

On a wallet card available at our entrance, David Rankin summarizes what Unitarian Universalists believe ¹. He lists 10 topics, but not once does he mention heaven, hell or an afterlife. So, clearly, in today's talk, I am not referring to officially held, present day beliefs commonly held within the Unitarian Universalist community, rather, I am referring to earlier days within the Universalist movement. ²

In accord with most religions, earlier Universalists believed that people, in some form, live on after death. In contrast to many religions ³ particularly orthodox Christianity, Universalists denied that a loving God would condemn people to punishment: certainly not endless torment.

We grant the logic of the Universalist position that because God is conceived of as being, most essentially, love, ⁸ then eternal punishment is impossible. ⁹ Love wouldn't, couldn't do that, and God, Love, would have failed to be more effective than fear if any are lost or left in torment.

On the other hand, we should recognize that there is some persuasive power in the idea that there are - and that it needs to be believed that there are - real consequences to a person's choices: values, attitudes and actions - and just not projected horrors designed to restrain destructive human actions ¹⁰

We need to believe that there are real consequences to our values, attitudes and actions not only because it is pressingly obvious in actual living but because life has no meaning, no purpose without consequences.

This is simple experience to us. You nurture a plant with food and water and sunlight and it thrives. You take the same plant do everything else but fail to give it water and it dies. There are consequences to our attitudes and actions.

We similarly need to believe that there are real consequences for our attitudes and actions in some life after death because we know human nature: we daily witness, some who would oppress others, and destroy other people and the rest of nature with impunity just for their own short-term advantage. We cannot see how a loving God would, effectively condone such 'sin' by leaving it without consequences, especially since the consequences imposed by this life often bear no relationship to the destruction brought about in this life.

So, justice and communal sanity cry out for consequences. Our whole society, from our personal meaning and purpose, to our relationships, through families to communities, to our national institutions, all depend on consequences, on justice in some form, on law if necessary.

And, we need to believe in some form of justice from a God who is Love because we cannot imagine a Love which does not seek at least some level of justice between those who are loved.

Again, it is simple experience to us. You love your children so you want them treated equally – that is fair, love demands it. So, it lies within the definition of love for a God who is Love to arrange some means of just consequences for a person's chosen values, attitudes and actions – if not in this life then in the next.

Of course, that depends on their being a next, a next life that is. So, we need to look at the kind of evidence there might be for life after death, and to then see how justice and love seem to be satisfied in the experiences which people tell us they have had in the next life, and then, finally, what difference it makes to our lives now.

Is it reasonable to believe that life continues in some personal form after death?

There are many books and texts on life after death, for simplicity I refer you to one book, that by Patricia Pearson, *Opening Heaven's Door* ¹¹ But let me start with some comments on the significance of experiences relating to dying and being dead.

1. The experience of people who are dying is as legitimate as any other individual experience. Drug or disease induced hallucinations can readily be distinguished from the peaceful state and perceptions of those nearing death. ¹² And each report is not to be simply dismissed because it is of one person. But, varied explanations for those real, and frequently repeated experiences can be expected. ¹³
2. The corroborative experiences of people relating to the dying or death of another person are also as legitimate as any other individual experience.

The reason that I start here is because we tend to assess other people's experiences by our own. If we have not had a similar experience, or do not have some trusted person who has shared a similar experience we tend to dismiss the experience as somehow less than real i.e. unbelievable.

The experiences of the dying, relevant to this talk, pass through at least two phases:

- a. what they say about what they see and the dead people they speak with,
- and b. the experience of the dead person being conscious and remembering being in another state.

We can seek to establish a functioning conscious mind when the body is clinically dead by questioning the person about their 'death' experience on their

resuscitation: e.g. did they see someone as dead whom they did not know was dead but who is in fact, dead. Or do they describe events which were happening during their death but out of their physical perception but which they witnessed and could recall on resuscitation. Both of these types of events are established in the literature.

