

First Unitarian Church

October 11, 2015

Why did the zombie become a UU?

He was looking for a church with braaaaaiinnns.....

Tonight is the season six premiere of the television show *The Walking Dead*, a show about a zombie apocalypse. I wonder—do we have any fans of that show in here?

It's a gory, scary show about a virus that causes people to die, and then it takes over and reanimates a small part of their brains, turning the people into flesh eating zombies. They then wander around the city—and the country, and the forests, and everywhere, because the virus sweeps across the country—looking for living people to bite and infect.

Grisly.

Civilization collapses as the majority of the population is infected. Hospitals and the police and the government and basically every inch of society are all overrun with zombies. Roving bands of survivors fight over the last of the food and medicine, often murdering each other, and even beloved characters can get killed off without warning.

It's pretty great. And it's pretty disgusting. I am not necessarily recommending it to you.

The show has set records for cable TV ratings. Research shows that it's most popular among 18-49 year olds.

But of course, fascination with zombies—and not only zombies but also ghosts and vampires and monsters and all that kind of stuff—is not a new thing.

The first horror movie was made in 1896 by a French filmmaker. It was called *The Devil's Castle*.

1896. That means that pretty much the instant motion pictures were invented, someone immediately made a scary one. The genre has been a favorite for many people ever since.

We really like our zombies, monsters, and ghosts. And of course, before there were movies, there were always other scary stories—written, or shared in oral traditions, like spooky campfire stories. That's where ideas for the movies came from! *The Devil's Castle*, after all, is named after the Devil, one of the oldest characters of all.

We like them because they make good stand ins for reflecting on ethical and existential questions. When I say existential, I mean questions about what our

existence means. If you've ever had the feeling that we are just like ants, running around pointlessly as the day of our lives go by,

Or if you've ever wondered what's the point of it all when we are ultimately helpless in a hostile universe...

Well then you've had an existential question (if not an existential crisis!).

We've always played out religious questions in dramas and other forms of entertainment. And scary stories are one way we do it, even though, most of the time, we don't think of them as spiritual things.

Do you remember back in 2004 when Mel Gibson produced the movie *Passion of the Christ*? It was a very graphic depiction of the crucifixion of Jesus, and it was controversial for its depiction of Jews. But it was #1 at the box office for quite a while.

Well, my colleague Thom Belote points out that, "After several weeks at number one at the box office, the movie that knocked it out of the number one spot was none other than a remake of George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*. That's right," Thom says, "a violent and gory film about rising from the dead and consuming flesh was beaten out at the box office by a zombie movie..."ⁱ

That's one way to see it.

We really do like our scary scenarios. Actually, it turns out that even the US government likes scary stories. Did you know that the Department of Defense has developed a plan to prevent a zombie apocalypse? I'm not kidding you. I'm not sure if you're going to be able to see this very well projected onto a white wall. This is the cover of it.

<http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2014/images/05/16/dod.zombie.apocalypse.plan.pdf>

It's got a zombie on it, and it says "Counter-Zombie Dominance" plan.ⁱⁱ It came out in April 2011. Less than a year after the *Walking Dead* series premiered.

Now the DOD has explained that they aren't really afraid of zombies.

They say they had to pick something impossible to use as the basis for thinking through their emergency response plan because if they wrote up a fictitious defense plan about, say, Liechtenstein, invading the US in a hostile takeover, then we'd probably have a bunch of Texans reading way too much into that. There'd be anti-Liechtensteiner rallies... and people drawing caricatures of the Alps... with their guns out.

Things could really get out of hand.

So they had to use the zombies.

Well... whatever the case...this got me thinking. Could it be that, like the Department of Defense, we can also use the zombie apocalypse as an exercise in *spiritual* disaster preparedness? Since zombies and other scary characters have a spiritual role to play, let's give it a try.

Spiritual disaster preparedness begins with making yourself aware of what taken-for-granted expectations you have for your life. What are your unspoken assumptions? How do you envision the future? What does it mean to you? Can you imagine something that would greatly change the picture? Some kind of disaster? Could be a disaster of loss of ability. Or loss of loved ones. Illness. What meaning would you maintain? What would fall away? In this case, the disaster is zombies. The spiritual disaster occurs in the gulf between what you were assuming your world would be like, and how it really turns out to be.

Here, the show itself is instructive. Religion pops up quite a bit in *The Walking Dead*. There's Hershel, old homesteader who is holding on to his old time religion—and his power as patriarch. He's a moral purist, unwilling to let go of the standards of conduct that have defined him all his life.

He still reads the bible, and searches it for clues about how to interpret the zombie takeover. But eventually it's clear that what he's really going on is the classic "leap of faith." He cannot personally see the meaning in what is happening, but he holds on with all his might to the idea that it is God's will and will make sense in the end.

