

Words with Baggage: Unpacking “Hell”

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A few weeks ago, there were massive protests in Baltimore as BIPOC communities expressed pain and rage about the stunningly violent police torture and murder of Freddy Gray, who had done nothing wrong except carry a switchblade. And I do mean torture; Gray’s spine was broken in three places and it took him days to die, apparently in agony. The police officers involved may have lied and/or falsified evidence, depending on whose version you read. And the response of most of white America to this moral disaster? To be angry at the small number of Baltimore protestors who turned violent, calling them “animals” and chiding them for destroying their own communities and thereby hurting their cause.

We’re talking today about the idea of hell, a word that made the Flame of Life Universalists list of religious words with baggage. And you could be forgiven for wondering why I started a sermon about hell with a story of social injustice and human frailty. What do these things have to do with hell? The short answer is, everything, but the longer answer takes a little working through.

It’s been generations since either Unitarians or Universalists believed in hell as either a place or situation of eternal torment after death; the Universalists even got their name because of their belief that God saves every single person. And Unitarians increasingly became, first, more positive about human nature in general, and later, less theistic. No God, no hell. And that’s where most UUs are today. If we believe in an afterlife at all, which most of us don’t, we don’t think it includes hell. So why should we talk about hell if it doesn’t exist?

Here’s the answer: hell, at least in its Jewish and Christian incarnations, has never really been about what happens after we die. It has always been about what happens while we’re alive, and it has always been a response to injustice in the real world. Jews started talking about hell a few centuries before the life of Jesus when it became clear to them that they were going to keep getting conquered, occupied, and persecuted by other nations: the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Seleucids, the Romans, and others. Hounded, exiled, killed, forced to worship other gods, watching as their temple was destroyed by invaders, forced into diaspora, Jews seem to have thought, we will have justice someday and if not in this life than in the life to come. These images of punishment after death don’t become prominent until relatively shortly before the life of Jesus, who seems to have adopted them in his parables. If he didn’t, the early church surely did and with the Council of Nicea, hell was locked in place. Since then, we have been treated to Dante, Hieronymus Bosch, Tchaikovsky and plenty of other authors, artists, and musicians with hell on their minds, not to mention the multitudes of fire and brimstone preachers with radio shows, websites and church signs. In the midst of modern Christian images of hell and how one gets there, it’s important to remember that hell in the Abrahamic religions started as an aching cry for justice.

And I find that history fitting because that’s where we need to go with the idea of hell today. We need to proclaim, loudly and frequently, that hell has nothing to do with an afterlife and everything to do with the world we live in today. The bad news is that hell is real. The good

news is that has nothing to do with God, whether or not God exists. And the better news is that we can do something about hell; indeed, I believe that our work as a liberal religious movement is specifically to get rid of the hell in our hearts and our relationships, our culture and our social structures, our society and our world. If this is ambitious, at least it is a human project and within our grasp to attempt.

Let's start with a workable definition of hell. I understand hell to be unnecessary human, animal, and planetary suffering caused by human sin. Now before you get too stressed out about the word "sin", please remember that I defined it a few sermons ago as "individual and collective imperfection, isolation, and idolatry." So, if you prefer, we can think of hell as unnecessary human, animal, and planetary suffering caused by individual and collective imperfection, isolation, and idolatry on the part of human beings.

This definition needs a little more unpacking. Let's start with the unnecessary suffering. All people suffer; the Buddha's First Noble Truth is that a certain degree and type of dissatisfaction is basic to life. The good things we hope for may not happen to us and bad things may. Loving our parents, friends, and pets means suffering with them when they are in pain and grieving when they die. Things that are good for us may not be pleasant and the things we love may not always be so good for us.

So, there's some suffering that we might call "necessary" in that we may resist it or resent it but it's not something we can change, either individually or collectively. And necessary suffering is not something I'm wild about but it's not hell. Hell is the part where we suffer and make each other suffer when we don't have to. Hell is when we engage in physical, verbal, emotional or spiritual violence. Hell is when we structure society so that there are valued people and devalued people, and the devalued people suffer even as the valued people benefit from the equation. Hell is war with its concomitant loss of life and limb and sanity and soul. Hell is every animal that is now extinct due to our thoughtlessness and all the animals yet to be extinct. Hell is a planet suffering from climate change that humans created yet too often won't acknowledge our role in. Hell is Freddy Gray's death in Baltimore and white America's response to it. There's plenty of hell out there. Or right here, as the case may be.