We may also establish a functioning conscious mind by the witness of someone who 'met' the dead person. J.B. Phillips, a well-known linguist and Biblical scholar has reported a 'vision' of C.S. Lewis shortly after Lewis's death. Phillips reports that, while he was watching television one day, Lewis 'appeared' sitting in a chair within a few feet of Phillips and spoke a few meaningful words to Phillips. A week later, while Phillips was in bed, Lewis again appeared and repeated the same message. Now it turns out that Phillips was in a life-threatening depression at the time and was doubting God's love for him. Lewis's appearances and what he said to Phillips snapped him out of his depression. Critical is the fact that Phillips had not known of the death of Lewis before Lewis first appeared. (see footnote 15) As I shared in the family time I regard the testimony of children most convincing in such circumstances.

I only have time for limited examples, so I refer you to Pearson's book and from there on to many more. I want to note that the death experience has been described for many hundreds of years and over many cultures and remained remarkably consistent. This does not decide for us whether the experience is grounded in physiological events in the human brain or whether it is grounded in a reality external to our bodies. The uniformity of descriptions merely supports the claim that this is a real experience needing explanation and then inclusion into our worldview.

There are many books which describe a positive experience in and beyond the dying process.¹⁴ In contrast, I choose to refer you to the testimony of Howard Storm, the atheist professor of art who “described himself as a selfish man who not only did not believe in God but detested those who did”.¹⁵ I choose this example for two reasons: first, I am assuming that you have all read or at least have heard of the positive journeys dying people most often have: the comforting presence of deceased relatives and friends; the movement through a 'tunnel' of light; the meeting with a loving being of light; the review of life; the self-assessment; the embrace of intense love; the delight; the need to return; the return to this life as a changed person now focused on caring for others. So, assuming that you know such examples, I choose to share with you one of the alternative experiences.

But first, I want to note that whatever the next world is it seems to be highly accommodating to us – both in this life and in the dying process. The imagery in dying, the scenes we go through reflect what we already might find familiar. So, for example, the iconic figure people meet is recognized by the person who has died, for Christians most often as Jesus – but people of different cultures may well 'recognize' a different iconic person. Thus, the Spirit world is seen to accommodate to our experiences for our benefit – so don't take things too literally. The experience of Howard Storm is very unpleasant but reflects what Storm would be expected to conjure up if he had to conjure up a journey into the next life. That doesn't make the underlying experience any less real, it had real consequences in Storm's life.

Also note that no physician, no one at all, is noted as declaring that Howard Storm was dead – Storm just assumes that he was. Two issues arise from this: what is the role of the brain in such experiences – could a brain generate the whole thing or is there some interplay with another world – a spirit world, and if so what role does

each play? It is an error to assume that such experiences, such interplay of the physical and the spiritual, only take place at death. I look forward to our August speaker who will, I hope guide us further into this arena. But let us relate Howard Storm's experience.

Storm was in Paris on June 2 1985 and went to a hospital with a perforated intestine. After 10 hours without treatment, in great pain, Storm died.

Storm notes: "I did stop breathing and went unconscious. ... Then I wasn't unconscious any more. Not only was I conscious, but I was more conscious than I had ever been in my entire life. My sense(s) were all greater than they had ever been. And I was absolutely amazed that my senses were so heightened."

"Then I heard people calling me outside the room. I went over to the doorway of the room and they were saying to me in English, ... 'Hurry up, let's go. We've been waiting for you.' And I said, 'Who are you?' And they said, 'We don't have time for your questions. We know all about you. We've been waiting for you a long time.'"

Now Storm has a "very bad feeling" when he leaves with his visitors. His visual acuity dropped quickly until it compared to "a very very bad TV picture" one with snow. This group of people that were commanding me to come with them. ... They were very authoritative."

"So, we're going along and I'm trying to ask these people questions. ... Eventually as I asked them questions, they would say, 'Shut up. We're sick of you. We're tired of you.' ... I began to get a little worried about them ... now we were in darkness. ... They were herding me along and I said, 'I don't want to go any further.' They said, 'You will go further. You're almost there.' And I stopped."

Now more numerous, his escorts became very violent with him. At this point, Storm tells his interviewer, “I don't want to talk about this anymore. It's too awful. ... (But, eventually) I heard what sounded like my own voice say to me, and this was audible, ... “Pray to God.” And I thought, “Dumb idea. I don't pray.” Then I heard the same thing, “Pray to God.” And I thought, I don't know how to pray. I couldn't pray. I wanted to pray. A third time I heard, “Pray to God.” ... I was trying to remember the prayer I had been taught as a child.”

