

From Mystery to Mystery  
Reverend Elizabeth Stevens  
Kitsap Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
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**Chalice Lighting**

Lynn S. Smith-Roberts

Come, Spirit of Life, to inspire us anew.  
Come, spirits of those present,  
    to commune together and be refreshed.  
Come, spirits of those past,  
    to answer our questions and show us the way.  
Come, as we light the hearth-fire of this  
    Community of Faith and Hope.  
Come, be warmed here today,  
    that we may all find the strength and wisdom to face  
    all that awaits beyond our doors.

**Meditation**

En Route to Death by Robert Weston

Autumn, we know,  
Is life en route to death.  
The asters are but harbingers of frost.  
The trees, flaunting their colors to the sky,  
In other times will follow where the leaves have fallen,  
And so shall we.  
Yet other lives will come: new creators will arise,  
Their genius nourished by the thoughts we leave  
As we on have been fed by those who came before.  
Lift high our colors to the sky! And give,  
Each in our own time, fresh glory to the earth.  
Flowing from each to each,  
Making us, part with part,  
A wholeness we could never be alone.  
Thus may we find a kinship with all life,  
Reaching across all barriers of race,  
Philosophies and creeds,  
Making us one with everything that lives  
And, as with our inmost atom, each bright star.

## Readings:

from Kitchen Table Wisdom by Rachel Naomi Remen, "The Emperor's New Clothes."

In 1974 as I became interested in working with people facing death, I had thought to study death itself much as I had studied any other new field that had attracted my professional interest. Approaching a librarian, I asked if she could direct me to the periodicals on death. "Do you mean *Cancer Research* and the *Journal of Oncology*?" We stared at each other for a moment. "Death," I said. Confused, she lowered her eyes and began to search her index under "D," finally coming up with a location deep in the stacks.

Following her instructions, I went downstairs past floors and floors of medical journals and books to the right floor. There, in the midst of rows and rows of ceiling-to-floor shelves filled with journals and periodicals, I found the section on death. It was a single shelf...which contained five outdated issues of the *Journal of Thanatology*, two books on the pastoral counseling of the bereaved, and a copy of the New Testament.

At the time of my brush with death in the medical stacks, death occupied the same position in my consciousness that it occupied in the medical library. I had been present at a death only when my frantic efforts to prevent it had failed.

About a year after my trip to the library, I began to have a series of vivid, disturbing dreams. I would find myself once again at the bedside of pediatric patients who had died many years before. Unbidden, I would see clearly the many things that I had not fully seen when I had actually been there. I would hear again whole conversations, word for word. I would see every nuance of expression on the faces of people whom I had not thought about in years. But the most frightening thing about these dreams was that eventually in each one I would come to feel what I had not allowed myself to feel, feelings of sadness, pain, helplessness and loss. I would awaken sobbing uncontrollably, sometimes for hours.

In the end I had twenty or more of these dreams, and gradually, something changed. I began to know how much I had cared for these children, how meaningful and irreplaceable their lives had been, and to wonder if their deaths had any meaning also. Eventually I began to experience the great emptiness left by their passing and genuinely wonder where they had gone. In the end I, who had taken death so personally, no longer saw it as a personal failure but as universal mystery.

Something inside me that had closed its eyes and run from death for years had turned again and wanted to see.

From "No Hell!" by the Rev. Robbie Walsh

I think the idea of hell stays with us because we are terrified that the Ground of Being might include both good and evil, both justice and injustice, destruction as well as creation, death as well as life.

We hold on to hell because when we discard it we glimpse through the clearing smoke a God who is too complicated for us.

## Sermon

This is the second sermon in a series on ten questions

Posed by Zoe Sallis

In a book called Ten Eternal Questions...

They're questions that the chalice circles will be discussing all year,  
And questions that lie at the heart of the spiritual journey.

The book contains a wide variety of answers to the questions..

Nelson Mandela's answers next to Jack Nicholson's.

The task I've set for myself in these sermons

Is to offer some answers from Unitarian Universalists, as well.

