

*Where Do Unitarian Universalists Go
When They Die?*

*A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE
Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga
February 22, 2009*

CONNECTIONS

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Matt Hoyt, and I am a member of this church. We begin each Sunday at this time with Connections. This is a time of community and contemplation, where we share the joys and the sorrows going on in our lives. This is not a time for announcements, politics or expressions of personal anger, but a time of deep sharing, where we are reminded that we are all human beings and we're all in this together.

Enjoy the experience of sitting in restorative silence until you are moved to speak. Please allow a breath of silence after each person speaks, so that we may focus our attention on what has been said. If you have something to share, please come forward, tell us your name and what's on your mind.



Spirit of Life, please meet us where we are, in our struggles, in our triumphs and in our setbacks. Be with us as we pause to remember those who need love and support; those who are hurting—either in body or in spirit; and those who are lonely or are suffering. Be with them now as we open our minds and hearts to a place of quiet, and offer a silent prayer for the healing of pain, and the soft, gentle coming of love. In this time of silence let our thoughts be with those who have spoken or been spoken about this morning.

Amen and Blessed Be.

Please rise now and greet your neighbors at the door. Welcome them into the sanctuary with a hand of warmth and a smile.

GREETINGS

April. Good morning, my name is April Waggener and I serve on the Board of Trustees. Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted. Please note the emergency exit over here to my right, now is the time to put your cell phone in “Worship Mode,” childcare for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery, and after the service today, please join us for coffee and conversation in the fellowship area right back there.

If you have a particular joy or sorrow or something you'd like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there.

You may have noticed the screen is down. Responses and song titles will appear at the appropriate time and we'll see several photos along with the story. We'd like to know your reaction to this, so please tell Jeff or any member of the board what you think.

A complete listing of announcements is included with the bulletin and is available on our web site. The best way to find out what's going on around here is to sign up for a weekly e-mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

HYMN 389, Gathered Here

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

In the light of truth and the warmth of love,

we gather to seek, to sustain, and to share.

STORY
It Could Happen...

One day, overnight, the world turned purple. Just about everything turned purple from the sky and ocean and mountains to the trees and animals and people and from the tallest skyscrapers to the tiniest ant. People sat around looking at one another wondering if they were dreaming. But nobody woke up and things stayed purple, all except for a single Blue Jay who hadn't changed color and stayed the brightest blue.

Being the only thing in the world that wasn't purple, he was caught and put in a cage.

People were shocked. Some were afraid and some were amazed and a few thought it funny, because along with everyone else, the President was very purple. Whole families were purple as were teachers, movie stars, doctors, nurses, gas station attendants, the Queen of England, the President of Mozambique, taxi-drivers, everybody. They went from place to place in their purple cars and buses and rode purple bikes and sat on purple furniture and ate purple food. Even Hershey's candy bars had turned all purple as had Skittles and M&M's. Girls generally thought this yucky, but some boys thought it was pretty neat.

The smartest scientists in the world gathered to figure it out. Was something wrong with people's eyes or was it a trick of nature? They did studies and tests and analyzed and evaluated and debated and wrote article after article, but couldn't explain it.

And no longer could people say they felt "blue" or had a "green" thumb. They couldn't even turn purple with rage, because they were already purple.

So what they said and how they said it began to change. Some people said purple was now the most important color in the world because it was everywhere. Others said that purple had no importance at all because there was too much of it. They discussed and argued, joined clubs, held debates, wrote books, and produced movies all about the issue of the importance or unimportance of the color purple.

The color of the Blue Jay became a big issue because he had such a little bit of blue and the world had such a whole lot of purple. People argued about the importance of that. Some said the Blue Jay must be a very special bird or maybe not a bird at all because he alone had kept his true color. Others said this was silly, that the Blue Jay ate bird seed and drank water and fluffed his feathers and that other than his special color he was still just a bird.

It was exactly one year to the day after the world had turned purple that people awoke to find the world had turned yellow. All except the Blue Jay.

In some ways a yellow world isn't any different than a purple world. People simply said yellow instead of purple when they talked about things. Only now the Blue Jay was more important than ever because he alone had stayed the color blue and people argued about what that meant. They lined up for miles just to take a look at him.

