

Hell? No.

In following this year's theme of *Personal Spiritual Perspectives on the Big Religious Questions*, I'd like to examine the concept and the history of Hell with you. As Unitarian Universalists, the chances are good that not many in this room spend a lot of time or worry on this subject, but a majority of the people in this country do, and I feel that it's important that we try to understand why. My hope is that by understanding this common belief, we can better appreciate other points of view and by doing that, find a better way to share ours.

To start off, I believe for many the attachment to Heaven and Hell runs deep and can't be written off easily. Maybe, more specifically, the attachment is to the human need and desire to believe that we live in a just and moral universe. In some religions, this premise appears as Heaven and Hell. In others, it appears as Karma, or the law of reaping and sowing.

In short, the idea is that we all get what's coming to us. In the end, good will come to good people and bad will come to bad people. We all know that it certainly isn't always like that here on Earth, where it seems that the good people are often stricken with terrible tragedy and the bad people grow old and healthy surrounded by good fortune. The hope is that everyone gets what they deserve. The good will be rewarded and the bad will be punished – if not in this life, well, certainly in the next one.

As I've said, people can be deeply, strongly attached to this moral view of the universe. Even to the point that if this doctrine were shown somehow to be false, they would struggle to believe in God. After all, how could a loving or just God allow Hitler or Bin Laden into Heaven and to *not* burn in Hell? It's only fair.

U.S. News and World Report magazine's Jan. 31, 2000 cover article *Hell Hath No Fury* reported that society's views regarding Hell have undergone a transformation in recent years. Sixty-four percent of Americans believe there is a Hell – that's 212+ million people; just in this country. Of these, a third of them believe it is "a real place where people suffer eternal fiery torment" (this is down from nearly half of them only three years earlier.) A little over half of the believers view Hell as "an anguished state of existence eternally separated from God" (which is up seven percentage points). Interestingly, of the American adults that said they believed in a place called Hell,

practically none of them thought that they personally were going there. From what I have read, these numbers have not changed significantly since that article.

A 2004 Gallop poll showed that whether you believe in Hell or not depends on your religion, your political affiliation, your education, and even where you live in the country. 83% of Republicans say they believe in hell, vs. 69% of Democrats and 58% of Independents. Americans with a high school education or less are slightly more likely to believe in hell than those with at least some college education (77% to 65%). Southerners (83%) are more likely to believe in hell than are Westerners, Easterners, and those in the Midwest (61-66%).

Personally, this subject of Hell has always both intrigued and frightened me. You may be surprised to learn that Hell was what initially brought me to this fellowship -- or maybe, more specifically, the fear of Hell did. When I found the Sheridan UU Fellowship I was searching for a place that didn't profess to know all the answers and wouldn't condemn someone to Hell for them not knowing either.

As you may remember if you heard my "Why I Am a UU" talk last year, I attended a fundamental church as a child, from the time I was about nine years old until I was 15. I had very little experience with religion before that time. The church people were kind, sincere and caring adults, and being a child, I didn't question their beliefs or teachings. I often think back to a talk on faith Ronn Smith gave a couple of years ago, when he quoted someone comparing faith to a pill that is handed to us to swallow without question or without chewing because it's "good for us" and we trust those that are handing it to us. That describes fairly well my early experience with church and religion.

This church believed in a literal, fiery Hell and their main goal, in my eyes anyway, was to prevent people from ending up there. It was preached that because we were all born sinners, any person that was not "saved" or "born again" would spend eternity in this Hell. It was a terrifying thought to me. The preacher's sermons always ended with a plea for anyone that did not know Jesus as their personal savior to come to the front of the church, confess their sins and pray for God to come into their hearts and save them. This personal relationship with God was the only way one could hope to see Heaven and avoid an eternity in Hell.

