

**All Faiths Unitarian Congregation
Fort Myers, FL
Sunday Service – October 30, 2016**

Opening Words - *The Hope Diamond*, by Jani Ramay, my dog.

I was a street puppy, wandering around homeless in Cape Coral, when a lady found me and took me home. Suddenly I had hope, but then she called the sheriff and I ended up in the Sheriff's dog jail. They not only imprisoned me, but castrated me, and put me into a cell all alone. Hope seemed to be far away. Then on Saturday morning, a man and woman came looking at the dogs in all the cells, and when they came to mine, they stopped. He said, "He's beautiful." She said, "Yes, he is, and he looks very bright and healthy."

So they took me home and hope returned. Then she told me that I was a Valentine's gift to her from her husband. He had offered to buy her a diamond, but she said, "I would rather have a dog." Wow – was I lucky. So that's how I became the Hope Diamond. She is especially happy to have me instead of a diamond, because her husband died the next New Year's Day. I will be 12 years old next month, and she's 77. We are hoping to have a few more good years together here in Florida's paradise, and then be together for all eternity. We give each other hope.

Sermon: *Universalism – Do dogs go to heaven?* By Joyce Ramay

In my last sermon, I spoke about Unitarianism. The Unitarian emphasis is on the Unity of all Reality, the Unity of Divinity. Today I will be speaking about Universalism. Originally Universalism dealt with the question about salvation – what happens in the future when we die, who gets to go to Heaven. Starting there it expanded into concepts on who gets included even here on Earth.

Universalism is considered to be a religious and philosophical concept with **universal** application. The various Universalist doctrines consider all people in their formation. **Unitarian Universalism** asserts that religion is a universal human quality, emphasizing universal principles that underlie most religions, and accepting other religions in an inclusive manner, believing in a universal reconciliation (or salvation) between humanity and the divine. Universalism has had a strong influence on modern Hinduism, which in turn has influenced today's western spirituality.

From an early age, I encountered questions about Salvation. At first my family went to the Church of God – where I heard a lot about hellfire and damnation, but one day my Aunt Mildred sang with gusto a powerful song – "Down, down, down, down, down in the depths of the sea, the sins of the past, are all gone at last, down in the depths of the sea." So that gave me some hope. Redemption was possible.

Then when I was 6 years old, we started going to the Methodist church, which was supposed to be more liberal, but we had a minister who would have fit in well at the Church of God. When I was 9 years old, my family started to disappear. My sister got married and moved out. My brother graduated from high school and joined the Air Force. My father left and my parents got divorced. It all occurred within a few months. Not long after that, my dog died. It seemed like I was losing everyone, and hope was remote.

On the next Sunday morning, Rev. Reineke, said, “You are looking sad today. What’s happening?”

I told him, “My dog Blackie died. I really miss him, but I know that he is in heaven with God.”

Rev. Reineke said sharply, “Dogs don’t go to heaven, only people go to heaven.” Well! I was pretty heartbroken at that, and thought, “That’s a mean thing to say to a child.”

A couple years later, the kids in my neighborhood, who were Catholic, were planning to attend two weeks of summer school at St. Mary’s. My mother had originally been Catholic but had left the church when she married my father, who was a divorcee. I asked her if it would be possible for me to go to summer school with my friends. So she talked with the priest at the church that my grandmother attended, and he agreed.

After a few days at summer school, I asked the nun, “My dog Blackie died. Do you think dogs go to heaven?” She asked, “Was he a good dog?” I said, “Oh yes, he was a very good dog and my best friend.”

She smiled and said, “Well, we are Franciscan nuns and our order was founded by St. Francis. He was very fond of birds and animals of all kinds. There was a wolf in his village that had been causing problems for the villagers. St. Francis tamed him, and the wolf became a friend of the village. So I am pretty sure, if St. Francis were here today, he would say, if your dog was a good dog, he’s in heaven with God.” (Note: Our statue of St. Francis in the Memorial Garden has the wolf with him.)

Well, that did it. I joined the Catholic Church and went to St. Mary’s School from 7th through 9th grade. The nuns were not only kind and loving, but also the best teachers I ever had. My 7th grade teacher was Sister Theonilla – which means lover of God. I still have her picture in my bedroom.

During that year, we had to learn the catechism so that we could be confirmed in the spring. We memorized all the answers. And of course, I chose Frances as my confirmation name. On Confirmation day, those of us who were to be confirmed were sitting in the right side front row of St. Joseph’s Church, and the nuns were in the left front row. My mother, aunt and grandmother were a few rows behind them. The procedure was for the Bishop to ask each one of us a question from the catechism, we would give the answers, then he would bless us and confirm us, and we would kiss his ring. It was a large church that held hundreds of people, so we were told to speak loud.

When my turn came, the Bishop asked me, “What happens to babies and children who die without having been baptized.”

I recited the correct answer - that they go to Limbo, but are not allowed to see God. He smiled and was pleased with my answer, but then in a loud voice, I announced, “But I don’t believe that. I believe that our good God would welcome all good children and people into heaven, particularly if they had not had a chance to be baptized.”

The nuns gasped and I could imagine what my family would be thinking. But Bishop Fitzgerald was Irish, with a good sense of humor. So he laughed, and said, “Perhaps you are right.” Then he confirmed me and I kissed his ring. I was 12 years old – kind of like Jesus in the Temple (we had that picture in our home). I sometimes wonder if Bishop Fitzgerald took it up with the other bishops, because a few years ago, I read in the newspaper that the Catholic Church had done away with the concept of Limbo.