Today's question is, "Do you think this life is all there is,

Or do you believe in an afterlife?"

They say when people get to heaven,

They're offered a choice between going on in

Or going next door for a discussion about whether or not heaven exists.

Guess which one UU's choose?

Many UU's believe that this life is all there is.

They look at the objective evidence:

When people die they die and their bodies eventually decay.

James Park has preached several sermons on the subject,

Starting from what we know about the death of the body.

He writes,

"All five of our senses depend on sense organs within living bodies.

After our bodies are completely dead , how could we have any sense experience?

"The human brain is a living organ located inside the skull of each living person.

When that person dies, all brain functions cease.

Likewise, all human memories reside in our brains,

In living organs that can (and often do) deteriorate even before we are dead.

If there is no memory of the life we are now living,

In what sense are we alive in the new existence?

All forms of communication and relationship depend on having physical bodies.

How then might we communicate and relate with others after we are dead?

If we lack experience, awareness, memory and action, how does "life after death" differ from death?<sup>1</sup>

I took a class on death and dying, once,

And on the first night, answering questions about belief in heaven or hell,

The answers around the room were pretty consistently

Against the idea.

They ranged from "when we die, we die."

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<sup>1</sup>: "No Gods Can Save Us from Death" by James Park.

To "there might be something,  
But we don't know what it is,  
And it certainly isn't angels playing harps on clouds  
Or demons and eternal fire."

Something fascinating happened in the next class, though.  
We were asked to describe an experience of being with someone who was dying,  
Or who had recently died.

Tentatively, one person after another  
Described feelings of peace,  
Or a transference of energy,  
Or a tingling feeling,  
Or a lingering certainty  
That the person who has died  
Isn't really gone,

Logic aside,  
The heart and our experience sometimes whisper  
That love, somehow, lasts.

Maybe it's just that grief speaks in this way,  
That hope and wishful thinking whisper reassurance  
To ease the pain of loss  
And the fear of not knowing.

This is "She Speaks of Death"  
(a poem by Barbara Pescan)

Oblivion, she said  
in a weary voice,  
is what is after death.  
There is nothing after death  
but nothing  
and that's all right with me.  
It made good scientific sense,  
nailed to the cathedral door  
of her religious childhood.

And when her husband died  
a few years later  
oblivion  
pinned against eternity  
sagged in the middle  
and in its folds  
sweet disbelief surprised her  
and the hope  
she hadn't seen the last of him yet.

UU author, the late Phillip Simmons, died of Lou Gehrig's disease.  
His life is profiled in the documentary,

"The Man Who Learned to Fall",  
which the Adult RE Committee is showing in November.  
He wrote:

I don't know what, if anything, follows this life. Certain scenarios are appealing: reunion with my childhood pets, all-night jam sessions with Jerry Garcia, reincarnation as a Basset hound. But none of that may come to pass. I don't mean to discount belief in an afterlife or in reincarnation, or the comfort and moral discipline such beliefs can provide. But these are matters of faith, not knowledge in the scientific or rational sense, and as such are better left to individual conscience.<sup>2</sup>

Mapping out the afterlife isn't a matter of geography.  
It's a question of conscience.

Dante's Paradiso is fascinating  
Not because it's an exploration of hell  
But because it's an exploration of one man's  
Mind, conscience, psyche and soul.

Questions about the afterlife reveal  
How we feel about our actions in the here and now.  
What are the things we do here on earth that are good?  
What are the things we do that are not so good?  
What are the consequences that we foresee  
That may not play out in a way that is manifested in the physical world,  
But on some higher plane?

You can believe in heaven and hell as actual, physical or meta-physical places,  
Or as states of mind.  
You can find maps of heavens and hells...plural,  
Each designed for specific kinds of people.

I had a friend once who used to say there was a special place in hell  
Reserved for people who pee in swimming pools.  
So from that statement, we know that  
She dislikes sneakiness,  
And values a sense of responsibility for shared resources.

On the other hand, those who believe that heaven is for people of one particular faith  
And hell is for unbelievers  
Driven by fear,  
Dislike doubt,  
And value a sense of safety and entitlement.