I've suggested above that hell is created as a result of individual and collective imperfection, isolation, and idolatry. Now maybe the imperfection piece is not entirely fair here. After all, if hell is unnecessary suffering and we can't make ourselves perfect, isn't some suffering just the inevitable outcome of our imperfections? Possibly. But acknowledging our individual and collective imperfections ideally ought to include trying to discern which ones we could realistically address and which ones are just not fixable. The serenity prayer invites us to differentiate between the things we cannot change and the things we can. Perhaps some of our imperfections could be mitigated.

For example, one of my imperfections is having a very hard time forgiving others for the wrongs they've done to me and those I love. And some people would say, that's not an imperfection and it's totally justified. Well, maybe. But at the end of the day, who is hurt by my anger at these people? Them? No. Me. Only me. I've thrown myself right into hell. Is this something I could change? Actually, it might be if I were willing to work on it. And every hour that I am not angry

is an hour I might be joyful, or productive, or creative, or engaged in justice work. So, getting myself out of my personal hell might allow me to make larger contributions to the world.

Here's a collective imperfection that I think we can struggle with. Social psychology teaches us that some degree of stereotyping others is intrinsic to being human. We have to make sense of the world somehow and our senses receive far too much information to process each bit of it individually. So, we make patterns. Unfortunately, for various reasons some of those patterns lead us to oversimplify tremendously when it comes to who people are and what we can expect of them based on a group identity. Stereotyping fails to appreciate the richness of individual people and leads to discrimination and sometimes underperformance on the part of someone who's afraid she or he might fulfill a stereotype by doing badly at something like an academic exam. It's a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy that wouldn't exist as a problem if stereotypes did not exist. Clearly, stereotyping can lead to suffering. And yet there are documented steps we can take to push against our own stereotyping and help others push against theirs, thereby taking some degree of suffering out of people's lives.

We also create hell through acts we do and leave undone as a result of our individual and collective isolation. As it happens, I wrote this part of this sermon during a period of feeling extremely isolated and low. Dahar Tsarnaev had just been sentenced to death and I felt rather alone in aspects of how the sentence made me feel. The specifics don't matter but I was isolating myself and feeling depressed. And while that doesn't sound like much it was, in a small way, a kind of hell. And a totally unnecessary one. There were all sorts of productive things I could have done to connect to others and mostly I didn't do them though I did get all crabby on Facebook and maybe alienated some people. Again, the point here isn't how I felt; it's what I did, or rather failed to do, about it.

To think about the hell of collective isolation we could do worse than to consider racial segregation. Segregation is a kind of isolation writ large and it happens, not because everyone wants it to, but because the group in power, in this case white people, want it to. So, in what sense is it reasonable to call segregation hell? For one thing, segregation is not only about spatial separation; it's mostly about how that separation gives members of BIPOC communities less access to the good things in life than most whites get. And segregation also means that we who are white are never pressured to understand what it's like to live as a devalued person with fewer life options. So, when the police kill Freddy Gray we assume he must have done something terribly wrong because in our white world the police don't bother us unless we've done something wrong and they certainly don't kill us. Under segregation we simply can't understand why this particular killing has set off so much pain and rage because we don't see how this particular killing is connected to all the other killings in segregated areas and all the other suffering in segregated areas. And when some protesters loot, we don't understand either the history or context behind their doing that, because we've never had to. Finally, the suffering caused by collective isolation is unnecessary. Segregation has long been the practice of the country but there's nothing that requires us to keep supporting it. If enough white people stood up and rejected segregation, both individually and collectively, this particular form of hell might be mitigated over time.

Finally, there's individual and collective idolatry as the cause of unnecessary suffering. As a reminder, I define idolatry as putting our trust in anything that cannot actually save us. Anything that can't solve the problems we set before it is a false god, and we have plenty of them. Individually we have our addictions, compulsions, fundamentalisms and sometimes even just our egos. I think it's safe to say that our individual idolatries put us in hell when they cause us to suffer unnecessarily, which is pretty much all the suffering they cause. I sure put a lot of stock in my ego but any time it takes a bruising it's more than just my ego that gets hurt. All of me suffers along with it because I am so invested in it.