Storm got more confused and spoke out what he was thinking. He notes, “The people around (me) responded violently to any accidental mention of God in my attempt to simply remember a prayer ... but they were (also) literally retreating back into the darkness.”

Then there was a time of being alone and time to recognize and work through being full of remorse for the life he had led. He says, “There was no hope at all; the despair of being stuck with absolutely no hope and feeling like my life was just the most miserable waste. I recalled my childhood and a Sunday school classroom song: “Jesus loves me.” There were both the words *Jesus loves me* going through my head, but also a very intense recollection of being a child and believing that there was this wonderful being ... who loved me and cared about me and would protect me and rescue me from harm.” So, despite his doubts Storm decided to take a chance on that childish faith. He “called out into the darkness, ‘Jesus, please save me.’ ... All I had was hope, but no faith.”

Into that darkness a light came, it took the form of a man whom Storm decided was Jesus. This one touched Storm, and wholeness returned to his 'body'. Storm “felt sensations of being loved that I had never experienced in my entire life and cannot possibly begin to describe because of its intensity.” Thus loved, carried, crying,

repenting, Storm was taken into the company of those who would put him at ease and review with him his whole life – none of his great achievements, just the good, the bad, and the ugly of how he had treated people. After the review and all of his questions were answered. Storm notes, “I said I was ready to go to Heaven, I want to go to Heaven’. ... They gave me the first bad news during this whole process of question-answer. ‘You're not going to Heaven. You're going back to the world.’ There was an argument – they won. Storm notes that “I was actually being given the privilege of having another opportunity in the world to live the way God had created me to live in the first place. ... When I came back, I was right back in the pain that I had left. Only I was back in consciousness.”

Surgery then soon happened and was successful. The next day on seeing his wife again Storm said to her, “Guess what: it's all love, just love. And you don't have to do anything but just accept it and become part of it. There's more love than you will ever know.”

So, without boring you with endless stories, let me put things together and suggest to you with a minimum of images, how love and justice get incorporated into the afterlife.

You die and let us see you being embraced by love preparatory to your life review. The objective is to have you see your life on love's terms: not on the terms you may have had pressed upon you, or terms willingly adopted which shaped your goals in life, on which you assessed your life. Love's terms are relational. How did you treat other people, yourself, the world? Did you grow to be able to forgive those who injured or disappointed you – can you forgive them, can you forgive yourself, can you forgive God? With the smallest opening to love and the merest willingness to see things afresh on love's terms, do you choose to grow toward

such love and forgiveness? Will you let love in? Oh, just the merest opening. Love, patiently, will lead you to love and forgiveness. Lead you to heaven.

But, if you will not love love's work. If you resist love because you will not relent, will not release the hurt, the anger. If you will shut love out, yet, with love you must remain, and with you, love chooses to remain. There is the added pain. It's not hell, unending. It is rather closer to purgatory, with the time, the experience being entirely in the hands of the individual. Love remains, close at hand, ever attentive, ready to comfort, ready to restore.

I remember as a boy doing something wrong, I forget what it was but it must have been pretty bad. Whatever it was had been told to my grandma and my mom – told, probably, by my beastly brother – and now it was supper time. And I knew that they knew. And I knew that they knew that I knew that they knew. There was nothing really hidden. And as I say, it was supper time, and we were all sat down at the table. And no one said anything about my crime. Not a word. My mom said, “Derek, why are not eating? Grandma has made such a lovely supper for us all.” “I don't feel hungry, mom.” “I'm sorry about that,” she said, “well, just sit there then, perhaps you will feel more like eating very soon.” “I want to go upstairs.” “Really, you must be feeling poorly. Well up you go then. I'll be up there very soon.”

I had created my own little hell. Stoked the fires with my own resistance. And love persisted. I still don't remember my crime – I only remember my time burning in my own little hell.

Universalism: love and justice.

To our last topic: how would such beliefs effect our lives today?

