

## Hell: Fiction and Reality

- Amanda Udis-Kessler, September 18, 2011, Pagosa Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

I imagine most people that know something about Unitarian Universalism would be puzzled about today's topic. Unitarian Universalists don't believe in hell. Even people who know very little about us know that. Universalism claims that God loves humanity too much to send anyone to hell. Our Universalist forebears were called "no-hellites." And, so the joke goes anyway, Unitarians have always believed they were too good to be sent to hell. So why talk about hell at all?

Actually, all too often we don't talk about hell, even when the opportunity is right in front of us. The Unitarian Universalist minister Fredric John Muir wrote a wonderful book entitled, *Heretic's Faith: A Vocabulary for Religious Liberals*. The book was organized into entries: God, grace, Jesus, and so on. There was, however, no entry for hell. Minister Bruce Marshall's Unitarian Universalist discussion book *A Holy Curiosity* has a powerful chapter on evil. Hell is not mentioned once in this chapter.

So then why do I think we should talk about hell? Two reasons.

First, hell is too important to leave to Evangelical and fundamentalist Christians. Their presentation of hell is deeply destructive for many people. Raise your hand if you heard about hellfire and damnation growing up. Keep your hand up if these images played any sort of problematic role in your life, if you ever worried about going to hell or worried that people you cared about were going to hell.

Second, there's a relationship between hell after death and hell before it. The fiction of hell after death distracts us from the reality of hell on earth. We can't address the reality of hell on earth until we address the fiction of hell after death.

Some years ago, a minister I know handed me a cassette tape. He had been pumping gas and noticed the tape sitting on top of the gas pump. The tape was labeled, "The Reality of Hell," and it turned out to be an Evangelical Christian sermon about hell. Given that I was planning to preach about hell at his congregation a few weeks later, I felt very lucky indeed.

I listened to the sermon and was impressed with the extent to which the preacher had thought about his subject. The sermon covered a multitude of ways in which eternal suffering in the flames of hell is physical and psychological and relational and spiritual. The sermon left rather little to the imagination.

Unitarian Universalists don't spend a lot of time thinking about the hell we've rejected. Listening to this sermon, I understood why, since the act of listening itself was quite unpleasant. It also seemed to me, however, that reflecting on this hell that human beings have invented can be an act of clarification and confirmation for Unitarian Universalists, as regards our faith that whatever may happen to us after we die, it does not include hellfire.

Here, then, to aid in a brief reflection on the Christian hell, are some choice quotes and images from the sermon:

- Quote: People in hell are going to be consciously aware that they have been deemed worthless, irredeemable, not functional. They're gonna be eternal trash. God is gonna see them as trash.
- Quote: Any kind of sin, whether the smallest lie or mass murder, is nothing short of cosmic treason.

- Image: Not accepting Jesus as your personal lord and savior is also cosmic treason. So you go to hell, a place of physical, psychological, relational and spiritual torment, because you fibbed, or killed someone, or because you didn't believe in Jesus. As if these things were somehow equivalent in the moral calculus of the universe.
- Quote: People make a conscious choice to go to hell. If you end up in hell, don't blame God. That's your choice.
- Image: Only getting your own soul saved and saving other souls really matters. Therefore, quote: Whatever you're doing [now] will mean nothing a hundred years from today.

This is the hell espoused by some Christians. It is violently anti-humane, and as descendants of the no-hellites, we reject the idea that any God worth believing in could ever have such suffering in mind for human beings or any part of creation.

I imagine some of you were saddened, horrified or infuriated to hear these sermon snippets. To say that such images and values are human creations, rather than God's revelation, may be good news, and indeed may be the best news that the Universalists ever offered. I find it profoundly disturbing, however, that people are capable of creating and deeply believing in this kind of hell.

However, make no mistake, hell is real. It absolutely exists. In fact, we don't need to worry about going to hell. We're already there. Hell is all around us, for those with eyes to see. Do any of you remember a band called the Go-Gos, from the 1980s? Belinda Carlisle, lead singer for the Go-Gos, wrote a song some of you might also remember, called, "Heaven is a place on earth." My claim, for the next few minutes, is that hell is also a place on earth.

