

Is Life Everlasting a Good Idea?

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Unitarian Universalist Meeting House in Chatham

August 9, 2009

*And am I born to die, to lay this body down
And must my trembling spirit fly
Into that world unknown?* – “Idumea” by Charles Wesley

A man I met a few times and greatly admired, Mike Seeger, Pete Seeger’s half-brother, died yesterday as I was preparing this sermon, and the thought came to me that I’d love to meet him up yonder and sit and pick a few banjo tunes with him. If, that is, they allow banjos in heaven.

What happens to us after we die? We don’t know, we can’t know. But what do we wish for, what do we hope for? What would we want to be there? Is life everlasting a good idea?

It’s important to approach this question with humility. A former parishioner once reported to me with delight a lapel button he had seen that perfectly described his theology; it read: “Militant agnostic: I don’t know and you don’t either.” It is in that spirit that I approach this enormous question of what happens to us individually after we die. Science for all its power cannot definitively answer what lies in what Hamlet called that “undiscovered country, from whose borne no traveler returns.” And though Shakespeare used the term borne, I don’t think he was talking about the bridges off Cape Cod.

The question of what happens to us after death is both abstract and intensely personal. Each of us will die in our turn, so we have a great stake in the question of what’s on the other side. Moreover, in this church we have recently lost beloved parishioners. We have had the experience of having people among us at coffee hour and in the pews and in the church councils who now are no longer among us. We would like to know in what sense those loved ones still exist. We may see them in dreams, a thousand things may remind us of them, we may even experience waking visitations. These questions are tender and deep. I will try to talk about them as sensitively as I can, but if I touch a raw nerve this morning, please come up and tell me afterwards. I welcome your sharing with me any feelings or ideas that these words may bring up in you.

We are not discussing this in a vacuum. A recent Pew survey shows that 74% of

Americans believe in an afterlife¹. Christianity is the dominant religion in our country and in our community; life everlasting is part of the creed of the various orthodox Christian faiths, founded in the promise of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son Jesus Christ, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” For orthodox Christians, life everlasting is salvation, the whole ball of wax, the point of the game. Besides Christianity, other major religions posit some state of existence after death: for Buddhists it is Nirvana, for Hindus reincarnation, for Muslims paradise. And in this country, there is a strong folk belief in heaven which is distinct from the actual teachings of Christianity and other religions. You heard it in the old shape-note hymn I sang today, and you will hear it in the gospel songs we will present week after next.

For there is a great comfort and emotional appeal in thinking that our loved ones have passed on to a better place, reached the distant shore, that they are home with their family, that there is a grand reunion awaiting us in which all suffering will be erased and all loss will be undone. Loss is bad, parting is such sweet sorrow. Why wouldn't we wish that there was some state of existence where these losses would be healed, where all would be reconciled?

Let me begin to answer that by referring to my experiences with dying people. It is a great privilege accorded to a clergyman to be with a person and his or her family in the hours of transition. It is a holy time. I described to you two weeks ago a particular death watch I kept with my client on death row. That was peculiar, but I have been with dying people in many other circumstances.

And with many, though not all, deaths, there comes a time when I as a minister encourage the patient and the family to start letting go. Our instincts are generally to fight for life; we cherish our moments of living, and most of the time everything we are seems to pull towards recovery, getting back on our feet, beating this cancer or heart condition or stroke. But in some cases at some times there comes a point at which the best counsel is acceptance of death, and we must practice the spiritual discipline of letting go. When we are called on to make decisions on extraordinary medical care, we weigh the value of life and death, and we realize that some forms of living are worse than death.

Realizing that in some cases the value of death is greater than the value of life leads me to question whether that may be so generally as to the afterlife. So what I want to do this morning is examine death from a naturalistic perspective and ask whether continuation of life

¹<http://74.125.47.132/u/pewforum?q=cache:QpemMLK9cBAJ:religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report2religious-landscape-study-key-findings.pdf+afterlife&cd=3&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&ie=UTF-8>

after death makes any sense and is something we would want.

