

Can a Unitarian go to Heaven?

Clay Nelson © 29 May 2016

To answer the question, “Can a Unitarian go to heaven?” I asked Google. I got some interesting responses, all “No!”

No, Unitarians don’t like gated communities.

No, everyone in heaven is in agreement. Thinking it was hell Unitarians wouldn’t go in.

No, a dead Unitarian is all dressed up, but with no place to go.

No, on the road to the after-life there is a fork in the road. The left path has a sign “To Heaven” and the right has a sign “To a Discussion about Heaven.” Without pausing, the Unitarians always turns right.

And my personal favourite:

No, old Unitarians choose not to go to heaven; instead they try to die on the second Thursday of the month because that’s when the recycling goes out.

The next one might have been intended as a joke, but actually is to the point.

No, Unitarians believe in life *before* death.

I probably live in a bubble, but I can’t think of anyone I know who believes in a literal heaven, or hell for that matter, at least not as places we go in the afterlife. Certainly the Hubble Telescope hasn’t found the pearly gates...yet. But that doesn’t keep us from telling jokes about heaven. I think telling them is our way of keeping deeper, more disturbing existential questions at bay. We find making jokes preferable to reflecting on our certain death and wondering about our meaning and purpose in this life.

Jack Spang, in his personal reflection on the afterlife, suggests that “the human *need* to believe in God and in such ultimate matters as life beyond death... must be greater than the human *ability* to believe these things. When people get to the point where they do not really believe what they are saying, they still seem to believe in believing what they are saying.” If so, joking about heaven may be our rational mind’s way of hanging onto the unbelievable to avoid death’s reality.

But in my line of work it is hard to avoid dealing with death and questions about the afterlife. I can remember one particularly difficult year when I did just over fifty funerals. Twice that year I did three in one day after already leading three Sunday services. I felt like the Angel of Death. That’s no joke.

It is the role of the ordained to be death’s interpreter in teaching, in pastoral care, in dealing with the diagnosis that announces someone’s impending demise, in grief management, in exploring death’s inconsistencies like why “the good die young,” in planning funeral services and in preaching on those occasions. I suspect that I am not the only minister who has kidded himself that he can deal with death, while still

hiding from it inside the sanctuary of carefully crafted pious words and nuanced traditional answers.

I was called out from hiding fifteen years ago when the doctors confessed that my cancer had defeated them and that I had twelve to eighteen months left. That I'm still here suggests that there really is life after death.

For the six months following the pronouncement of my death sentence, until I was told the experimental treatments had put my cancer in remission, I got a crash course in being alive, truly and fully alive. Believing I would not see it again made the maple tree's deep red autumnal leaves set against a deep blue sky in my front yard not just incredibly beautiful but an invitation to be grateful to be alive to appreciate it. Before death came knocking I suspect I was blind to its transitory beauty, seeing only the leaves I would soon have to rake.

During those six months I devoted myself to putting my affairs in order, but that was not just about updating my will. It was about finding wholeness, shalom, peace. I might not be able to be cured but I could still be healed. That time made me better at living in the moment. It clarified priorities. Things that seemed so very important before the diagnosis were revealed as inconsequential. Things I had previously seen as something I could put off until I was less busy came to the front of the queue. That's what happens when we are no longer certain the sun will rise tomorrow. Relationships and simple pleasures become life's treasures.

By this point in my life I had pretty much discarded all belief in any kind of after-life. Certainly of any kind where I had self-consciousness and personal identity, where I would be reunited with lost loved ones. I did wistfully fantasise that my beloved dogs that had pre-predeceased me might greet me. Unitarians might not be in heaven, but surely dogs go to heaven.

So there wasn't much reflection on my part about what was next in life's journey. It was more about the now and what my life had been all about. It was a time for searching for meaning and purpose.

Where I came out was that my life was an accident. In fact, all life is an accident. We have not yet solved the mystery of how life first began on this inert third rock from the sun, but eventually single-cell plants came into being and produced oxygen giving the necessary ingredient for future life to evolve. About 65 million years ago a major accident, involving the earth's collision with a comet thought to be the size of Mars, changed conditions here dramatically. It ended the age of reptiles and enabled the rise of mammals. No one planned it. It just happened. But if it hadn't our earliest known mammalian ancestor, a furry mouse-like creature that inhabited the grasslands of what is now East Africa might not have come into being. Looking at it then, it would have been difficult to imagine us as its direct descendants. Evolution is just a series of unplanned accidents. No intelligent design required. The facts make clear that we are accidental tourists passing through this life.

On an individual level we are also accidental creatures. Chance was working at the moment of our conception. We are each the result of a chance connection of one living thing, a spermatozoon, and another living thing, a single, somewhat fragile egg.

There was no hope for on-going life for either until they connected. No divine force determined which of the millions of our father's sperm found our mother's egg. It was chance. According to the laws of nature all living things are products of chance.

