

We Were Never Meant to Survive: A UU Look at the Afterlife, by Rev. M. Lara Hoke
a sermon preached at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Andover, November 15, 2009

When we were kids, my brother and I used to be in awe of astronauts. One of my very earliest memories of watching TV with my family – something we did together a lot, as you might have gathered by now – was watching astronauts. We sat down together back in December 1972, staring at our humble little 18 inch, black and white TV set, watching the Apollo XVII moon landing. This was the last of the moon landings, in fact. My brother and I were admiring the astronauts, ooo-ing and ah-ing at their every move, when my father – the ever-cerebral Unitarian Universalist – reminded us gently that the real heroes of the space program were the geniuses at NASA who did the calculations and created the machines that made moon landings possible. Being an astronaut, he reminded us, required far less know-how, far less brain power. Young though I was, what my father said made sense. But my admiration for the astronauts did not wane. What amazed me about these men (yes, they were all men then) was the courage that it takes to get into a space ship of some kind, largely losing control over your fate, and entering the great unknown. The astronauts were almost unfathomably brave, in my book.

There's a quotation that you'll hear from time to time in ecological circles. The quotation is of Russell "Rusty" Schweichart, who was an Apollo IX astronaut, one of my childhood heroes. I'd like to share a brief excerpt of Astronaut Schweichart's musings on seeing the earth from space. He said, "When you go around [the earth] ... you begin to recognize that your identity is with that whole thing..... You realize that on that small spot, that little blue and white thing, is everything that means anything to you. All of history and music and poetry and art and birth and love; tears, joy, games. All of it on that little spot out there that you can cover with your thumb."

Certainly Schweichart's words serve well to remind us of the preciousness of earth, and of the fragility of earth, and that is why these words are so popular with environmentalists. But these words came back to me about four years ago, when I began my work as a chaplain in hospital and hospice settings. I served as a chaplain in hospitals and hospice from September of 2005 until June 2009, right before I joined you in the ministries of this congregation¹. In my role as a chaplain, I used to see many people – patients – each day, and among them were always several who were actively dying. I was impressed over and over by how brave these people were. Many of them said, without any prompting from me, that they knew they were dying, and that they were ready. Sometimes hairs would rise on the back of my neck when they said this, not unlike the feeling I got watching a few humans walking on the moon more than 35 years ago.

When we face the death of a loved one, it is incredibly hard to face life without him or her. That is, we're profoundly sad because we will not see our loved one again – not in this lifetime, and possibly not ever, period. Naturally this is a devastating feeling. Probably everyone here has experienced it, and some of you, like me, too many times. But imagine that *you* are the person who is dying. Each of your loved ones is bracing herself or himself to lose you – but *you*? You, the one who is dying, *you* must brace yourself for losing it all. As Schweichart says, on this earth, this "small spot... is everything that means anything to you. All of history and music and

¹ I was a student chaplain from the fall of 2005 until the fall of 2006, when I began a year-long, full-time chaplain residency program (all part of CPE, or Clinical Pastoral Education). These were all in hospital settings. From the fall of 2007 through June 2009, I was a hospice chaplain.

poetry and art and birth and love...” All the people that have ever meant anything to you – family, friends, favorite authors and musicians, anyone and anything you’re ever loved or admired – it’s all right here on earth. And when you die, or “leave this earth” – as far as we know – you leave it all behind, forever. How scary, how sad, how much loss is *that*?

Think of it: In all of human history, only about 500 brave souls have ever been launched into space, to go back to my astronaut heroes. Yet all of us, each and every last one of us, will die. I will die. You will die. We *all die*. We all need courage for this final journey.

It has always seemed strange to me that most people rarely talk about death, or what the afterlife might be. After all, it is the only thing we know for sure about our future: I can guarantee you that I will die. I cannot with 100% certainty guarantee you anything else about my future. Only death is absolutely certain. There is no loophole that allows us to avoid death.

Impermanence seems to be at the core of life on this planet, and in the universe. Nothing that is material can last in its current form forever; not inanimate objects, and certainly not us living creatures. The planet itself will eventually die, in spite of our best efforts at ecological care. After all, our sun will eventually die. This is a strange, and difficult, reality to accept. But to quote from the poem by Audre Lorde, “We were never meant to survive”. And so, today I want to think, with you, a little about death from a Unitarian Universalist perspective.

