

THE CIRCLE OF LIFE AND DEATH

by
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Sometimes I get the *'heebee-jeebees'* when I hear the D-word. Fear of death is one of the great fears of humanity. We fear our own deaths, as well as our lovers, our parents, our children... Just hearing that five-letter word, d-e-a-t-h, makes some of us begin to feel depressed. Yet, our spiritual tradition does not have much of a particular, overarching theology of death or the *'hereafter,'* other than the perennial Universalist message of “universal salvation” – wherein the Divine is a loving Being that would condemn no person to some dark and ominous

eternity. Which is comforting, as far as that goes; but it does not go far enough for me. We do, however, have an amazing theology of life, welcoming people into sacred communities of love, justice, and harmony with all humanity. Our interdependence is underscored and upheld, leading us into broader understandings of our relationships, of theology, biology, psychology and even of life, itself. Even in light of today's theme of death, we still affirm the UU tradition of “the celebration of life.” Earlier, we heard in a song, “the Circle of Life...moves us all through despair and hope, through faith and love, till we find our place on the path unwinding...”

I *believe* in a real Circle of Life. I came to realize that it was the theological foundation of my work as a hospital chaplain, and it remains important to my ministerial work here and now. If we were to draw this as a diagram, the natural cycles of life in the world follow a ‘ring’ pattern: birth – life – death – rebirth. For every ending there is a new beginning. The wheel keeps on turning... Now, I don’t just mean this in rationalist, biological terms, or at the other extreme, with trite expressions about birds and bees... or something like that. Instead, it would be good for us to spend some time thinking of this cycle of nature in theological terms.

I have often heard my Christian friends, and former patients, talk about “returning to God.” In many ways, God is just too huge of a concept for human understanding, so let’s use a metaphor instead. Think of a huge ocean...and a drop of water – *plop!* – returns to the sea. If the ocean is *All-that-is-Divine*, and we are the drop of water...we become one with the Divine. I talked about rebirth before, but not reincarnation, because I don’t believe in direct reincarnation. If the drop of water enters the ocean, it is dispersed throughout the greater body of water – it is impossible to remove exactly the same drop of water. However, other drops of water (which may

contain a bit of the water from your drop) can be removed – hence “rebirth.”

This is how I see the power of Life, which is also that which Unitarian minister, Ralph Waldo Emerson, called the “Over-Soul,” a much larger Being that that some people call Mother-Father God, or the Divine, or the Spirit-of-Life... the Spirit-of-Life that is symbolized by the flame in our chalice. In the reading, Reverend Church wrote about awakening “*to a world of light and dancing shadow, stone and glass, life and death... awakening... to the call of life itself*”. Do we recognize this life that is greater than ourselves? Hinduism teaches about Brahman and Atman, in which Brahman is the great, cosmic

entirety of the Divine Universe, and Atman is the portion of the Divine within each of us, our soul. Not to put too fine a point on it, but Brahman is their name for my ocean, and Atman is the drop of water. In Hinduism and Buddhism, this ocean metaphor has a name: *Samsara*. I have seen this kind of metaphor, using different terminology, in many of the world’s religions – Hinduism and Buddhism, in some folk traditions related to Christianity and Judaism, and various Native and Pagan religions. It seems to me that there is an inherent Truth to a metaphor that is found in so many different places and times.

So, let me ask you: Is it clear to you, how this idea of *samsara* fits into Unitarian Universalist

theology? I think **Walt Whitman** said it well, in his poem, **Interweb**:

*A noiseless spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood
isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of
itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.*

*And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of
space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the
spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile
anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere,
O my soul.¹*

I clearly hear a message of interconnectedness of all life in Whitman's poem. These words make me

¹ "Interweb" in *Meditations of Walt Whitman: Earth, My Likeness*, edited by Chris Highland, (Berkeley: Wilderness Press, 2004), 104.

visualize my soul, out in this vast ocean of space, building these filament bridges that help me to connect one part of existence to another, like an interdependent web circling over and under, around and through the Circle of Life... looking like so many spokes on a wheel. And metaphorically speaking, I am able to choose any one of those filaments and travel off in that direction, like a dewdrop rolling down a strand of web. I find myself in a new way of living, not just a new way of dying. Although...dying well is a reflection of living well...and that **vast ocean** does... await us all. It remains for us to build the bridges, connecting the shores of this life to another, till finally we have traveled the whole circle round.

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I have a story to tell you, about one young man who did just that. In this true story, I will talk about those we leave behind, because the theology I have shared is not well suited to grief counseling. It just isn't, and I get that! In the moment of losing someone else, someone whom we love, how does pain, suffering, grief and other emotions relate to this Circle of Life? I believe that we each have our own attachments to the life we are currently engaged in, and have love for the people in our lives. So, I realize that telling a person who just lost a loved one – or know they are ***about to*** lose a loved one – telling them about some sort of *rebirth*, may not give them the

consolation, closure or support that they need.

