

A Place Called Heaven
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By Leslie Kee

Unlike some people, I have been fortunate enough to be able to choose where I wanted to live and raise my children. For me, this was a place where there are more four-footed creatures than people; where you can sit on your front porch at night and count falling stars; where after a thundershower, the air has a crispness to it that smells like new life; it is a place where you can see both ends of a rainbow touch the earth.

While our sons were growing up we spent as much time as we could camping in the mountains near our home. These are the times and the places where I began to find my answers to the big questions in life – you know, why are we born? What is the meaning of life? What happens after we die?

Because today is a day of remembering those who have died, I would like to share a story with you which has helped me answer the particular question, what happens after we die? Is there really a place called heaven?

It all began one morning while we were camping in one of our favorite spots. As I sat with my cup of coffee gazing over a meadow full of wildflowers heavy with dew, I heard my two young sons trekking up the path, returning from their favorite fishing hole where they had been angling for some trout to add to breakfast. As I listened to their approach, I realized something didn't sound quite right and sure enough, I soon found out why their fishing exploits has fallen along the wayside. Apparently, my children had found a rabbit instead of a fish.

Of course he was adorable – soft, grayish brown, button eyes and gentle ears. He wasn't very old and it was clear that something was wrong. It looked like he had been on the losing end of a hawk's early-morning hunt and the approach of these two care-free fishermen had interrupted the raptor sufficiently to fly away and abandon his catch.

“Look mom! We found a bunny! But he's hurt. Can we fix him? Can we keep him?” And there it was – the deafening sound of silence. My heart began to pound, the sea rushed into my ears, and my mind raced over all the possibilities.

What's a mother to say? “Yes, my beloved children, the bunny is hurt; he's hurt very badly. It is sad that he is alone; maybe his mother was so busy protecting his brothers and sisters from the hawk that he got separated from them.”

“What can we do for him, mom? Can we make a bed for him!?” “Yes, let's do that.” And so we did. We lined it with fragrant pine needles and padded it with soft cloth. And then we held a vigil – a vigil of hope.

The boys hoped he would get well and they could keep him for their very own forever and ever. I hoped that my children would learn one of life's most painful truths in a way that did not divert their placement of faith away from what is good and right in the world.

While we waited, we talked honestly about the dying bunny. Why did he have to get hurt by that mean old hawk? Why was he chosen and not that pesky muskrat that keeps scaring away the biggest fish in the stream? Is his family worried about him? What's going to happen to him after he dies, mom?

The bunny rabbit did die, and to this day, when we return to that special place in the forest, we still pause and give a nod to that small grave in which my two little boys buried their little friend.

Was I wrong not to tell my children about a bunny heaven? Should I have told them: This is God's way of teaching us that all good bunnies go to heaven? Should I have told them the big mean hawk was wrong to pick on the warm fuzzy bunny? Or, God forbid, I could have told them: Don't worry about it, everything will be ok – just go play, I'll take care of it – and all the while secretly making plans to dispose of the carcass in the dumpster on our way out of camp.

Was it wrong for me to let my children think bunny rabbits are truly kindred spirits? Was I wrong to help them dig an earthly grave so the body of this innocent creature could decay naturally and become part of the forest floor? No, I don't think I was wrong because I believe in telling the truth.

The truth of death is the cessation of the body's biological process and re-absorption of its physical elements into the earth's cycle of life and death. This is a good thing – the way it is supposed to be. I believe it is always right to find a way to tell the truth, gently and respectfully. By doing so we honor what is good and worthy in the other.

And so we dug the grave in a sunny spot next to the oldest and wisest tree we could find. We reverently placed the still-warm body into the welcoming earth. We marked the grave with pine cones, twigs and mountain flowers. And every time we return to this, one of our favorite places on earth, we never fail to pause, reflect and give a nod to this place where what we learned about right and good will always exist.

Through the years this story has come to mean a lot to me, particularly in the times I have searched for ways to articulate my Unitarian Universalist faith. Like many other Unitarian Universalists, I was raised in a different church and I was taught a different understanding of what happens after death. I grew up believing in heaven.

The heaven I believed in was a very powerful set of images and words found in the Bible. In the Book of Revelation, chapter four, we read:

...and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne. And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald...and all the creatures around the throne were singing...holy, holy, holy, the Lord God Almighty...you are worthy, our Lord and God to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things...

