

Purgatory
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I have to say that, in beginning some research for this sermon, my vision of Purgatory was fuzzy at best...and has only cleared up a little.

Growing up, good Protestant Boy, I knew that Purgatory was a Catholic invention, an imaginary halfway house between Hell and Heaven with no Biblical basis, I was told. It was wishful thinking for a last chance in the afterlife after what is *really* the last chance in this life.

The word *Purgatory* comes from the same root as the word *purge*; to cleanse, to purify. Souls in Purgatory were, presumably, being purified on their way to Paradise, but, curiously, their ETA could be moved up, their waiting period in Purgatory could be shortened, by the prayers of loved ones or, more crassly during the Middle Ages, by the procurement of indulgences. (Indulgences are items offered by the Church which believers bought or otherwise earned to decrease the amount of time or the severity of punishments they or their loved ones would receive in Purgatory).

As my confidence in the tenets of my own childhood faith waned, I began to be more interested in how *all* religious speculation about the afterlife came to be. As my certainty about Hell and Heaven has faded, my curiosity about what all of these concepts, including Purgatory, can tell us about human nature has grown. I find that Purgatory arose from the recognition that “most Christians remain sinful in some measure right up to their death; they therefore need both punishment and purging” to fully purify themselves for entry into Paradise ([*Surprised by Hope*](#), by N.T. Wright, pg. 165). I discover that such great minds and talents as Thomas Aquinas spent considerable time and effort describing Purgatory; I find out that [the Italian poet, Dante](#), is chiefly responsible for what images of Purgatory we have, and that it supplies the middle volume of his *Divine Comedy*, in which he writes,

“Now I shall sing the second kingdom,
there where the soul of man is cleansed,
made worthy to ascend to heaven.”

I discover (long after having read the book) that the well-known writer, monk and activist Thomas Merton entitled his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* after the topography of Purgatory described by Dante (each of the mountain levels representing one of the Seven Deadly Sins which are being purged from the lives of these sinners).

Seven Deadly Sins (most serious to least serious, reversing *Inferno*):

Pride

Envy

Wrath

Sloth

Avarice: immoderate desire for wealth (& Prodigality: extravagant wastefulness)

Gluttony

Lust

(Interesting note: before you even get in the gate to Dante's Purgatory, there's an outer waiting room. Those who made God wait—who waited to convert until they were on their death-bed, for instance—are sent here to wait for 30 times the amount of years they made God wait. Stephen King, commenting on this “waiting room” aspect, reportedly said, “If I have to spend time in purgatory before going to one place or the other, I guess I'll be all right as long as there's a lending library.” I know that many of you would agree because I see you all at the library after church or during the week...

And one more interesting—hopefully interesting--aside about King's statement: he seems to be assuming that souls can go from Purgatory to *either* heaven or hell, depending on their performance. As far as I can tell, souls in Purgatory are destined for heaven. The only question is how long it will take them to get there. Dante even has a St. Peter-like figure guarding the Gate of Purgatory, which makes me think of a movie theater ...you have to show your ticket just to get into the lobby--Purgatory--but once inside you know that you'll be able to see the movie--Heaven).

So the whole idea of Purgatory may make for classic literature, not to mention hours of idle speculation, but what is its religious or philosophical or moral content? How did it come to be a tenet of one of the most influential religions in the world? If we understand it as based on the belief that we can be purified through suffering...Does that resonate at all with our Unitarian Universalist tradition? Does it coincide with our own experience and understanding?

First, let me share a bit of our Universalist history that may bear on our discussion of Purgatory.

Universalism originally arose within the Christian tradition, rejecting the notion of eternal punishment for sinners. A loving God would not condemn his creatures to eternal damnation; no crime that mortals can commit would warrant such a punishment from a just Deity. In other words, there is no Hell.

The Universalists, however, though they all agreed that there was no *eternal* punishment after death, did not necessarily agree on what *did* happen after death. One faction believed that souls were welcomed into Paradise immediately as they left this mortal life; they became known as the Death and Glory Universalists. The other faction believed that, indeed, there could be a limited time of discipline, punishment, and instruction—and *limited* was a relative term, as some speculated that it could last as long as 50,000 years-- a limited time of discipline, punishment, and instruction that prepared and purified the soul for entrance into Paradise.

Sound familiar? This faction was known as the Restorationist Universalists, [the Restorationists](#), though it strikes me that they could as easily have been called the Purgatorians...or something like that. They had rejected the notion of Hell, but they had embraced a version of Purgatory.

This was not only a way of reassuring folks that really bad people would at least suffer for awhile—though it served that function, too--it was also a way of underlining the importance of free will. It was a way of holding onto the value of human endeavor and moral improvement.

You see, Calvinists believed in a doctrine known as Unconditional Election. It meant that God had already decided who would go to heaven and who was destined for hell. Nothing humans could do would change that decision; it was pre-ordained.

Universalists—the Death and Glory Universalists—though miles apart from the Calvinists in many ways, similarly believed that our fate was pre-ordained: in this case, God had decided that *everyone* was

destined for Paradise. Again, nothing that humans could do would change that decision. A much happier fate, assuredly, but a fate that left little room or purpose for free will.