For the next two years, exactly on the day the world had turned purple and then yellow, it turned new colors: first orange and then pink. Still the Blue Jay stayed blue, causing ever greater disagreement—until in the fifth year the whole world turned blue.

The first thing people asked was what about the Blue Jay. Had he stayed blue? Yes, he was still the same color. No longer were there two colors in the world, but just one -- the color blue. And because the Blue Jay was a color like everybody and everything else people began to lose interest. Now that he was neither more nor less important crowds stopped coming and one day, six months into the

year that the world had turned blue, somebody let him out of his cage and he flew off looking happy to be free.

The very next morning the world regained its rainbow of colors as if nothing had ever happened. At first this was a novelty but soon people forgot the world had once been all purple. They forgot the world had once turned yellow, then orange, then pink, and then blue. They returned to saying they felt “blue” or were “green” with envy or had a “green” thumb.

But on occasion they wondered where the Blue Jay had gone and how he was doing and, most of all, if he was still the color blue and what it had all meant.

CHILDREN'S RECEPTIONAL

We hold you in our love as you go, as you go
May your heart be at peace as you go
To nurture the spark of your precious life
We hold you in our love as you go.

SHARE THE PLATE

Once a month, this church donates the Sunday morning offering to another agency working to make the world a better place. We will do that today. At the suggestion of Maurine Olin, we will donate the collection to the Blue Monarch.

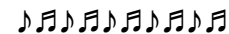
The Blue Monarch is a non-profit organization designed to serve the oppressed and abused women of Tennessee. They accept women, with their children, who are currently recovering from physical, emotional or sexual abuse, alcohol or drug addictions, poverty, or severe family issues. Blue Monarch offers each woman a one-year, residential program specifically designed to fit her individual needs and eliminate the abuse and oppression within her life.

While they house and support each woman and her children for a year, the woman works hard to further her education, break her addictions, become a better mother, obtain a job, and much more. Their mission is to give these women hope for themselves and their children, and equip them with the tools they need to become strong, confident, and self-sufficient.

The Blue Monarch relies entirely on contributions from individuals, businesses and foundations. They have been in operation since July, 2003 and have served more than 200 women and children. Their office is in Monteagle, but they accept women from all parts of Tennessee.

We'll collect the morning offering now, and if you write a check for your annual pledge, please mark it that way. Otherwise, all donations, less pledge payments, will go to the support of the Blue Monarch. As always, the Wood-Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non-perishable food and household items for the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. And thank you very much for your generosity.

If you wish to light a personal candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Mary Hunter will assist you.



Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our blessings every day and be thankful for them. Christina, please lead us in our Hymn of Thanksgiving.

HYMN OF THANKSGIVING

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,

For all gathered here, and those far away,
For this time we share, with love and care,
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day.

ORISON

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

Ken Nickerson reports that his surgery went well, and was not nearly as traumatic as he had imagined during the three months he waited for it. He says that things are nearly as bad as our fertile imaginations make them.

Today my prayers are drawn to people who suffer oppression on the personal level. I'm not thinking about Native American peoples or African Americans or Jews or Italians or any ethnic group that suffers oppression based on heredity. I pray for the people who are persecuted, even slightly, for being too skinny, too fat, too old, too young, too weak or too far outta the norm to be included.

I pray for those who want to fit in but don't fit in, especially gay teenagers: the effete, the butch, and the middle of the road. Lord knows adolescence is difficult. I managed to escape mostly intact, but some don't and the emotional wounds of youth do not easily scab over and heal.

I pray moreover for those who would persecute others who are not like them. Would that every priest, minister, imam and spiritual leader be like Pere Henri in the movie *Chocolat*. Near the end of the movie he preached his finest sermon when he said, "Let us be measured not by what we resist nor who we exclude, but rather by what we embrace and who we include." That's the heart of Universalism, and I pray for more of it.

