

**“YOU DECIDE!”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg**  
**Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**Appleton, Wisconsin**  
[www.fvuuf.org](http://www.fvuuf.org)

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On Christmas day, I flew to Pennsylvania to spend some time with my extended network of in-laws. One afternoon found me in a mini-van being driven around by my teenage nephew Ray. The weather was cold and wet. The traffic was bad. No one had eaten lunch. There I was, crammed in with my spouse, my mother in law, one ten-year-old and two kindergarteners. By the time one of the kids was sobbing because the other two were “so annoying,” I was praying for deliverance, which I don’t even believe in theologically.

But my nephew Ray wrangled us all like a champ. He was kind but firm. He set limits with the littlest and listened respectfully to the adults. He took us all to the drive-thru at Starbucks and somehow managed to translate everyone’s whining from the cavernous backseat into sorely needed caffeine and calories.

I couldn’t figure out why he was so happy because I don’t think any of the rest of us were. But he is the kind of person for whom the knowledge that he was behaving kindly was enough to bring him satisfaction. Don’t get me wrong; he loves his family and values time with them. But he believes that doing what is right –and in his African and African-American family, providing for your family is the highest right in almost any situation—is its own reward.

What else could he possibly be getting out of the situation? He was quite a few dollars poorer. He must have been stressed out. He’d initially proposed this special outing for himself and his aunt alone and it had quickly become an extended family debacle, where one toddler peed in the antique mall and an adult screamed bloody murder when he drove through a yellow light. But still, I swear, he was happy, smiling contentedly as we finally pulled into the driveway at home.

Ray, who did give me permission to share this story here, illustrates the idea that our Unitarian forbearer William Ellery Channing called “salvation by character.” A person’s character in the everyday is the key to whether or not they are truly religious, said Channing. It’s not about anticipating a heaven or fearing a hell still to come. And that is just what our service is about today, a humanist look at heaven and hell and the ways that we create those conditions of joy and terror here on earth in the present tense. Channing helped shape for us a Unitarian Universalist worldview that discarded a judgmental God and instead insisted that simply being a good human being is the loftiest religious act anyone could perform. Salvation by character.

A more modern way to put it is, in the words of Andrea Lerner, who works for the Unitarian Universalist Association, “Our faith is not interested in saving your soul—we’re here to help you unfold the awesome soul you already have.” I think both she and Channing would approve of

Ray because Ray doesn't need reward or punishment to motivate him to be good. His own character is strongly developed enough that being good is in fact its own reward. His soul is already awesome.

In Unitarian Universalism we also have the Universalist side of our legacy to guide us and it too relies heavily on the belief that your personal character should guide your actions. Universalists have long claimed that fear should never be a part of religion, that living in fear of hell is to be spiritually impoverished from the word go. Here's an old story about that:

One day in the early nineteenth century, the great Universalist minister Hosea Ballou was riding between towns with a minister from a more traditionally orthodox Christian denomination. They were arguing theology as they traveled the circuit of their pulpits. At one point the other rider looked over in frustration and said, "Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away, and I'd still go to heaven." And Ballou looked back at him and calmly replied, "If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you."

If you were a Universalist, Ballou says, you wouldn't be plotting to scam your way into a far-off eternity. You'd be listening to how your own conscience calls you to behave today. This is a practice that many Buddhists I know would call mindfulness.

In fact, I think most religions have somewhere at their core the understanding that what's most important is character. Here is a Jewish version of this theme, to add to the Buddhist and UU ones. When I studied with well-known author Rabbi Lawrence Kushner at the Center for Jewish Studies in Berkeley, California, he cared so little about the afterlife that he drew no distinction between heaven and hell at all. Heaven had no pearly gates to cross through and no cloud puffs upon which to rest golden harps. Hell was not smoky, fiery or sweaty.

Instead, he suggested, imagine that after you die you are ushered into a simple room, clean and bright but plain, where a comfortable recliner awaits you. When you sit, a big flat screen high definition TV appears. On it you watch your life unfold again and again, witnessing and reliving each choice you made and all of your actions. Forever. So, he asked, is that heaven or hell? You decide.

This resonates with my understanding of Unitarian Universalism. We don't have some arbitrary rulebook or Divine Decider that vets our behavior. We have principles, purposes and sources that we get to use as guides, and then we look inward. Ralph Waldo Emerson called this listening to the small, still voice within. And then we decide for ourselves. You decide. I decide. We all face decisions with ethical import in life.

Some important ethical decision-making moments in my life, for example, include whether I should share with a loved one my concerns about their partner. Or the question of whether giving money to a family member be helpful support or co-dependently harmful. Neither were easy calls. I sought advice in each case but I was always clear that my own character drives how it is that I respond and which choice I make.

