

**HOW TO GET TO HEAVEN**  
**A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene**  
**Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**April 10, 2005**

**Reading:** “Heaven is So Far of the Mind,” by Emily Dickinson

Heaven is so far of the Mind  
That were the Mind dissolved  
The Site—of it—by Architect  
Could not again be proved

‘Tis vast—as our Capacity  
As fair—as our idea  
To Him of adequate desire  
No further ‘tis, than Here

**Sermon**

The scene is the lobby outside of heaven. There are five people milling around, about to undergo the usual grilling, to see where they will spend eternity.

Person #1, when asked about her earthly religious beliefs, earnestly tells The Questioner, “My faith in you never wavered. My parents told me to believe, my friends and family and co-workers all agreed. I never questioned anything, because I was told that questioning would get me in trouble.” God points to an elevator marked “Down” and says, “Sorry, kid, you’re headed that direction.”

Person #2 comes forward and says, “Well, it looks like I was wrong, but I never believed in you. I was rebellious, a free spirit. I enjoyed looking down on other people and annoying them, especially my parents. Mostly, I just never gave it much thought.” God says, “Go over and join that woman waiting by the elevator.”

Person #3 shuffles up. He says, “I was an agnostic. My whole life, I just couldn’t quit questioning whether you existed. I thought about it a lot, considered all the arguments pro and con. I couldn’t satisfy myself one way or the other. I see I was wrong but . . . I gave it my best shot. Should I join those two?” God says, “No, you’re coming with me. I gave you rationality for a purpose.”

Person number 4 comes up, knowing she had been a believer all her life, but nervous, having seen that first believer head for the “Down” elevator. She clears her throat, then says, “It wasn’t all that easy. The problem of evil alone kept me awake many a night. I examined all of the standard arguments closely, but found none definitive, although some had merit. I thought belief and action should go together, so I put all of

my eggs in your basket, and tried to follow your moral dictates.” God says, “Moral dictates, huh? Go join that third guy, while I interview this last one.”

The fifth person shrugs and says, “I’m sorry, I didn’t believe in you. Now I see I was wrong. But I examined all the arguments and evidence provided by theologians, and I found them all wanting. However, I tried to conform my life and actions to your moral teachings which, I discovered, mostly squared with those of other sacred traditions. And these, I felt, did not require any transcendental support. Do you want me to get in that elevator line?” And God replies, “No, you and I and these other two can go in this big gold door.” (Miller)

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We have all heard story after story about people who go up to the gates of heaven and talk to St. Peter or to God. (Like the one about the Unitarian Universalist minister who got **the** biggest and best heavenly mansion, because he was the only UU minister they had ever seen.) Most are not quite so earnestly instructive—but still intended to illuminate what people are like on earth. (Mark Twain said, “Pick Heaven for the climate, Hell for the company.”)

If we were to take a survey this morning, asking what each of us thinks about life after death, we would get just about the full spectrum of views possible. A small number probably holds some version of the traditional afterlife (although I suspect that very, very few would go along with the traditional hell). Another group would declare that there is no immortality except our children and the memory of our deeds—when we die, we die. A third group might hold the conviction that there is more, indeed, than this one small earthly life, and may envision it in any number of creative ways, including Eastern religious concepts. And a fourth might just say, “We don’t know, and it doesn’t matter.”

What does matter, they would say—and in this they are joined by all the rest of us—is how we live our lives here. We might wish to lead a good life for a karmic or divine reward, or we might wish to do so simply because we ought to do a creditable job if we only have one shot at it.

The only heaven we know of for absolutely positively sure is the one we live in, the one we make. Emily Dickinson says, “No further ‘tis, than Here.”

No less a luminary than Siddharta Gautama, the Buddha, said, “No one saves us but ourselves. No one can and no one may. We ourselves must walk the path.” An unknown bard said, “Sing like no one’s listening, love like you’ve never been hurt, dance like nobody’s watching, and live like it’s heaven on earth.”

“Live like it’s heaven on earth.” What, we ask ourselves, does that mean?

Our opening story ends with God saying, “...life grounded and guided by reason and science, a world where all will flourish! How’s that for Paradise?” I imagine that each of us here believes in reason and science, in the examined life. At the same time, I know there’s more to heaven on earth than empirical observation and logic.

I bent my poor brain out of shape for several days, thinking about this issue. Sometimes we are “good,” and sometimes we are “bad,” in all kinds of ways. How do they all work together—or not—to help us live like it’s heaven on earth, to help us

contribute to making heaven on earth? I consulted theological books and histories of religion, which didn't help much. I ran through the categories of good works that I could think of, and I even reviewed the breakdown of the bicameral mind, in case that had anything to say about it.

