

A Natural History of Heaven and Hell.

Sermon for April 10, 2005. By Lone I. Jensen

Prepare yourself! We are going to talk about Heaven, Hell and Purgatory. And not just from a safe intellectual distance either. So I ask your indulgence this morning, no pun intended, since I realize that this topic may carry a lot of emotional baggage for some of you. And if you are a visitor here today you should know that Unitarian Universalists do not generally accept hell as a theological reality. Universalists boldly refused to worship a God that would condemn his or her children to everlasting suffering. Thus they were called derisively the “no-hellers.” And if UU’s were, to their surprise, to enter either heaven or hell they might just try to reform both of those institutions. Let us get some climate control and better working conditions for the poor devils and find something really useful for the angels to do! Like Mark Twain, UU’s have a lot of trouble with most ideas about heaven as well. Give us a choice between heaven and a discussion about heaven and we flock to the discussion. Better a lively debate than eternal, endless and one suspect ultimately boring bliss. What indeed would satisfy a UU or any human being for all eternity?

Mark Twain gave advice on how to behave at the pearly gates:

Do not speak to St. Peter until spoken to. Do not begin any remark

with, “Say.” Leave your dog outside. Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you would stay out and the dog would go in. As the practical Captain Stormfield discovers in his visit to heaven, “Singing hymns and waving palm branches through all eternity is pretty when you hear about it in the pulpit, but it’s as poor a way to put in valuable time as a body could contrive.” (“Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven,”)

But where did we get these ideas? Heaven and hell are two extreme polarities, grand theater, stage and canvass for great artists’ wildest imaginations, site of our deepest fears and most unimaginable hopes.

William Blake: The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.

From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell.

Much damage and very bad theology has been done in their name. Yet hell as we know it in popular images with hot flames, torture, suffering, devils and tormented souls is relatively new and has its roots in the late Middle Ages. Dante when he wrote his Divine Comedy gave us a blueprint for the soul’s descent into hell.

*Day was now fading, and the dusky air
 Released the creatures dwelling here on earth
 From tiring tasks, while I, the only one,
 Readied myself to endure the battle
 Both of the journey and the pathos,
 Which flawless memory shall here record.
 Through me is the way to the sorrowful city
 Through me is the way to eternal suffering
 Thru me is the way to the lost people
 Abandon all hope, you who enter...*

*I come to a place where all light is muted,
 Which rumbles like the sea beneath a storm
 When waves are buffeted by warring squalls.
 The windblast out of hell, forever restless,
 Thrusts the spirits onward with its force,
 Swirling and mauling and harassing them.
 When they alight upon this scene of wreckage,
 Screams, reproaches, and bemoanings rise
 As souls call down their curses on God's power.*

(Dante's Divine Journey, Inferno)

The notion of hell is inspired by cryptic passages in the Bible such as this one in Revelation: *And the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a*

star fall from heaven unto the earth: and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit. (Revelation 9: i-3) The “bottomless pit” is hell, or sheol in Hebrew and Hades in the Greek of Revelation. But hell as a fully formed, articulated, systematic and vivid theology of horror hell simply mirrored daily reality. The promise of Heaven gave some hope to the poor and powerless trapped in an earthly hell of plagues, wars, poverty, madness induced by rotten grains, famines and injustices. Those wronged or abused could imagine their tormenters in one of the nine circles of hell. That is one reason the idea of hell has endured despite all reason: a desire for delayed justice. We would do well to recognize that deep desire even as we reject hell on the grounds that it is theologically unsound. It creates an image of God as a cruel, abusive and torturing parent.

Hell is terrifying to a child. How many of you have ever worried about dying in sin? As a child I was afraid of dying, of sleeping, lest I die before I wake and of what this all powerful, all seeing, all knowing God might do to me. I imagined God up there in the sky, wearing a pointed hat with stars, rather like a divine magician who could make me disappear. Poof no more me and off to hell! Since I did have bad thoughts and fought with my brother it seemed like there was plenty of reasons for this God not to like me. Hell seemed like a distinct possibility. How a loving God could be so cruel, well, that I was too young to worry about. Children all too

easily accept cruelty as part of the natural order. That is part of the reason it is so easy for so many people to believe in hell, they have experienced it first hand. But I was lucky. I had a father who told me again and again that heaven and hell are within us. We make it for ourselves. This I find to be true every single day. We live our own hells and we create our own heavens.

And while human beings create physical hells with wars and cruelties worse than any Dante could imagine, just think of Rwanda's genocide or the holocaust, there is another hell, far more common and it is in our mind. For most of us this is the hell we barely recognize because we do not like Dante have Virgil, the Roman poet, seen as personification of human wisdom, as our own personal spirit guide.