Now I want to make what I think is an important move, and I think that this is a critical point for all religions: it doesn't finally matter how a person explains this description of the dying experience and the after-life experience – whether as external reality or as psycho-social reality. In either case, committing to a worldview, a faith-stance is universal, everyone has one – we all need one, we all accept one, we all adhere to one.

Even if our worldview changes from time to time, at any one time we have a worldview which determines our values, our attitudes and our actions; determines our style and quality of life; and our worldview effects the style and quality of life of those we meet - or never meet, (*everyone to a greater or lesser extent – by engagement or neglect*).

Our worldview, our religion, our faith stance should then – as most major prophets teach us - be measured by our character, who we are and seek to become. Our character, ourselves, is all that we can take into any after-life. And that character is evidenced by the fruit showing in our lives and the fruit evident in the lives of those we influence. As my pre-eminent teacher Jesus tells us “by their fruits you shall know them”. And the fruit he highlights in this context is forgiveness. ¹⁶

Now what would be the fruit in our lives which comes from adopting the understanding of dying and the after-life put before us today?

The self-measure placed before us soon after our death is the ability to rest in, to delight in the embrace of all-knowing love and thus allowing such love to utterly penetrate our being, making us as one with it.

(Us, freely allowing what cannot be refused anyway, that is, allowing that love full knowledge; and us choosing to receive full understanding and forgiveness; thus

embracing all others with the same love, them being of the same love which embraces us.)

But here is the rub. If we are to embrace and be embraced by pure love after death we must practice being that in this life. If we are to be comfortable with love and the requirement of forgiveness then, we must nurture that quality within ourselves now.

An aside: I was working in the dining room at McDonalds when I was called into conversation by a man I did not know, but whose companion knew me quite well. I mean no insult when I say that the man was older and looked a bit rough. We made the connection of living in Calgary about the same time. I told him of my experience of driving cab in the east side, quite often driving prostitutes, and how I found them to be honourable and fair with me. Obviously, this was not a planned conversation! It was then that the man called me to come closer and said, "I've got a question for you." To which I replied, "OK." "So," he asks, "what would you say to man who was dying - full of hate?" I replied, "I would say that he must decide whether he still wants to live with that hate after he dies. If he doesn't want to live with it then, he should find a way to forgive now. The game is almost over. No change can come now by clinging onto hate. But change for the better will come by forgiving others, by forgiving yourself, by forgiving God." The man thought awhile, then replied "Yea." And at that I was called back to my work. Later on, he told me that I had changed his life that day and could he have my 'phone number – I gave him my e-mail. I hope that he will write or drop by again.

Of course, I know, it's easy to say 'forgive' but I know that it is difficult indeed to forgive others, even more difficult to forgive yourself, and a big step to forgive God.

But for quality of life here and for ease of movement into any life which follows, for any flourishing of self, community or Church remember: by their fruits you shall know what they are, by their fruits you shall know their peace or turmoil inside, by their fruits you shall know their peace or stresses at home, by their fruits you shall know their mission and effects in society. And God's fruit is you – me and you.

So, take all of your life to date and wrap it up as a parcel, and in imagination, let it float away down a river or stream somewhere. It's done with, over. You still may have lessons to learn from it, others may too, but it is done now. *Can you forgive others their sins: ingrained as they are by evolution, played with by socialization and society, embraced by the individual.* Can you forgive those who hurt you – first because they are human, and second because you choose to be free from resentment, free from grinding on it.

Right now, who do you most need to forgive? Can you at this moment name them to yourself. Do you want to be free, free from being tied up with them by day or night, night after night? If you want to be free of them, I know that you can't just flippantly forgive them, but can you promise yourself to try to achieve forgiveness. That doesn't mean that you forget what happened. That doesn't mean that you again permit or enable your being taken advantage of, used or abused again. It means that you let the consequences flow toward them and let them have to deal with the consequences. It means that you get out of the way. You free yourself from having to fix them. Let life do it. And if life doesn't fix them let death do it. They are going to die. They likely will recall how they have lived. Let death fix them.