Well, of course, I was sure to go up and “get saved” shortly after starting to attend services. In fact, I was so worried that it may have not stuck that first time that I ended up getting saved several more times in the next few years just to make sure. As funny as that sounds now, at the time I felt that the consequences of being wrong were just too great. I also developed a desperate need to convince my family and friends that they must be saved too, or they would not be going to Heaven. If this Hell thing was real, and I was convinced it was, how could I *not* warn everyone of the importance of salvation? To do anything less would be irresponsible and unconscionable.

I remember one “soul winning” visit that I made along with one of the ladies in the church where the woman that answered the door was quite vocal that she didn’t need our kind of religion, and we could just go back to where we came from. The church lady sadly shook her head as we left, turned to me and said, “Isn’t that so sad, Verleen? That lady is going to Hell.” This was obviously very serious business.

In Stacy Page’s talk on Evolution, she wondered if she would be less angry about Creationists trying to take over the science departments of our children’s schools if she could understand their perspective. Perhaps this fear of Hell, this fear of making an irreversible, eternally devastating mistake, could be one of the factors in their inability or refusal to hear the validity of science. I know it was for me.

After leaving the church at 15 years old, I tried not to think about the Hell stuff very much. I made sure my kids attended church long enough to be saved, which gave me peace of mind, but I really had no desire to return myself. I guess I just couldn’t handle the troubling question of how to save the rest of the world. Avoiding thinking about the subject and avoiding going to church was working fairly well, I suppose, until the day I found out my teenage son considered himself an Atheist.

Oh man, I didn’t know what I did or didn’t believe anymore. By what I had been taught, my son was destined for Hell, but that couldn’t be right, because Hell is for evil people, not for my child or for people I know and love. This was a pivotal point in my spirituality.

To be sure, I had always had doubts about my beliefs; questions that I didn’t allow myself to ask or dwell on, but now, with my son’s soul on the line, I had the motivation to do some long-overdue homework. So I got busy and started reading,

exploring and thinking. The questions and doubts that I hadn't allowed myself to ask, but that came bubbling to the surface during this time, were thoughts such as these:

- Of the seven billion people on earth right now about two billion are Christians. If what I was taught was right, then that left about five billion non-Christians who will go to Hell forever when they die. Not to mention the billions of people who lived before this time and died not believing. Could all these people be in Hell too?
- And what about those that lived and died without having ever received an opportunity to be saved? This would include millions who died as babies as well as the billions of people who lived and died never hearing about God or Jesus. The vast majority of all those who have ever lived fall into this category. How could God condemn people to Hell that were born into non-Christian countries or homes and had never even heard about him?

I'd been told that these people might be given a sort of free pass. The rationale was that since their ignorance is due to circumstances beyond their control, God will admit them into heaven regardless of their lack of repentance. But if this is true, it raises a troubling possibility – that missionary efforts to such areas could be the cause of people who do not accept their teachings to go to Hell!

- Another thought that really bothered me was that if God is all knowing, then He knows who will be saved and who will not even before they are born, so did He create some people just so they can be tormented in Hell for eternity? That didn't make any sense at all.
- According to the World Christian Encyclopedia there are more than 33,000 different Christian religions in the world, how could we, mere mortals, be expected to choose the right one, the one that was guaranteed to lead us to salvation? Well, obviously we couldn't. It had to be simpler than that.

A big part of my search was learning about what other people believed about the concept of Hell. I was surprised to learn that it wasn't always an all or nothing thing. In fact, I discovered that within several religions their beliefs on Hell had actually changed over time.

In general though, I learned there are basically four different views: The Literal or Orthodox View of Hell, The Metaphorical View, the Purgatorial View, and the Conditional View. I'd like to take a minute to tell you a little bit about each of these:

The first and most well-known of these four, and the only one with which I was familiar at the time, is the **Orthodox or Literal View**. This belief holds that Hell is a literal place beneath the earth in which wicked or undeserving people are sent by God after death, to be horrifyingly tortured for eternity by flames in a lake of fire. The Devil or Satan, and his demons are said to rule over this place. The Bible describes Hell as both fire and darkness, "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" and "the outer darkness" where "men will weep and gnash their teeth."