Thou, which are everywhere,

Many are your names.
May we always feel your presence,
May your wisdom guide us,
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.
May we have what sustains our body and soul;
Lead us first to forgive the mistakes of others
Even as we hope our own mistakes will soon be forgiven.
May we resist the temptation of the quick and easy,
And be delivered from that which demeans and destroys life.

May we live purposefully and joyfully
in every moment,
in every encounter,
now, and in the time to come.

In these few moments of silence, let our prayers rest gently on those who are persecuted for something they cannot change and let us always remember those who suffer the fallout of war.

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

RESPONSE

When our heart is in a holy place
When our heart is in a holy place
We are blessed with love and amazing grace
When our heart is in a holy place

SERMON:

A few weeks ago, a congregant of a certain age, shall we say, having reached that point in her life where thoughts of her own mortality were intruding on her otherwise felicitous existence, said to herself, "I wonder what will happen when I die?"

“If I were a good Christian, I would go to heaven. If I were bad, to hell. Or perhaps purgatory. If I were a bad Muslim, I would go to hell and if I were a good Muslim, to a paradise where I could consort with 77 handsome young men. If I were a Jew, I would go to heaven or to a place of unpleasantness. If I were a Hindu, my spirit would be regenerated and return to life as who knows what. If I were a Buddhist, my fate would be unclear, but for sure the Buddha taught that nothing is permanent and everything changes. But I’m a Unitarian Universalist. I wonder where UU’s go when they die.”

Finding no satisfaction in the op-ed section of the Times-Free Press, she wisely decided to consult with her minister, a man known far and wide for his knowledge of things divine and profane. “Tell me, Reverend Minister Man,” she said. “Where do UU’s go when they die?”

And the Reverend Minister Man thought for awhile about this question. He consulted all the holy scripture in his library: *The New York Times*, *The complete works of Shakespeare*, *the American Heritage Dictionary*, *Roget’s Thesaurus* and *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations*. He skimmed the *Complete Idiot’s Guide to World Religions*. He even read the Bible. And the Qur’ān. And the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. And the *Tao Te Ching*. And the *Analects of Confucius*.

After he had exhausted all the world’s repositories of sacred information and absorbed the knowledge of the sages of the ages, he called upon the bewildered congregant, who greeted him expectantly, hoping to learn where her soul would reside after departing her body.

And the Reverend Minister Man said, “I’m pleased to bring you good news! And I’m afraid I have bad news as well. The bad news is that I don’t have the faintest idea where Unitarian Universalists—or anyone else—go after they die. No one knows the answer to that question. No one ever has ever known and no one ever will. It’s a

central mystery of existence.

“The good news is that since no one knows, or will ever know, you can make it up as you go along. There is just as much evidence to suggest that you will go to heaven as there is to suggest you will go to Honolulu. There is no more reason to think you’ll end up scampering about a celestial summer camp than sunning yourself on the shores of Sri Lanka.

So if you’d like to spend eternity in Boca Raton, no problem. How about a little village on the western slopes of Missionary Ridge? Would you prefer the moon or Alpha Centauri? Anything’s possible—just wish upon a star and make it so.”

I apologize to the congregant if I seem a little flippant with my answer to her question. The bad news—the *only* news—is that I really don’t know where UU’s go when they die. If anyone purports to have the answer, they are kidding you. Or themselves. In the realm of religion and spirituality, there aren’t many things I can state with assurance, but this is one. No one knows anything about the afterlife, the other side, heaven, hell, your eternal reward or going home to Jesus. Call it what you will, it’s still a mystery.

We can’t know the afterlife—it is, after all, *after life*—and no one has ever returned from the other side with souvenirs and photographs.

Furthermore, no one has demonstrated that a person has an immutable soul—a spirit that does not die with the body and which lives on to inhabit the afterlife—if the afterlife exists.

Those are the plain facts. We don’t know what happens after we die and we cannot be sure we have a soul to go there.

My own take on this is that, because we don’t know with 100% certainty about these matters, death scares us. From the very earliest cultures up to modern times, death has been the great unknown and that’s scary. And because we’re scared, or at least apprehensive

about death, it's not unreasonable for us to imagine what it will be. And we try to imagine it being as appealing as possible.

