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 Arlington Street Church
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No Hell Below Us

*Dedicated to the memory of John Lennon
 in honor of his 70th birthday (10/9/1940)*

Imagine there's no Heaven
 It's easy if you try
 No hell below us
 Above us only sky
 Imagine all the people
 Living for today...¹

“It will be a cold day in the hell we don't believe in...” My friend and colleague, Rev. John Gibbons, is speaking, but I lose the rest of the sentence. *A cold day in the hell we don't believe in* gets me thinking about ... hell.

My friend Tony Larson, known as Parson Larson, is fond of dressing entirely in white, head to foot, like – you guessed it – a tent revival preacher. And then he does just that: gets a tent up over his head, fills it with people, and twists and shouts and preaches salvation while great beads of sweat roll from his brow. Only these are Unitarian Universalist tent revivals. I kid you not. Tony promises heaven to the overflow crowd, heaven on earth, and no hell beyond this life.

Here's a little Parson Larson for you:

“My friends, not everyone can be a Unitarian Universalist. Not everyone should be a Unitarian Universalist. Because the first criterion for getting into this church is: [you have] to know how to sin. That's very important to us, and not everyone knows how to do it. We don't want people here who never do wicked things. We don't want people here who are holier than ... thou. We don't want people who have 'made it' in the salvation department, and are just waiting around to get picked up. Because people with too much heaven in them are hell to live with.

“Now don't get me wrong,” Parson Larson continues. “If there [are] any perfect

¹ John Lennon, *Imagine*

human beings around, we might let them in. But ... anyone who claims [they] don't do wicked things is either trying to fool others, or trying to fool themselves. It is the nature of ... human [beings] to be evil as well as good. And you should not be a Unitarian Universalist if [can't say amen to that. Amen!]....”²

What Tony is getting at here is the idea that, when it comes to evil, we would demonstrate far more integrity in showing compassion rather than self-righteousness, in being understanding rather than judgmental. That's the big heart of Universalism.

Not everyone knows that the “Universalist” in “Unitarian Universalist” refers to a belief in universal salvation. The idea that some were saved and some were damned, whether by faith or works or predestination, was abhorrent to our Universalist forbears. Their god was a god of love. Rev. Bucky McKeeman, of blessed memory, explained it, “Universalists believe that all of us are going to end up together in heaven, so we might as well learn how to get along with each other now.”³ Rev. Henry Clay Ledyard, a labor advocate and Universalist minister a century ago, before the 1961 merger of the Unitarians and Universalists, proclaimed, “The mission of the Universalist church has been a double one: first to controvert the one-time prevalent idea of an endless hell. This has practically been accomplished,” he affirmed, somewhat contrary to fact. “But,” he added, “the second and more important [mission] awaits fulfillment: ... a fight [that] shall continue until the real, actual hells, before our very eyes, are destroyed.”⁴

On Friday morning, Arlington Street's Susie Nacco, owner of Sirius Landscapes, was at the state house, receiving an award from Governor Patrick for hiring five men who were recently released from jail. When I congratulated her and expressed our pride at the recognition she well-deserves, she said, “They made mistakes. We all make mistakes. The difference is, we didn't get caught.” She adds, “They did their time. Now, we welcome them back into society.” Yes, ours is redemptive faith, a saving faith. Rev. Thomas Starr King is reported to have said that Universalists believe that G*d is too good to damn us. Unitarians believe that we are too good to be damned.⁵ Put these together, and there's no afterlife in hell.

2 From *Why You Should Not Be A Unitarian Universalist*. Rev. Dr. Tony Larson is minister of Olympia Brown Unitarian Universalist Church in Racine, Wisconsin. Please see downlode.org/Etext/why_not_unitarian.html for his complete text.

3 *ibid*

4 Henry Clay Ledyard (1879-1950). Please see hds.harvard.edu/library/bms/bms00361.html

5 Thanks to Karen E. Dau, Archivist, New York State Convention of Universalists. Please see nyscu.org/quotes.shtml

I've told you about the rare Christian fundamentalist minister who was asking me questions ... questions about our faith tradition, questions about you, getting more and more confounded by my responses. Finally, he exclaimed, "I just don't see why they'd come to church if you don't have hell to hold over their heads!" It's the love, my friend. It's service. Justice. Peace. There's so much we can be and do *together* that we could never be or do alone. My colleague just shook his head in wonder.