The 2004 Gallop poll I mentioned earlier showed that whether you believe in this literal Hell or not depends on your religion. Baptists are the most likely to believe at 65%; followed by Presbyterians (46%), Methodists (42%), and Episcopalians (40%). And at the other end of the spectrum are American Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, agnostics, atheists, and Unitarian Universalists, who more often than not, do not believe in Hell at all.

The second view of Hell, the **Metaphorical view**, has only been around since the 16th Century. This view claims that while Hell is certainly an eternal state of torment and separation from God, the actual punishments are just not clear in the bible. Believers of this type of Hell suggest that the wicked will never be redeemed or be allowed into Heaven, but they take a less than literal interpretation of the bible when it comes to what Hell actually will entail. Many reject the idea of physical torment altogether and suggest that the torture of Hell is mental anguish caused by separation from God. The *U.S. News and World Report* survey taken about 10 years ago showed of people that believe in Hell, 53%, or just over half of them, have this Metaphorical perspective of Hell.

The third view, **The Purgatorial View**, is the one traditionally held by the Roman Catholic Church. Everyone, at death, is immediately judged. Those who have committed one or more mortal sins that have not been repented and erased through church sacraments will go directly to Hell. A very few who have lived unusually spiritual lives will go directly to Heaven. The rest will go to Purgatory, which is a place of divine cleansing where unconfessed sins are judged and punishment is

inflicted -- a type of temporary Hell. After a period of punishment, which may extend over many centuries or even millennia, each person will become sufficiently purified and only then will they be accepted into Heaven.

Purgatory was originally interpreted in symbolic terms. It later became viewed as an actual location; a form of Hell. But more recently, the church has once again returned more to a more symbolic interpretation.

In fact, Pope John Paul II has rejected the idea of a physical, literal Hell. Rather, the pope has said Hell is separation, even in this life, from joyful communion with God. He believes that scriptural references to Hell and the images portrayed by Scripture are only symbolic of "the complete frustration and emptiness of life without God."

The Jewish religion has historically had a purgatorial view of Hell also. Gehinnom is usually translated as Hell, but Gehinnom is actually more of a spiritual realm in which souls are cleansed or purified of their sins for up to one year before they are allowed to go on to Gan Eden, the Heavenly Garden of Eden.

And lastly, the fourth view is **the Conditional or Temporary View**, which is embraced by those who struggle with the contradiction of everlasting punishment and a loving, gracious God. These people believe that Hell is either temporary or redemptive and whatever suffering a soul has to endure after death will result in them being redeemed and restored to a position of worthiness of God's favor. Associated with the Conditional View, is Annihilationism, which is the belief that the unsaved will be tortured in Hell for a limited interval, and then totally destroyed. Afterwards, they would just cease to exist in any form. The Annihilation view is one held by Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists.

So now you have a little background on the four most common beliefs on Hell: The Literal, Metaphorical, Purgatorial, and the Conditional views.

I was very interested to learn that during the time of the early church, it was widely believed by most Christians that God would eventually save everyone. This belief is called Universal Salvation or Apocatastasis (App-oh-cuh-tass-uh-suss). Pagans and Heathens, however, generally believed in eternal punishment of the wicked. The theologian Augustine (who lived in 354-430 A.D.) converted from Heathenism to

Christianity, but consistent with his Heathen roots, he kept his belief in the endless punishment of the unsaved. His theology soon became dominant in the church. As a result, in 553 A.D. the church took an official stand against the teaching of universal salvation. It was heresy to preach this view.

As a result, the doctrine of universal salvation lay largely dormant for several centuries. Eventually it started to revive and became fairly strong again by the eighteenth century. Under the leadership of Hosea Ballou, who has been called the "father of American Universalism," along with the minister John Murray, the first Universalist church in America was organized in 1774.