A couple years ago, there was a show on NBC called *Thank God You're Here*. Anyone seen it? What happens on the show is that a few actors have rehearsed a short scene and then another actor, who knows nothing of the scene, enters through a door. And the first thing someone says to the new actor is, "Thank God you're here!" That's the only thing the new actor knows—that someone will say, "Thank God you're here!" From that the new actor can assume that he wasn't there when needed, but now is there and that he knows something or can do something for the scene.

And the entertainment value, if you will, is generated by how well the new actor integrates into the scene, or what he or she makes of it with the rest of the cast. Sometimes the new actor tries to take the scene in a new direction. Sometimes the new actor fits in and sometimes the whole thing falls apart right there on live TV. Coming from a theatrical background, I can appreciate the concept, although I watched the show only once. I've done enough improv to last me a lifetime.

It occurs to me that the setup for this show is something like dying. Like actors ready to go on, we have no idea what's on the other side of the door. We know we'll have to go through that door. We are nervous, even frightened or flat scared. Sometimes to the point of paralysis. We know what someone will say, but that's all we know. Will the scene be a prison or a park? Will it be in Mozambique or Miami? We don't know. The only thing we carry with us as we enter the scene is our ability to cooperate with others in order to make the best of a scary situation.

From the very earliest cultures to the present day, people have *believed* in some sort of existence after death. And that implies a belief in something spiritual about human beings that does not die. So we have two intertwined beliefs, each resting on the

presupposition of the other for its own existence. A soul and eternity. You can't have one without the other.

And since we know absolutely nothing of the afterlife, we have imagined so many scenarios. You ever read *The New Yorker*? Like the cartoons? There are more than a thousand cartoons in *The New Yorker* dealing with the subject of heaven and/or hell. There are too many of St. Peter at the Pearly Gates, checking people into first class or steerage. The one I liked best had a big black woman standing in for St. Peter and in front of her was a very surprised diminutive white man. It was like Queen Latifah and Harvey Korman. And she was saying, "Yeah, honey. That's what they all say."

Another cartoon I liked showed a couple of men in hell, with cloven hoofed devils holding pitchforks and flames all around. And one of the men was saying, "I had a first-class cabin up there, but that meant spending eternity with my first wife."

Those cartoons appealed to me because we might be surprised by what we find on the other side. Things might be altogether different over there from what we imagine. We might be judged by someone very much unlike ourselves. Heaven might not be pleasant. Hell might be preferable. Who knows?

Those cartoons also display a western and Christian idea of the afterlife. But some idea of heaven and hell seem to pre-date Christianity, not as theological concepts, but as a place people go after death. The followers of Jesus, the early Christians, really had no theological concepts of heaven or hell or a soul. It was Plato who introduced to western culture the idea that each person has an immortal soul and in the first three hundred years after Jesus dies, many Greek philosophical concepts were imported into Christianity. But many cultures, even non-western ones, aboriginal cultures and native American cultures have some explanation of the afterlife. According to many cultures and theologies, there is some place to which the spirit of a dead person goes after the body dies.

Often connected with the afterlife is the idea that bad people are punished and good people rewarded. This concept of justice runs very deep in humans.

Did you ever see the movie, *Ghost*? Patrick Swayzee plays a ghost who hangs around after his death to exact revenge on the evil people who killed him. He communicates with people in this world through a charlatan medium, played by Whoopi Goldberg. In one scene, we witness the deaths of a couple of very bad people. After they die, their spirits rise from their bodies, but are hauled down into some very unpleasant place by some very unpleasant-looking spirits. The conclusion is obvious. If you are bad, you're gonna get it in the next life.

They aren't on TV anymore, but some years ago, the Prudential Insurance Company ran some ads that showed a man who had died riding on an ever-ascending celestial escalator. He passes through clouds and behind him is a beautiful azure sky. Birds twitter and soft breezes blow. The conclusion is obvious. Heaven is a place of calm beauty.

Those two images—if you're bad you're going down and if you're good, you'll go up—are cast and re-cast by novelists, comic book artists, TV shows, magazines, movies and now the internet. They reflect the very traditional idea that good people will get their just rewards in the next life even though they may suffer horribly in this life and that bad people will be punished in the next life, even though they live high on the hog in this life.

