

**“Why Be Good If There Is No Hell?”**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Dottie Mathews, Assistant Minister**  
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**January 12-13. 2008**

**Reading: *Tiny Gods* by Hafiz**

Some gods say, the tiny ones,  
"I am not here in your vibrant, moist lips  
that need to beach themselves upon  
the golden shore of a  
naked body."

Some gods say, "I am not  
the sacred yearning in the unrequited soul;  
I am not the blushing cheek  
of every star and planet--

I am not the applauding chef  
of those precious sections that can distill  
the whole mind into a perfect wincing jewel, if only  
for a moment,  
nor do I reside in every pile of sweet warm dung  
born of earth's gratuity."

Some gods say, the ones we need to hang,  
"your mouth is not designed to know his,  
love was not born to consume  
the luminous  
realms."

Dear Ones,  
Beware of the tiny gods frightened men  
create  
to bring an anesthetic relief  
to their sad days.

**Sermon:**

In retrospect, perhaps I should have been a bit cagier in naming this sermon. I realize now that the title quite obviously betrays my own position on this central point of theology. If I'd been thinking, I might have held out for a bit more tension to build on the subject. I could

have kept you wondering at least a little bit. But evidently, obviously (and I'm sure it's no surprise) I admit – in fact I assuredly state without equivocation - that I long ago set aside the belief that there might be a place of eternal and everlasting punishment to which the evil-doers in this world are exiled after they take their final breath.

At one time I did believe that. At one time in my life, many years ago, I shuddered in fear of such a place. I was by no means alone in that fear. Many of my era were at least occasionally haunted by the extreme unease of that threat. And, even today, I know and respect people for whom this grim concept is a tenaciously held theological pillar. But such ideas have no place in my personal theology today.

That is not to say that I am certain there is **no** sort of afterlife whatsoever (although, for me, I remain quite comfortably vague on that as an unanswerable question). But it **is** to say that I believe that the place commonly called hell – the fiery pit of eternal anguish and torment, and all the various permutations that have sprung up in the literature and religions of the world, is a creation of the human imagination. And that I believe such notions have survived over the millennia because they speak to a human need to address the irrefutable unfairness of life; to create a system where justice will ultimately be meted out to those who do harm, even if they appear to get away with it today. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, humans persist in the desire to live in a world that is **fair**, where the scales ultimately **do** get balanced. And since there is no evidence that this is such a place, the only option has been to create a place of decisive retribution in an ethereal afterworld. For some, this belief is the only thing that can (under the cover of righteousness) slake the human thirst for revenge.

Concepts of a pain-filled eternal abode that is earned as a consequence of one's indiscretions and failures (what some call one's **sins**) have been documented since the times of ancient Egypt. And the tales have evolved through the centuries, through Plato, Virgil, Augustine, and quite famously through Dante's writings. In fact, it seems the images that most people carry of this place of infinite anguish come in large part from his poetic Divine Comedy far more than from any religion's actual scriptural writings.

The Old and New Testaments do, of course, have references to Sheol, Hades, and Gehenna. Sometimes those words are translated as hell and others times not. But if they are intended to describe the same place, there are some significant variances in their descriptions. Both Christianity and Islam have teachings that indicate that hell (at least in some citations) is a place of fire. But other traditions have hells that are more lifeless, cold and dull.

Judaism tends to be unclear on what happens to the wicked but most rabbinical teachers conclude that there is a sort of waiting room after death. And this waiting room is not a place of great suffering nor is it eternal. It's just a place where the soul can be purified on its way to the world that is to come.

Some eastern religions have their own forms of post-mortem reckoning, often involving the length of delay before reincarnation occurs or for some, the punishment/reward might be in the form which one takes on in his or her reincarnated life.

A slight bit of research quickly shows that these beliefs, these stories, these myths and traditions each evolved in particular settings with particular inherited influences and that they do seem to be useful in helping humanity make sense of the inevitable inequities of life. If

this topic fascinates you, I'd recommend a book I found entitled, The History of Hell by Alice Turner<sup>1</sup>. She covers the subject from Gilgamesh all the way up to Freud...and she even has illustrations!

But my conclusion [that there is no place in my unabashed Universalist theology for a construct like hell] isn't really the point today. The impetus for this sermon came from a recent conversation I was engaged in with a man who (as you'll see) holds a fundamentalist religious perspective.

It was a pleasant-enough exchange. He was doing his loving best to persuade me of his sincerely held viewpoint. As he sees things, God has a set of mandatory beliefs that I (and all others) must adopt in order to be saved. At first, my dialogue partner tried to persuade me on the basis of saying that the only way to find **real** happiness in this life is to accept the truth of his way of believing. But when, after several attempts, he couldn't convince me that I am in any way unhappy in my current state, he played what he apparently saw as his "trump card:" the threat of being irrevocably, everlastingly damned.