But don't leave it to death to fix you, eh? You can free yourself from resentment toward others, and you can free yourself from blaming yourself too. You too are a creature born with weaknesses as well as strengths. You too were trained and

influenced by others. You too had drives you barely understood and didn't always control to best advantage. You too were surrounded by circumstances which enabled or undermined your progress. The measure isn't what you gained or what you lost, the measure is who you have become, how you cared, freed up, nurtured, guided, encouraged others to become their best selves.

And that counts because that is how you become your best self. And you is all that you can take with you, through death, and into life after death. So, forgive others. Forgive yourself.

And if you are angry at God, if your god did not fulfill the promises made on their behalf by people who said that they knew God's will but didn't, understand that it is our ignorance of whatever God there be, and that is the effect of the gods we chose to govern our values, our attitudes and our actions. God is just God's own self. Far from being in control of everything, God experiences everything. If only for that, forgive God. Have mercy on God. Weep, if you can, with God.

And if, despite the evidence and our hopes, if there is no place, no life for us after death, at least, this way we became the best, the most loving people we could be, striving to build the best, the most loving communities for us and for others: now and into whatever is for them beyond this life of ours.

For us and them we became our best, and gave of our best, for we hoped, we believed the best. Agreed?

[1](#) Rankin, David, *What do Unitarian Universalists believe?* Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, Mass. wallet card, undated.

[2](#) Some day, perhaps, I may have the privilege of sharing my thoughts on the Unitarian side using the functional rather than the (Platonically based) philosophical definitions of 'God' and gods.

[3](#) All religions and societies have some form of consequential thesis. Even Buddhism has consequential (karmic) reincarnation before the goal of enlightenment.

Coogan, Micahel, D., *World religions*, Duncan Baird Publishers, London , 2003, is a good summary with sections on each religion's views on death and the afterlife.

[4](#) Dearman, Fran, *All about us*, Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, Olinda, Ontario, Jan. 2017.

[5](#) Dearman, page 2, para. 5

[6](#) Dearman, page 2 para. 4. I concur with this theology.

[7](#) Dearman,, page 2 para. 5.

[8](#) 'God is love' in Christian and Jewish Scripture is most plainly seen at Deuteronomy 7:9
Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. And 1 John 4:8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

The best definition of love which I know is found at 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

(All Bible quotes NIV.)

[9](#) Christian theology: Jesus referring to children, Matthew 18:14 In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

Note that earlier in this chapter, versus 6-9 (later addition?) there is equally strong grounding for punishment for 'sins'.

[10](#) 'destructive attitudes and actions' = original sin in Christian orthodoxy, but originating in the demands of evolution, thus not intrinsically 'evil', but may be considered as 'sinful' by being deleterious to 'accepted' personal or collective 'good'.

[11](#) Pearson, Patricia *Opening heaven's door: what the dying may be trying to tell us about where they're going*, Random House, Canada, copyright, Patricia Pearson, 2014

[12](#) Pearson, chapter 2 What the dying see, see especially page pages 35-36

[13](#) Nelson, Kevin, *The Spiritual Doorway in the Brain*, Dutton Publishers, Penguin Group, N.Y, N.Y., 2011.

Nelson proposes a purely physiological explanation for the 'typical' dying experience – tunnel of light, etc. One problem comes with the details of people and conversations held and the experience of meeting dead people the dying one did not know were dead. A possible combination sees the physiological process as comparable to that of an eye that sees. That we can fully explain the mechanism of sight despite it's upside down, left to right consequences, that does not invalidate the claim that something real is being seen by the person seeing.

[14](#) Pearson's book has already been noted. One of the earliest was *Life after Life* by Raymond Moody.

[15](#) Varghese, Abraham, Roy, *There is Life After Death: Compelling reports from those who have glimpsed the afterlife*, The Career Press, NJ, USA, copyright 2010 by R.A. Varghese, quotes are from Chapter 4.

Storm, Howard, *My Descent into Death: And the message of love which brought me back*, Doubleday, Random House, 2000, 2005.

[16](#) Matthew 7:16-21 By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn-bushes, or figs from thistles?

Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

The complementary fruits of the Spirit and the qualities inherent in love are summarized by Paul:

Galatians 5:22-23 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Also compare the above images with Matthew 6:12, 14, 15 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.