

## Heaven on Earth? What on Earth are you Doing?

In Unitarian Universalism, we tend to shy away from ideas of an afterlife or judgment day. However, what if we had to answer to our own version of St. Peter? What would we say if we died and had to fess up to our deeds? Did we do our best?

We will explore afterlife narratives from different cultures and use them to reflect on our own UU attempts at creating a "heaven on earth."

A man dies and goes to the gates of heaven where he meets Saint Peter. Peter says to him, "I have looked at your Book of Life and you are welcome into heaven under one condition."

The man replies, "Yes, Saint Peter. And what is that condition?"

Peter says to the man, "You must spell the word: love."

So the man spells the word, "L - O - V - E" then Peter admits him into heaven.

As the man walks in, Peter tells the man to watch the gate until he returns. Peter had something to discuss with God. Peter reminds the man that he must ask whoever comes to the gate to spell the word.

After a short period of time, the man's wife shows up at the gate.

"What are YOU doing here?" he demands of her.

"Well," she says, "on the way home from your funeral, there was an accident and I died."

The man tells her, "Alright, but before you enter heaven you must be able to spell a word."

"What word is that?" she asks.

"Czechoslovakia," he says.

When I first began thinking about this service, I admit I was primarily concerned with the music. I grew up in a United Methodist Church in East Texas and the portion of the service that moved me most profoundly was the music. Now don't misunderstand, I also read the Bible and challenged my Sunday School teachers in a way that made them want to throw me out some mornings. In fact, I asked way too many questions and seldom took anything on "faith" alone.

I remember one morning in Sunday School when the high school group was having a serious discussion on heaven and hell. I was a diligent student and read the assigned biblical passages and I had much to say on the subject. Though I was often timid in social situations, in church, I was the obnoxious know-it-all. That year, the teachers were surprisingly thoughtful and insightful and gave me plenty of space to wave my obnoxious bookworm flag. So I read that Bible – I was always ready.

That morning was like most others and the teachers had discussion questions. One of them asked, "What do you think happens to non-Christians when they die?"

The room was silent for a moment. Everyone was a little uncomfortable. I blurted out something to the effect of, "Well, if they haven't accepted Jesus, then they'll go to hell. It says so in the Bible. I mean that's what it says even though..." my sentence tapered off as my confidence waned.

Then an older boy spoke for what was perhaps the first time ever. He was not at Sunday School because he liked it. He was at Sunday School because of parental coercion. He spoke while my words hung in the air, saying, "No, I don't believe that. What kind of God would condemn a person who didn't believe in him? What if I married a Jewish woman? She would believe in God but she wouldn't accept Christ. Why would God condemn her to eternal hell for that? It doesn't make sense. No, I don't believe that."

I'm sure I made some sort of response but that doesn't matter anymore. I thought about what he said for months. His bold answer drove me to ask more and more questions. As Unitarian Universalists, we don't always have the answers but we always have questions. And I eventually found Unitarian Universalism but my religious experiences before adulthood were based in Christianity.

The first time I recognized "religion" and the "spiritual experience," I was in a room of adolescents singing praise and worship songs. Later, I matched this

experience to my intellectual encounter with Emile Durkheim in my academic studies. Durkheim locates “collective effervescence” as the “cause of religion.” Durkheim says that, during communal ritual experiences (such as the unison singing of praise and worship songs), “sentiments bubble up in the excitement... It is in the midst of these effervescent social environments and out of this effervescence itself that the religious idea seems to be born. At such moments the profane is left behind and only the sacred exists.”<sup>1</sup> These types of experiences unite the people of a group for a common feeling and purpose.<sup>2</sup> Durkheim believed whole-heartedly that “religion’s true purpose is not intellectual but social.”<sup>3</sup> Religion unifies people and brings them together for a spiritual and common purpose.

This common purpose is most important when we’re acting on our ideas of social justice, doing the most good, and working to make the world a better place to live. Thinking individually is positive and UUs do it so well. But at a point, some realizations can only be accessed by action. For example, one might be afraid to take action for fear of upsetting or offending someone. But I’d like to propose that considered action is always better than *no* action.

Let’s look at thinking:

With thinking, you gather information, spend time alone processing the information, spend time with others discussing and debating that information. You make careful decisions, discuss further... But thinking is a fundamentally personal experience.

Now let’s look at action:

With action: you take information and knowledge and do something tangible with it. For example, you may know that someone is oppressed or being treated poorly and you may believe that something should be done to improve conditions for the poor or for minorities.

However, if you never pass beyond discussion, how much are you really changing the world that we live in? Think, contemplate, discuss, but then take it to the next level. The next level can be small. Don’t worry about changing the world in a single step. It’s okay to start small but do something. As artist Pablo

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, (New York: Oxford, 2006) 101.

<sup>2</sup> “Emile Durkheim,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/durkheim/>, Accessed May 29, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Pals, 107.

