

"Journey and Transformation: Purgatory"

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Red River
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READING

The Angel of chastity speaks as Dante and Virgil encounter
The Wall of Fire:

"Blessed one, till by flame purified no soul may pass this point. Enter the fire and heed the singing from the other side." These were his words to us when we had come near as we could, and hearing them, I froze as motionless as one laid in his tomb. I leaned forward over my clasped hands and stared into the fire, thinking of human bodies I once saw burned, and once more see them there. My kindly escorts heard me catch my breath and turned, and Virgil said: "Within that flame there may be torment, but there is no death. Think well, my son, what dark ways we have trod I guided you unharmed on Geryon: shall I do less now we are nearer God? Believe this past all doubt: were you to stay within that womb of flame a thousand years, it would not burn a single hair away. And if you still doubt my sincerity, but reach the hem of your robe into the flame: your hands and eyes will be your guarantee. My son, my son, turn here with whole assurance. Put by your fears and enter to your peace." And I stood fixed, at war with my own conscience. É And seeing me still stubborn, rooted fast, he said, a little troubled: "Think, my son, you shall see Beatrice when this wall is past."

Dante Alighieri
translated by John Ciardi

SERMON

This morning I address the third in a series of sermons on Journey and Transformation, based on Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. Today I'll be speaking about Purgatory. And I'm certain there are some of you out there who are wondering, "Why? I know what Unitarian Universalists believe, and I know they don't believe in Purgatory! Or, at least I don't think they do." So why talk about it? Why talk about an old concept described in a book written over seven hundred years ago based on a cosmology that no UU probably believes literally.

We know now that our cosmos isn't a three layer cake, with Hell at the bottom, Purgatory in the middle, and Paradise on top. We know that it's a vast, sometimes orderly, sometimes untidy and very complex multi-dimensional creation. Why, then, go back to an outdated concept?"

As a way of answering, let me tell you a story in five chapters: Chapter 1: I was walking down the street one day and fell into this huge hole, deeper than I am tall. I was in there a long, long time before someone found me and pulled me out. Chapter 2: I walked down the street the next day reminding myself not to fall in the hole. But I fell in it anyway. I called for help this time, and someone rescued me a lot quicker than the first time. Chapter 3: The following day I walked down the street very carefully, because I knew that hole was there and I didn't want to fall in it again. But something must have distracted me, because I fell in it again. I was able to get myself out this time, but it was really hard to do and it took a long time. Chapter 4: The next day when I walked down the street, when I got to the vicinity of the hole I slowed way down. When I got near the hole I was creeping. I went to the edge of the hole and looked down and inched my way past the hole. I did not fall in. Chapter 5: On the fifth day I walked down a different street.

So, let's get back to the question I imagined you asked - "What do we gain by reading *The Divine Comedy*, and listening to a sermon on Hell, Purgatory and Paradise?" The answer is that these old symbols are archetypal - they give us a handle on our human experience-our falling into holes experience-and they help us learn how to go other ways. You'll notice I said "ways". There are more than one.

So, let's talk about Purgatory. Purgatory and Hell are alike in some ways. For one thing, in Purgatory people are suffering from the same sins that they suffer from in Hell.

Dante and his guide Virgil encounter Arachne who is guilty of the sin of pride. Dante recalls this image with these words, "Ah, mad Arachne! So I saw you there--/already half turned spider - on the shreds/of what you wove to be your own despair."

Arachne was so proud of her weaving she boasted that she could weave better than Minerva, the Roman goddess of weaving. Minerva in disguise challenged Arachne to a contest. Arachne created a tapestry in which she disparaged the gods, and was changed into a spider by Minerva, who created in her tapestry a portrayal of the glory of the gods. So it is that Arachne is punished by her pride, just as others are punished for their gluttony, envy, avarice, lust, sloth, and wrath.

The story of Arachne has special meaning for me. Many years ago I entered a crocheted blanket I had made in the Western Washington State Fair. I had started the blanket at a time when I didn't have a car and commuted to work on the bus. I had two hours each day to work on my blanket.

It was the third crocheted blanket I'd made, and I was feeling really excited about how it was turning out. I knew I wanted to enter it in the fair, but even though I had a deadline still, I procrastinated. Getting all the squares blocked and connected up to one another took quite awhile. I had just barely gotten the thing together when my son Jesse came to spend the night with me - yes, another Jesse story.

He lay down on the couch in my living room, and covered himself with my masterpiece. It was a chilly night- as September evenings in Seattle can be- and he pulled the blanket up over his head, making a warm cocoon for himself.

The next morning he checked my voice mail and discovered a message that had come in the previous evening from his roommates. The message said that his roommate, who worked with children in a day care center had brought home head lice, and would he please come home to disinfect himself and his room, especially his bedding.