Then I was on the phone to a close friend of mine, who is a fine painter, and I mentioned my problem, in reply to her query about how I was doing. She said matter-of-factly, "I'm most likely to find it when I keep my eyes wide open. When I really see things, there is so much to be awed by."

My heart responded. (Her reply was particularly touching, since she had just lost a close relative, that morning.)

I hung up the phone and looked out the window. I opened my eyes wide and remembered the prayer I say over and over, as many times a day as I can think of it, "Help me pay attention." I saw the shape of the hill sloping down from the rock, the yellow of arrow-leaf balsam perking up in spots. I saw the slant of the Quail Ridge Hill, and the flatness of the horizon, with trees still gray-brown, and I saw the red of the tulips echoing the red of the stop sign, and the rhubarb's leaves about twice as big as they were yesterday. I saw two flickers in the bare tree across the street, and hoped that one would visit me in the tree outside the computer-room window, and would speak its mysterious one-syllable message to me—that urgent note I have yet to understand. I glimpsed the shape of things and the details at the same time—the gift that sometimes comes when I am actually paying attention—and I sensed the miracle at the heart of it all.

I felt the deep joy that informs existence when we are right with it, a sense of rightness deeper and higher than the usual ups and downs of daily life—more connected to those moments of birth and death and love and pathos. More gratefully aware of the heaven on earth that is always there, often obscured by the constant race of life's "stuff" to be done or said or at least worried about.

When the light of that transcendent soul moment passed—as it always does, leaving the memory and the knowledge—I started thinking again. (I did have a sermon to create, after all, and mystical moments do not form or write sermons.)

I thought of how we can keep ourselves more aware of the heaven we have, here on earth—how we can keep that awareness by silence, worship, meditation, music, art, making love, communing with nature, losing ourselves in deep investigation. And I thought of how we can *contribute* to heaven on earth for ourselves and all creation—also by attention and awareness.

If our attention reminds us over and over that all is connected, we are more likely to respect the natural world and work to keep it in existence. Our consciences are likely to be kept more awake by our hearts' promptings, which push us into thought and action.

And if we see the potential beauty and harmony in all that we have been given, we are more likely to do the hard work of keeping our heads and hearts open to other people. What Jewish theologian Martin Buber called the "I-Thou" relationship. When that happens, love and respect are more likely to triumph, as opposed to indifference or resentment. Or hatred.

Many of you know that I just won a hotly-contested race to be the trustee to the national Unitarian Universalist Board, from the Pacific Northwest District. All involved in the race have been asked to send recommendations for changes in the process, to the District body responsible for creating and maintaining fair election practices. (Everybody agrees that many, many changes need to be made.) My opponent, Dick Jacke, wrote a very lengthy critique. It is clear in part of his comments that he believes I did not campaign fairly, perhaps even that I misused my position as a respected minister in the district. (My perceptions of what went on and, more importantly, why are different from his, of course.)

At first blush, this may seem unrelated to this issue of heaven on earth. But it is not. Here is a good man, who put the same kind of time and energy I did, into running for a position he wanted to hold. He feels ill-used by me. I can shrug and say that it is his problem—which it is, ultimately—or I can make an effort toward reconciliation.

A commitment to “heaven on earth”—which is to say, better connections, more respect and love—requires that I at least ask him if we can talk about it. And so I did. He replied courteously, expressing his wish to clear the air, too, and we will meet when I go to Seattle for an ordination and ministers’ retreat next Sunday.

I don’t love the idea of this conversation, because I don’t have very much fun talking to people who are mad at me. But I have to do it, if I am to be able to look myself in the mirror—or to preach reconciliation with a straight face.

It isn’t always quite so momentous. In my Evensong class the other day, some of us realized we have quite different views on the subject of the words “religious” and “spiritual.” The differences themselves don’t matter this morning—but the way we dealt with them does. In this class, we have come to respect each other immensely. When I heard three people express their feelings about “religion” as opposed to “spirituality,” my first response was the usual one of annoyance. Then, I realized who was doing the expressing, and how I feel about them, and I started listening better. When it came time for me to express my views, it was abundantly clear from their questions that they were doing the same thing. I don’t know that we understand each other thoroughly on the questions, but our hearts are all in possession of genuinely listened-to information. Our hearts’ openness to each other has contributed to the store of respect in this imperfect world—has made it just a little more “heavenly.”

We can all be doing it, all the time, if we pay attention. (Simple but not easy.) If we open our minds, use our “god-given” rationality to help us to conclusions about reality. If we open our ears and hear—really hear—what others are saying, even when we disagree or have problems with the other. If we open our hearts, and contact that person from whom we are estranged. If we open our eyes and look out our windows and see pattern among the detail, see the flicker who wants to bring us a message.

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