However, in that chance encounter much of our identity was set. Our sex was determined. We had no choice in the matter. Our body shape, potential height, our IQ, the colour of our skin, our eyes and our hair were decided by genetic code that did not ask for our input.

That code also set a biological clock ticking within us, starting our relentless march towards death. Thus, death needs to be seen and understood as a natural part of the cycle of life. It is a given, not an abnormality. It is not an enemy to be defeated or overcome. It is only because humans evolved to be self-conscious creatures that we even hear the clock ticking and are left wondering when it will wind down and stop.

But our genetic code is not the only chance factor that determines who we are. We did not choose our birth family. We had no choice in determining our birth order or whether we were loved and cherished or abused or abandoned. We did not choose its values, tastes, educational achievements, religious views, economic status, nationality, our well-being during our time in utero or even the diseases to which we might be genetically pre-disposed. It was all chance. While we might eventually exploit, overcome or succumb to these chance factors, they will always be part of our origins beginning with conception.

At some point in our human development we begin to have a say about who we are, but our origin will always colour our choices, decisions, relationships, vocation, beliefs, and attitude.

So if life in general and our own individual lives are a matter of chance, that leaves little room for a supreme deity who is spending time rolling the dice for each of us. Little room for a god prepared to intervene to save us from our circumstances, to make decisions for us or to direct our lives, or decide where we are going in the after-life.

Fifteen years ago, during my heightened awareness of my mortality, I had an epiphany. There is no meaning and purpose to life... unless we create it. We are the creators, not some supernatural being. And create it we must. It is essential to living life fully, if not to survival itself.

If you have ever had times in your life when you have lost sight of your meaning and purpose or been prevented from living it by outside forces or if circumstances have changed, making it redundant, you know how destructive that is. It's hell. Having meaning and purpose is heaven on earth. But creating it is not a once and for all undertaking. It is an on-going process. Raising our children can give us meaning and purpose, but they eventually leave the nest. Our work can provide meaning and purpose but jobs become obsolete or are moved overseas or eventually we have to retire. Being a good spouse can give us meaningful purpose, but marriages end or spouses die.

Our capacity to keep creating meaning and purpose comes from the divine within us.

But if there is an external God, I hope it is comedian George Burns. He died twenty years ago shortly after turning 100. He was still working. You may remember him because he played God in a trilogy of movies with John Denver. But it is not his movie role that makes him my preferred deity; it was his capacity to keep recreating himself. It was also his good advice to preachers, “The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending, then having the two as close together as possible.”

In 1903 when he was seven he and three of his pals started busking. He says, “We put out a hat and began singing. Sometimes people put money in. Sometimes they took it out. Sometimes they took the hat.”

This led him to a career in vaudeville that lasted until radio and the movies killed it. He and his wife Gracie, who was also a vaudeville entertainer, made the transition. They made movies together and had their own radio programme. When television made its appearance they made their transition to the small screen with a hit programme based on their radio show. When Gracie retired due to heart problems George threw himself into writing and producing TV programmes and films. He also continued to perform in films, making his last appearance at the age of 98. When he wasn't in a film or producing one, he was on the road doing stand-up comedy in nightclubs. He once observed, “I don't believe in dying. It's been done. I'm working on a new exit. Besides, I can't die now – I'm booked.”

George Burns was a gifted entertainer, but more importantly, he was a master at finding a reason to get out of bed in the morning. In fact he advocated not staying in bed, “Unless you can make money in bed.” He spent much of his life in heaven. The deaths of Gracie and of his best friend, Jack Benny, hit him hard, but the entertainer in him knew the show must go on. People need to laugh.

When you are in one of those transitions, when life feels like hell, when you aren't sure where to find your meaning and purpose, remember you are a Unitarian. Our purpose is about making heaven on earth. That is how a Unitarian gets to heaven. In a prayer attributed to St Francis we are told how, “It is in giving that we receive, it is in loving that we are loved, it is in forgiving that we are forgiven and ultimately it is in dying that we live.” Francis is reminding us to find meaning and purpose in our kind and generous and loving relationship with others. When our focus is not solely on ourselves heaven's gates open to us. There we can enjoy life's simple pleasures together.

This familiar story makes the point. A man is being given a tour of heaven and hell. They begin in hell where he sees hundreds of hungry people in a room full of banquet tables. The banquet tables are filled with delicious food, with amazing aromas, and all the people have spoons. The spoons have long handles, just too long so the people in hell cannot feed themselves – they cannot get the food into their mouths. So they are eternally tortured by their hunger in a room full of delicious food. The man on the tour asks about heaven. The tour guide says that heaven is much more pleasant. The room looks a lot like this one but everyone there is very happy at their banquet. The man asks, “In heaven do they have shorter spoons?” The tour guide says, “No, the spoons are the same and the food is the same. But in heaven, they feed each other”.