Part of a discussion about heaven or hell might involve the possible need for  
A time or place of purification after death...  
For Catholics, it's named purgatory,  
For Jews, Sheol.  
Many native Americans tribes believe that  
Dying people are met by spirit guides who review with them whether they have used their gifts wisely

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<sup>2</sup> : Learning to Fall, p. 148.

And listened to the urgings of their spirit guides  
During their lifetime.

These concepts are a way of making peace with the very human experience  
Of sin...

We all fall short of our own expectations, and the expectations of others.

We all do things we regret later.

A belief in purgatory lets you believe

That perfection of the soul is possible.

So does a belief in reincarnation,

Though for people who believe in many lives,

Past, present, and future,

The process of purification,

Takes longer.

Lifetime after lifetime,

The journey continues,

The lessons are learned and re-learned better,

Until the animal nature is shed completely

And complete and perpetual union with the divine occurs.

Sioux City Iowa UU Gary Nooney writes in a sermon titled

"Why I believe in Reincarnation"

..Since accepting the idea of reincarnation in my own life, much has changed and shifted. For example, I no longer believe that any of us are truly victims. No one can hurt me unless I decide to allow this to happen, unless I decide that being hurt is something I want to experience. So if someone suggests to me that he or she is a victim, I instead see this person as a powerful being who wanted to learn something through such an experience. Any terrible thing that I observe in others is likely a thing I have also done in some lifetime or another, so this helps me to develop compassion and patience. The Buddhists suggest that we consider every being we meet as someone who could very well have our mother in another life, and so to treat every being with the deepest of respect and gratitude.

A belief in reincarnation is an invitation

To see oneself as an eternal part of an eternal process,

Rather than as a temporary part of an eternal process.

Both reincarnation and a belief in the afterlife

Require a belief in spirit, in soul,

In something that transcends biology.

However, a belief that this life is all there is

Doesn't negate a belief in something transcendent.

The nature of that which transcends might be natural,

Rather than supernatural.

The Rev. Robert Weston, whose words I used

For our meditation earlier, describes

The creative process as cumulative,

Evolutionary.

The immortality we gain  
    By participating in the creative process  
        is the only immortality  
    We know for sure is real.  
"We build on foundations we did not lay,"  
    reminds the late Rev. Dr. Peter Raible.  
There are concrete achievements and creations we leave behind,  
    Products of our labor and our skill...  
Some are tangible, some intangible.  
    Books, buildings,  
Patients cured, children raised or taught,  
    Money made, legacies created and distributed.  
Great artists leave lasting legacies...  
    Beethoven, Mozart,  
DaVinci, Rembrandt...  
    Their work becomes the treasure of many generations.  
Politicians and statesmen,  
    Generals and movie stars,  
All have an impact and so gain immortality.

What about the non-famous?  
    The vast majority of people whose names  
Aren't associated with the legacy they leave?  
    Where does the immortality of the common man or woman live?

Try something for me.  
    Think about the people you know who have died.  
Imagine their face.  
    Listen for their voice.  
Do you hear it?

Every person we meet,  
    Every person we care about,  
Every person we enter into a relationship with  
    Changes us,  
And leaves an imprint on our own spirit.

We carry their voices with us always.

People will carry your voice,  
    Too, which is why it's so important  
To pay attention to the kind of imprint you are leaving  
    On others.

We all have negative voices that speak in our hearts and heads,  
    Critical, judgmental, harsh, unloving, angry, violent.

When those voices speak in you,  
    Choose not to listen.  
And if you find those voices coming out of your mouth,  
    Shut it.

Take a deep breath,  
And remember your own kindness and compassion.

You can choose to be a voice for love,  
A voice for justice,  
A voice for peace and compassion.

A voice that reminds people that they are holy, and whole,  
And capable of great things.  
{break}

A few more words, then, about hell.  
The Universalist branch of our faith  
Discarded the notion of hell completely.

Which raises some tough questions  
That we might be tempted to avoid.

