe we continue to experience that spirit. Their spirit stays with us, like a companion through our days. For the rest of us, that experience might suggest that the ways we live and speak and act will endure beyond our lives, that our spirits will touch others and this world.

By the legacy we leave, our spirit will show up for a long time after we are gone. Hence, let us pay attention to the ways we choose to have our spirit show up in this life. Blessed be and amen.

² Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York, 1998: Riverhead Books), 367.