Can you imagine Jesse's dilemma - to tell me or not tell me, that my beautiful blanket might now have head lice on it? Can you imagine my dilemma - after he did tell me. Do I spray the blanket or not? If I spray it, will the spray damage the blanket? Or make it smell? If I don't spray it, I run the risk of infecting my house, and every crocheted blanket at the Fair. Wrestling with a dilemma like this is the same as spending some time in Purgatory.

I sprayed. It didn't ruin the blanket, but it did make the blanket smell. So it was with some concern that I turned the blanket over to the Fair authorities a day or two later. Could they smell the chemicals? What would they think if they did? All this on top of hoping that my work was good enough to win a ribbon of some hue.

I was not surprised, when, a few days later, I drove down to the Fair to discover my blanket hanging at the very end of the entire display of blankets- as far from any of the other needlework entries as possible. There was no ribbon on it.

I didn't feel heartbroken. The purgatory of the head lice experience had taught me sufficient humility that my pride did not expect a reward. I was, however, disappointed. Later, when the Fair was over, and I went to claim my blanket, I was given the rainbow ribbon which is given to every Fair entry. It's the way Fair folks say thank you to all whose work is displayed at the Fair.

So in one way I identify with Arachne. I, too, am a woman who love to weave and who can be tempted through her weaving by the sin of pride.

So, in Dante's Purgatory, the same sins are punished as are punished in hell. But there's a difference. Hell is eternal. Purgatory is temporary. Purgatory is a place where our sins are purged on the way to wholeness. In place of remorse and

resentment - the emotional climate of Hell - there is repentance and acceptance in Purgatory. The suffering in Purgatory is a suffering which is purifying.

Let's look at some other ways in which Purgatory is different from Hell. Going back to the story of the hole in the street, when we are in Hell we fall into that hole over and over again without ever seeing it.

In Dante's master work, Hell is beneath the earth. There is no sun, no moon, no firmament overhead. There is only the black pit, the hole.

So it is, when Dante and Virgil move from the Inferno to Purgatory, the first thing they become aware of is the night sky overhead. Dante writes:

*Sweet azure of the sapphire of the east
was gathering on the serene horizon
its pure and perfect radiance - a feast
to my glad eyes, reborn to their delight
as soon as I had passed from the dead air
which had oppressed my soul and dimmed my sight.*

*He describes the stars on the horizon:
The planet whose sweet influence strengthens love
was making all the east laugh with her rays,
veiling the Fishes, which she swam above.*

So it is that Virgil and Dante move from the frozen wastes of Hell into the fires of Purgatory, drawn on by Love which is symbolized in these opening lines by the planet Venus.

In Hell we see only the hole. In Purgatory we see more than just the hole. Another way in which Hell and Purgatory are different is that in Hell the only sounds are sounds of agony. In Purgatory there is music- angelic music, triumphant music, encouraging music. Just as we were drawn into this morning's worship by our prelude, so Dante is drawn on in his journey through Purgatory by music.

I am reminded of yet another purging experience. Several years ago at this time of year I lost my house, my children, and my job all at the same time.

I had sold my old house- that was a choice- and bought a new one. I was not homeless. Yet the home I had sold was one I lived in longer than any other in my lifetime, and it was the place where I had raised my children.

My younger son had been accepted at the college his older brother attended, and I was suffering from empty nest feelings. So while I was glad Jesse was launched and on his way, I also missed both him and his brother.

Losing my job was also a choice. I had decided to end my career as a business manager and study for the ministry.

However, when I went to tender my resignation, I had expected to stay another three to four months. I wanted an orderly transition for the agency and time to find a part time job to sustain me while I attended school. The universe had other plans. My boss agreed with me that it would be best for me and for the agency if I left, and she told me she wanted me out of there by 5 PM the next day.

I was stunned. I walked around for days, weeks, months in shock, in deep grief. I was in the hole, exhausted, full of self pity, unable to find a way out.

That was the fall the movie *The Mission* was released, and the musical score of the film spoke to me. I bought a recording and played it, over and over again. Sometimes I danced to it. Sometimes I simply sat and wept to it. Sometimes I both danced and wept. But I am convinced that it was that music that lead me out of my hole- the music beckoned me, no, seized me, and led me out of the pit. Wrestling with huge losses and changes can be like spending time in Purgatory.

Last week, when we were in Hell, I didn't introduce you to the most important character in the pit- the Devil, Lucifer, the fallen angel. He lives in the very bottom-most reaches of the inferno, not, according to Dante, in a fiery pit, as we often see portrayed, but in a solid block of ice. In Dante's *Comedia* the inferno is frozen, forever. The fire is in Purgatory- the purging, purifying fire of truth, of humility, of repentance, of acceptance.

Of all the passages in Dante's *Purgatorio* I find the words I read earlier some of the most touching, and revealing. Let me read them again for you:

*"...Blessed one, till by flame purified
no soul may pass this point. Enter the fire
and heed the singing from the other side."*

This is the angel speaking. In Hell, there are no angels. Notice how he addresses Dante, "Blessed one." In Hell no one calls anyone else blessed - there is no blessing in Hell. The angel - s call to enter the fire is an invitation. Dante will not be thrown into the fire. He must enter the fire on his own, as a signal of his acceptance. And there is singing on the other side, an auditory light at the end of the tunnel, to encourage him, to give him a sense of where he is in relation to the other side as he passes through the fire.

