

# *What Happens After Death?*

**Rev. Vanessa R. Southern**

**[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)**

**November 13, 2005**

## **Reading:**

"When that which drew from out the boundless deep  
Turns again home."

-- *Alfred, Lord Tennyson*

## **Sermon:**

In thinking about our topic today, I remembered a movie that Robert Duvall wrote, directed and starred in years ago. The movie, called "The Apostle," was about a kind of itinerant, evangelical preacher, played by Duvall. In the opening scene, Duvall's character drives along a country road and comes upon an accident. Police are gathered, bemoaning the carnage. Flares direct traffic carefully between one car overturned in a ditch and one totaled at the side of the road with a woman weeping beside it. A hundred feet away in a field lies a third car. Duvall and his wife pull up to the scene and you can feel a kind of excitement build. He pulls over by the side of the road and asks his wife to wait while he grabs his soft-cover Bible and makes his way through waist-high grass to the car in the field.

This car is on its side. Behind the wheel is a young man who has an empty look in his eyes, and blood running from his nose and ear. You think he's dead until you notice the up-and-down movement of his chest as he breathes. His wife is crumpled over in the seat beside him.

Duvall leans in, turns off the engine, and the car radio goes silent. He tells the man he is a preacher and that he and God love this man, and asks the man to respond however he can. "Are you ready to meet your Lord if he comes for you?" he asks. "Do you accept our Lord Jesus Christ as your personal savior?" And on it goes until the man nods, almost imperceptibly. A tear runs down his face and later he whispers, "Thank you." Duvall tells the man there are angels watching over him and that he will be fine no matter what happens now, until a cop appears and drives Duvall away from the car.

"Victory is mine. Victory is ours," Duvall says to himself as he walks away. And to his wife as he gets in the car he says, "We've made news in heaven today, Mama."

Throughout history, human beings have often wondered and speculated and hinged our faith on visions and assertions about what happens after we die and how we get one place

or the other. In Western culture, it has inspired artists from Dante to Hieronymus Bosch with their elaborate, haunting visions of hell, and our concern continues to fill bookstores with titles like *In the Arms of Angels* and works about the Rapture like the popular *Left Behind* series. We sing about it, as we did with our hymns this morning. We wonder. Some folks even go door to door to offer up copies of the keys to the kingdom they think they have come upon.

One of my favorite modern comic depictions of this fascination is from an odd little movie called "Cold Comfort Farm." In it, a young woman from London who goes to stay with some distant relatives in the country encounters an uncle who farms during the week and is a local preacher on Sunday. His church is called the Church of the Quivering Brethren. This uncle believes firmly that all people are going to hell, and he's agreed to be their preacher because "Someone's got to tell them so." Behind his pulpit is a mural of naked people trying to escape from the crimson flames of hellfire, as he calls it. On the way to church one Sunday, she asks him what he is going to preach about; he tells her he never knows 'til he gets there, but it is always "something about burning."

It can seem a macabre obsession at times -- this quest to find out where it is we end up. And I have to admit that even our own Unitarian and Universalist forebears spent a good deal of their time worrying about this subject. Fortunately, both had an *early* shared tendency toward the belief that God would save all humanity, a belief that ultimately banished any notion of hell from either theology. But it took a while to fully get there.

Early Universalists faced and struggled in the face of pressures to show the soundness of their more merciful vision of life after death. There was pressure from their detractors and their own members too to show that sinners in the world would be sufficiently punished and held accountable for their lives. My favorite theological tap dancing around this came at the hand of the famous late 18th- and early 19th-century Universalist preacher Hosea Ballou, who, early in his ministry, preached that sinners would suffer 10,000 years in hell, then be rescued by God. (How Ballou came to this number is a mystery to me.)

Later, however, he came to a position called ultra-universalism from which he preached that hell was a fiction and God redeemed every child of his creation *at the very instant* of their deaths. It was a radically merciful vision. Most Unitarians came to share that belief. The Unitarian vision of heaven, in case you are interested, was of a place where old relationships were rekindled and we engaged in an eternity of wholesome good fun. I imagine myself playing an eternity of backgammon -- it isn't clear if this is heaven or hell, but anyway ...

Both Unitarians and Universalists trusted that goodness was its own reward. Both came to believe that humanity was drawn by its nature toward the good, or lured there by God in a desire to imitate this loving presence. And anyway, neither thought that punishment itself or the promise of it in another life was what made folks virtuous, so why torture ourselves or others with the teaching of such nonsense?

The question is: What do we believe? What does each of us believe about life after death and how does this belief inform our lives? One thing I love about our early theologians like William Ellery Channing was that they insisted on theology being practical. If we were going to talk a lot about a subject, it had better have some practical effect. So, again, we ask, what do we believe about what happens after death and how does that inform our living?

