



"Is There Life After Death? "
Claudia Hall
August 2, 2009

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

Sermon

Unitarian Universalist theology and practice

We have a free faith. What this means is that anything we say can be disputed and both parties can be good, devout UU's. Having said that, is there any common ground? Is there anything we can claim is definitely ours as a faith? Or are we limited to talking about other religions and then saying "pick what works for you"? For my part, I refuse to think that UUism is limited to being a shadow of other religions. Most other religions are specific, they detail out the human condition and its meaning. Related to today, most religions have a definite belief and system of teaching about what life, death, and beyond are about. Judaism, the source of today's reading, is an exception. Jewish tradition is very mixed on the subject of life after death, with opinion ranging from their being nothing, to reincarnation, to a heaven/hell paradigm, to a shadowy otherworld, called Sheol in the text. What Judaism does focus on is making the world better here and now, and on the ways in which a person lives on within the lives they touch. In many ways UUism is kin to Judaism in this, we focus much more on living here and now, and making this world a heaven on earth than we do on what happens when we die. Yet, we do have things to say about what happens when we die. Like Judaism we are not always agreed on the specifics, but we do have underlying themes that unite us. Today, we get to explore those themes as they relate to death and life after.

Something keep in mind as we address this topic today is that in UUism we do have a theological method; we believe that our faith is informed by two main themes. The first is our direct experience. Here is where we usually agree to disagree. We each have had different experiences, different ways of interpreting those experiences, and different outcomes from our experiences. So, we respect that the truth we know may or may not be the truth another knows, even as we stick to our knowing. Second, we believe in a living tradition, our revelation is not fixed at a point and time in the past, it is unfolding each day in the combined experience of the community. Here is where we as UU's gain our strength and unity. When we gather together and share our individual experiences, we are not limited to those but we can use those as parts of a greater whole that we call the tapestry of our faith. Tapestry is a good metaphor here, because each strand is a different color, they look and feel different, and each are woven differently into the pattern, but it takes them all to create the greater whole.

What does OUR faith say?

So having said that, what does our common tapestry teach us about life after death? 1 Corinthians 13, often used at weddings, says in part "what remain are this, faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love". This love is not the romantic love



between partners, it is instead the abiding and endless sense that the Universe holds and sustains us for all time and space.

Using this verse as a lens to focus our broad teaching on the subject, what can we learn about life after death from faith, hope, and love?

Faith

First, our faith teaches us that there is an order to the universe, that nothing is ever destroyed, and that what we do with the life we have has an impact on the entire interdependent web.

Our faith teaches us that community life is important, from single celled organisms to stars and galaxies, all things are linked and those links are what create life.

Our faith teaches us that we each contribute in ways that are unique, important, and eternal to this interconnected web. In short, our faith is what puts our life in the greater context of all the Universe. We are an important part of a cosmic whole, and we can trust that the whole is made greater for our contribution to it.

Hope

Our faith gives us hope. Hope that we matter to the Universe, hope that there is a purpose to existence, and a benevolent one at that. Hope that, no matter where we are in life or death, that we are sustained as a part of a greater whole. Our religious home is a huge part of that hope, it nurtures and sustains us in life and in death. It sustains us in all kinds of death, not just physical. We face death all throughout our life. The death of hopes and dreams, the death of careers and health, the death of relationships and marriages...whether our own or others, these deaths affect us all and our faith gives us a means to grieve, a context to place the grief in, and a world view that offers us hope that we can grow and become more because of what we have undergone. Our hope is not that this suffering will end, or that we will be saved by some cosmic force, our hope is that the love of the community will take our brokenness and create from it beautiful life-mosaics that will inspire others to heal our beautiful yet broken world.

Love

We believe in love. In the gift of love given to us by the universe with our first breath, in the love of family and friends, in the love of a religious community that allows us to expand our horizons and claim the truth we know, while not denying the truth another knows. In this gift of love we live our days, faithfully returning some measure of that love, choosing good over evil, love over hate, freedom over slavery, justice and reconciliation over hatred and prejudice. As we do this we give life to the cosmos, both tangibly in our environmental impact and socially through our work to allow others to live fully



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and joyfully as human beings. When we celebrate equality we are affirming the power of love to transform individuals and societies. This power is not limited to physical transformation, nor is it limited to the span of our time as physical beings. The women and men who fought for racial equality live on in each person who refuses to believe that skin color limits a person. The men and women who bravely challenged laws and fought social pressure because their love is real and true have made a difference and we are seeing the shift of our society to an acceptance of difference unheard of throughout history. This change does not happen in one lifetime, but those who have worked and lived and loved for a cause live on as that cause gains momentum and fruition. Love holds us and sustains us, in our community of faith and as we work for those things we believe are sacred. Our faith allows us to say that yes, we do live on, in the love and growth taking place in our world. Our faith refuses to limit life after death to one soul or one body, we instead are focused on all the lives that continue because of love.

Conclusion

Life after death is a multifaceted topic not limited to the soul's presence in a heaven or hell, but it includes all the ways we live, and all the ways we die. Our faith gives us a world view that says nothing is ever gone forever. Whether as energy, memories, reincarnated beings or some other means of existence, everything that exists is interconnected, never destroyed, and always sustained by the underlying order of the universe. Our faith is flexible enough that we can use our direct experience to articulate the specifics of how we think we continue in the universe, but *that* we continue is an assurance our faith gives us. Be it the death of a dream, the death of a marriage, the death of a loved one, or our own death, our faith teaches that we go on. Our community gives us a sustaining hope, for ourselves, our families, and our world, that our contributions will never be forgotten but will instead become a part of the hopeful light of faith we pass down to future generations. So, is there life after death? I believe that our UU faith teaches us the answer to that is a resounding YES! Do not be afraid of death, for we have faith that there is life, and where there is life there is hope, and where there is hope love can flourish. Faith, hope, and love, these three remain, but the greatest of these is love. So choose love my friends, choose hope and faith over despair. Live, and love, and know that there is, indeed, life after death.