

**RSC SERVICE  
January 24, 2010**

**“H-E-Double Hockey Sticks”**

**MY REFLECTION**

Since my very first time up here at the pulpit, my first RSC service, I have secretly dreamed of giving a true “fire and brimstone” address. You know the type. They are full of passion and self-righteousness. The speaker, usually a minister with a heavy accent, gets the chance to look out on his own congregation, the one who pays his salary and tell them they are doomed. It is the kind of sermon where the preacher speaks directly for God and, just for emphasis, all the good words seem to get an extra syllable added to them.

**Gawud is here with me, and he sees you all, awash in a sea of Sin-uh.**

But, I remind myself, this is a Unitarian Universalist church, and we just don't do that sort of thing. How could we? It just does not work if I have to quantify my disdain.

**You are all awash in sinuh,  
but I respect your individual path towards truth.**

It loses something. And to make matters worse, there is the whole concept of universal salvation, universal love of humanity that would make the entire idea of damnation, of eternal perdition simply a moot point. You cannot have fire and brimstone without the pits of eternal burning flames, and it just isn't very intimidating when brimstone is replaced by mild disappointment and reconciliation provided by an impartial mediator.

Let's face it. There is just not much power to the concept of Hell in this building. And, while that may disappoint the part of me that wants to pretend I am Jerry Falwell or Jimmy Swaggart, it is a good thing in the long run. Besides, I have neither the pompadour nor the sky blue leisure suit to really pull it off anyway.

So, what do we make of Hell? Do we ignore the entire idea? Do we rebuff it as a simplistic and superstitious relic of the past? Do we reject it as a tool of powerful church elders designed to keep the rabble in line through a campaign of fear? Or, do we look at it from a comfortable distance, putting aside both the fire and the brimstone, and try to understand that in the many different interpretations of Hades, Hell, the Underworld, the Dark Realm, we can find out about ourselves. We can better understand human frailty, our deep fears and cultural taboo. Even for those of us who see no value in supernaturalism or no truth in divine fear mongering can better comprehend just what it is about the human experience that resonates in the image of Hell.

Sarah Skrainka was nice enough to come here to speak about how perceptions of Hell changed and evolve, how different cultures define something which you might expect defies definition. I can only imagine that a church service is probably the last place she expected to discuss the subject. But here she is, and I would like to thank her for humoring us, we odd questioning UU's. We can see in what she describes some very different images of Hell than those most of us grew up imagining.

The Christian concept, despite those who would speak of private, personal suffering, remains heavily tied to medieval images of torture chambers, burnt flesh and pitchfork wielding demons. Hell is a place where the unrepentant suffer for all eternity. It is a place set aside for nonbelievers, for heretics, and for those whose piety could not trump their very human failures.

It is this Christian image of Hell, even if it would be refuted by theologians today, which I think best speaks to our current culture. It reveals three essential fears that we all carry with us. I posit for you today that these three fears are as much a part of this community as they are the most devout fundamentalist community, even though we might speak of them differently and deny that they stem from anything more than human nature or psychological phenomena.

The first of these is fear of our own humanity. What do I mean by this? We fear, at the same time that we admit, our connection to nature. We may admit that we are animals, beings with instincts and drives, beings of flesh and blood that hunger and hunt, that struggle to survive and battle with others and ourselves to exist at all. We try to deny our animal nature through culture, civilization, art, music, all the things that point us towards a sense of divinity, but we know deep down that there are human, animal, earthly beings within us.

Perhaps we deny these beings because we also fear mortality, a basic fact of an organic, earthly life. We fear our own inherent nature, our natural selves. There is a common saying about mortality, one I first learned in Spanish literature but which is much much older than any texts I regularly read. It states that humanity, among all the animals of the world, is the most cursed. We are cursed because we know what others do not. We know that we are born to die, and that we are condemned to death for the simple crime of being born.

When I repeat that idea in front of my students at Augustana, I sense they don't believe me. They are, after all, immortal and invulnerable, but it will hit home someday, probably around their fortieth birthday. But what does this curse of humanity, our flawed, fatal and fearful animal selves, have to do with Hell?

Hell is all about the animal. It is the place where our animal selves are the only selves that remain. If there is something more to us than this, it is the part that suffers, that feels the torment of eternal pain. The animal self has both doomed us to this punishment, through any number of deadly sins, but it is our hope that we are more than animal that suffers the tortures of the demons and the distance from the divine.

Our fear that we are nothing more than our animal halves is the fear that we are by our very essence a tortured being each and every day. Tortured by inevitable truth, tortured by our own desire to be more than we may truly be, and tortured by the thought that we may never get to know our other self, if there truly is another self to know.