Now, the Universalists of the nineteenth century (like Ballou, the horseback riding minister) agreed with all this. Each of us is our own decider and that the realm in which it matters is this one (not the afterlife). But they took it a whole huge step further.

They said that heaven and hell do actually exist but that they are earthly states of being. That people experience heaven and hell during our time on earth, not in some nebulous afterlife. So while they agreed that people of strong character who made good choices were to be praised, they also believed that each and every one of us is on the hook for everyone else's choices too. Both heaven and hell surround us on earth so we better work to get everyone a little more heaven and a lot less hell. They called this collective salvation.

“Salvation” can be a tricky word, right? What works for me here is to think about salvation not in the sense of being saved from hellfire and damnation but of being salved. Of being healed, lifted up and held; kept safe in what Martin Luther King, Jr. called, in our responsive reading, “an inescapable network of mutuality.”

Well, to put it mildly, this was not popular. “All of us or none” was not a common Christian conception of the afterlife then, nor is it today. I believe this legacy still makes Unitarian Universalism unique. And at the time, the political consequences of the belief that we all had to be free from hell for any of us to get to heaven were tremendous. It was the fuel that flamed the fire of their commitment to work for free public school, abolition, prison reform, public housing and health care, especially compassionate treatment for those living with mental illness. It's hard to overstate how much their tireless advocacy helped shape our society, even as we continue to struggle to adequately address these same issues today.

So, then, if this stuff is collective and not individual, then the network re-broadcast of our lives, that great TV show in the sky that the rabbi envisioned, can't just be a play back of what one single person saw and smelled and did. The camera can't just follow me around—the scope of the narrative would have to be immeasurably broadened if we're all really in it together. The evaluating principle cannot be whether I had sufficient character for my actions to make me happy.

The question must be did my actions help myself as well as the collective, did I save (or salve) everyone I could? My nephew Ray's film would pan back to see me marveling at his maturity from the back seat and it would also have to include the life story of the Starbucks barista. I wonder how he used that change Ray stuck in the tip jar, did it help him find some sense of peace or what the Universalists would call heaven? Maybe, maybe not.

And another scene would have to be the story of the fossil fuels consumed by the minivan Ray borrowed from his parents to schlep the family around. Obviously he's not individually responsible for environmental devastation. But collectively it is our work to address it together, and so it does intersect with his life. That's part of saving ourselves and each other.

On this weekend that honors him, let's let the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. weigh in here. He too sought earthly justice over the promise of a future reward. “A religion true to its nature must...be concerned about...social conditions. Any religion that professes to be concerned with

the souls of men [let's say people, instead] and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion.”

At the Fellowship, I see our commitment to ESTHER, for whom we took the offering earlier in the service, as evidence that we are not a dry-as-dust religion. Partnering with our local interfaith justice organization is one way to help banish the hells of injustice and spread the harmony of heaven. Donating generously to ESTHER is a fine and decent way to help other people. Thank you for giving.

But on MLK day weekend, I hear King and my Unitarian Universalist ancestors whispering in my ear that while charity is appreciated, mutual partnership with ESTHER is more meaningful. My character is measured by my efforts on behalf of not only myself but everyone. We are bound to each other by the inescapable network of mutuality and that means, for better or worse, our heavens and hells border one another's. It is therefore our responsibility to make it 'for better' and not 'for worse' for everyone. You can't be saved or salvaged if your neighbor is dammed or wounded.

We talk about this here at the Fellowship when we say, in our mission statement, that we lead in social justice. Our social justice core team wants to get us talking more about this part of our mission and so they will host a brown bag lunch here in the sanctuary tomorrow/today at 12 noon, at which all are welcome. They will also have folks at the congregational life table in the Fellowship Hall after this service.

Let me leave you with an image to which you might aspire, if you, like me, dream of collective joy and flourishing on this good earth rather than just personal reward in a distant afterlife. You might think of my teenage nephew Ray, sure, with his awesome soul.

But let me also introduce you to the Sufi saint, Rabia of Basra, who lived in the early 100s in Iraq. A poet and prophet who's often credited with being the first to set forth the doctrine of Divine Love, she was one day seen running through the streets of Basra carrying a torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. Of course she was asked what on earth she was doing! And she replied, "I want to put out the fires of Hell, and burn down the rewards of Paradise. They block the way to Allah. I do not want to worship from fear of punishment or for the promise of reward, but simply for the love of Allah." Or God or the Spirit of Life, or however you might describe that which inspires you to build your character for its own sake.

This month, as we explore character as our theme, how are you called to enter the world with a torch in one hand and a bucket in the other?

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