In *Dante's Path* Bonney Gulino Schaub and Richard Schaub explore how this mirrors our own inner journeys. *We began to see that Dante's descent into hell was a catalogue of our fears, his passage through purgatory: the road to liberation from those fears, and paradise was reality where we explore higher consciousness.*

Hell is the place we lose sight of who we really are. We forget that we are born good, blessed by being and sacred by nature. Divine creations really, perfect in our imperfection. Instead we focus on what is wrong, on the impossible pursuit of perfection or contrite on what people are doing to us, or thinking of us. Schaub tells this story: *William was an actor who had won the leading role. Because*

of some brief, passing moments of disapproval from the director he came to believe that the director didn't like him. In his imagination, William imagined elaborating on the director's lack of training and on his insensitivity in dealing with the cast. The criticisms went on and on in his mind until he became lost in these elaborate, imagined conversations. The reality was that the director treated William well and the play was going well but those "facts" did not prevent William from directing the flow of his consciousness into energizing his sense of hurt and desire for revenge. His consciousness was slowly creating a hell state of sullen rage within him.(Schaub)

Oh, I have been there. Only my hell circles and hell states tend to be more focused on what I have done wrong. I suppose we each as Dante's poor souls have our own preferred circles of hell. These hellish states, of fear, of anger, of inner disapproval and condemnation can feel as if I have indeed fallen into a bottomless pit or the hottest, hollowest hell as my grandmother used to say in Danish when she was really angry. Hell states, as miserable as they are can also be addictive. There is a certain satisfaction in feeling wronged though frankly feeling you have done wrong is no fun at all. Rage has an adrenaline rush. And besides these states keep you from entering what Dante calls the dark woods, the beginning of the souls' journey toward self knowledge. *We all have the capacity to completely miss the point of our life.*

So how do we get out of hell? *We have to recognize when we dropped down into it, and we have to know how to move up out of it. Virgil began to teach these skills to the Pilgrim when he asked him to witness and identify what he was seeing without responding or becoming emotionally involved with hellish behaviors and circles of thought. (Schaube) .*

Next time you end up in hell, stop, take a deep breath, observe. You can become your own Virgil, your own source of wisdom. *Hell is a place we want to get out of.*

When we stop, take a deep breath, see the beauty around us, notice, become the observer, we enter purgatory. Which is really a place of possibility.

“What negligence and what delay is this?

Race to the mountain and strip off the slough

Which won’t let God be manifest in you!”

The goal of Dante’s climb is the reunion with Beatrice. My husband’s first love was also called Beatrice. He was 16, in Catholic school and reading Dante. This earthly Beatrice worked at the vegetable counter at the local grocery store. True to Dante he worshiped her from afar but ate his vegetables religiously. Once united with Beatrice Dante, not my husband, turns upward toward

God for the end of the journey. Setting out on the slope below on Easter morning, he arrives three days later at the earthly paradise:

Longing now to search in and around

The heavenly woods — dense and green with life —

Which softened the new sunlight for my eyes,

Not waiting any longer, I left the cliff,

Making my slow, slow way on level ground,

Over the soil which everywhere spread fragrance.

Purgatory is not just a Catholic concept. The Universalist wondered some two hundred years ago how truly lost souls, those had done horrible deeds, could be reconciled to God. They flirted with the idea but eventually gave it up.

After purgatory comes Heaven, best case scenario. Dante sees Paradise from the inside of a rose. *Dante turns the rose inside out so that it is seen entirely in reflection, all mirrored in the one radiance that shines down from above:*

Just so, above the light and round and round,

Reflected from more than a thousand tiers,

I saw all those of us who have returned there.

Within its depths I saw gathered together,

Bound by love into a single volume,

Leaves that lie scattered through the universe.

What an amazing image! Imagine rose petals as leaves of love, fragrant soft to the skin leaves of love scattered throughout the universe. Fluttering leaves land among us as acts of love. How do we create heaven? We learn how to love universally. Not just like in the movies or the romances but with an all pervading love that encompasses all. God of love to Dante was the light that illuminates.

The Love that calms ...forever greets all those who enter ... so is the candle for Its Flame prepared. -Beatrice

I know I saw the universal form the fusion of all things, for I can feel, while speaking now, my heart leap in joy. -The Pilgrim

Dante taught that love-its presence, its absence, its distortion is the single cause of all of the joys and sorrows of humanity. Rumi taught that the end goal of all spirituality is love without an object. Assagioli referred to the “supreme heartbeat of unity” that reconciles our conflicts. And many other teachers and traditions have also found their way to this same conclusion: Love is the unifying force in the universe. (Schaube)

Over the millennia the human imagination has tried to tear away the veil that separates us from the dead. We do not know what happens but we do imagine. Driven by the hope of reunion the ancient Egyptians mummified and built a whole death culture around an afterlife that was very much like a nice relaxing afternoon on the

earthly Nile River. But you could not enter this paradise without first having your heart weighed and unless it was innocent of sin and as light as a feather it would immediately be eaten by the jackal headed God. The Greeks and Romans saw shadows of spirits in the underworld, and again only the few, the heroic, became immortals and joined the very human Olympian Gods.

We humans still want to tear at that veil between the worlds of the dead and the living. When all we can really do is trust the mystery and work to escape the many hells of our own makings. The Universalists were right. Love is the unifying force in the universe.