The thing about a leap of faith is that either you've got it or you don't. You cannot will yourself to make it. Not really. We can't force ourselves to believe something that doesn't ring true in our hearts. If you grew up in another kind of church, it's possible you experienced that firsthand. Maybe you felt really bad about it. But you just couldn't make yourself believe.

There is also more than one scene that takes place in a church in the show. In one, the main protagonist, Rick, enters a Southern Baptist church to find zombies sitting in the pews, staring at an enormous crucifix on the wall. He destroys them, then takes a seat himself. He starts to pray out loud. Looking at the crucifix, he says:

I don't know if you're looking at me with what — sadness? Scorn? Pity? Love? Maybe it's just indifference. I guess you already know I'm not much of a believer. I guess I just chose to put my faith elsewhere; my family, mostly, my friends, my job. The thing is we — I could use a little something to help keep us going. Some kind of acknowledgement, some indication I'm doing the right thing. You don't know how hard that is to know. Well, maybe you do. Hey look, I don't need all the answers. Just a little nod, a sign. Any sign will do.ⁱⁱⁱ

A few minutes later, his young son gets shot. That's saying something. But is it nihilistic? I mean, does this suggest that there is no god and maybe no meaning? Or doesn't it just press us to formulate a spirituality that makes more sense with the way things really happen sometimes? Even the bible has a story kind of like that—

there are no zombies, despite the irony of Mel Gibson and George Romero—but in the book of Job, countless terrible things befall a man, even as he tries his hardest to be a good and religiously devout person.

By the way, the crucifix on the wall is just a Hollywood prop. Baptist churches do not have crucifixes, which are images of Jesus hanging on the cross. They don't have them because they believe it is misguided to show Jesus still on the cross, when the gospels culminate not in his death, but in his resurrection. They stick with bare crosses instead, to make the point that he is no longer there. That's your bit of religious trivia for the day.

Obviously, in a massive disaster, people who have been sheltered from harsh realities or who have explained them away have to come to terms with tremendous suffering and chaos. In the show, most people are losing their religion. So I wonder... how would Unitarian Universalists fare? Could our religion survive the zombie apocalypse?

Consider the challenges.

[Slide]: Spiritual Challenges in the Zombie Apocalypse

1. Perceived absence of God
2. To whom or what are we accountable?
3. Constant threat of death
4. Prolonged state of fear
5. Human nature "revealed"
6. Hopelessness
7. Meaninglessness

But... hang on a second. These are not merely hypothetical challenges. These don't happen only when zombies attack. We can come face to face with the threat of death *any* time. A near miss in traffic. A terminal diagnosis. Even thinking about these things can put us in that place, at least temporarily.

We see the worst of human nature in the news all the time.

And what is a mid-life crisis but a head on collision with questions of meaning and meaninglessness?

Friends, this is what your ministers do in their spare time. We go around looking at things, like zombies, and thinking, "That'll preach."

Really, they all go back to the question of meaning. If you believe in God, and suddenly are confronted by a profound sense of God's absence, what meaning is

left? If you could die at any moment, meaning is *urgent*. If you don't have a mature spiritual grounding in meaning, and you find yourself in a prolonged state of fear, it is going to be very difficult to think, and be, and reflect enough to get yourself there. And through meaning, we find hope. Not hope in the sense of feeling optimistic that we can get what we want. Hope in the sense of a deep, inner orientation. Like the poet Emily Dickenson must have been imagining when she wrote:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all..

When we have a sense of meaning, we are oriented toward it, and it gives us hope. It allows us to feel as the gospel singer sings, that “it is well with my soul.”

The Unitarian Universalist humanist minister, William Murry, writes that “the meaning of life is not a question with one big answer, but with many little answers. We don't eat one big meal and expect never to have to eat again. So we should not look for one big meaning to life which, once discovered, will satisfy us for the rest of our lives.”^{iv}

Some of us believe in something we would call God, some do not. But one thing that Unitarian Universalist have in common is that whatever your take on God, we have what you might call a horizontal theology. Those of us who believe in God tend to think of God as being in the world in some way or another, rather than removed from it, like a father observing his kids from up on a balcony. We see God in or through each other. A “Namaste” kind of theology. Namaste comes from the Hindu tradition. It is a greeting that means “the sacred in me bows to the sacred in you.” A liberal Christian way of expressing it is to say that we are God's hands and feet, that God acts through us, and is in us. Suffering with us, hoping with us. Not apart.

Atheist or humanist UU's speak not of God but of ultimate meaning being located in relationship. In that horizontal plane. When we leave our lives, what remains is the love we shared with others; through family, friends, and service to our fellow people.