Collectively we have some pretty substantive false gods, such as money, violence, patriotism, sports, and for some people, guns. To be clear, I'm not saying that money is inherently a bad thing, that we should not care about our country, or that responsible gun owners should not be able to own guns. Not at all. What I'm suggesting is that our society, either in part or as a whole, treats money, violence, patriotism, sports, and guns, in unduly worshipful and uncritical ways. None of these things will ease our heartbreak, give us courage to work for justice, help us become humbler or train us in the ways of gratitude. None of them will help us grow into wholeness. And all of them, when misused as they all can be, cause unnecessary suffering. Unbridled capitalism that allows rich people great luxuries while poor people starve causes suffering. All forms of violence cause suffering. Patriotism can be manipulated to send us to war, and we know how much suffering war causes. I'm as big a sports fan as the next person but sports that sacrifice safety for excitement lead to injuries and death, clearly a case of suffering. And guns enable people to wound and kill hundreds of other people each year, whether through accident or intentionally, as well as contributing to both suicides and unintentional self-deaths. That sounds like a lot of suffering to me. The suffering that can attend poverty, violence in all its forms, or war – each of these, alone or together, can be pretty hellish.

So if you find this a useful way of thinking about hell the obvious question is, what on earth can we do about it? If you believe, as I do, that it is our great work to drive hell into oblivion, how can we do it? To answer this question completely is the project of many lives but I think there are some places we can start.

When our individual imperfections cause unnecessary suffering to ourselves and others, we can examine the imperfections bravely and seek out spiritual practices that can help us mitigate the imperfections. Such practices might be anything from meditation to talk therapy to reflective walks in the woods to meeting with a group of like-minded friends to talk about our attempts at self-healing. Only you know what your imperfections are and what kinds of suffering they cause, and only you know what you can do to push back against them.

When our collective imperfections cause unnecessary suffering to ourselves or others, we can commit to gathering as communities or as a society to analyze the problems in sufficiently comprehensive ways and work out responses that might lessen or end the suffering.

When our individual isolation causes unnecessary suffering, we can do our best to break out of it. I eventually reached out from the depression mentioned above and asked my Facebook friends to send me pictures and videos of cute kittens. I got what I asked for in spades, and not just kittens but puppies, full-grown dogs, bunny rabbits and armadillos. It really helped, though I still don't

like armadillos. It's not always easy to push against our isolation but I'm pretty sure that most of the time if we try, we'll find our friends on the other side waiting to support us.

When our collective isolation causes unnecessary suffering, we need to engage in prophetic action around the nature of the isolation, the nature of the suffering it causes, and the senses in which it is unnecessary. Some collective isolation feels necessary simply because it's been in place for so long. If we are thoughtful and brave, we can make a case for changing what feels natural if we can show the harm it causes.

When our individual idolatry misdirects our attention and causes us to put our hope in something that will always fail it, we can strive to accept that we are putting our trust in the wrong place and ask about where might be better. What does meet our needs? What strengthens us? What causes us to flourish? What reduces our suffering? If we begin to know the answers, we can direct our attention more appropriately.

When our collective idolatry distracts us from good ways to live and leads to pain in its various forms, we can again engage in prophetic witness to the nature of the idolatry and the damage it's causing. This particular struggle is difficult because so much of our society has already placed its hope, whether for gain, excitement, or meaning, in these problematic places but we can be voices of protest in a variety of ways.

These, of course, are just some general ways we might contemplate working to end hell on earth but I'm convinced that if we dug into any one of them and did our work with others more specifically concrete solutions would arise for consideration and practice. So, it's really up to us to start. Do we think that hell is a human invention? And if so, do we think we can be part of the process of un-inventing it?

If so, I sure as hell hope we will take seriously our opportunities to make a dent in the raging fires all around us – the fires of pain, loneliness, hatred, isolation, violence, and inequality. It's our work, friends. May we rise to the occasion. Amen and blessed be.