Even though there isn't a shred of evidence to support those images, I will admit they are attractive. I don't want President Bush to suffer in any way whatsoever. In this life. But I can't help smiling when I think of what he may face in the next life. Can you imagine how surprised Jerry Falwell was when he discovered that St. Peter is actually a black, lesbian, pro-choice, agnostic Democrat.

Since the beginning of time, we have wanted to mete out justice to those who deserve it, either reward or punishment. And since the beginning of time, it has been apparent that some people who deserve justice, escape it. Thus, it seems reasonable to imagine that they will get their due in due time.

But why do these ideas persist when there is no evidence for them? Why does the concept of a soul and heaven and hell and eternity resonate so deeply with humans? I have already alluded to my opinion in this matter: The concepts persevere in human history because we need them to satisfy our sense of justice.

It is far more reassuring to believe that we will be rewarded after death for our virtues than to assume it's all over. If there is no heaven, for all the good deeds we done, we might as well have stood in bed. It is far more reassuring to believe that our enemies will be punished for their evil deeds than to think they will continue to persecute us after we die. If they're gonna get away scot-free, if they will never get what's coming to them, we might as well give up and go home right now. I mean why bother to establish justice if it all ends at the hour of death?

And then there's the recruitment value of heaven and hell, which is not lost on those who run the Christian church. It is far more attractive to posit heaven as one's reward for following the ten commandments than a gold watch and chain and a certificate suitable for framing. It is far more terrifying to posit hell as one's eternal punishment than threaten mere excommunication. Heaven is the carrot; hell is the stick. Thus the promise of heaven and the threat of hell serve as social control agents, keeping order where there might otherwise be chaos.

It seems to me that a person wishing to prove the existence of heaven or hell would first have to prove the existence of God as the creator of heaven and hell. If you can prove the existence of God, you can infer the existence of heaven and hell; that is, if you interpret the

Bible in a certain way. There are seven traditional proofs of God's existence and any one of them, if acceptable to you, could also prove the existence of heaven and hell.

1. The Ontological Argument. This says God exists because the concept of God exists, and we would not have conceived of God if God did not exist. Therefore, God must exist—and heaven and hell, too—because we have a notion of them.

2. The Cosmological Argument states that there must be some reason for the existence of the universe; it must have a cause. And that must be God because God is the only being whose existence requires no explanation. The ultimate cause of everything—including heaven and hell—must therefore be God.

3. The Teleological Argument states that the universe is a highly complex and ordered system; it serves a purpose. To say that the universe is so ordered by chance is unsatisfactory as an explanation of its existence. It is far more plausible, that the universe—and heaven and hell—are the way they are because they were created by God who is the best designer and engineer in the universe.

4. The Moral Argument for the existence of God states that morality has a divine origin. Morality consists of an ultimately authoritative set of commands; and where can these commands have come from but a commander with ultimate moral authority? That would be God, who also created the reward for good morals and the punishment for bad morals.

5. The Argument from Religious Experience states that personal religious experiences prove God's existence—but only to those who have them. Those who experience God have *direct* evidence of God's existence and those who don't have *indirect* evidence. In effect, God exists because he told me so.

6. The Argument from Miracles states that the occurrence of

miracles demonstrates the existence of God. Miracles typically involve the suspension of the natural laws of the universe so that some supernatural event occurs. That can only be the handiwork of God. This proof assumes that the accounts of miracles in the Bible are true.

7. Pascal's Wager is an argument for belief in God based on an appeal to our own self-interest. It's called Pascal's Wager because it is a calculated bet that God exists. Might as well bet on the existence of God because if you win, you hit the biggest jackpot ever. It is in our self-interest to believe in God—and in heaven and hell—because if they exist and if we're good, we will live forever in heaven and always have the proper body mass index.

On the other hand, if we disavow God and heaven and hell, and if they truly exist, and if we are bad, we are sure gonna catch hell when we die. And in either case, if God and heaven and hell are fictions, we have lost nothing. Based on the positive and negative outcomes, it is in our best interest, therefore, to believe and to be good.