According to modern scholars, the Book of Revelation was written during the time of the Christian persecution by the Roman Emperor, Nero, around or after the year 64. But it has only been within the past 200 years that critical scholarship of the Bible has confirmed for many of us that just because they are recorded in the Bible does not mean they are actual words from God. Many of us also understand the terrific power Biblical language has had over the Western world's collective imagination for many centuries.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, persecution and suffering did not go away and many people had cause to wonder if there was a way to give meaning and relief to their suffering.

Throughout history, humans have wondered if there is some place where everything that is awful and agonizing does not exist – where pain and suffering have been transformed into eternal joy and happiness. It is human nature to want a place called heaven.

In 2001, The Reverend David Bumbaugh delivered a sermon entitled, "Toward a Humanist Vocabulary of Reverence." He wrote,

...what has happened to the Humanist witness among us? How has it happened that we, who once seemed to set the agenda for religious discourse, now find ourselves increasingly on the defensive.... we have allowed

ourselves to be defined by the opposition.... we have dismissed traditional religion as an atavistic aberration... we have given up the hope of a constructive dialogue... and in the process of defending, we have lost the vocabulary of reverence, the ability to speak of that which is sacred, holy, and of ultimate importance to us...

And so I, like many other liberal religionists, find myself struggling with two valid assertions. On one hand, I know I need to quit shying away from words like God, salvation, evil and heaven; and on the other hand I struggle to find new and improved religious vocabulary which conveys and honors the power contained in traditional words like God, salvation, evil – and heaven.

Fortunately, there is a whole new generation of post-modern religious scholars who are doing just what Reverend Bumbaugh has called for. Vibrant new insights complete with re-visioned symbols, restated words and re-valued history are emerging from the work of Womanists, Eco-Feminists and Liberation Theologians. If you took a snapshot of this new generation of word-makers, you would see a collection of passionate, intelligent, creative people who are not exclusively white males of European descent.

One of my favorite faces in this picture is the Reverend Dr. Thandeka, who specializes in the work of 19th century German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, whose work Professor Thandeka has extended into what she terms “Affect Theology.” As I understand it, Affect Theology offers a rational argument for the non-rational dimension of the religious experience which, for me, is a humanist religious experience.

Affect Theology is grounded in science and so it all starts when a person is conceived. At this very instant our nascent biological structure begins to be infused with aliveness. After we are born, our body’s aliveness turns into a deeply embedded sense of self. It is within this sense of self the interaction between our internal and external environments takes place. This is an organic process because its foundation is the physicality of our body – not the rationality of our mind.

And so, for example, when my children showed me the injured bunny, my first impulse was to reach out to my children – an affective, physical response – I didn’t even think about it, my body responded for me.

Though instantaneous, it was secondarily that my mind began searching to give meaning to the bodily sensations – *my heart began to pound, the sea rushed into my ears, and then my mind raced over all the possibilities.*

According to Affect Theory, this is the very nature of human nature: an inward sensation felt by the embedded sense of self, given outward rational meaning. This is the undulating, symbiotic motion of a living system: it is the pulse of life.

Another example of this theory is babies. Because our biological nature is programmed to strive for life, when we see a baby – the ultimate symbol of life – almost everyone automatically feels good – we don’t even think about it. Generations of good parenting have produced mountains of evidence proving how children who are wanted, loved and raised in balanced homes and families become caring, giving human beings.

And because our biological nature is programmed to strive for life, when we encounter, for example, a child living in appalling conditions, our natural response is to take immediate action directed at changing that which denies life and turning it into that which affirms life.

And this is why, in the face of things like suffering and death, I believe it is wrong to deny the affect by telling a child to buck up, be a man, this is God’s way of keeping the rabbit population controlled -- big boys don’t cry. This denies the child’s affective response to things that do not make him feel happy. If you try to make death

out to be something it isn't, or to deny it or to reward it with a throne room in heaven, no healthy child will believe you.

And so when suffering and death were at hand, I did not lie to my children. I did not demonize the source of death, and I did not deny the comfort of the earth. In my heart, I know this was the right response because my Unitarian Universalist faith has encouraged me to explore why I believe the earth is a beautiful and holy graveyard for all the living beings who have died --that the earth is truly a spiritual place. Death is not the end; it is only a change of worlds.

I hope Unitarian Universalists put their shoulders into the work of creating and using a new and improved language of reverence. I believe it is our duty to recognize not only the power but the honor within all religious words, the ancient as well as the modern. In this way, we will be contributing to the salvation of the world.

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