Let me explain what I mean by naturalism. Last February, near Darwin's birthday, we heard the Fleck Lecture by Ursula Goodenough, one of the founders of Religious Naturalism. Religious naturalism is a stance founded on the proposition that we start with the natural world as we know it through science. Now almost by definition, science does not have anything to say about the soul or what happens to it after death. So I want to acknowledge at the outset the limitations of the perspective I will present, but I think the exercise is still useful.

Here's a summary of what I want to say: from a naturalistic perspective, life after death is not a desirable thing for three reasons: it doesn't fit within the shape of a human lifespan, it thwarts evolution, and it would lead to information overload.

First, it seems to me that a human life has a definite shape. It is sort of like the muffin bushes outside the church or a bell curve, full in the center and less full on the ends. As we go through life, our strengths, our powers our abilities rise and then decline. Different faculties reach their peaks at different times. Some of this is based in our physiology. Because humans have such large heads encasing large brains, babies to get through the birth canal must be born at an earlier developmental stage than most of our mammal cousins, so a human child has a long period of dependency relative to our lifespan. It is not until the first decade that we reach sexual maturity. Our athletic abilities seem to peak in the late teens or early twenties.

Our intellectual abilities generally increase until a certain point, and then start to decline. Our physical abilities undergo a more pronounced decline, as many members of this congregation know all too well. My first wife's father was a lifelong diabetic. In the mid 1980's, when he was in his late sixties, he had severe problems with circulation in his extremities, causing a series of amputations of his lower limbs in the last two years of his life: first the toes, then the feet, then the lower legs. I have always wondered whether, if I met him in heaven, he would have his feet back.

Now you will immediately see that that question is naive, because, in the common folk belief, bodies don't go to heaven, souls do. Interestingly, that is not the position of most orthodox Christian faiths, for the Nicene Creed states a belief in the "resurrection of the body." But most of us who hold a belief in an existence in the afterlife are not going to look for our bodies to come with us.

But the more general point is one of change. We all go through changes over our lifetimes. The Edmund Robinson standing here before you in 2009 is not the same Edmund Robinson who tried legal cases in the courts of South Carolina in the 1980's or the college kid opposing the Vietnam War in the 1960s. It is not just that there are physical differences, my whole personality changed. Sure, there are continuities and similarities, people who knew me from high school or college would say I still have some of the same traits, but there are also real

differences. If there were to be an eternal Edmund Robinson existing in the year 2050 in the afterlife, which Edmund Robinson would it be? There is a shape to a human life, it is rounded off at the end by death, and the idea of a continued existence defies that shape.

Second, life everlasting defies evolution. In the second creation story in Genesis, God expels Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden after they have eaten the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and besides expulsion from the garden, four punishments are imposed, the heaviest of which is mortality, that each human shall die². In a weird way, this mirrors the bargain set up by evolution.

Death is the common lot of humans and our near animal cousins, but it is not general to all living things. Simple one-celled animals that do not reproduce sexually do not have any regular life-cycle and do not regularly die. Of course, you can kill amoebas and paramecia by boiling them or poisoning them but they don't die naturally. Rather, they reproduce by splitting. And because their reproduction is asexual, they don't have the mixing of genes that the higher animals do, and they don't evolve nearly so well. So there is a tradeoff between sex, death and evolution. If you have sexual reproduction, you are going to have death as part of your life-cycle, but you are also going to have evolution over the course of many generations.

Our individual deaths, in this perspective, are the evolutionary price we have paid to be able to evolve the large cerebral cortex which gives us language, music, art and sermons on Sunday morning. If we have no death, we would not continue to evolve as a species.

