

Love the Hell Out of the World

When I was a teenager, I was desperate to save people from spending eternity in hell. The youth group of the fundamentalist, evangelical nondenominational church that I belonged to would drive en-mass to a neighborhood and then go around knocking on doors, distributing tracts that talked about how believing in the wrong things could damn your soul to a future of fire and brimstone.

I tried very hard to fit into this youth group, but all the time, there was a nagging dis-ease in me. I would repent, and dedicate myself to saving others, over and over again, but at my core, this theology based on fear and retribution did not work for me.

It was not long before there came a time when I could no longer believe, or even pretend to believe, that God would inflict such torment on the starving children in Africa who had never heard of the Resurrection. There came a time when I could not longer believe that “Jesus loves the little children” but his Father condemns some of those same children to eternity in hell. There came a time when I realized that, if God truly is a God of love, there is no way that he/she/it could possibly love me any less than my parents do, and they would never, ever do something that horrible, that permanent, to me.

I wish that when I was about 18 I had heard the “Muddy Children” story about Hosea Ballou that we heard in our Moment for All Ages. I would have become a Universalist on the spot “Father, I remember what you told me when I was small. I believe that even if God is disappointed with people, or a little angry with them, God will always love them and want them to be happy, no matter what they do, and no matter how muddy they are.”

The road was a bit more winding for me, but it was not too long before I found Unitarian Universalism. It was not too long before I came to feel a deep awe that in this vast, mysterious universe, you exist, and I exist, and we all exist and live and love and are loved in return. That instead of trying to save the world from eternal damnation, I would instead try to love the hell out of it.

Many of us believe that, at the core of Unitarian Universalism, our mission is to love the hell out of the world. Such a fabulous phrase from my colleague, Joanna Crawford. Like all good ideas, it has been seized and claimed by many others, including myself, not only as a personal mission but as a core theological statement. And it continues to capture attention and imagination, not only because you can’t help but smile impishly when you say it, but because it has multiple levels of interpretation.

First, there is the “Love the world a whole heck-of-lot” interpretation. This understanding recognizes the incredible wonder that life exists, that beauty exists, that we are made of star stuff and all a part of the interdependent web of existence. When you love the world a whole, you appreciate a loving relationship, recognize the beauty of a sunset, an embrace, a walk in the woods, marvel at the unending drive of humanity to find meaning and the amazing things

Love the Hell Out of the World

we create in the process. E. B. White is rumored to have said that he wakes up in the morning torn between a desire to save the world, or to savor it. This first interpretation is one of savoring.

The second way to interpret “Love the HELL Out of the World” touches on the saving of it. This “old world is full of sorrow, full of sickness, weak and sore.” You don’t have to look far to see that as beautiful and wonderful as the world can be, so can it also be a hell. A hell that imprisons people in poverty, oppression, injustice. A hell of alienation, isolation and distrust.

Martin Luther King, Jr, once said “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” To love the hell out of the world is to drive out hate with love. It is to create salvation – not in some other world, but in this one, right now. To work to create the beloved community, where the inherent worth and dignity of each person is respected and where all have access to peace and justice.

Loving the hell out of the world means you don’t have to be torn between a desire to save the world, or to savor it – it means that both go hand in hand.

And there is a third way to interpret what it means to love the hell out of the world – a third way that is increasingly apt given the way the religious right tries to use the fear of eternal damnation to oppress people and keep them in line. In this interpretation, loving the Hell out of the world means fighting the forces of that fear, not with anger or frustration, but with love. Again, I appeal to Martin Luther King, Jr, who, in our opening words, said that “Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that.”

I have heard it said, and perhaps you have too, that Unitarian Universalists can “believe anything they want.” This is not true, and I will get to that in a moment. But I see where it comes from. Our Unitarian forebears said that each person possesses the capability to look at Scripture and interpret it for themselves. This expanded to an understanding that each person can experience the divine in our own way. Our Universalist forebears agreed. Indeed, their 1899 Universalist Declaration of faith ended with the statement: “Neither this nor any other precise form of words shall be a condition of fellowship.” We have a clear history of upholding freedom, reason and tolerance. Misinterpreted, I can see how someone might shorten all this “You can believe whatever you want.”

But this is incorrect because, at the very least, *there is no room for belief in eternal damnation in Unitarian Universalism*. And this comes primarily from our Universalist heritage of faith, hope, and love.

In the United States, Universalism arose in the late 18th century. George de Benneville was a French preacher and physician who was imprisoned in France for advocating Universalism. When he immigrated to America, he continued preaching Universalism and gathered quite a

Love the Hell Out of the World

following. John Murray founded the first American Universalist meeting house in 1779. And Elhanan Winchester founded the first Universalist church in Philadelphia and wrote several books promoting the universal salvation of all souls. These men, and others, preached a theology of Universal salvation out of protest against Calvinism and its theology of predestination – the idea that even before a person was born, God would know whether that person was destined for heaven, or hell. Murray, de Benneville, Winchester and their contemporaries agreed with the Calvinists that God is just, but then argued that God is also a God of love, which meant that there was nothing a human being could do that would justify eternal damnation. Many felt that one's soul might spend some time in purgatory in punishment, but all would be united with God in heaven eventually.