These Christian Universalists held a Conditional View of Hell. They taught that the unsaved are tortured in Hell, but only temporarily, with a series of graded punishments, until they were sufficiently cleansed to be accepted into Heaven. Regardless of how long this cleansing process took, everyone is eventually saved. They believed that an eternal Hell was a creation of the church and it had no biblical support. It formed a major part of the beliefs of the Universalist.

Today, in the 21st Century, Universalism is still not a common belief. In fact, in most Christian circles, it's a dirty word. Rob Bell, the pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, authored a book in March of last year called *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, which ignited a firestorm of controversy when it came out. In Rob Bell's words, "At the center of the Christian tradition, since the first church, has been a number who insist that history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God." People have been coming out of the woodwork to either bless or curse Rob for the courage he's shown to share his beliefs. Either way, they're talking about it, which is encouraging to me.

So, after learning about all these different views, and contemplating it for awhile, I came to the conclusion that I agreed with the Universalists; if there is a Heaven, then I believe either every one or us or none of us are going. And if that's the case, there really isn't any need for a Hell is there? So, I stopped believing in Hell. Not immediately; it was a process. But I finally realized I didn't need to believe in it anymore. It didn't help me be a better person when I did. Perhaps it helps others to be

better people though. In that case, I am all for someone believing in Hell if that belief ultimately helps them be a kinder, more ethical, person.

Although I may not believe in a supernatural Hell after I die, I do believe in the living Hell in which many people in the world can find themselves. I think a living Hell can be many things; hopelessness, mental illness, physical pain, dementia, cruelty, environmental disasters, discrimination, violence, poverty and hunger, just to name a few. It is this living Hell in ourselves and in the world that I want to commit to reducing, treating, or removing.....and when that isn't possible, then to providing comfort, compassion and companionship as much as I am able.

So what does all this Hell stuff mean for those of us that don't believe it? It means that you may now understand a little more of where those that do are coming from. It means that we can better appreciate the freedom we have in the UU faith to search for spiritual truth without the fear of punishment.

If you've ever wondered what good your UU faith can do in the world, just think of the many people who may be trapped in the fear of Hell, and who might be waiting for hopeful words from someone. I know that as Unitarian Universalists we shy away from anything that could be considered proselytizing, but we have good news – news that some people may be hungry to hear. There are so many that have never heard about the freedom of Unitarian Universalism. I encourage you to talk about your faith. Discuss your beliefs with others. You just may be planting seeds of hope and spiritual freedom. There are people who need that hope, not Hell.

Closing words:

Excerpt from a sermon by Steve Edington, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashua, New Hampshire:

“Whatever heavens and hells do exist, they are ones we human beings have generated; and over the course of human history we've seen plenty of both. Our codes of morality and ethics have all grown out of the heavens and hells that reside in the human psyche.

Whether or not there is some Force of Power beyond ourselves and greater than ourselves in which our codes of behavior are ultimately vested, I really don't know. What I do know is that we have to confront and deal with the heavens

and hells that reside in each of us. We need to recognize our capacity for the fears and hatreds and misunderstandings that can separate us from our better selves and turn us against our fellow human beings. Whatever we may each believe or not believe about the ultimate sources of morality, we need to be moral beings nonetheless. By the same token, we need to celebrate our creative and benevolent and loving and justice-seeking selves as well. And we do all this not for the sake of some future reward or punishment, but because we believe in the sanctity and sacredness of the life we experience right here and now, every time we draw a breath.

"Heaven and hell and all the gods are within you..." That is a very powerful statement about what it means to be human and about what it means to take responsibility for our humanity. We seek here, in the life of this congregation, to offer a human community wherein we can discover and celebrate what Abraham Lincoln called the "better angels" of our being and of our nature. As we walk together on this common, human way, may we seek - in this blessed earthly existence of ours - to create "new heavens" as we "build eternity in time."