Picasso says, "Action is the foundational key to all success."<sup>4</sup> Be present in your ideas. Once you think about them, put them into action.

Now the timid might be saying, "What if the decision I acted upon was wrong?"

And I say, "So what?" The first step is THINKING, the next is DOING, the third is the essential completion of the trifecta, REACCESS to make sure your actions align with your productive thoughts. Don't let your productive thoughts block action. We should continue our cycle and try to perpetuate a process where we are always acting, always thinking, always acting... (and so forth)...

This brings me back to the story you heard earlier about the Chinvat Bridge in Zoroastrianism. If you were to cross that bridge, would you be sliced in half or would you make it to heaven? If you were experiencing Judgment Day as a Muslim, would your book read more good than evil?

Of course, for Unitarian Universalists, we avoid simple dichotomies of good v. evil. We also love to talk about nuances and shades of grey. And I am right there with ya. BUT, thinking about judgment and death can bring up some really poignant questions.

Rev. Forrest Church, a Unitarian Universalist minister who died of cancer in 2009, wrote in his final book about death and dying. He says simply, "Begin by looking for new questions, not old answers. Answers close doors. Questions open them. Questions lead us on adventures."<sup>5</sup>

The questions are the thinking – the adventures are the action!

As Unitarian Universalists, we often get caught up in the philosophy and the nuances of decisions in our lives. Thinking can be a strength but it can also delay or even subvert action.

So I take us back to Saint Peter. He greets us at the gates to heaven and he wants to know why we deserve to be in heaven. Will you recite the Seven Principles and tell him what you have thought about all of the years you were on earth? Will you talk about how you thought everyone was inherently worthwhile?

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/action.html>

<sup>5</sup> Forrest Church, *Love and Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow*, (Beacon Press, Boston: 2008), 97.

Ah, but he cares about more than what you think. The proof is in the pudding. Think about what you've DONE in response to those thoughts. Think about what you *could* do if you started working a little harder today. If your eternal life were truly on the line, would you change your behavior? Would you become more aware? St. Peter also wants to know what you did.

If you had to walk that daunting Chinvat Bridge, a hike that could end you in one slice, would you reconsider how you spend your days? Would you reconsider what you'd do today?

I ask these questions not to chastise you, but to challenge you. In fact, I am most of all challenging myself. Most Unitarian Universalists don't focus on answering to a higher power on Judgment Day. That is a perfectly legitimate way to live. However, if we lit a little fire under our complacency, what could we accomplish?

As Rev Church said of Unitarian Universalists:

**We don't need anything to dispense our own form of magic. We don't need to be titled, beautiful, or successful. We don't even have to have a sense of worthiness. All we have to do is help others: to see our tears in their eyes, to recognize that the same sun sets on each of our horizons, that the mortar of morality binds us fast to one another, that we are one...**

**we choose to join hands and hearts because we know how easily we slip back into mechanical habits that blunt our consciousness. We need and know we need to be reminded week in and week out how precious life is and how fragile. A year can seem to last forever, to the point that we may pray for it to end; yet decades flit past in an eyeblink.<sup>6</sup>**

**When we die, the same questions will be wafting in the air. Did we make the most of our time? Did we overcome adversity when hard times came? Did we love our neighbor as ourselves? Did we make the world a more loving and interesting place?**

So I simply stand here at the beginning of this glorious day to gently remind us all not to take it for granted. What is that angel on your shoulder writing down? What are you telling St. Peter at the gate? Is it something thoughtful that you've

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 56.

done for your fellow being? Is it picking up a piece of stray trash in a park? Is it buying dinner for a homeless person? Or is your angel writing about how you binge-watched an entire series on Netflix in one sitting? Or is it writing about how you ignored the needs of others for your own convenience?

Find and explore your strengths and imagine how you can thoughtfully use your skills for good.

Here is a personal example: I spent most of my childhood and adolescence with my dad remodeling an old home from the ground up. I got involved with Habitat for Humanity because they spend their time building houses for people who need them because they believe “that every man, woman, and child should have a decent, safe, and affordable place to live.”<sup>7</sup> It was a message I could get behind and I had the experience and skills to reinforce the projects. Our church is trying to move in a direction of social action. But it needs people to fuel the passion. This church needs you. This community needs you. If we all took on small roles, there would be less of a burden on just a few individuals and more distribution. Religion is all about that social connection. We come here this morning with common thoughts and bold ideas. This church will be as lively and as fruitful as we make it. It is a composite of us. Don’t be a bystander. Put your thoughts into action.

Make sure you think about those little angels on your shoulders. What are they writing? Would you make it across the Chinvat Bridge to Heaven? What are you doing as a nuanced, thoughtful, shades-of-grey Unitarian Universalist to make this world just a little bit better today?

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<sup>7</sup> “Habitat for Humanity: Frequently Asked Questions,” <http://www.habitat.org/how/FAQ.aspx>, Accessed June 1, 2014.