The next generation of Universalists were called ultra Universalists. Like many who came before them, they understood God to be the ultimate parent. They believed that no matter how poorly we humans behave, God still wants what is best for us – nothing can separate us from God's love. But they took the next step and said that all people will be united with God in heaven, without any time of punishment or suffering.

There is another wonderful story about the ultra Universalist minister Hosea Ballou (there are many of them, actually!). He was riding between pulpits, when

“he stopped for the night at a New England farmhouse. The farmer was upset. He confided to Ballou that his son was a terror who got drunk in the village every night and who fooled around with women. The farmer was afraid the son would go to hell. “All right,” said Ballou with a serious face. “We’ll find a place on the path where your son will be coming home drunk, and we’ll build a big fire, and when he comes home, we’ll grab him and throw him into it.” The farmer was shocked: “That’s my son and I love him!” Ballou said, “If you, a human and imperfect father, love your son so much that you wouldn’t throw him in the fire, then how can you possibly believe that God, the perfect father, would do so!”¹

Today, many, many Christians hold to the theology of eventual universal salvation, even if it is not official church dogma. But back then, it was threatening. People were concerned that the Devil was using Universalism to preach a false doctrine that would inevitably damn its followers. Here in Louisville, the Universalist church (which merged with the Unitarian church in 1870), was called “The Devil’s Chapel.” This was not a term of endearment!

Universalists believe that God loves each and every one of us. And therefore, we should treat each other accordingly. This made them vigilantly evangelical and caused them to be very active in the social justice causes of the times, such as abolition, the separation of church and state, and the ordination of women.

¹ <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/2745.shtml>

Love the Hell Out of the World

Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Josh Pawelek, writes that today, this positive theology manifests as a “a life-saving, life-giving, life-enhancing religious response to all those theologies that drive arbitrary wedges between people, that seek to frighten people into faith, and that teach people of their inherent sinfulness rather than their beauty, worth, and potential.”²

Indeed, I see a direct line between historical Universalism and our current “Standing on the Side of Love” campaign. If God won’t be damning people to eternity in hell in the afterlife, shouldn’t we be working to free people from hell in this life? Or, put another way, if we are all connected in sacred mystery, then no one can be free of suffering while others are oppressed.

Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed reminds us that “in being loved we learn to love. Those who are loved will in turn love others. Those who feel God’s infinite love within themselves will feel so good about themselves, so connected to life, so full of compassion that they will not be able to help but to spread that love. They will overflow with love.”³ We strive to be God’s hands, the embodiment of the divine in the world, to create heaven on earth for one another – to create the beloved community where all are loved because all are loved.

Building on Martin Luther King, Jr.’s statement that only love can defeat fear, blogger Tom Earthman urges us, as Unitarian Universalists, to take up the mission to love the hell out of the world because when we do, love becomes a new kind of battlefield, and we become “fighters in a sort of war against fear, hate, and ignorance. It gets us hurt, to open our hearts to others. We really do share the pain of those who are suffering. . . We need to focus on healing people, however large or small their hurts, and sending them back into the world to share love.”

I recall a time more recently when I was in the trenches, fighting on the side of love rather than the side of fear, working as a chaplain in the cardiac unit of a local hospital. A woman I was visiting opened up to me. She told me that she was afraid of dying because she was estranged from her brother and wanted to reconcile with him. “But he is gay,” she told me, and her church had told her she was not to associate with him because he was a sinner, doomed to eternity in hell. “Do you believe God is like that?” she cried out to me, obviously in pain – torn between her love of her brother and her fear for her own soul. It would do no good for me to explain to her that I was agnostic, at best. “You love your brother, I can see that.” I told her. “Would you damn him to hell to eternity for being gay?” “Of course not!” she replied. “So how could God be any less loving than you?” She broke down, called her brother, who came in to visit her and they reconciled. She told me later that her heart, which

² <http://uuse.org/speechless-in-the-face-of-evil/#.UxYtEvSwJFN>

³ <http://www.questformeaning.org/page/reflecting/dragged-kicking-and-screaming-into-heaven>

Love the Hell Out of the World

had been so full of pain and fear, was now overflowing with love and gratitude. And she made a speedy physical recovery.

Loving the hell out of the world means being in relationship with the world. It means constantly expanding who “we” are. It means challenging ourselves to not turn away from the pain within ourselves and within others. Loving the hell out of the world means loving each other out of hell. It means listening to one another, learning from one another, helping each other. It does not mean we will always agree – we won’t – but it means we will stay in conversation because our mission is the same, even if our politics or theology are different. Loving the hell out of the world means overcoming fear, bitterness, and hatred, with abounding and embodied love.

This world may be fractured, may be full of sorrow. But there is hope. A bright new day is dawning – a day when we are able to love each other out of hell, out of suffering, out of injustice. This is the divine vision. It is a Universalist vision, and it is why we stand on the side of love. May we each go our way this morning, knowing we are called to love the hell out of the world, to both save it and savor it. May it be so. Blessed be.

Rev. Dawn Cooley
Louisville, KY