How can I make this claim? Bear with me.

We Unitarian Universalists believe deeply in the inherent dignity and worth of all people, yet we acknowledge that sometimes we do more harm than good; we hurt rather than helping. Acknowledging this does not make us Calvinists or anti-humanists. It makes us realistic. When we sing "We Would Be One," we acknowledge that we are not one. In fact, our world is not one, and right now it's hard to say when it will be one. When we sing, "Wake Now My Senses," as we will later, we own just how asleep we can be. I doubt any of us can take a good hard look at ourselves or the world we live in and honestly claim that we always do our best.

So, the good news is not that there is no such thing as hell. Rather, the good news is that, far from being condemned to suffer hell eternally, we can work toward completely eliminating hell where we find it among us. When we sing, "We Would Be One," we witness to our desire to be one greater community building a world for all people. When we sing, "Wake Now My Senses," we acknowledge that we can play a role in the awakening of our senses, our reason, our compassion, our conscience and our vision of ministry. Today, my vision of ministry is to go straight to hell – in order to scope it out, take its measurements and renovate it right out of existence. Think of it as a kind of extreme makeover of hell.

In the late 1980s, Bruce Southworth, a Unitarian Universalist minister in New York City, gave a sermon about hell in which he described hell as the "betrayal of the divinity within [our souls], self-destruction, and evil." Hell, said Southworth, is "not just our [personal] ability to betray the divinity within us, but also society's betrayals," because there is social "carelessness toward the Spirit of Life [that] resides within each of us." Southworth identified the experience of not being treated as a full

human being as an example of the reality of hell. While he did not specifically mention the First Principle, it seems to me that Southworth defined hell as every situation in which people failed to treat themselves or others in a way that acknowledged humanity's inherent worth and dignity. To put it differently, whereas philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre claimed that, "hell is other people," Southworth might say that hell is the inability to care about other people.

And hell is a high-stakes matter. As much as I disagree with the preacher on the cassette tape, I think he has one piece of profound wisdom to offer us, which can be found in his description of the horror of hell as physical, psychological, relational and spiritual. When people put themselves or others in hell, I think it's fair to say that bodies, minds, emotions, relationships and spiritual lives are at risk.

How does that translate into the everyday? It means that every time someone is raped, gaybashed, bullied or abused in any way, a little more hell has been created. Every human being who goes to bed hungry confirms the reality of hell. People who suffer and die of diseases for which medicine exists but is too expensive are living in hell. War, as we know, is hell. Environmental degradation and the loss of species is hell. Our addictions and insecurities are our own personal hells. Every time a trusted religious authority tells someone that God hates the person and has abandoned them, for whatever reason, the religious authority has sent that individual to hell – right there, right then. The Evangelical preacher on the tape is confident that judgment sends people to hell, and I agree with him. Judgment does indeed send people to hell. It's just that the judgment in question is human judgment – of ourselves as falling short or unworthy, of others as bad or undeserving. When we say "damn you!" to someone with whom we are angry, when we tell someone to "go to hell," it doesn't matter that our comments don't sentence them to some kind of after-death experience. We've done our part to cause harm – to themselves and to us.

We've all heard the Christian claim that perfect love casts out all fear. Unfortunately, perfect fear apparently can also cast out all love. When early Universalist John Murray instructed his followers to give the world "not hell but hope and courage," he correctly identified despair and fear as indicators of hell. Hell is not the eternal blazing fire after we die. It's being trapped in the ice of isolation and despair before we die.

Now, the preacher on the cassette tape claimed that people make a conscious choice to go to hell. If you end up in hell, the preacher said, don't blame God. That's your choice. We have our own choice in front of us, and we have it in front of us many times a day: Will we reproduce hell or will we make it a thing of the past?

