

What's Next?
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville
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The earliest discussion about death that I can remember was with my mother. I don't know how old I was – maybe five or six, but that's a guess. Her father was an old man, and my mother explained to me that people get old, and eventually they die, that someday my grandfather would die. She explained that when people die they are put in the ground, they are buried. I remember being quite upset. The image I had was of a living person being put in a hole and then covered with dirt. I couldn't quite grasp the concept of being dead.

My next encounter with death I can place more accurately. It was after we had moved from Pleasant Ridge to Birmingham, that is, from a lower middle class suburb of Detroit to an upper middle class suburb, but it was while I was still in elementary school. I must have been about eleven. Our cat had had kittens, and my parents let me keep one of them to be my cat. The mother cat was my brother's. While Spunky was still young, he disappeared. When I came home from school one day, my mother reported to me that she had found Spunky. She had found him in the bushes in front of our house, and he was paralyzed. She had taken him to the vet, and chances of recovery were slim. The question she posed to me was whether we should have him – I don't remember how she said it; and I'm not sure what the best way to say it would be: should we have him “put down”, “euthanized”, “put to sleep”, “killed”, “put out of his misery”, “sent to a better place”? I resisted, holding out for recovery, but also declining to visit him – I couldn't face seeing him in his present state. After several days, I consented, and Spunky's short life came to an end.

We were a church-going family, faithful Presbyterians. Somewhere along the way I learned that when you die you go to heaven. No one ever told me about the Calvinist doctrine of predestination – that God decides in advance who is to go to heaven and who will be sent to the other place, and there's nothing you can do about it. That was not part of the Sunday school curriculum, and I doubt that it was ever preached from the pulpit.

Actually, while technically there's nothing you can do to change the decision that has already been made, good behavior is an indicator that you are among the elect, among the saved. This gives people an incentive to behave well. I'll talk more about this in a sermon I've been thinking about for a long time, a sermon on the free will problem.

In any event, I had an expectation that heaven awaited me, but I began to look at religion – and in particular, at the prospect of immortality – more rationally and objectively. I concluded somewhere along during my teenaged years that the most likely arrangement was that when you're dead, you're dead. And I found the prospect of death disturbing.

During my sophomore year in high school we read Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Do they still read *Julius Caesar* in tenth grade? I hope so. Here is Caesar's response when his wife Calpurnia urges him to stay home because of numerous threatening signs:

Cowards die many times before their deaths;
 The valiant never taste of death but once.
 Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,
 It seems to me most strange that men should fear;
 Seeing that death, a necessary end,
 Will come when it will come. (act II, scene ii)

That's most sensible advice. Don't worry about death. You can't do anything about it. You only have to face it once. There's no point in facing it before you have to. It's surely good advice, but I must admit that I've been among the cowards, not among the valiant.

Two years later, during my senior year in high school, I chose to do my term paper on the concept of the immortality of the soul. I wonder how many students choose such a topic. Fortunately, that paper is now lost – at least I hope it is. But I still have two of the books that I relied on, Julian Huxley's *Religion without Revelation* (1957) and Ashley Montagu's *Immortality* (1955). My research confirmed my view that when you're dead, you're dead.

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There are, among Unitarian Universalists, many different views about death. By the way, this is intended as the first of two sermons on death. In this sermon I take a quasi-philosophical approach. The next one – as yet unwritten and unscheduled – will be more pastoral in its concerns.

Many Unitarian Universalists share my view, that there's no way around the finality of death. The idea of immortality through memory and influence may have some appeal, but it's not like the real thing, and, for most of us, it won't last very long, at least, not very long compared to forever.

But many others, among our co-religionists, see other options; they're not persuaded that death is final, they're not convinced that our experience during this lifetime is all there is. Some Unitarian Universalists believe in a continued existence that's something like going to heaven. Of course, what heaven might be like is hard to describe. Most of us would agree that the best we can come up with are metaphors and analogies. We don't literally believe that the streets of heaven are paved with gold – but who knows?

Which reminds me of a story. *There once was a rich man who was near death. He was very much aggrieved because he had worked hard for his money, and he wanted to take it with him to Heaven. So he began to pray.*

An angel heard his plea and appeared to him. "Sorry, but you can't take it with you." The man implored the angel to speak to God to see if He might bend the rules.

The angel reappeared and announced that God had decided to make an exception. He could take one suitcase with him. Overjoyed, the man filled a suitcase with pure gold bars, and placed it beside his bed.

Soon afterward, it was his turn, and he showed up at the pearly gates. St. Peter spotted the suitcase, "Hold on," he said, "you can't bring that in here!"

But the man explained to St. Peter that he had permission and asked him to check his story out with the Lord. Sure enough, St. Peter returned, saying, "You're right. You are allowed one carry-on bag, but I'm supposed to check its contents before letting it through."

St. Peter opened the suitcase to inspect the worldly items that the man found too precious to leave behind and exclaimed, "You brought paving stones?" [Thomas Cathcar & Daniel Klein, *Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar . . . : Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes* (Abrams Image, 2007), pp. 177-78 (edited)]

Some Unitarian Universalists believe that one's soul merges with other souls, or that one's life merges with Life itself, or with God, and thus that one continues in existence but not as a separate entity.

