

“Everything is Fine! Reflections on ‘The Good Place’”

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Reading: From “Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey Into the Afterlife” by Eben Alexander (Abridged)

Remember: you are loved. You have nothing to fear. And you can do no wrong...

[I]f we can, in an ultimate sense, do no wrong that does not mean we can do no wrong down here on the physical plain. Nor does it mean that this world isn't a painful...place, or that evil of the most profound magnitude doesn't exist here.

Instead, it means in the true universe, the larger spiritual universe that we are in constant, if unconscious, contact with, we have nothing to fear. While on Earth, we are only players on a stage...but when we die we step off that stage. And when we do, we recover our full vision. We remember where we originally came from, what kind of place the universe really is, and we catch a glimpse...of where we are going.

Though, of course, we can't see it all. All of us are dancing around the real secret of the universe...but the secret itself remains ungraspable. Every second of every day, your deep self is completely connected – or entangled, to use the language of physics – with the true universe. That is the secret, and it sits every second, every nanosecond, at the center of each of our existences. We do not stop at death. But on Earth we are equipped with brains that, designed by ourselves in collaboration with the universe and the Creator, all but completely cut off our knowledge of that fact. We walk about not knowing that we are eternal beings in an incalculably long process of growth toward becoming who we were always meant to be. Like a salmon swimming upstream to the place where it was hatched – struggling and fighting hard against the current at times – we know all along, on a deep level, where we came from.

Reflection

Eben Alexander affirms “We do not stop at death.”

And *this* is how Eleanor Shellstrop, one of the main characters in the television program “The Good Place” experiences What Comes Next.

Eleanor, a young woman, sits on a couch, facing a wall-sized sign reading “Welcome! Everything is fine.” The room looks like a waiting room at an upscale doctor’s office - clean and modern, the décor attractive and soothing.

An office door opens and a dapper, bespectacled man with snow white hair and a bow tie invites Eleanor into his office. Once the man sits behind his desk, he introduces himself as “Michael.” “How are you today?” he asks Eleanor.

“I’m fine,” she says calmly. “But I have one question: Where am I, who are you and what is going on?” He replies, quietly and matter-of-fact, “You, Eleanor Shellstrop, are dead. Your life on earth has ended and you are now in the next phase of your existence in the universe.” To which Eleanor replies, “...Cool. I have some questions.”

Her first question is “How did I die?” Michael explains that, in the event of embarrassing deaths, memories are erased. He tells Eleanor that she was in a grocery store parking lot when she dropped a bottle of “Lonely Gal Margarita Mix for One.” Bending over, a column of shopping carts rolled out of control in her direction. But that is not what caused her death. The carts pushed her into the street where she was hit by a mobile billboard truck, advertising an ED medication. One of the first EMTs on the scene was an ex-boyfriend. Eleanor says she has heard enough.

Eleanor then asks, “Who was right?” meaning which religion best understands what is to come. Michael replies that every religious group – Hindus, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists – gets about five percent correct. But it was Doug Forcett, a young man in Calgary in the 1970s who, in a chemically-induced state, answered his friend’s question “What do you think happens when we die?” and got about 92% correct. The scene cuts to a framed portrait of Doug Forcett in Michael’s office. Michael summarizes

the afterlife – there is a Good Place and a Bad Place - and reassures Eleanor she is in the Good Place. He then invites Eleanor on a tour.

As the episode unfolds, Eleanor reviews her time on earth, a life of selfless service to humanity. Her home is created just as she would like it, full of clowns. It is in her new home that she meets Chidi, the soulmate assigned to her by the Good Place and eventually confides to him that...there has been a big mistake. She never defended innocent inmates on death row...and she hates clowns. Everything is not fine. Eleanor Shellstrop is in the Good Place under false pretenses.

It soon becomes clear that Eleanor has good reason to continue her deception. Chidi introduces Eleanor to Janet, sort of an embodied Siri or Alexa who holds all the knowledge in the universe and can conjure objects instantaneously. Eleanor asks Janet what the Bad Place is like and Janet explains that this is the one thing she cannot tell them but she can play a brief audio clip of what is happening right now. Cut to the sound of people screaming and someone yelling “The bear has two mouths!”

Like Janet, there are things I cannot tell you about the program “The Good Place” as it is against my ministerial ethics to reveal spoilers in popular culture. But I can say that through Eleanor’s plight, through this silly, irreverent and sometimes naughty television show, we are invited to not only consider “What happens when we die?” but also “What makes a good person?” and “Can human beings change for the better?” As we conclude this month, centered on “mystery,” I invite us to consider these questions together.