Rebecca Parker, the president of our Unitarian Universalist seminary in California, says we can use our gifts to either bless or curse the world. For Parker, the gifts in question are identical. It's what we do with them that differs so profoundly, and that makes such a difference to the world around us. The good news here is that we are not abject sinners, and we may even be good at heart. The bad news, or perhaps the differently good news, is that our goodness appears to have limits. Both as individuals and in larger social groups, we experience temptations, we get lazy, we get onto the path of least resistance, and we struggle with greed, violence, vengefulness and those other attributes that mark our worst selves. There's a story in the ancient Rabbinic commentary known as the Talmud, that suggests that whereas Jews pray to God, God prays to himself every morning, that his desire for mercy will overcome his desire for justice for that one day. Think about that. Even the Holy as envisioned by religious leaders hundreds of years ago acknowledges the internal struggle to be and do good.

Who here is familiar with the water balloon horse race on the midway at an amusement park or carnival? For those of you who aren't, here's how it works: you squirt water into the mouth of a porcelain clown and if your aim is good and the water goes into the clown's mouth, it blows up a balloon. As the balloon fills up, in turn, it moves a small toy horse along a track toward the finish line a little at a time. (Don't ask me how it does this.) In the same way, individually and communally, we can ride our best selves away from hell or ride our worst selves toward it. Any of our values or actions that contribute to the world we live in can be seen as similar to the water that is squirted into the clown's mouth.

To demonstrate, let's imagine for a moment that hell and not-hell are more like a continuum than like two exclusively different worlds. Now, let's say that hell falls over here toward stage right, and not-hell falls over here toward stage left. I'll start in the middle and go for a ride.

I'm an insecure teenager. There's a new girl at school, and I can just smell the fear on her. It's worse than my own. I decide this is a great opportunity to feel less insecure, and the way I do it is to get my friends to tease her mercilessly. Three steps to my right, toward hell.

I'm that same insecure teenager, in an alternate version of the story. There's a new girl at school, and I can just smell the fear on her. It's worse than my own. I decide this is a great opportunity to push against my own insecurity so I make a point of talking with her and inviting her to get a soda with my friends. Soon she's a friend too. Three steps to my left, away from hell.

I'm a golf association, and I've always been racially segregated. One day, a Black person applies for membership. I know I'll lose some wealthy white members if I change the segregation policy, so I leave it standing. Three steps to my right.

I'm a golf association, and I've always been racially segregated. One day, an African-American applies for membership. I know I'll lose some wealthy white members if I change the segregation policy, so I change the policy, lose the members, and make up for them by recruiting heavily for new members in neighborhoods I have literally never been in before. Three to my left.

I'm a government with lots of corruption and lots of hungry people. Because of the corruption, my cronies eat well but lots of others don't. Three to my right.

I'm a government with lots of corruption and lots of hungry people. Because of the corruption, my cronies eat well but lots of others don't. I decide that I can't live with this situation, so I throw my cronies out of office, bring in some people committed to feeding the hungry, and take three paces to my left.

So, is the opposite of hell on earth heaven on earth? Is heaven a place on earth? I don't know, but I'm pretty sure that not-hell on the left over there is love and compassion, open-heartedness, humility. I got those images from many religious traditions and figures, particularly the two that most draw me, Jesus and the Buddha. Nourishing our best selves is about developing love and compassion, even and perhaps especially when this is difficult to do. There are all sorts of spiritual disciplines and political activist approaches that can help us work on love and compassion. We can pray, meditate, talk to each other, read, and join covenant groups. We can make individual decisions to tend our best self as many times a day as we have the opportunity. We can start talking about what it means for a community, an organization, a company, a country to tend its best self. We can, as St. Francis of Assisi has suggested, bring love where hate rules and bring joy where sorrow rules.

The preacher on the cassette tape claimed that because eternity is the only thing that matters, whatever we're doing now will mean nothing a hundred years from today. Let's go prove him wrong. Let's make our lives matter. Let's nourish our best selves. And let's all go to hell and make a heaven of it.

Amen, and blessed be.