Now I wish to say again that his attitude was very kind. There was nothing mean-spirited about this particular conversation. And I could tell that his urgency to restate, clarify and emphasize his beliefs for me came from his seemingly genuine desire to spare me from endless suffering after I cease life on this earth. But when I explained that I did not believe such a place as hell exists, this man was taken aback. He tried to enter a few more conversational doors but when he could see that the scriptural citations he had memorized were still not persuading me, he asked the million dollar question: "Well," he said, "if there is no hell, then everyone can just go around doing anything they want. What's to keep you from just killing people then!?!?"

Perhaps it is my vocation or perhaps it is my longstanding enjoyment of these sorts of theological conversations, but this odd reasoning does seem to be raised quite frequently when the discussion reaches this impasse. It's always a bit of a quandary to me why the murder thing comes up so often in these conversations. I want to say to these folks, "Hey, you're scaring me right now because it sounds like the only thing that's keeping **you** from pulling out a weapon and murdering me is that you believe there's a place of eternal punishment to which you'd be damned if you did!"

It seems really unlikely that these folks truly believe that all human beings are precariously teetering at the edge of homicidal mania and that the only thing that holds us back is the alleged heat of hell's flames lapping at our heels. It just doesn't seem that could really be true for them...

But, regardless, **we** are Universalists. That means that the flames that inspire us come from the fire of our souls. The flaming chalice that we lift high holds our passion for freedom, equity and love. John Murray, the father of Universalism here in the United States preached this message tirelessly. Give them "...not hell, but hope, and courage<sup>2</sup>" he said!

This same sweet message of hope comes to us richly from our stream of ancestors on both

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1 Turner, Alice *The History of Hell* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company) 1993

2 Howe, Charles, *The Larger Faith* (Boston: Skinner House) 1993, p. 9.

the Universalist and the Unitarian sides. In fact, one of our early Unitarian leaders, William Ellery Channing, frequently told of a crucial dawning that occurred for him one day while he was still quite young. This epiphany led to his leaving behind the fire and brimstone faith of his family and ultimately becoming one of the greatest Unitarian preachers of his day. The story he told was that as a young boy he had gone to church with his father. Sitting in the pew he listened carefully, quaking as the preacher railed on and on in furious detail about the gruesome torture that awaited all unbelievers.

As they left that church day, young Channing overheard his father compliment the preacher on his sermon saying that it was a compelling message full of “sound doctrine” that he had delivered that day.

As the boy rode home next to his father, he was totally absorbed with his reflections on the terror of those horrific images. But as he sat thinking, he noticed something quite odd. His father was obviously unfazed, to the point that he was actually whistling as they journeyed home together. It was at that moment that Channing realized, *My father doesn't really believe this!* It made sudden, clear sense to him that his father could not possibly actually believe that the people he knew and loved were about to suffer **that** sort of extreme and limitless pain. Surely, if he did, he would not – he could not - be whistling casually as he went on about his life!<sup>3</sup> Young Channing had a point; and his point is valid today, I think.

It's interesting to note that according to the Gallup organization, a poll taken in 2004 reported that fully 70% of Americans avow a belief in an actual place known as hell<sup>4</sup>, and quite a large proportion of that group say they have no confidence they and their loved ones might not be headed there. In a separate poll, published late last year in Newsweek, a Beliefnet survey revealed that well over half of the respondents indicated they think they know people who are destined for hell. Here's portion of the written summary from that survey:

*“Do you know the doomed? Sixty-one percent of men said they knew some hell-bound folks, compared to 54% of women. (It's unclear whether the results show that men are more judgmental, better judges of character, or hang out with more evil people.)”<sup>5</sup>*

These answers are hard for me to fathom. I can't help but go back to Channing's conclusion. Perhaps we've just grown calloused to what these concepts and stories actually convey because we've heard them since our early childhood. But take a moment to really think about it. Remember how devastated this community - this country - the entire world was for months after we watched the World Trade Center crumble. How very, very hard it was for our minds to accept the truth that thousands of people died in such a senseless manner. Think back to how truly broken our hearts felt at the vision of those people leaping to their deaths - how spirit-crushing those images were.

This is just one of the many examples upon which we might draw. If these sorts of tragedies bring **that** sort of disorientation, emotional pain and depression to us as observers - in most cases when we have no personal knowledge of the individuals involved - it does seem

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<sup>3</sup> Channing, William Ellery, *Memoir of William Ellery Channing* (Boston: W. M. Crosby & H. P. Nichols) 1848 p. 35

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/11770/Eternal-Destinations-Americans-Believe-Heaven-Hell.asp>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.beliefnet.com/story/193/story\\_19359\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/193/story_19359_1.html)

impossible that the dancing, singing church-going folks could in their deepest hearts be genuinely convinced that their sweet grandmas and beloved uncles and kind neighbors who don't happen to share their particular beliefs are actually going to spend eternity in unspeakable and endless torment!! Like Channing as he gazed at his father, I find it very hard to imagine that anyone who has respect and concern for humanity could truly, TRULY believe that and still go on whistling.