Eleanor and Chidi are not the only ones to explore these questions on “The Good Place.” We also meet Jianyu the silent monk, Tahani the elegant socialite and Jason, a sweet and shy man from Jacksonville, obsessed with the Jacksonville Jaguars, who, as my mother would say, is “not the sharpest tool in the shed.”

In time, it becomes clear that people and things are not as they seem. And, as the series progresses – now in its third season – it also becomes clear that the afterlife adventures the characters experience together inspire all

of them to evolve in some way, including Michael, the otherworldly “architect” of the Good Place and Janet, who – while never a robot – becomes more and more human with each new chapter.

It is sobering to think that religious traditions only understand about 5% of the truth about What Comes Next. That being said, as we consider the big questions raised by “The Good Place,” I turn towards the Unitarian Universalist tradition to see what ideas are part of the collective heritage of this faith.

Consider the work of two men considered the great fathers of Universalism and Unitarianism – the Reverends Hosea Ballou and William Ellery Channing. Channing is remembered as the one who first and fully articulated the Unitarian Christian perspective through an ordination sermon in 1819. Ballou, Channing’s contemporary, wrote the defining text on Universalist theology, titled “A Treatise on Atonement.”

One of the great ironies in history is the fact that even though William Ellery Channing and Hosea Ballou respected each other’s leadership, they didn’t like each other very much. Ballou and Channing traveled in different social circles and held conflicting theological views. If they returned from the dead to learn that their traditions joined to make one faith, the news would probably kill them.

In 1832, William Ellery Channing preached a sermon titled “The Evils of Sin.” In this sermon, Channing acknowledges the propensity of humans to sin but argues that we are saved by our conscience, forever prodding us closer to the good. His sermon also includes a unique understanding of the afterlife: When our bodies die, our conscience and our character remain, continually progressing in a positive direction, somewhere in the ethereal realm. However, when we die, God judges our characters and punishes us accordingly. Hence, it is in our best interest to progress as much as possible in this life.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Ellery Channing, “The Evil of Sin,” In Works of William Ellery Channing, (Boston, MA: American Unitarian Association, 1890)

Back in Channing and Ballou's time, ministers argued theological points with one another in the public square, similar to how politicians debate civic policy today. Responding to Channing, Ballou wrote an essay titled "A Candid Examination of Dr. Channing's Discourse on 'The Evils of Sin.'" In his "Candid Examination," Ballou challenges Channing's idea of successive advances towards goodness, acknowledging that human behavior varies throughout time. And, with apologies to atheists, he states that Channing's belief that God will punish us in the afterlife is a "gross atheism."<sup>2</sup> As we named in today's First Reflection, Universalists believe that all will end up in the Good Place, not because of the goodness of human beings but because of the goodness of the Divine. So, from Ballou's perspective, Channing's understanding of God as a punishing God is an insult to the Creator.

I bring into this reflection a contemporary affirmation of What Comes Next. I thank Donna Reed for encouraging me to pick up Dr. Eben Alexander's book "Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey Into the Afterlife." As named in the introduction to the reading, Eben Alexander mysteriously contracted bacterial meningitis which swiftly brought him into a coma and to the brink of death.

While in this state, Alexander witnessed amazing things, celestial beings who imparted knowledge about the nature of existence. Alexander lost his identity here on earth and came to understand himself as an eternal being. The primary message he brought with him from this state was that you and I – each and every one of us – are loved. We have nothing to fear. And we can do no wrong.

Alexander claims his experience is concrete proof of the afterlife. First, before his near-death experience, Alexander was not a "skeptic" but more someone thoroughly committed to what can only be proven through the scientific method. His defenses around belief in an afterlife were high, warranting a profound experience to convert him to a different perspective.

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<sup>2</sup> Hosea Ballou, A Candid Examination of Dr. Channing's Discourse on the Evil of Sin (Boston, MA: BB Mussey, 1833), 29.

Second, his medical tests made clear that the parts of his brain that could produce hallucinations were entirely dormant. And third, before his experience, many of his neurology patients would tell him similar stories after reaching the edge of death, stories he previously explained away as disease-induced psychosis. Alexander emerged from his near-death experience, as he describes it, still committed to his role as a healer, this time through also sharing his experience and his message to those of us on this side of the veil.