Some UUs believe in reincarnation, that we are reborn and have multiple lifetimes. I claim no expertise with respect to the doctrine of reincarnation, but I was taken aback one day last August. We were watching the BBC news [Aug. 31, 2007, 10:30 p.m., channel 13], and I happened to notice on the crawl at the bottom of the screen a reference to attempts by the Chinese government to control Tibetan Buddhism: "new regulation on reincarnation," it said. I have no idea how you would go about regulating reincarnation.

And, finally, there's Rucker Blakeslee, the main character in Olive Ann Burns's wonderful novel, *Cold Sassy Tree* (1984). You'll recall that his wife has died, and he has shocked his family by announcing his plans for an immediate remarriage. In one scene, it's Sunday afternoon, shortly after the wedding, and Mr. Blakeslee is talking to his grandson Will, telling him about the worship service he had led in his own living room that morning, with only one other person present, his bride, Miss Love. (pp. 187-89)

RB Well, and then I talked to Miss Love 'bout Eternal Life. As you know, son, jest believin' we go'n live forever in the next world don't make it so - or not so.

Will Grandpa, you don't think Granny's gone to Heaven? She ain't Up There waitin' on us to come?

RB I like to think she is, son. If'n they is a Heaven, she's Up There, I know thet. Ain't but one way to find out if she is or ain't, though. And I'm not thet curious." *(he sighs, spits)* Havin' faith means it's all right either way, son. 'The Lord is my shepherd' means I trust Him. Will Tweedy, you go'n be tempted, and you go'n suffer, and you go'n die. Ain't no way out of it. But with the Lord's hep, you can stand up to temptation, and live th'ew the bad times, and look Death in the eye. You remember what I say, son." *(he looks dead serious, then all of a sudden laughs again)* You know, if'n I was a real preacher, Will Tweedy, wouldn't nobody come to my church.

Will I would, Grandpa.

RB Well, I ain't shore 'bout Miss Love. She was expectin' the Lord to strike me down this mornin'. When I finished preachin', she brought in some lemonade and pound cake, and I said it was the best Lord's Supper I ever et, and she said it was blasphemy.

As Grandpa Blakeslee explains, there's only one way to find out what happens to you when you die, and he's not that curious – he's willing to wait. In the end, we all have to wait, no matter how convinced we are of our positions.

Those are some of the views that you're likely to find among Unitarian Universalists. I hope you'll let me know, after the service, what I've left out.

There are two beliefs about death that I would be surprised to find among Unitarian Universalists.

First is a belief in a literal hell – a belief that some are condemned to everlasting torment and torture. The Universalists – two hundred years ago – based their identity on the unwillingness of a loving God to send anyone to such a place. And the Unitarians of that era believed that no one, at least none of them, was bad enough to deserve such a fate.

The second unlikely belief is a belief in the resurrection of the body – that's the idea that we're dead for some indeterminate but lengthy period of time, and then, at the appropriate time – like the second coming of Christ – we rise up from our graves, presumably with new bodies. That's the doctrine you'll find in the New Testament, and you'll find it in the Apostles' Creed – the creed we would recite every week in my Presbyterian church. As I said, I would be surprised to find this belief among us – but I like surprises.

One problem we have when we speculate about some form of life extending beyond death is epistemological – how can we know? What is our source of knowledge? But there’s a different problem that I don’t know how to solve, but I don’t know how to let go of it, either.

Suppose, for example, that we all move on to heaven when we’re done here. My question is this, how long do we stay there?

One option is that we live on in heaven a certain number of years – perhaps a hundred years, or a thousand, or a million, or until the universe burns itself out. The second option is that we live on in heaven for ever, for all of eternity, for time without end.

Now it seems to me that the first option – the term limit option – puts us right back in the position in which we find ourselves here: Someday this will end. Now, you may think that if you expected to live for a million years that the prospect of death wouldn’t bother you. But think of the dragonfly. Adult dragonflies live only a couple of months, at best. [\[http://www.dragonflies.org/faq.htm#faq3\]](http://www.dragonflies.org/faq.htm#faq3) I can imagine dragonflies looking at us humans and thinking, wouldn’t it be wonderful to live as long as they do! Life will come to an end, sooner or later, and the prospect of future nonexistence will always be there.

Living on in heaven forever – that’s the second option – is that any better? Do you see yourself getting bored? Perhaps not in the first thousand years, or perhaps not in the first million years, but *forever* is a very long time. After a while, we may wish to say “enough!”

If we have reservations about the idea of existing forever in heaven, how would we feel if we had the chance to live forever here on earth, if we could somehow avoid death? Now, human life spans have been gradually increasing, and no doubt further increase is possible, if we don’t kill ourselves off through global warming or nuclear disaster. I heard recently, I forget where, that if we retained the regenerative power of a 10 year old all our lives, we could live to 1000. A tenfold increase in our life spans would certainly change human society, but it would not change the underlying reality – death would still await us.