And this thought leads me to the second of Hell's revelations, our very human fear of inadequacy. What is Hell after all if not a final destination for all those who did not do enough, love enough, believe enough or choose wisely enough? The Christian image of Hell, in particular, seems to be designed to push us to stick to the right path, to focus our energies on being better than we would otherwise be. One might see this as a very good message, but is it one that tortures us more than it edifies us?

Are we meant to spend our lives here, in this amazing world, fearful that we are incomplete, incompetent or inadequate? Does that sound like the voice of the divine in our ears, or does it sound like our own voice, fearful and self-doubting? The image of a dark underworld where the unworthy must pay an eternal price often for very simple or very transitory failings speaks to our own fears that we are imperfect, imperfectable, and simply inadequate. We fear this when we love others, because we question if our love is ever enough, and we fear this when we look at ourselves.

I suppose it is necessary to have this fear. We need to question our inner world as much as we question the outer one. I have seen what a life without self doubt looks like, it is a orange tanned drunk man who names his abdominal muscles and pulls the sleeves of his muscle shirt to kiss his own biceps. It is not a pretty picture.

But it is far too easy for us to become weighed down by this fear, to retreat into feelings of shame, self-loathing and worthlessness. We have all seen this as well, and it is far worse than not pretty, it is a deceit that eats at our very souls. We, in this church, who profess the dignity and worth of all people, of all of existence, recognize that there is value in each of us, there is greatness in all of us, and that our feelings of inadequacy are best tempered by the caring and compassion of a community.

This idea of community brings me to the third and final interpretation of Hell which I wish to highlight today. It is perhaps the most telling for us, holders of a chosen faith, one which prides itself on individualism and the use of community to support that individual quest for truth. It is our deep, unwavering fear of isolation.

I know what you are thinking. In Hell no one is alone, after all there are so many others there. The population of politicians, lawyers, TV evangelists and reality show celebrities alone is enough to overcrowd the place. But, I would argue that as much as our images of Hell, both ancient and modern, is about punishment or suffering, it is more about isolation. Hell is both the isolation from the divine, from the spirit of life, the giver of hope or the joy of love and the absolute isolation from each other, from human contact, community and compassion.

We may view Hell as many ancients did, as Tartarus, a deep pit of unique tortures, where Sisyphus eternally pushes his stone up the hill, only to have it roll back, or where Tantalus reaches for food or water only to have them recede from his grasp. We may imagine the fiery pits of so many medieval images, where sinners and heretics live in constant pain, begging for a second death to escape their unending suffering, or we may look at the symbolic image of Hell, the separation from the divine, the pained existence of Mephistopheles living each day with an inner abyss, a sense of incredible loss, fully aware that the purest source of love and hope is no longer his to experience.

Regardless of which image we conjure, there is an underlying fact that, while perhaps not emphasized enough, is certainly central to each image. That we suffer these tortures, bear these weights and endure this emptiness alone. There is no *esprit de corps* among the damned. No camaraderie or sense of shared burden in the Underworld. No union of disgruntled souls taking claims to the management. Hell is suffered alone, felt alone, feared alone. There may be millions of us feeling the flames, we may even have all arrived in the same handbasket, but once there we are on our own. If we were all in it together, it would at least be bearable, and we would not call it hell, we would call it graduate school.

It is the feeling of isolation that we should perhaps fear most, above both our animal nature and our sense of inadequacy. It is rightly feared because it is a suffering we have witnessed before. We see its devastating effects when those we love fight depression. We see it in the faces of the grieving when their closest companion departs this world. We know this feeling, that we are suffering and we suffer alone. That is the true nature of Hell.

There is no easy way to dispel this fear. No simple prayer or ritual of faith that can banish it from us, that can pull us out of Hell, and yet there is a path. It is here, and in a thousand other places. It is with each other, reaching out to each other, being there for each other, and in taking time to be together that we banish the fear, that we banish Hell from our lives. So take pride in being here today. Leave this place with a desire to be with others and share their lives. Make a promise to yourself to reach across the aisle, to step across the threshold and be a part of a community over this next week. The fire of that commitment, of that call to be part of something greater than your own fears is the only fire you need. It is far more powerful than any of the fire and brimstone that Hell can supply.

## CLOSING WORDS

The Roman emperor and noted Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius gives us some words to consider as we leave this place. He advised us, saying:

Live a good life. If there are gods and they are just, then they will not care how devout you have been, but will welcome you based on the virtues you have lived by.

If there are gods, but unjust, then you should not want to worship them.

If there are no gods, then you will be gone, but will have lived a noble life that will live on in the memories of your loved ones.

And so, as we leave this place, I would say to you...

Go in peace, embraced by the light and warmth of our gathering.

Go in love, ready again to struggle on.

Go in beauty, shining forth like a lamp for freedom.

Amen!