As someone whose skepticism runs deep, I am not entirely convinced by Alexander's "proof." Yet, if he does speak the truth of what is to come for all of us, I am encouraged. And, as a theology geek, I cannot help but notice that Alexander's illustration of the afterlife sounds very much like Ballou's Universalist vision.

I once remember my minister, Kim Crawford Harvie, saying in a sermon that, when we die, we become connected to all that is. For some, this is Heaven. For others, this is Hell. This idea is the closest I have come to figuring out how to answer the question "What happens when we die?"

Yet, I aspire to believe as my friend Susan believes. About twenty years my senior, Susan has seen her share of struggle and hardship in life. And somehow, through it all, she has found her way to equanimity. I once remember her saying "I have come to trust life so I have also come to trust death." Her words meant to me that there is little point in thinking or worrying about What Comes Next. We are in part of a cycle. The cycle is natural and it will make its turn when the time is right, in a way that affirms who we are. I am still working on the "trusting life" part so I am not quite there. But cultivating trust in What Comes Next and how I get there is something I hope for before my time comes.

Perhaps concern about the afterlife is best set aside as there are other things that warrant our attention. Perhaps the true gift of the program "The Good Place" is not so much focusing on What Comes Next and why but encouraging us to think about human ethics beyond good behavior being an admission price to a place with an endless supply of frozen yogurt, in

flavors like “Four-Day Weekend, Full Cellphone Battery...and Beyoncé Compliments Your Hair.”<sup>3</sup>

The characters in “The Good Place” evolve and so does the emphasis of the show, moving from a tally of good and bad behaviors to what constitutes an ethical life. This shift is prompted by Chidi tutoring Eleanor as Chidi was a professor of moral philosophy before his death and, as most would conclude, the Eleanor Shellstrop that does not like clowns and did not help orphans has a lot to learn about morality.

As noted in a *New York Times* Magazine article, “Good Place” creator – or “architect” - Michael Schur studied moral philosophy to shape the trajectory of the show, drawing on the classic works of Aristotle, Mill, Bentham and Rawls. Schur went so far as to create packets of academic material for the writers so the whole team would be guided by the philosophical canon. Schur also reached out to a professor at UCLA who eventually became a “consulting philosopher’ — surely a first in sitcom history,” observes journalist Sam Anderson.

This professor, Pamela Hieronymi, introduced Schur to the work of T.M. Scanlon, Harvard professor and author of “What We Owe to Each Other.” In Hieronymi’s words, Scanlon’s ideas ground “morality in terms of cooperative human relationships — the way networks of people, with their interdependencies and conflicts, have to find a way to coexist and sacrifice and treat one another with respect.” Schur resonated with the title of the book and it’s assertions: “It *assumes* that we owe things to each other...It starts from that place...It’s a very quietly subversive idea.”

Anderson observes that “what we owe each other” “is...deeply un-American — an affront to our central mythology of individual rights, self-interest and the sanctity of the free market.” Viewers follow Eleanor’s quest for goodness, someone who “will turn out to depend on the people around her, all of whom will in turn depend on her. What makes us good,

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/04/magazine/good-place-michael-schur-philosophy.html?fbclid=IwAR0mXASoQZDq\\_1Ja2\\_zHGnLxA5Bg3g8WIOYrMlyAOsgxmhbveeMou-ufalg](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/04/magazine/good-place-michael-schur-philosophy.html?fbclid=IwAR0mXASoQZDq_1Ja2_zHGnLxA5Bg3g8WIOYrMlyAOsgxmhbveeMou-ufalg)

Chidi tells her, is ‘our bonds to other people and our innate desire to treat them with dignity.’”

As a theology geek, I celebrate that living in covenant, shaping our behavior based on “what we owe each other,” has entered mainstream television. I cannot help but delight in watching Eleanor pursue “salvation by character,” as Unitarian minister James Freeman Clark once called personal evolution. And I also cannot help but be inspired by the sincerity with which Michael Schur, through his ridiculous characters, invites us – despite the futility of it all and the badness in the world – to try. For even if there is no one to judge our actions or if Ballou and Alexander are right and we are loved and can do no wrong, we are witnesses to our own humanity. That, in itself, is motivation to live a moral life.

Michael Schur concludes, “No one is perfect. No one will ever win the race to be the best person. It’s impossible. But, especially since starting this show, I just think everyone should try harder. Including me.”

And I conclude that a world where each of us, broken and limited people all, seeks goodness is something like Heaven on earth. In the midst of our imperfect but sincere striving, “everything is fine.”