Nonetheless, whether or not others actually believe that is still not the question today. What I do wish to discuss is why we, as Unitarian Universalists, are motivated to do good when we **don't** believe that, when we adamantly have no teaching, no doctrine, no pronouncement about what we will gain (or what we might avoid) in eternity.

We are not inspired by anything divinely promised, whether punishment or reward. Our impetus to good comes from no celestial carrot. No behavioral or dogmatic formula to help us win streets of gold, or stars in our crown, or virgins to wait on us. Instead, our impetus for good comes only from our drive to be instruments of healing to our troubled world.

We recognize our role. We recognize that we are necessary for the survival of humanity and the earth. We honor the significance of that role as a source of deep, personal meaning. And since we are not looking heavenward (in or the other direction) for things to be made right, we are able to live dedicatedly and wondrously in awe of **this** life. We, in **this** body, in **this** time, we are the current manifestation of billions of years of evolution. What are the odds that of all the ways the chemical and energetic forces of the universe might have combined, that they would come together in such a way as to bring us here, in this place, in this now?

What are the odds? But they did! And because all that history and forces **did** combine to produce this one precious life that is ours, we know that we had best not let it be wasted. We know that when we act in ethical, moral, compassionate ways, the rewards come in **this** life - in our own relationships with others, most especially in our relationship with our own souls. We know the simple truth that acts of kindness and compassion simply feel good to our hearts.

We are an impatient people. It is not enough to say that in the sweet by and by there will eventually be a reign of peace and harmony. We want that here and now. We are not willing to wait for eternity; we are dedicated to making **this** world a place where true justice prevails.

We can't afford to put off the fight against greed and waste and hatred, hoping that there is a god who will in the future resolve everything for us. In our opening reading, Hafiz warns us against bowing to the tiny gods that men have made. We cannot wait! It is up to us to do our work - today!

Now we know that this movement toward transformation does not come easily. We walk a road that has been trod upon by countless people before us - women and men who are true heroes who devoted themselves to the care of humankind and the care of our earth **not** because they feared eternal punishment, but simply from their love of - and belief in - humanity.

If you want to be awestruck, try going to the Unitarian Universalist Association's website and searching for *famous UU's*. The list will blow you away! There are scientists and politicians

and activists that have literally – each in their own way - changed the face of our world. Many of them! Here're are just a few: John Adams, Louisa May Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker, Dorothea Dix, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, e.e. cummings, Roger Baldwin (founder of the ACLU), Horace Mann, Henry Whitney Bellows (founder of the agency that later became the American Red Cross), Linus Pauling, Abigail Elliot (pioneer of the nursery school movement), Pete Seeger, May Sarton, William Carlos Williams .... These are just a very few of the biographies out there: people who gave huge chunks of their lives to create a world of compassion and respect for human dignity.

Our UU ancestors were at the forefront of promoting the astonishing idea of religious tolerance and freedom. They were among the first to take a stand in the abolitionist movement, the women's suffrage movement, the ongoing battles for civil rights, for gender equality, marriage rights, and more.

These folks – and all of us today who are striving to bring true righteousness to our world – are driven purely and simply by that same love.....which I happen to believe is a much stronger motivator than is fear.

One might well ask – which is the **truly** moral person: the one who does good without assurance of reward nor fear of punishment, or the one who tailors her or his behavior only to avoid dreaded consequences? We could enter into a long discussion about the nature of morality and ethics. And, if you've been reading the letters in the Post Crescent lately, you know there are some would have us believe that the only thing that keeps a society moral is the public display of overtly religious symbols on certain holidays. We respectfully but vehemently disagree. Our moral choices and decisions spring from hearts that tenderly hold the diverse complexities of this world. Yes, even with all its pain and unfairness and uncertainties.

We know that we each have our role to play, that this community needs us; this country needs us; this world needs us. We answer that call with **love.....** And we know that there are none who are divinely favored more than others, none who have a corner on spiritual truth over others, no select groups who are destined for eternal rewards while others suffer without end.

We know that we are **ALL** in this together.

We respond out of the love of our hearts – pure and simple.

We opened with a poem from Hafiz who wrote in the 14<sup>th</sup> century in what was then known as Persia. And I will now close with a poem written in that same time period in many miles away in Italy, by the mystic, Catherine of Sienna:

*All has been consecrated.  
The creatures in the forest know this.  
The earth does,  
the seas do,  
the clouds know,  
as does the heart full of love.*

*Strange, a priest would rob us of this knowledge  
and then empower himself with the ability  
to make holy  
what already was.*

I wish to do good --- I **MUST** do good --- precisely because there **is no** hell. It's up to me,  
and it's up to you.

Amen.

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