At public school, in our 11th grade world history class, I asked our teacher how we could study world history without learning about world religions. She said it was difficult for her to teach about religion because of the separation of church and state. Then she suggested that I could organize a project of students reporting on religions of the world. So I gathered material from the public library on world religions, and assigned them to each of the 30 students in our class. My goal was that we should know about other people's faiths so that we could live peacefully with each other and respect each other's traditions, instead of having wars like the crusades.

After graduation from high school, I left the Catholic Church because I could not accept some of the dogma – especially with regard to salvation or damnation of people of other faiths. I knew people from other religious traditions, and I found truth and virtue in their beliefs and practices. I continued my interest in religions, and learned more about them in my university majors in Ancient and World History, and Anthropology, along with outside reading.

For many years, I was “unchurched” because I no longer accepted narrow versions of theology. But somehow, I retained a strong sense of the sacred, that there is some beautiful indefinable mystery, that there is a universal consciousness that connects us to each other and to all of nature. I know I am not alone, and never will be alone, no matter how many losses I experience in life.

Science helped me, too. How can you study Biology, Chemistry, Physics and Astronomy without being filled with total amazement, and a deep sense of gratitude for Creation? I was particularly moved by the law of conservation of matter and energy - that nothing ever dies – it just gets recombined or transformed from one thing to another. And then I thought, if this table is eternal, and that light is eternal, why wouldn't this consciousness that all sentient beings experience also be eternal?

So that's where some Hindu ideas appeal to me – the concept of reincarnation, or perhaps recombination. There is so much that we do not understand, there are so many mysteries that we can never penetrate. But wise thinkers throughout the centuries have told us that we are more than just our bodies, that there is a spiritual aspect that is universally shared.

Perhaps that is what Universalism has to tell us – that yes, everyone experiences salvation, or reincarnation, or recombination, or some kind of continuity, so that when we die, we are not really gone, and when our loved ones die, they have not really left us.

When people know they can trust me not to ridicule them, many have shared that they have seen, or felt, or somehow experienced the presence of loved ones who have died. They are not people who hallucinate. They are perfectly rational people, or should I say “sensible” people – sensible people are those who can experience more than just the left brain of logic, law, and literalism of language. Sensible people are those who feel not only all their five senses, but perhaps a sixth sense, that merges them with the universal and eternal consciousness of which we are all a part.

Attending funerals can often be challenging for people who do not accept Christian theology about original sin, heaven and hell. When our best friend David died in 1982, we went to his funeral at the Unitarian Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. My first husband and I were both “former Catholics” but had not been associated with a church since college days.

We were totally enchanted by the UU funeral service, because the minister did not say all those negative things that had often made us groan inside. A few days later, we got together with his widow, and we said, “Diane, we are your best friends. Why didn’t you ever tell us about your church?”

She said, “Unitarian Universalists don’t proselytize.”

We both immediately replied, “You should!”

That year, when we moved to Fort Myers, we located the Unitarian Universalist church and joined. We were delighted to be part of a congregation where we could explore our own spiritual journeys, but not have to agree on dogmatic details. When my first husband Bob Bruce died, 29 years ago today, on October 30th, Rev. Bill Miller tailored the memorial service to suit his beliefs, and the music included Bob’s favorites from Rodgers and Hammerstein.

My second husband, Pervez Murad, was Muslim. He was very comfortable having our wedding ceremony in 1988 performed by Rev. Bill Miller, who again tailored the ceremony to respect Pervez’s Muslim faith, which was actually not very different from Unitarian Universalism.

When my third husband, Haneef Ramay, and I moved here in 1998, I took him to the local mosque, because he also was Muslim. He was not happy there because he was an inclusive Sufi type of Muslim, and did not accept the exclusive Saudi Wahhabi influenced version of Islam that he found there.

So I said, “Let me take you to the Unitarian Universalist Church.” We went, and the first day when Haneef heard Rev. Wayne Robinson, he fell in love and said he had found his home. He appreciated the inclusiveness, and the sense of reverence that he felt. He once gave a talk at services about his faith, in which he said, “I am a Muslim, and because of that, I am a Unitarian - believing in one divinity, and a Universalist - believing in the sanctity and brotherhood of all living beings.” When he died, Rev. Robinson performed his memorial service.

Many of us here don’t believe in the kind of God or heaven that we learned about in childhood, but we **are** here at a religious gathering, on a Sunday. We are **not** attending a secular lecture somewhere. The word religion comes from the Latin word Re-ligare – which means to re-connect. Our newsletter is named *Connections*. We are here not only for information. We also seek some inspiration. We come to a religious gathering to connect with each other and with something greater than ourselves. We believe in the worth and dignity of all people, and the sanctity of all life.

When we founded All Faiths, we emphasized affirmative appreciation for **All** the Sources that you find in the UU Covenant at the front of your hymnals. That is why we chose the name All Faiths.

This is a place where we respect and honor the free and universal search for virtue and truth, and we treasure all the many paths that humans have taken through the ages on their spiritual journeys to unite with the universal spirit that binds us all together as one.

So - do dogs go to heaven?

Yes, and so do cats, and birds, and all of us, and all other people, and all sentient beings, wherever they may be found in this magnificent Cosmos of ours! We Universalists appreciate, love and are connected to this amazing Universe!!!

And of course, as you have heard me say before, I am already living in paradise, and I didn’t even have to die to get there.