The Restorationist Universalists shared theology with the Unitarians in that they felt that our choices, our reason, our individual spiritual growth and learning should have some effect on our fate.

Purgatory, though I still find the whole concept puzzling and unsettling in its focus on purification through suffering, *does* leave room for free will in a way that many Christian doctrines don't.

"You assign each cause only to the heavens, as though they drew all things along upon their necessary paths," [says Virgil to Dante in Purgatory](#). In other words, you ascribe everything to the will of God and nothing at all to the will of humans.

"If that were so, free choice would be denied you, and there would be no justice when one feels joy for doing good or misery for evil. Yes, the heavens give motion to your inclinations...but you still possess a light to winnow good from evil, and you have free will." In other words, yes, God is still in his heaven, we do not control *everything*, but we do have the capability of knowing right from wrong and we have the freedom to act upon that knowledge and our choices *matter*.

A primary focus of Dante in *Purgatory* is to highlight the consequences and potential of the choices that we make. In his picture of Hell, known as *The Inferno*, the suffering served only as punishment for the unfortunate souls who found themselves there. In *Purgatory*, the suffering is meant to have a beneficial effect; to teach, to purify, to open a deeper understanding. It unlocks a hidden potential to be better than we had been before.

Do we learn from our suffering? Here, in this life? Keep in mind that I am *not* inviting you to suffer because it's *sooo good for you*. That is not my intention. But I am saying that there is some amount of suffering that is unavoidable that arises from the very fact that we are mortal. Sing of living, sing of dying, they are part of an eternal process like the ever circling sun which we cannot change, nor can we fully experience them without also experiencing the suffering which comes with it all. There is a certain amount of suffering that occurs in proportion to the extent that we are in love with life itself. "To live in this world, you must be able to do three things," writes poet Mary Oliver, "to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing that your own life depends on it; and when the time comes to let it go, to let it go" (#696, *Singing the Living Tradition*). There is pain sewn into the very fabric of existence; there is pain that comes from holding that which we cherish in the full knowledge that our grip will one day be released; there is suffering that comes because we don't love one another well enough and because we sometimes love what is not worthy and sometimes fail to love that which is most worthy, and even because we love one another too well.

I believe that part of the "wisdom of the aged, deepened by a longer view" comes from the experiences of facing suffering that we maybe wouldn't have believed we could weather. It is the courage, even though one has experienced great pain, to trust life again. If suffering can be said to have purifying powers, it is maybe because it can wash away our unworthy priorities. What is really important, we ask ourselves. Where should I focus my time, my energy, my attention, my *self*?

Does that mean we seek out suffering? Does that mean that we should refrain from easing someone's suffering for fear that we will take away their opportunity to be purified? Does that mean we accept

wars and poverty and sickness and environmental devastation and personal tragedy and oppression and human cruelty and economic injustice as wonderful opportunities for personal growth?

Nothing that I have said should be heard as a justification for suffering. Nothing that I have said *explains* suffering; I do not promote it as the ultimate self-help tool; I do not embrace it; I do not *like* it. The very idea that we would resist an opportunity to ease another's pain because of the spiritual value of suffering only highlights how religious doctrine can be used to subvert the central message of a religion.

There is more than enough suffering in this life to go around. There is suffering that is inextricably intertwined with life itself. We don't need to worry that we will run out of suffering. We don't need to save a space for it. In fact, one of the great gifts of suffering is the renewed commitment to ease suffering wherever and whenever we encounter it. It opens us to a deeper loving; opens us to the gift of care, both in receiving it and in offering it to others. It inspires us to search out a higher justice than is sometimes meted out in the natural course of events, and it compels us to help others in despair. One of the great gifts of suffering is that, having faced up to pain, we can allow our compassion to overcome our fear in striving to relieve the pain of others. Pray that we never let our *beliefs* about suffering interfere with our ability to relieve it.

A rather disheartening final note about doctrine: I mentioned earlier the sale of indulgences in the Medieval Catholic Church. This was one of Martin Luther's major criticisms of the Catholic Church and became a major issue leading to the Protestant Reformation. Even Dante, good Catholic, consigned those who sold indulgences to the eighth circle of hell. The church outlawed the sale of indulgences in 1567.

[The New York Times reported](#) on February 10th that Pope Benedict has stepped up the distribution, reintroduced by Pope John Paul II in 2000, of indulgences for a new generation. In all fairness, they are no longer *sold* (though donations are generously accepted), but are earned through certain prayers, devotions, or pilgrimages in special years, and their purpose is still to reduce or erase the punishment that one receives in Purgatory. I'm not sure where the purification is in that scenario. What's the point of a Purgatory with loopholes? Can even Divine Justice be bought off?

Or maybe we should pull our heads out of the clouds and take a look around at ground level. Maybe we should heed the words of Henry David Thoreau who, when asked on his deathbed if he could see into the next world, replied, "One world at a time." If we wish to face up to suffering, if we wish to talk about justice, if we are working toward a purification of our souls, there's plenty of work to do right here...and there's no time like the present. In fact, there's no time *but* the present...

Closing Words (Dante, [the final words from Purgatory](#))

From those most holy waters
I came away remade, as are new plants
renewed with new-sprung leaves,
pure and prepared to rise up to the stars.