Note that the God being argued here is the traditional God of Jewish and Christian scriptures, as interpreted and improved by Christian theologians up through the present day. This God is thought to be an omniscient, omni-benevolent, omni-present, all-powerful and eternal super-being.

Such attributes as all-powerful, all-knowing and especially eternal—these absolute terms introduce logical and existential problems and therefore, I reject them. Using these concepts in argumentation is like balancing 10,000 bricks on a pin. Theoretically, it can be done, but no one has ever succeeded. It is for this reason that I am not persuaded by any of the arguments. They argue for a God that defies common sense.

And following that, I reject the concepts of heaven and hell. Because we can not know what happens after we die, it is my belief that we

ought to do the best and be the best we can while we are alive. As far as I know, we only go around once, so let's make the best of it. While we still have some powers of speech and action, we ought to build our own heaven on earth and do what we can to destroy whatever earthly hells we find. As I wrote that, I noticed that my words amounted to a version of Pascal's Wager without the possibility of a divine jackpot.

A woman once wrote me about studying *The Divine Comedy* in a high school English class. She wrote, "We were asked to write about our visions of heaven and hell. I wrote that I had always been taught in Sunday School that when we went to heaven, we would sit at the feet of God all day. We wouldn't know the people we had loved in our lifetimes; we would not know hunger, thirst, pain, or any other human feelings. I thought that sounded pretty dull. It wasn't really the way I wanted to spend eternity. My teacher conceded that I had a point."

I had that same thought a few times as well. Eternally being happy, eternally being satisfied, eternally wanting for nothing is a boring prospect that runs counter to every notion I have of the human spirit. I can't prove that I have a human spirit, but if I did, I am here to tell you that my spirit is happiest, my spirit is strongest and feels most alive when I'm challenged.

It's like perfection—once you achieve perfection, you have nowhere to go but down. Once you achieve complete harmony and satisfaction, all you can do is yawn.

So for me, heaven—being a state of eternal satisfaction—is an inhuman and inhumane concept and therefore not worthy of a God who loves me as I am and therefore, does not exist. Ditto for hell.

But the Reverend Minister Man never really answered his congregant's question, did he? I think the congregant was asking for some solace when facing death, and truthfully, I have no magic

words to make it all better. The best I can do is be there with her at that time. Together, I believe we can face anything unafraid.

In the *Grapes of Wrath*, Tom is dying and says good bye to his family this way:

Maybe a fella ain't got a soul of his own,
but on'y a piece of a big one
an' then—then it don't matter if I die.

Then I'll be all aroun' in the dark.
I'll be ever' where—wherever you look.
Wherever they's a fight, so hungry people can eat,
I'll be there.

Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy,
I'll be there.
I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad
an' I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry
and they know supper's ready.
And when our folks eat the stuff they raise,
and live in the houses they build
why, I'll be there. See?

Like Tom, you'll be remembered. You'll be there.

BENEDICTION

If you were here last Sunday, you may recall my benediction story about a woman who was looking for God. Her rabbi told her there was no secret, that God was not hiding, but that she was hiding from God. Turns out that her search for God is not unusual. Tao is a Chinese word that is translated as the Way or the Path or sometimes as the Principle. Tao cannot be expressed, but it can be known.

A monk asked Wei-kuan: "Where is Tao?"

Wei-Kuan said, “Right here. Right now.”

The monk said, “Why don’t I see it?”

Wei-Kuan said, “Because of your egotism, you cannot see Tao.”

The monk said, “If I cannot see it because of my egotism, do you see it?”

Wei-Kuan said, “As long as there is ‘you and I,’ the situation is complicated and Tao cannot be seen.”

The monk said, “When there is neither ‘you’ nor ‘I’ is it seen?”

Wei-Kuan said, “When there is neither ‘you’ nor ‘I,’ who is here to see Tao?”

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

We extinguish this flame,
but not the light of its truth
the warmth of this community
nor the fire of our commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
and share with all the world.

POSTLUDE

We Shall Go Out with Joy