He's not alone. Many faiths "have a well-developed tradition of graphically depicting hell in order to preserve the social order..." There's a major tourist attraction in Singapore, "a kind of amusement park," themed on "the ten courts of the Confucian hell. Statues of demons stand at the gate, and visitors pass through dark, spooky rooms filled with realistic sculptures depicting" various tortures being inflicted on liars, prostitutes, drug dealers, people who have cheated on their taxes, and children who have disobeyed their parents. American foreign policy commentator Walter Russell Mead writes, "You don't want to know what happens to people who neglect their duty toward the elderly." Let's just say "a sound track plays the screams of the damned."

The park is enormously popular with parents, mostly families with small children; it's a place they can bring their children, they say, "to learn about right and wrong." Think family values.⁶ That's entertainment: a cold day in the hell we don't believe in.

Parson Tony Larson does make the case for hell, as long as it's inspirational. He recalls a woman married to a man who's neglecting her and the kids, gallivanting all over town, drinking, gambling, chasing after other women. Her minister commiserates. "Your husband," he says, "is a miserable sinner!" "A sinner he is, Reverend," the woman cries, "but miserable: no, he isn't. He's having the time of his life!"

Parson Larson has the best and the simplest definition of sin I've ever heard. Sin, he says, is doing things that hurt people. I would say, people, places, and things. For those who are sinning, as it were, and having the time of their lives, maybe it would be better to put the fear of G*d in them, and threaten them with hellfire and damnation. But for that, they'll have to attend another church.

We all know that life isn't fair. It's so tempting to say, "There's a place reserved in the hell we don't believe in for people who..." You can fill in the blank. People do horrible things, and show no sign of remorse or repentance. Maybe something in us would feel relieved to know that it will all be taken care of on the other side: They'll get theirs.

⁶ Thanks to Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, pp. 312-313

But the lust for revenge, someone said, “is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.” Let's not do that to ourselves. *That* is hell. I choose to entertain one of two beliefs about divine justice, which are not mutually exclusive:

First, I can well imagine justice in the form of karma. We may not see justice in this lifetime, but maybe there will be other opportunities. “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people,” says the prophet Isaiah. “...Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked [roads] shall be made straight, and the rough places plain.”⁷

Second, if there isn't any justice – if life is really irredeemably unjust – it's just not mine to sweat. Ultimately, the only soul each of us can save is our own. Life, said Rev. A. Powell Davies, “is just a chance to grow a soul.” And fearing hell is a contraindication for growing a soul; the two cannot coexist. We grow our souls when we cherish this opportunity, and hold as sacred, this life on earth. Alleviating suffering becomes more pressing. Love, not fear, wins.

I love this old Zen story, retold by Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield:

A big, tough samurai went to see a little monk.

“Monk,” he said, in a voice accustomed to instant obedience, “teach me about heaven and hell!”

The monk looked up at this mighty warrior and replied with utter disdain, “Teach you about heaven and hell? I couldn't teach you anything! You're dirty. Your sword is rusty. You're a disgrace, an embarrassment to the samurai class. Leave immediately! I can't stand the sight of you.”

The samurai was furious. He grew red in the face, shook all over, and ... was speechless with rage. He pulled out his sword and raised it above him, preparing to slay the monk.

“That's hell,” said the monk.

The samurai was overwhelmed by the compassion and surrender of this little man, who had offered his life to give this teaching to show him hell. Slowly, he put down

7 Isaiah 40:1,4

his sword, filled with gratitude, and suddenly peaceful.

“And that,” said the monk softly, “is heaven.”⁸

My spiritual companions, with the big heart of Universalism – compassion rather than self-righteousness, understanding rather than judgment – may we embrace the chance to grow our souls. Emboldened by our mission of love and service, let us put our minds and hearts and hands to the work of making justice and peace, ending all manner of hell on earth. “Go out into the highways and by-ways,” wrote Universalist minister, John Murray. “Give the people something of your new vision. You may possess only a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them not Hell, but hope and courage.” It will be a cold day in the hell we don't believe in when anything but love is the most powerful force on earth.

8 Adapted from Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*, pp. 295-296