This topic has been a burning one for me since my time as a chaplain. As a hospital chaplain – nevermind as a hospice chaplain – it was impossible not to think about death regularly. I learned a lot from the sometimes scared, but always courageous, people who were dying. They were wonderful teachers. But as much as the dying can be teachers to us, the living, the funny thing is ... sometimes they expected to learn something from *me*. After all, I was their chaplain. I *must* surely know about the afterlife – I must know what it is, and how people get there.

I’ll never forget one of my first conversations with a terminally ill patient. As the conversation went along, he asked me what my denomination was. I proudly told him that I was a Unitarian Universalist. He asked, understandably enough, “What do Unitarian Universalists think happens to us when we die?”

I must admit, my heart began to race. Believe it or not, I was caught off guard. There’s nothing like being a novice chaplain to catch you off guard constantly... But what would I say? I took a deep breath and told him that – as with all matters theological – there is no one answer with which all Unitarian Universalists would agree. I told him that most UUs would acknowledge quite openly that they do not know for certain what happens. Then I gave him the classic Emersonian stance: I told him that most UUs are focused on living well in *this* life; that most of us believe the good and bad we do are compensated for in *this* lifetime. I told him that many of us see our acts and works of love and justice as living on immortally after we’re gone. He responded, “Hmm... That’s not really so much to go on, is it?” He had a point.

Shortly after this encounter, also early in my time as a chaplain, I met another person who was dying. She was a Roman Catholic. Even though she was struggling for breath, she badly wanted to talk with me. She asked me my denomination, and again I said that I was a Unitarian

Universalist – though this time with more dread than pride, I must admit. Apparently she was familiar with us. “I know, I know,” she said, as she shook her head in amusement. “You have no easy answers for me, only questions.” She was right – we Unitarian Universalists do love our questions. But sometimes people want answers, particularly when they’re actively dying, and I don’t blame them.

Not long after that, I stumbled onto the old issue of *UU World* magazine, the one that had the article that Lynne shared as today’s reading: the words of Richard Taylor in “What Matters Now”². Professor Taylor modestly said that he was not courageous, but to my way of thinking, facing death as he did demonstrates almost unbelievable bravery. I was struck by two sentences in particular. The first was, “People who can turn to God have a strength that is denied me.” Professor Taylor seems to be implying that Unitarian Universalism perhaps doesn’t offer as much strength for looking mortality in the face as traditional Christianity does. But in the second sentence that grabbed my attention Professor Taylor goes on to say, “I cannot embrace what I regard as an illusion.” I cannot help but admire the intellectual integrity of Professor Taylor, and of Unitarian Universalism. But I want to get beyond intellectual integrity, and go to hope – maybe even faith. And so I want to think some more about the question – no, about the *answer* to the question: What *do* Unitarian Universalists think happens to us when we die; what are our sources of hope?

I’ve thought a lot about it over the past four years, and upon this further reflection, I think we Unitarian Universalists have as much to offer in thinking about the afterlife as any other religion. To our credit, we do not offer false certainty; but we *do* still provide some hopeful traditions and ways of thinking about death and the afterlife. I have come to believe that we are *not* missing a view of the afterlife. Instead, I have come to believe that we have a “hopeful agnosticism” toward the afterlife. And the room for hope makes all the difference.

I’d like to backtrack a little to the early Unitarians in the United States (in the early to mid 1800s). The Unitarians have always been our hyper-intellectual half, and their influence on our denomination is clear. As I mentioned earlier, Ralph Waldo Emerson and many other Unitarian thinkers of his day thought that heaven and hell were to be found right here, in this lifetime. Like many modern UUs, these Unitarians saw the finality of death as a compelling reason to live life as fully as possible. The *hope* is that after a life well lived, one will live on in the minds and hearts of those persons whose lives we enriched.

I think the piece that I overlooked when I initially thought about the UU view of the afterlife was our Universalist heritage. Why do we always forget the gentle Universalists? As you might know, the very theological doctrine that originally defined American Universalism was the belief in universal salvation – the idea that no loving God would condemn humans to suffer eternally in hell after they died. So unlike the Unitarians, the Universalists *were* focused on the idea of salvation and heaven, even while they rejected the notion of hell, or at least of an eternal hell. If Unitarians are our hyper-intellectual half, than Universalists are perhaps our hyper-hopeful, hyper-loving half. But where is the influence of Universalism to be found in modern day Unitarian Universalism’s view of the afterlife?

² Richard Taylor, “What Matters Now”, *UU World* in May/June 2003.

