

**Wyoming Tribune Eagle June 2, and Casper Star Tribune June 4, 2016:
“Ruminations on the hereafter.”**

Cultural and religious judgments are against the principles of Unitarian Universalist Church, where I found a home when I moved to Cheyenne. There I am free to think or speak atheist thoughts yet sing in the choir. Its covenant resonates with me, “Love is the spirit of this church and service its cause.” UU is an interfaith community.

Not long ago I attended a funeral service in a Wheatland church. Though I did not know the deceased, some of her descendants are neighbors or acquaintances; plus, a women’s group had asked me to contribute to the after-interment luncheon. Rather than drop off what I brought I stayed on.

The preaching and the hymns were all about salvation and a happy life in the hereafter. Although not adhering to these precepts I sang along, since the hymns were familiar. I couldn’t help wonder, though, what Jewish and Muslim friends make of Christian salvation, let alone Buddhists or Hindus.

“Children, have your mothers no shame?” Sunil Yapa recalls the nuns’ denunciations of mothers walking their children to school in sarongs that bared their midriffs. What burdens we place on developing minds!

When I moved to my farmland last year, I joined the aforementioned women’s group, which meets monthly in a community house to share food and ideas. Eighty years ago the group was formed by a handful of farmers’ wives and ranchers’ wives. Since then it has diversified but one thing has remained the same: each meal is preceded by an address to a heavenly father.

Do these gentle souls actually believe in the existence of such a being/spirit? Perhaps, out of respect for tradition, they don’t voice questions or doubts. To me the idea of a heavenly father seems reminiscent of the imaginary friends my granddaughter maintained in her pre-school years, “my gingers.”

I was not always agnostic. In Germany I adhered to the Protestant faith; in California, Darold and I joined a Methodist church. Our three children were baptized there. The church offered study sessions and encounter groups we found meaningful. Eventually, however, we drifted away.

What turned me against worship long before I quit was an incident with my in-laws who came visiting from Indiana when our first child was born. Then in their early seventies, they may have worried about death and dying, but they only expressed preoccupation with the grace of Jesus and the afterlife. One evening Darold’s father said he wasn’t sure he qualified for salvation, since he had married a divorced woman—his wife, who sat listening to this exposition. He explained that divorce, according to the Bible, “is a sin.”

His words enraged me. The woman was good enough for you when you were down and out, I wanted to say, yet now you decry her? (Darold's mother died of cancer when he was in his last year of high school; his dad remarried soon after.)

But I was also enraged at the dogma of selective salvation. Is Jesus the only way into heaven? How can a God be just and good if he sends billions of people to eternal torment? Does it make sense to believe God to be a loving, kind, compassionate father who wants to know people in a personal way, yet if they reject a relationship with Jesus, they will suffer in hell? Are Christians the only ones who have it right; everyone else is in error?

Twelve years prior to his death I divorced Darold, but I was with him during the last ten days of his life. After his passing I sometimes found myself gazing at cloud formations, addressing him in my thoughts. I realized then how readily one might believe that an ancestor or deceased beloved resides beyond, invisible to the eye yet accessible in thoughts and prayers.

I still address some of the deceased in my thoughts. The brothers who once peopled my life. Certain writers long departed—Viktor Frankl, Erich Fromm, Paul Tillich—who influenced me deeply. Much of the time, my thoughts form around “I love you, oh God I love you!” Other times, it’s “My poor, poor darling.” The thoughts put me in an attitude of humility or prayer; i.e., I imagine myself kneeling. I used to hold these imaginary conversations with Jesus.

The ruminations aren't confined to the dear departed but include contemporary writers whose works I cherish, children and grandchildren away from my life, fellow devotees to a cause that help me make sense of life, friends I have loved and love. “You'll never know how much you have contributed to my life,” I tell them.

“We need not think alike to love alike,” says our pastor, the Reverend Audette Fullbright. This idea goes back to the founder of the church in 1565. At UU, “salvation” comes with ensuring that our lives have meaning.