But living *forever* on earth, that would be different.

That, you may recall, was the prospect that Adam and Eve had before them, living forever, in the Garden of Eden. They lost their chance when they ate the forbidden fruit, and God evicted them from the Garden. (see Genesis 2:9, 17; 3:22-24). The quest for immortality is a theme also of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the world’s oldest epic poem. [see Frank S. Frick, *A Journey through the Hebrew Scriptures* (1995), pp. 141-42]

But what if we could do it – what if we could really avoid death, and live forever, on our very own, familiar planet? For this to work, of course, we’d have to rule out accidental death, murder, and suicide. We would also have to rule out children: if no one leaves, there’s no room for anyone new. Human society would be very different, in ways I haven’t tried to imagine, and won’t try to describe. But I see challenges.

Boredom. If spending eternity in heaven would be boring, spending eternity here on earth would be just as bad. Wouldn't we get tired of it all, after a few thousand years, perhaps, and long for a way out? The religions that accept reincarnation see the value of eventual extinction.

But even if you don't think you'd ever get bored, there's a more serious problem. Many of you were here when Michael Dowd talked about evolution a month ago [January 9, 2008], or you watched the video of his lecture the night before last [February 8, 2008]. Part of his message was that if you don't have death, you can't have evolution. Thus, if death weren't part of the system, we wouldn't be here. You might have noticed in yesterday's paper that this is Evolution Weekend. [Arkansas Democrat Gazette, p. H1 (Feb. 9, 2008)] If anyone asks you whether your congregation participated in Evolution Weekend, you can say that we did. By the way, you'll have another chance to see Michael Dowd next summer, at SWUUSI, the Southwest Unitarian Universalist Summer Institute, July 20 to 25.

But don't let the prospect of living forever, of defying death, bother you – it's not going to happen. Still, if you find the idea attractive, I have a couple of ideas – farfetched ideas, perhaps – about how you might go about living forever.

The first is to be Teddy Roosevelt – not the President Theodore Roosevelt who died in 1919, but the President Roosevelt immortalized on Mount Rushmore. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Rushmore] Mount Rushmore, by the way, was completed in 1941, less than six months before I was born. And I grew up thinking that it had always been there. Actually, my earliest belief about Mount Rushmore was that it was a natural formation that just happened to look like the four presidents. Of course, there are two problems with the Mount Rushmore form of immortality. First, the monument, unlike the flesh and blood man, lacks consciousness, and, second, while the monument will presumably last a long time; it won't last forever.

Here's my second idea, my second immortality attempt. If you want to live forever, you should have chosen to be the square root of seventeen rather than a human being. The decimal expansion of the square root of seventeen never ends. No matter how long, or how fast, the expansion is calculated, it just keeps going. It's as good an example of actual immortality as I can think of – but who among us would be willing to trade places with it? (And I hope there's no actual mathematicians in the house this morning.)

This is heavy going, you may be thinking – or a waste of time. And it may get worse before it gets better. But don't give up.

A sermon on death could hardly be complete without a discussion of the meaning of life. If we're all going to be dead within a hundred years, or two hundred years, at most; if we'll all be forgotten within five hundred or a thousand years, what's the point of it all? Doesn't life become meaningless? I've long considered the Meaning of Life – that's with a capital "M" and a capital "L" – a puzzling concept. I know of lots of things that give life meaning. I could

make a long list just of meaningful things that I've experienced today – from waking up with Kerry next to me, to singing “Abide with Me” with all of you a few minutes ago. [*Chris, play last line of SLT #101, Abide with Me*]

But is anything I do or experience *ultimately* meaningful? I have no idea, probably not. But suppose that I could live forever – suppose that we could all live forever – would that bring greater meaning to our lives? I don't see how. As I see it, it would make what we do *less* meaningful. Now we can say that you have only one chance with life, that you only go around once, that this life is not a practice session for the next one. Life's finitude makes it serious.

Indeed, some would say that if the only meaning we could find in life came from chocolate chip cookies, it would be sufficient. I'll conclude with a story.

A very old man lay dying in his bed. In death's doorway, he suddenly smelled the aroma of his favorite chocolate chip cookies wafting up the stairs.

He gathered his remaining strength and lifted himself from the bed. Leaning against the wall, he slowly made his way out of the bedroom, and with even greater effort forced himself down the stairs, gripping the railing with both hands.

With labored breath, he leaned against the door frame, gazing into the kitchen. Were it not for death's agony, he would have thought himself already in heaven.

There, spread out upon newspapers on the kitchen table were literally hundreds of his favorite chocolate chip cookies. Was it heaven? Or was it one final act of heroic love from his devoted wife, seeing to it that he left this world a happy man?

Mustering one great final effort, he threw himself toward the table. The aged and withered hand, shaking, made its way to a cookie at the edge of the table. *Smack!* His wife suddenly smacked his ancient hand with her spatula.

"Stay out of those," she said, "they're for the funeral."