I would argue that it can be found in at least two ways. First, I think most UUs today believe that there is a universal afterlife, they just don't know exactly what it is. That is, all humans share a universal fate. We all die; we know that. But I believe you would be hard-pressed to find a UU who believes that we are entitled to a particular, perhaps more special, afterlife, while non-UUs are condemned to suffer, or at least to an inferior afterlife. Think about it. Many religions believe that their members will be either the only ones to achieve salvation, or at least the ones who attain the best, highest heaven. I don't know a single UU who believes that we as a group are entitled to anything more, or less, in the afterlife than any other human beings. The second influence of Universalism that I would point to is an openness to the possibility that there is some type of life after death, something more than our ashes returning to the earth while our memories linger on with loved ones. For me, at least, there is a lot of *hope* to be found in this openness to mysticism, this openness that not only don't we know what the afterlife *is*, but that equally we cannot say what it *isn't*. And of course, the influence of Universalism tends to make us have hope that this unknown, possible afterlife is, at a minimum, benign. Our Universalist half has never doubted that the universe was ultimately a friendly place.

Going back to influences from our Unitarian tradition, the Transcendentalists (including Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and others) should be mentioned. The Transcendentalists were very open to Eastern philosophy and the influence of Eastern religious traditions. When we consider the Transcendentalists' openness to Eastern tradition, and add to that the openness of Universalism to the possibility that there is an afterlife, I believe we can begin to account for modern UUism's (at least partial) openness to the idea of reincarnation. That is to say, I have met more UUs who are open to the possibility of reincarnation than that are open to the idea that there is a "heaven" or a "paradise" awaiting us when we die.

But even for those of us who do not believe in reincarnation, there is still an Eastern, mystical influence on our thinking about a possible afterlife. Some UUs would agree with Eastern traditions, including Buddhism and Hinduism, that we suffer because of the illusion that each of us is a separate being with individual needs. That is, if we could see ultimate reality – if we could really see and easily experience with our senses the interdependent web of all existence (as we say in our Seventh Principle) and the Oneness of all things – we would not suffer as we do now, trapped in our human bodies, trapped in our individual consciousnesses. If you think of it this way, then being released from our individual, earthly bodies is a possible pathway to freedom from suffering – even to bliss. For some modern UUs, the "bliss" that is hoped for after we die is the possibility of achieving Cosmic Consciousness, sometimes called Buddha Consciousness or even Christ Consciousness. Some modern UUs, like the Transcendentalists before them, think that Cosmic Consciousness is to be achieved *in this life* through meditation and enlightenment. I personally doubt that it's possible to achieve what I think of as Cosmic Consciousness in this lifetime, while stuck in these bodies and these brains. They're awfully confining, these bodies and brains. But I personally have *hope* that after we die, we achieve Cosmic Consciousness – that by leaving our bodies, perhaps, we have hope for merging with and understanding the Great Mystery at a level that we cannot presently even articulate. I certainly don't know that this is true, but my hopeful agnosticism allows that it is one possibility.

Does this openness to an afterlife sound like bunk to you? Does it fly in the face of science? Perhaps – and perhaps not. Modern physics and cosmology has put forward a well-regarded

theory (called “string theory”) that claims that there are more than the three spatial dimensions that we can detect directly with our senses – in fact, the theory claims that there are 11 dimensions, not 3. I’m no physicist, and I don’t even pretend to understand string theory. I’ll leave that to the geniuses at NASA, and in the university – and some of you in these seats! My point is more that there’s still a lot more that we *don’t* know about our universe than that we *do* know. The idea of Cosmic Consciousness isn’t even as counter-intuitive to me as what the greatest minds in physics are telling us about string theory, quantum mechanics, and more. And some scientists are beginning to take seriously the idea that consciousness itself might be a dimension of space, adding to the possibilities for what an afterlife might be. But those are topics for another day, and probably by different speakers.

In closing, I remember again Professor Richard Taylor and today’s reading. I can’t help but wonder if perhaps some of these Unitarian and Universalist traditions gave him some courage for the final journey after all. He was not afraid to speak his own piece, so close to the end of his life, and gave each of us that much more strength for the journey. Those of us left behind can continue to ponder the Great Mystery that is this universe, parts seen and unseen. Unitarian Universalism acknowledges that nothing material can last in its present form forever, including earthly human life, but gives us hope that maybe, *just maybe*, some type of spiritual existence as well as dignified acts of love and justice go on and on. In the words of this morning’s responsive reading, “May we have the faith to accept this mystery and build upon its everlasting truth.”³ Blessed Be. Amen.

³ David H. Eaton, “A Common Destiny”, No. 557 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.