The third problem is information overload. I think that the human brain has a limited capacity to take in new information. I read an article a year ago³ that said it was common in people in their fifties and sixties to have problems remembering names of people and of things. I paid attention because this is happening to me. The article said that people experiencing this become concerned that it is a sign of early Alzheimers, and of course this can be a symptom of that condition. But the inability to remember names in late middle age is much more common than the incidence of Alzheimers in that age, and the article went on to say that it was just a function of the amount of information stored in the memory. The more information that is

²Genesis 3:19: “[God’s Judgment on Adam] By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

³Older Brain Really May Be a Wiser Brain By Sara Reistad-long New research suggests that memory lapses that occur with age might be a sign of a widening focus of attention. New York Times May 20, 2008

stored, the longer it takes to retrieve it. In this way, the brain is like a computer. Think about the storage capacity of all the computers you have had. As we got larger and large hard drives with more and more data on it, the processors had to be faster and faster in order to find the data in that vast jungle of bytes.

Unfortunately, they can't put a faster chip in your brain; so when you are sixty, you have known a lot more people than when you are twenty, and your sorter has to plow through a lot more memories to come up with that name.

Now imagine what it would be like if instead of six or seven or eight decades of experience, you had a mind that had to hold several centuries or several millennia? For if the life you live in the hereafter is at all like the life you live in the here and now, you will continue to have experiences, you will continue to meet people, you will continue to store experiences as memories. At what point will you run out of hard drive? From the point of data overload, it would seem that life everlasting is not a good idea.

But some of you can see the holes in these arguments already. They are based on a huge assumption, that life in the hereafter bears some resemblance to life in the here and now. The tradition, to the contrary, is that "we shall be changed."

As to my shape argument, maybe I am only going by the visible shape of the human life. If you are looking at a carrot from the mole's perspective, you would say it is tapered at one end and blunt at the other, but if you saw the above-ground stem you would realize the true shape was quite different.

As to the memory overload, the mind in time problem, we have three possible ways around it: minds in the afterlife which are not dependent on brains and therefore have infinite capacity for memory, minds which cease experiencing, or minds which experience but do not remember.

Science and naturalism has no account of a mind not anchored in a physical brain, but neither has science come up with the actual way in which our consciousness, our subjective sense of self, is generated by the physical brain. There certainly exist phenomena such as songs and poems and fiddle tunes and treatises, which were originally the products of brain-based minds but no longer dependent on them.

As the "Idumea" describes the afterlife:

"A land of deepest shade, unpierced by human thought

The dreary regions of the dead, where all things are forgot." This is a picture of an afterlife devoid of memory, and I would say devoid of consciousness.

Thornton Wilder confronts the issue in "Our Town," but his take is that the dead gradually lose interest in affairs of the earth, fixated as they are in bringing out the eternal in themselves.

Another problem I have with life everlasting is moral: what happens to suffering and evil? The notion that one can have good without bad, or joy without suffering, seems to me to be naive and misguided. The life we know is a tapestry of joy and woe, as William Blake says, finely woven. Death is the border of that tapestry. Is it only the joy threads that extend beyond that border; if so, how can the fabric be sustained? Would one get tired of harp music all the time and long for a little blues?

These are disturbing questions, to be sure. I raise them because I wrestle with them and I think some of you do as well. But despite these serious issues, my jury is still out on the question of an afterlife. I would like to think that there would be a place where I could go after I die and meet my father and my friends who have died, to talk with Dave Reed and Chuck Chesnut and Kay Baker and all the people whose memorial services I have performed.

I am not elevating death over life; as I have said over and over, to believe that death is a final end to our existence gives more value to life, not less. It counsels us, as Thornton Wilder urges us so poignantly, to live every minute of life to the fullest, to cherish this world we are given and the ones we love.

And there is some evidence weighing on the side of life after death. We have much testimony from people with near death experiences that they felt themselves drawn toward a bright light, that they were enveloped by love. Some of you may have been through this, or know someone who has. I believe in the power of love to overcome death, though I think that is more in the power to motivate us to work hard in this life to minimize suffering, oppression and injustice than in any continuation of an individual existence after death.

And there are many layers opened by that word individual. We have been thinking of existence in the hereafter as an individual existence, that Edmund or Wally or Jane would retain their identity. But existence in this life is only partly individual. It is mostly relational. The relations we build up, the words and deed of love, can and do survive us. To me, the point of life is to build up as much love as you can while you're here. Perhaps some part of you survives death but not in a way that you could say it is still you.