Hearing the angel's words congeals Dante. He is thrown momentarily back into Hell or the hole by his own fear, imagining himself burned to death, not trusting his companions:

*These were his words to us when we had come
near as we could, and hearing them, I froze
as motionless as one laid in his tomb.
I leaned forward over my clasped hands and stared*

*into the fire, thinking of human bodies
I once saw burned, and once more see them there.*

His companions are sensitive to his plight, and Virgil, symbol of reason, tells Dante the fire will not harm him, and reminds him of all that the two of them have gone through together, calling Dante to recognize the love with which he has been guided, and the trust that has been growing within his own breast:

*My kindly escorts heard me catch my breath
and turned, and Virgil said: "Within that flame
there may be torment, but there is no death.
Think well, my son, what dark ways we have trod...
I guided you unharmed on Geryon:
shall I do less now we are nearer God?"*

Virgil calls the fire a womb of flame, stressing its transforming, nurturing quality and invites Dante to prove this to himself by seeking a sign. He invites Dante to place the hem of his coat into the fire, to see that it will not turn to ash, just as Dante will not turn to ash:

*Believe this past all doubt: were you to stay
within that womb of flame a thousand years,
it would not burn a single hair away.
And if you still doubt my sincerity,
but reach the hem of your robe into the flame:
your hands and eyes will be your guarantee.*

Sometimes, when we are being asked to do something which is very difficult, so difficult we feel as if we might perish, it is good to ask for a sign. This does not mean, necessarily, that I believe literally in signs - tea leaves, tarot cards, and other divining methods. What I do believe is that if we pay attention, if we truly notice what is happening in our environment, instead of running on automatic, we can judge for ourselves that it is safe to enter the fire - to enter into that life experience which will bring us closer to wholeness and health.

As Virgil encourages Dante by saying, "My son, my son, turn here with whole assurance. Put by your fears and enter to your peace." Dante hesitates, "And I stood fixed, at war with my own conscience."

But he has awakened from his frozen state - thus the war within him.

How often we find ourselves suffering from inner conflict when we are about to do something which will change our lives. Old voices within our subconscious, our internalized teachers from the past, speak out of fear and say, "You'll hurt yourself, don't do it," even as newer, internalized teachers from the present, speak out of love, "Put by your fears, and enter to your peace."

Seeing his charge "still stubborn, rooted fast," Virgil adds his final words of encouragement, a reminder of the love that has guided them all along the way, "Think, my son, you shall see Beatrice when this wall is past."

Dante enters the fire, and comes to the final realm of Purgatory, The Earthly Paradise, where he bids farewell to Virgil and meets Beatrice for the first time.

There is yet another passage at this point which I find very moving. It is Virgil's farewell to Dante:

*"My son," he said, "you now have seen the torment
of the temporary and the eternal fires;
here, now, is the limit of my discernment.
I have led you here by grace of mind and art;
now let your own good pleasure be your guide;
you are past the steep ways, past the narrow part.
See there the sun that shines upon your brow,
the sweet new grass, the flowers, the fruited vines
which spring up without the need of seed or plow.
Until those eyes come gladdened which in pain
moved me to come to you and lead your way,
sit there at ease or wander through the plain.
Expect no more of me in words or deed:
here your will is upright, free, and whole,
and you would be in error not to heed
whatever your own impulse prompts to:
lord of yourself I crown and mitre you."*

So it is that Virgil, the voice of reason says goodbye and celebrates Dante's achievement, his journey through Hell and Purgatory and his transformation to an upright, free, and

whole being who would be in error not to heed his own impulses, who is lord of himself, both as a social being and as a spiritual being.

Reading this, I think of us Unitarian Universalists, who have a twin heritage - reason from our Unitarian roots, love from our Universalist roots. Dante's *Comedia* tells us that we are blessed to have roots of reason. They will take us far, through Hell, through Purgatory, through the Wall of fire, even, into an earthly paradise. That is all the further some of us chose to go.

There are others, however, who seek Paradise. For them, their guide, now, will be Beatrice, the voice of Love, who will lead Dante into Paradise to encounter the mystic rose.

Last week I asked you to consider your own private hell, or one you can imagine. This morning I ask you to take a moment to call to mind a Purgatory learning or cleansing experience in the past from which you emerged stronger. Who or what led you through your personal wall of fire? As you were emerging on the other side, who or what helped you to realize that you were emerging from your Purgatory experience intact and stronger. Sit with your experience for a moment, then let yourself return to this time, to this space.

Let us sing a hymn which reminds us both of the beauty of the rose and the pain of its thorns - life is full of both experiences - Hymn #130 - "O Liberating Rose".