

Traditions of the Afterlife

The Weird and the Wonderful

November 1, 2009

For many years during my part time ministries, I worked in a Funeral Home. I drove a hearse, assisted with removals and in the morgue, did many funerals and was privileged to work with a director and owner who was a UU, my former Youth Group Advisor and owned a Memorial Society certified Funeral Home. Funeral Directors and workers are a breed all unto themselves; like the professions of garbage collection, and sewer reaming, it is one occupation that is rarely talked about in public or among general company. Any mention of my past employment usually results in an euuuuuuuooo, an about face, and a very quick exit from the conversation. There are occasions when it can be a useful tool, depending upon to whom one is speaking! I would like to note that among all the toys that have been created for the enjoyment of our children, there has never been a match-box die- cast hearse found among them!

However, on the contrary being introduced as a minister, rather than a Funeral Home employee, elicits a very different response, the sometimes welcome, often dreaded question, “What do UU’s believe?” inevitably follows the introduction. I discovered that quoting the 7 principles to the enquirer usually gets a polite nod, but that’s not the answer they are looking for...what is really meant, between the lines, is the question “how does your faith relate my beliefs as to to what happens when you die?” That is the bottom line, anything else that does not address that question directly, is just meaningless rhetoric.

Most religions are concerned with the results at the end of the lifeline and all the efforts put into getting there with the promise of reward in the afterlife, be it Resurrection, Nirvana, the bliss of heaven or fires of hell. Every tradition that I have witnessed during funeral rites, with few

exceptions, has its roots in that premise, that the spirit remains in some form, and the role of those left behind is to perform some rite to assist the deceased in completing their journey to the other side.

Therefore the care of our shells, what remains when the life has left the body, in Christian societies is left to others to deal with. All of these unseen events, from the time of death until the deceased is prepared for public viewing, or burial, remains unknown to most people, and it is what our horror films are made of.

Our very first introductions to concepts about the afterlife often come to us during this time of year, when the veil between the living and the dead is alleged to be at its thinnest. Halloween being that of which we are most familiar; dressing up as ghoulish creatures of the night, skeletons, ghosts and witches all of whom represented an evil presence, an unknown associated with those who are drifting about, who may have made bad choices in life and were doomed to the fringes between the living and the dead. We know that originally the importance of the tradition of All Hallows Eve and The Day of the Dead were incorporated into the Christian calendar as All Saints and All Souls day, as a compromise between Christian teachings and the traditions of Paganism.

Our culture has divided the concept of an afterlife into two very distinct factions; the Good and the deserving verses and the evil and corrupt. These images of sitting at the right hand of God or relegated to the eternal fire pit have become a significant part of how many faith communities structure their doctrines, behaviors, rituals and rites of passage.

Our Wiccan community today still suffers greatly from these ancient images and the persecution of witches as evil, green, wart speckled, spell casters, hags on broom sticks and devil worshipping horned warlocks performing Satanic rites on unsuspecting virgins, who may require an exorcism to recover if they survive.

These commonly accepted ideas of the Afterlife as a reward or punishment for our deeds or mis-deeds here on earth, do not necessary fit with the theologies of many Unitarian Universalists, as a matter of fact it is a topic that most of us prefer to avoid, do not discuss, or merely keep our opinions to ourselves.

I grew up in a household that was pretty much non-verbal when it came to things of the spirit. Only once did I ever hear my dad refer to the netherworld and he said, "I don't believe in ghosts, but I have seen three!"

During the years I worked at the Funeral Home I was privileged to witness, a large variety of non-traditional funeral practices that allowed for many alternatives that other Funeral Parlors would not. The most interesting came from faith communities that were not considered acceptable in Christian society. One funeral I assisted at was in a Modern Buddhist Chinese Temple in Lynn, MA. Preparation of the body was done by family members; washing and anointing the body in preparation for the vigil at the temple. Most funerals for the Chinese community take place on the weekend, and the Zodiac is consulted to determine the optimal time for the service. We removed our shoes as we entered the temple, where the casket was covered with photos and wreathes. Small grills were burning in the kitchen and much food was prepared. Paper items such as money would be burnt in small grills. The belief and tradition surrounding these paper items is that when burnt, they go to the deceased in the afterlife, where these items are needed just as much as they are here. The concepts of heaven and hell did not exist at these services.