One way I like to think about it is that we are all part of a great song or a great dance. While we as individuals might not last beyond our death, the dance goes on; Meredith Garmon, one of my UU colleagues from Gainesville, Florida, recently rephrased John 3:16 to read "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten song that whoever might sing it should not perish but harmonize eternally."

Classically Universalists affirmed that God was too good to damn anyone to eternal punishment. In the spiritualism movement of the Nineteenth Century, Universalist ministers were active because the seances affirmed basic Universalist belief. All of the spirits reporting in from the afterlife were happy. None seemed to be reporting in from purgatory or the inferno.

Hamlet said, "there are more things on heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your poor philosophy." Perhaps with new scientific understandings of the human we will understand how it is possible for some part of us to continue after the body dies. For the moment, I want to leave you with a story which, a friend told me the other day, which both disturbed and delighted me. The story is rather private and intimate, so I got my friend's permission to use it and will tell it here, but change a few non-essential details in the telling. I will call my friend John. A few years ago, John encountered some health difficulties that then impacted negatively on his job and John ultimately lost the job. Recently John was visiting a city and consulted a medium in that city who purports to communicate with the dead. In the course of the session, various deceased relatives of John spoke through the medium and offered love. Then the medium purported to speak for a former employee whom I will call Susan. Susan and John had been close professionally; though they had not been romantically involved, there had been a great deal of mutual affection and respect between them, but as John's difficulties had advanced, John came to feel that Susan was not being loyal to him. As John's problems with the job reached the breaking point, Susan had suddenly died.

In the session, Susan, speaking through the medium, offered her apology to John for not standing with him in his employment troubles and had words of encouragement for him, advising him that he would surmount his troubles. Then the medium fell silent for a moment, and then said, "and there's one thing more." And with that, the medium went over to John and planted three kisses on his cheek. This had been a characteristic gesture of Susan when she was alive, but the medium would have had no way of knowing that.

Three kisses. Is life everlasting a good idea? Perhaps all the logic in the world does not outweigh three kisses from the beyond. Amen.

Readings

Long Afternoon at the Edge of Little Sister Pond by Mary Oliver

As for life,
I'm humbled,
I'm without words
sufficient to say

how it has been hard as flint,
and soft as a spring pond,
both of these

and over and over,

and long pale afternoons besides,
and so many mysteries
beautiful as eggs in a nest,
still unhatched

though warm and watched over
by something I have never seen——
a tree angel, perhaps, or a ghost of loneliness.

Every day I walk out into the world
to be dazzled, then to be reflective.
It suffices, it is all comfort——
along with human love,

dog love, water love, little-serpent love,
sunburst love, or love for that smallest of birds
flying among the scarlet flowers.
There is hardly time to think about

stopping, and lying down at last
to the long afterlife, to the tenderness
yet to come, when
time will brim over the singular pond, and become forever,

and we will pretend to melt away into the leaves.
As for death,
I can't wait to be the hummingbird,
can you?

“Our Town” by Thornton Wilder, Act III, Stage Manager soliloquy

Now there are some things we all know but we don't take 'em out and look at 'em very often. We all know that something is eternal. And it ain't houses and it ain't names, and it ain't earth and it ain't even the stars – everybody knows in their bones that *something* is eternal and that

something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and you'd be surprised how people are always letting go of that fact. There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being.

Y'know, the dead don't stay interested in us living people for very long. Gradually, gradually, they lose hold of the earth – and the ambitions they had –and the pleasures they had – and the things they suffered –and the people they loved. Hey get weaned away from the earth – thatt's the way I put it, weaned away. Yes they stay here while the earth-part of them burns away, burns out, and all that time they slowly get indifferent to what's going on in Grover's Coprners. They're waiting. They're waiting for something they feel is coming. Something important and great. Aren't they waiting for the eternal part in them to come out – clear? Some of the things they're going to say maybe'll hurt your feelings – but that's the way it is: mother 'n daughter – husband 'n wife – enemy 'n enemy – money 'n miser – all those terribly important things kinda grow pale around here. And what's left? What's left when memory's gone and your identity?