Therefore, the theological understanding that I have outlined may not be useful as a way of alleviating grief *in the moment*, and it is not my suggestion to use it in that way. Which brings us back to the basic skills of ministry: listening, being present, and respecting where people are in the moment. A theological understanding, such as the one I have shared with you, may or may not come to the grieving person later; and, as minister or chaplain, I may or may not be present when a grieving person is finally able *to make meaning* from his or her own grief. But I also realize that you or I could sit with a grieving person, support them, help them to maintain their

bridge to the life of the lost loved one... Fondly remembering shared times they had with them, while also preparing to walk through the rest of one's own life *without* that loved one.

With that said, here is an example where I believe the Circle of Life was inherently present within a situation fraught with grief and pain. While serving as a chaplain, I was called upon to help a young man make a life-decision for his mother, that she was no longer capable of making for herself. She had had her son later in life, and was now a widow. At this point in her life, she now had many severe medical issues, which had recently been complicated by her slipping into a coma and being unable to live

without life-support. Her son was – **maybe** – 20 years old, and he had the weight of life and death on his shoulders, alone. In the process of letting her go, the son wanted to do something that would honor his mother's Christian beliefs, but that would also work with his own agnosticism. It turns out that this young man and I share a culture, as both of us had come to that hospital in Oregon, from our lives in the college community of Berkeley. We both have histories of spiritual exploration and expansive understandings of the Divine. He wanted to offer a prayer that would bridge the gap between him and his mother, and between himself and God. As a Unitarian Universalist chaplain, I was probably a good match

for him, and our shared culture helped us build rapport. I figured out that he had basically already made the decision to turn off his mother's life-support, but he wasn't yet ready to articulate that out loud.

As I drew his story out of him, and heard much about his life with his mother, and their estrangement from other relatives who might have otherwise been there to support him. He and she had many bridges connecting them, but like so many people, bridges to other relatives had been burned. How many times have you heard of this – how many family members no longer speak to each other? Well... While we were talking, the young man and I planned out a

prayer, we went into his mother's room, and we prayed. I left some space in the middle of the prayer for him, in which he started speaking:

“God, I don't know if you can hear me. But if you can, my mother loved you all her life. Please take care of her...” And he continued on with a heartfelt prayer to God, such as he had probably never before uttered in his life.

I learned from that young man that I can simply support someone – he made the decision about her care, he added his own words within the prayer I started and ended, and he shared many stories with me before and after that prayer. He was strong and capable – he just needed someone there to support

him. He needed help in building his bridges of life, and he needed to know that it was okay to let his mother go, if she was ready to go.

His theology was rationalist, maybe even humanist – not at all in keeping with his mother’s faith. But he needed to respect her beliefs, during the course of his decision-making process. I believe that he understood the concept of the Circle of Life, and personally took solace in that, although it may have differed from his mother’s own belief. And this was okay – it was my job to meet him where he was, and be there for him. And that is my second message for today: while I believe in the Circle of Life, teaching a lesson about that is not a good way to approach grief.

Rather, it is better to simply listen... In his case, I think he already got the theology I’ve been telling *you* about, but that wasn’t what he and I *talked* about. We did not talk about building bridges between his mother’s life and his own, although that is what we accomplished that day!

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You may build those bridges unconsciously, over many years. Perhaps you are able to connect your life to that of your children – and you will live on within them, after your death. Many take solace from this knowledge. Others build bridges in other ways... Making connections with their communities through the gifts of art that they leave behind... or,

creating much-needed **services** for others that shall continue on after you leave... or, working tirelessly for **civil rights**, social justice and freedom for all, the benefits of which shall last for all people, for all time. There are so many bridges one could build, that continue to share your wisdom and life's vitality with others... even when your drop of water has returned to the great ocean of life... even when you have traveled back to the center of our interdependent web... even when you have walked around the "path unwinding," that Circle of Life... The wheel keeps on turning. One lesson that Starhawk teaches the Feminist Goddess movement is this, that: "*We are searching for the waters of life, we are moving, we*

shall live again!" Stop looking at death with a sense of depression or dread, but recognize the theology of life that we all share, in which death is only one strand in the web, one drop in the ocean, one step in the **middle** of a long and wonderful journey. The great theologian, Martin Buber, said: "*God is not here or there, to be possessed, but is everywhere, to be met. It is only we who are not always there.*"² That is our lesson, to **be** here, to be present in our great sea of life, to be here as we build our bridges to the lives of all our loved ones.

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² Emphasis mine.

Whether you call it Life-Force, or a great Ocean, Brahman or Goddess or Spirit-of-Life, *find your connection to something deep inside you*, and then **share** it with everyone else. Children of the Earth, *this* is our universal salvation. As John Buehrens once wrote, “*love the Ground of Being with all one’s heart and mind and strength.*” I can think of no higher aspiration. May we awaken to the fullest gifts of life... Blessed be you all! Namastè. Amen.