At one wake of a man of Greek descent, a silver coin was placed between the lips of the deceased to pay for passage to the next world. This is reminiscent of the ancient Greek custom of placing a coin the mouth of the deceased to pay passage across the river Styx.

The most moving of rituals came from the traditions of The Native Americans, whose entire existence was dependent upon a deep and reverent relationship with all of nature. Collectively the tribes of all nations, although varied in their rituals, saw the transition from life to death as one

uninterrupted continuum, all connected by the workings of the natural world and lessons of their ancestors.

The early missionaries, who traveled up the Hudson from Indian to Eskimo territories, reported back to their superiors the “horrors” of native burial practices, of returning the dead back to nature, allowing them to decompose on wooden scaffolds, or cremating the dead to return the cremains to the earth, while grieving, chanting and dancing around the corpse. Although ecologically sound in disposing of human remains, the missionaries labeled such ceremonies as not only godlessly- pagan but sinful. From these reports back to “civilization” our own funeral rites forbade such desecration of the body. Only within the past decade have the churches begun to change their views on care of dead to include cremation as an ecologically sound alternative to expensive casket burials, not to mention the fact that the cemeteries are running out of space!

Even more profound, was the value placed on the wisdom of the elders and the deep love and respect shown for the lessons of their living and the messages and guidance which their spirit brought to tribe through natural occurrences; such as the sudden appearance of a spirit animal, a hawk, eagle a bear or wolf, at a time of indecision, or the rituals of a shaman voicing the continuing guidance and instruction, from a respected one who has passed.

Over the years a majority of Native traditions have been Christianized, as have so many others, to such a degree that many of their customs have sadly been lost or compromised.

Speculation over the existence of an afterlife has taken many forms and the myriad of ancient rituals to call forth memories of the dead have been adjusted, adapted and at times unfairly judged and corrupted by religious leaders as demonic or anti-Christian. Regardless, the rituals we create, the ceremonies we perform, the rites of passage we honor for ourselves and our loved ones are performed not only to comfort ourselves and remember our dead, but done so in the hope that what has come before in this life, still has a presence in ours today.

As a Unitarian Universalist minister, who is supposed to have some insight on this topic, the greatest clue came to me years ago when my three year old nephew, picked up a harmonica and blew into it. When a sound emerged, he held it up with a surprised look on his face and queried, “batteries?”

No, I said, “that came from you!” We don’t run on batteries, just energy, contained vibrant energy... After that experience when asked about God and the afterlife, I could respond, “I believe that we are born as unique, remarkable beings, each of whom relates to the web of life in our own way, and it is the essence of God, of the miracle of creation, and when the cycle comes to fruition, it is that energy that remains in whatever form it may come to us. It is in us and around us eternally and with those we love, always.

Whatever one chooses to believe, in an afterlife, a spirit world, a white light, ghosts or nothing, humankind will always seek out the wild, the weird and the wonderful. We will give it names, tell our stories, mourn and celebrate in the hope that there lies beyond a home for the mysterious energy within us that science tells us can neither be neither created nor destroyed.

I would like to close with these words by The Rev Forrest Church, from his book *Of Love and Death*, published shortly after his death from esophageal cancer: he wrote.

“Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.

We are the religious animal; knowing that we must die, we cannot help but question what life means.

We are more alike in our ignorance than we differ in our knowledge.

***God* is not God's name. *God* is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each.**

Whether or not there is life after death, surely there is love after death.

The one thing that can never be taken from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we die.

The purpose of life is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for.”

...Want what you have. Do what you can. Be who you are...

So be it

Amen

H.Baylies © 2009