What do you do with someone who is a despot, a torturer?  
What do you do with someone who deliberately and willfully  
Causes harm?  
How do we fit them into our world view?  
How do we understand their role in creation?

The Rev. Bill Schultz, UU minister and executive director of  
International human rights watchdog organization Amnesty International  
Challenged the assembled colleagues during professional days this summer  
With his Berry Street Lecture entitled: What Torture has Taught Me.

First he shared stories of torture,  
Stories to break your heart and break open your soul,  
Stories of such terrible ferocity that I literally stopped breathing.

Then he said:

I tell you about it not to shock you but to ask you to consider a question that has haunted me the last twelve years—is what I say from the pulpit about the world around us, about the nature of God and humanity, about the dynamics of human relationships—is what I preach to the people sufficient to encompass a world in which such coarseness and brutality exists?

I remember a cartoon from years ago in which the wayside pulpits of an Episcopal church and a Unitarian Universalist church were both visible on a street corner. It was Easter and the title of the Episcopal rector's Easter sermon was "The Truth and Power of the Risen Christ" while across the street the Unitarian Universalist was preaching a sermon entitled "Upsy-Daisy." My point is simply that to my mind an "upsy-daisy" theology fails the torture test.<sup>3</sup>

I have been wrestling with his words ever since.

We can't approach the mystery of death with an "upsy-daisy" attitude.

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<sup>3</sup> : What Torture's Taught Me: Online at <http://www.uuma.org/berrystreet/Essays/BSE2006.htm>

If our theologies are going to pass the torture test,  
We have to be willing to face our fears,  
Lance our wounds,  
And be present to death as well as to life.

We have to see, and name, and love  
What is- including the parts of life we'd rather deny.

If there is no hell, then  
Torturers souls don't come from hell  
And cannot be consigned back to hell.  
And if that's true, then torturers must come from the same place  
We do.  
We have to admit our kinship with people  
Who are not "god's chosen people,"  
Who are not kind and just and generous.  
People who are destructive  
And different,  
Who we would like to categorize as "not-us."

Why is that so hard to do?

We don't want to have to accept the parts of ourselves  
That are capable of cruelty.  
And so we separate ourselves from people who  
Reflect those qualities back to us.

We don't want to have to accept the parts of ourselves  
That have been victimized,  
Hurt, torn, damaged,  
And so we separate ourselves from people  
Who embody woundedness.

We don't want to let ourselves feel the pain of loss,  
And so we separate parts of ourselves,  
Tuck them away.

We don't want to accept the inevitability of our own death,  
And so we separate ourselves from people who are dead  
Or dying.

Believe what you want about heaven and hell,  
But know this:  
Eternal happiness isn't the alpha and omega.  
Wholeness is.  
And separation is just an illusion.

We can't separate out the painful parts of life,  
The ugly,  
The vicious.  
We can't separate out the painful places in ourselves,

The parts that can be ugly,  
The parts that sometimes get vicious.  
And we certainly can't continue to fuel the illusion  
That some people matter more than others  
Because they happen to have been lucky enough  
To have been born in a time and a place  
That allowed them to grow up less damaged  
Than might otherwise have been the case.

We need to understand that we are the same  
As the person starving in Bangladesh,  
As the person shooting heroin on the street ,  
As the murderer on death row.  
Understand it not in our heads  
But in our hearts.

We must face, unflinching,  
All there is in THIS life,  
And then make peace with God, with ourselves, with life and with death.

Somehow.

From mystery to mystery  
And life's the time spent in between.  
I pray that each and every one of us  
Finds the courage and the strength  
To embrace not just mystery, but mayhem, and majesty,  
Not just uncertainty, but ugliness, and unity.  
Not just doubt, but devastation, and delight,  
Not just heaven and hell, but hope for all humanity.

So be it, and blessed be.

### **Benediction**

Take courage friends.  
The way is often hard, the path is never clear,  
and the stakes are very high.  
Take courage. For deep down there is another truth:  
You are not alone.  
Go in peace.