

Wind on the Water

A Viewsletter To Encourage
Unitarian Universalist
Theology and Spirituality

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The Wheel of Life

There is a story about a group of artists who came to do a portrait of the Buddha. He said, "Do it this way," and drew a picture in the sand. You can still see copies of his self-portrait: The Buddhist Wheel of Life and Death.

It has four rings. In the center, a rooster, a pig, and a snake chase each other biting each other's tails. They represent anger, greed, and illusion.

Around them is a circle showing souls rising and souls falling.

Around that is a circle showing six realms of being.

Around that the final circle shows twelve stages of life, death and rebirth, each leading to the next.

The entire wheel is pictured sitting in the lap of Yama, the God of Death, clutched in his claws and teeth, for life is lived in the jaws of death.

It is the third circle, the one showing the six realms, that I wish to consider more fully.

At the top is the Realm of the Blessed Gods who dwell in opulence and ease. All blessings come to them

through no effort of their own.

To one side is pictured the Realm of the Jealous Gods. They also dwell in opulence, but without ease, because the blessings which come to them are the result of their own considerable labor and struggle. They are tortured in part by the realization that theirs is not the highest Realm.

To the other side of the Blessed Gods is the Realm of the Humans. The Realm of the Humans is filled with distraction; it is filled with a multitude of activities, all calling for attention.

The bottom realm is the Realm of Hell Beings, souls in continual torment. The picture of this realm usually includes a mirror, a reminder that most of the suffering of the Hell Beings is self-inflicted.



To one side of the Hell Beings are the Animals, placid and mindless.

To the other side of the Hell Beings is the Realm of the Hungry Ghosts. They are pictured with thin necks and huge bellies. Their's is the realm of addiction, of craving that can never be satisfied.

Now if you wish to be a literalist, you might think each realm is a real place and that souls are reborn in one or another of them.

If you view it more symbolically, you might decide that each realm represents some type of person.

If you are honest with yourself, you

will see that you move among the realms yourself from moment to moment. What we mean by salvation is a movement along the wheel, from one of the lower realms to one of the higher. But the wheel is always spinning, and that form of salvation can

Solon and Croesus

When Solon, the law-giver of Athens, was touring the Eastern Mediterranean world, he came to Sardis and visited king Croesus. Croesus arranged to have his slaves show Solon the treasure rooms filled with gold and precious jewels, and a day or two later, over dinner, Croesus asked Solon, "You are renowned for your knowledge and your many travels; who would you say is the happiest man you've ever seen?"

Solon answered, "Tellos of Athens."

Croesus paused, "What is the reason for your choice?"

"His city was prosperous, and Tellos himself always had sufficient money for his needs. He saw his sons grow to fine manhood and saw their children born and live. And when Athens was at war with Eleusis, he died gloriously on the battlefield and was given a public funeral where he fell."

"Humph, then who would you say was the second happiest?"

"Cleobis and Biton, two young men of Argos. They lived comfortably and were so strong they won prizes at the games. And one day, when their mother, a priestess of Hera, had to be

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carried to the temple in an ox cart, and the oxen were slow in coming in from the fields, the boys yoked themselves to the cart and hauled it the six miles to the temple.

“The men praised the boys for their strength, and the women praised their mother for having such dutiful sons. Their mother was so pleased by the praise that she went up to the statue of Hera and prayed that her sons be given the greatest blessing that the gods can give to mortals. And the goddess answered the prayer. After the sacrifices were made, and the sacred meal was eaten, the two boys fell asleep in the temple, and in their sleep, quietly and peacefully, they died.”

“And where do you place my happiness, that you won’t even compare to that of commoners?”

“My lord, the gods are envious and enjoy bringing down the prosperous. Life is how long? Seventy years at 365 days: somewhere over 25,000 days, each of which may bring things unlike the others. You can see that life is chancy. You are rich and rule many people, but until I know you have died happily, I cannot answer your question. Great wealth may make a man no happier than modest means unless it lasts. Many of the rich have bad luck; many poor have good.

“I would hold the word ‘happy’ in reserve for those who have lived blessedly and have died as they have lived. Often the gods give a man a glimpse of happiness before ruining him.”

When Solon resumed his journeys,

Faith Watching

It is said that the Hindus in India did not know they had a religion until Europeans came and told them. We have quite self-conscious religions. But we also have many religions that

are not self-aware. This summer offers the chance to observe the popular rites of three of them.

This July fourth you can observe the major festival of the American civic religion. The ceremonies and myths are so common to us that we fail to notice them. Try looking at them with fresh eyes.

There will also be an international festival this summer: the Olympic games. Pay attention to the rites and the myths - the underlying themes of the stories that are being repeated. What is the message? Is this part of an incipient world civic religion?

On August sixth we celebrate the release of a demonic power of terror and destruction. It is symbolized by its churning fiery cloud rising like a mushroom cap. It is accompanied by (mostly false) stories of the qualms of those who released the demon. Its rites include vigils, pilgrimages to its sacred shrine in Japan, and origami.

For Reflection

During a break in a baseball game at a Catholic boys’ boarding school, the boys got into a discussion on what they would do if they had only an hour left to live.

One of the boys said, “I’d go to confession and make a good confession and then go into the chapel and spend the rest of the hour praying. I wouldn’t take any chances.”

A second boy said, “You know, there are a lot of things I haven’t experienced yet. I’d go into town and experience them before I die. I’d leave enough time for confession, of course, but I don’t want to die before I’ve really lived.”

The boys then asked the brother who was supervising the ball game, “What would you do?”

He shrugged, “I’d finish the ball game.”

If you knew you were to die soon, is there anything you would need to do first? Or is what you are doing now the best thing you could be doing?

The question

Rabbi Zusya said, “In the next world, they will not ask me, ‘Why weren’t you Moses?’ They will ask me, ‘Why weren’t you Zusya? You had the perfect chance. Nobody could have stopped you. *Why* weren’t you Zusya? Why weren’t you *Zusya*?”

Enhanced spirituality

The Rev. Edgar Peara writes:

Being spiritually minded and divinely behaved demands a studied effort. Even Jesus went off by himself for extended periods to pray. UU spirituality might be enhanced by a regular, rigorous self-examination. Bob West said, “To be religious today is to plumb depths within yourself with honesty and then to apply what you find in daily life. One without the other is of little value.”

Enhanced spirituality can result from the study of great inspirational works, scriptures, or the works of the mystics. The truths discovered then help transform character by the sincere desire of prayer plus the open receptivity of meditation, and the conscious, disciplined effort to outwardly express those ideals. Spirituality is best expressed in universal love which is unselfish, forgiving, committed, kind, helpfully caring and serving of persons and society.

Growth in spirituality requires consistent effort, patience, open-mindedness. It is the desire to merge with ultimate reality’s plan of goodness for humanity, to recognize and marvel at the intricate evidence of creation on every hand, to consistently want to be influenced by love.