Well, this week as I was pondering these questions, I got asked to prepare a memorial service for a long-time Summit resident, Norman Rauscher. I had done the service for Norman's wife, Hannah, almost three years ago. Norman and Hannah were civic leaders in the community. He was a reporter who became the editor of the Summit Herald. She was a teacher who was also a journalist. Both served on boards of important non-profits in the community like Runnells rehabilitation hospital. These were people with busy, caring lives who lived, to use the words of Alfred North Whitehead, by the "law of expenditure" -- that is, it is not what you get but what you give that marks a life.

Norman and Hannah had no children, and there is very little family left behind, so it came to be the responsibility of a very good friend of theirs to clear out Norman's remaining belongings. When she and I talked this week about the service, she mentioned how hard it had been to go through his belongings. With no family and no clear historical purpose, there was no reason to keep so much that was his. As a result, trophies and civic awards, letters and personal effects -- evidence of a life well lived -- had nowhere to go but the city dump, and this friend spoke of how hard this was to carry out.

It struck me how this experience reflects a reality of life and, more importantly, of death. It's the hard truth that we don't like to discuss or face -- that most of what we have spent our lives tending to or creating has a good chance of evaporating the moment we stop breathing and life recedes from our limbs. I'm with Edna St. Vincent Millet in her poem "Dirge without Music," a poem I read at my grandmother's funeral and at the graveside service for one of our dear members, Catherine Roxburgh. Among the words are these:

I am not resigned to the shutting away  
of loving hearts in the hard ground,  
So it is, and so it will be,  
for so it has been, time out of mind: ...  
A fragment of what you felt, of what you knew,  
A formula, a phrase remains, -- but the best is lost.  
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.

I've been thinking in part this week about why we human beings have spent so much time and energy worrying about and arguing about and creating these elaborate visions of what happens after death. Clearly a part of it is our fear of death. And clearly too, part of why we spin detail about days of resurrection and judgment and what heaven and hell look like is because we want to believe that there is justice. We want the good ultimately to get what they deserve and the bad to get punished too. And part of what scares us all,

no matter what we believe, is a fear that what is good will be lost; that of our lives only a fragment, a formula, a phrase will remain.

I understand all of that; all of our needs and fears and hopes, our desperate hopes. I understand it because they are mine too. And yet I am realizing what our UU forebears must have realized centuries ago -- that these elaborate doctrines we create to answer those questions and to quell our fears are misguided. They spawned less-than-wonderful visions of God, for one. But even besides that -- they keep us speculating about things that are completely beyond the limits of our knowledge. *They waste our time*, like so much theologizing does.

I am beginning to think that perhaps we simply have to get more comfortable with uncertainty. Perhaps we need to be honest about what we know and cannot know, and then to make uncertainty our bedfellow. To curl up with it at night. Particularly on this issue. The fact is, no one yet has come back to tell us what it is we face after death. No one has proven -- or disproven -- that this life is it or, if not, what endures and how.

There is certainly a lot we cannot explain. Senses we don't possess. Realms of experience, of energy and matter we cannot fully grasp. Premonitions. Intuitions. Visions. I've had my small share, but they were enough to shake my certainty that all there is is a this-worldly world, yet not enough to give me any more concrete answers.

So, on this issue of life after death, I think at bottom I am choosing to be an agnostic. By my lights, those who describe décor of heaven and hell are preaching a certainty I don't think they can have. Similarly, those who preach a stark materialism that means that all there is left of us is simple organic matter decaying and friends' stories -- well, to me they also are claiming a certainty that is beyond them. There is much we don't know. Any claims we make are faith claims -- important personally, but ultimately on this issue imperfect and tenuous.

I guess I would love to *know* there is justice in the cosmos. I know I'd like to believe that something of me besides this sorry body and a few sermons and the recollections of friends will remain. I'd love to be sure that I will see the people (and animals) I loved again in some future time and place. But in the agnostic meantime, I find I am a bit like Henry David Thoreau, who, when asked on his deathbed whether he believed in life after death, said: "I'm taking this one life at a time." In the end, we UUs have always committed to what we do know. And what we know is the need to tend to what it is we know we love in this world, the need to alleviate the suffering we can see and feel around us, and the pursuit of self-transcendence and sacred living as it is possible here and now. Our work, in the uncertain meantime, is (to use traditional language) the making of heaven here on earth.

Forrest Church, the senior minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City, says that religion is the human response to the dual reality of being born and having to die. In other words, it is out of our understanding of ourselves as alive and sensing the limits of that life that we ask the classic questions of the religious life -- questions like where is it

we come from, where is it we are going to, and how we make the most of the time in between.

Even as we search as we must for answers to the first two questions -- of where we come from and where, ultimately, we are going to -- my hope is that we continue to live most deeply into the last question. In so doing, my hope is that our lives will be rich and blessed such that should it be the case that something of us does remain imprinted on this world, it will be the legacy of a life poured out in beauty and devotion in these living, breathing days.

Amen.