I polled some of my colleagues about what hymn to open with today. One of them suggested the oldie called—I kid you not— “I cannot think of them as dead.”

But listen to the words:

I cannot think of them as dead,
who walk with me no more;
along the path of life I tread
they are but gone before,
they are but gone before.

And still their silent ministry
within my heart hath place,
as when on earth they walked with me,
and met me face to face,
and met me face to face.

Mine are they by an ownership
nor time nor death can free;
for God hath given to love to keep
its own eternally,
its own eternally.

Whether you think love comes from God or was an amazing byproduct of the Big Bang, or whether you think those two concepts are the same dang thing, we can appreciate the deep truth in the hymnist's words: that love does not end in death or disaster. Love transcends the vicissitudes and misfortunes of this world. I'm not talking about romantic love, though that is sometimes part of it. I'm talking about soulful, connected-with-something-larger-than-yourself love. Love with a capital L. Do you have it? Have you thought about how to express it through your life?

If you came into this church today with some measure of cynicism in you, or if you are angry for some reason, the notion might sound cheesy but I'm telling you, when all is said and done, Love with a capital L, that is what grounds us and it is one of the biggest things that gives our lives meaning. But it does so, as Murry suggests, in a thousand little answers.

One of the answers comes in the form of congregations like this one.

When we are in a prolonged state of fear, or anger, cynicism, or sadness, it can be very hard to cultivate the kind of presence we need, the kind of attention to the present, that opens us up to love, meaning, and hope.

In those times, when we are in too much a state of crisis to keep grounded in our faith, that is when you can rest in the spirit of this gathered community. Collectively, the hundreds of people who are part of this congregation, including you and me, have experienced untold losses, traumas, disappointments, personal failures. Things that happened quickly, out of nowhere, and disasters that ripened slowly, over a generation or more. And we have somehow come through them, or are coming through them, and are learning to live meaningful lives through them, and we possess together a collective wisdom about the role those things play in human lives. That we are more than our disasters. That humankind is more than its worst expressions.

Out of that wisdom, we take up this religious community we have inherited from the people who came before us, and we continue their work of creating it each day. We do so by showing up, by bringing our whole selves to it, by supporting it. So that, when needed, we and others can rest in the spirit of a gathered community that

knows love, meaning, and hope. Not naïve hope. Hope that perches in the soul, and sings the tune without the words, and never stops at all.

In the show, as the band of protagonists wanders around fighting off zombies and other, less friendly humans, they develop a deep sense of community. They grow as individuals. People who were lonely become family. People who were weak become warriors. The world they are in may seem nothing but hostile, but in fact there is still something kind, something meaningful, in it for them.

It made me think of a reading by Victoria Safford, who tells a story about a friend of hers who was going through a divorce, and all the grief and collateral damage that goes with it. One day he received a profoundly kind, anonymous note, just out of nowhere. The experience reminded him of words from the Song of the Bird, from the Ojibwe tradition: Sometimes I go about in pity for myself, and all the while the wind is bearing me across the sky.”

Maybe this is why the Walking Dead comic book—which is what the TV series is based on—first paints a picture of the catastrophe,

The world of commerce and frivolous necessity has been replaced by a world of survival and responsibility. An epidemic of apocalyptic proportions has swept the globe, causing the dead to rise and feed on the living. In a matter of months society has crumbled, no government, no grocery stores, no mail delivery, no cable TV.^v

And then it says this:

In a world ruled by the dead we are forced to finally start living.

My fellow minister Thom Belote, who also saw the zombies and thought, “*That’ll preach,*” says, “People in the walking dead aren’t afraid of dying as much as they are afraid of becoming zombies. Not living our lives. Being mindless. Zombies are never satisfied. They eat and eat and are still hungry.”

Unitarian Universalism isn’t one big, fast spiritual meal that will keep you satisfied for life. It’s slow food. Small plates. Family style. But it is deeply nourishing. It is satisfying. And come the zombie apocalypse... or just life... it’s a provision that will serve you well.

Nevertheless, it is well to pray that our faith isn’t tested anytime soon. Please join me in singing our closing hymn, #1 in your hymnal, “May Nothing Evil Cross This Door.”

ⁱ <http://revthom.blogspot.com/2014/10/sermon-zombie-theology-delivered-10-26.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/16/politics/pentagon-zombie-apocalypse/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Episode __, __. You can hear a great conversation about this at On Being [Monsters We Love: TV's Pop Culture Theodicy](#) . Or read the transcript:

<http://www.onbeing.org/program/monsters-we-love-tv039s-pop-culture-theodicy/transcript/272>

^{iv} Murry, William R. *A Faith for All Seasons: liberal religion and the crises of life.* River Road Press: Bethesda, 1990.

^v Qtd. from Thom's blog- see link above.