

The Allegory of the Long Spoon

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Today was my first visit to the Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington, and there was a lot to like, beginning with this: *Love is our doctrine, the quest for truth is our sacrament, and service is our prayer.*

I also loved the fact that the second “hymn” was Bill Withers’s *Lean on Me*, very appropriate, since the focus of the service was on asking for help. Reverend Mara Dowdall noted that most of us identify with one of two groups – those who give help or those who need help, and how easy it is to forget that we are all part of both groups.

After noting that Unitarians do not believe that a loving God sends anyone to Hell, her sermon began with an allegory I’ve always treasured but had forgotten. My understanding is that the Allegory of the Long Spoon is part of many cultures and faiths - Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish,

and Oriental. The version below was adapted by Elisa Pearmain from Japanese and Chinese folk tales.

Long ago there lived an old woman who had a wish. She wished more than anything to see for herself the difference between heaven and hell. The monks in the temple agreed to grant her request. They put a blindfold around her eyes, and said, "First you shall see hell."

When the blindfold was removed, the old woman was standing at the entrance to a great dining hall. The hall was full of round tables, each piled high with the most delicious foods — meats, vegetables, fruits, breads, and desserts of all kinds! The smells that reached her nose were wonderful.

The old woman noticed that, in hell, there were people seated around those round tables. She saw that their bodies were thin, and their faces were gaunt, and creased with frustration. Each person held a spoon. The spoons must have been three feet long! They were so long that the people in hell could reach the food on those platters, but they could not get the food back to their mouths. As the old woman watched, she heard their hungry desperate cries. "I've seen enough," she cried. "Please let me see heaven."

And so again the blindfold was put around her eyes, and the old woman heard, "Now you shall see heaven." When the blindfold was removed, the old woman was confused. For there she stood again, at the entrance to a great dining hall, filled with round tables piled high with the same lavish feast. And again, she saw that there were people sitting just out of arm's reach of the food with those three-foot long spoons.

But as the old woman looked closer, she noticed that the people in heaven were plump and had rosy, happy faces. As she watched, a joyous sound of laughter filled the air.

And soon the old woman was laughing too, for now she understood the difference between heaven and hell for herself. The people in heaven were using those long spoons to feed each other.

([Click here](#) to see a very nice illustrated version)

So we learn that when we try to feed only ourselves, everyone goes hungry. But when we try to feed our sisters and brothers, we find enough for everyone. Amen.