

Thoughts on the Future

Bob Newnham December 31, 2006

The Future:

In essence we all have the same future: we will live for a while and then we will die. We are all mortal. I remember reading a science fiction book about a group of people from outer space who came to earth and were amazed that people could live under these conditions. They were immortal and had no death on their planet. They wondered how we as human beings could survive knowing that we would soon disappear, how this species of life could live under such conditions. How do we as Unitarians deal with such a difficult situation?

As we begin another year together in our brief existence, let us think about life, death, and immortality.

What is life? To most scientists like myself, life is a material process, with electrons in particle and wave form shifting and surfing over and through organic matter like a strange, slow wave. It is a controlled artistic chaos, a set of chemical reactions so staggeringly complex that something like eighty million years ago, it produced a mammalian brain that now in human form is capable of composing beautiful love letters and also working with silicon based computers to investigate the nature of the universe. Life appears, at the present time, 2006, to be on the verge of understanding the nature of its own thought processes –together with the molecular mechanisms responsible for the human mind and perhaps coming to grip with the sense of self-being that some refer to as the human soul. As an old materials scientist, I find this prospect very exciting; having worked most of my life working on lots of different transducers for use as sensors and actuators, this is a step beyond where I thought we could ever understand – the nature of matter and the thought process.

As my favorite hymn says, “Wonders Still the World Shall Witness.” In this coming year and the next few years, I think we’ll witness a level of understanding of ourselves that we never thought possible. I wish I could be here to see how all of these ideas develop. But there is much more to life than the view of the materials scientist. We all must learn to deal with life as human beings. How are each one of us going to deal with it --the idea that we will soon be separated from our loved ones and on to the next stage of whatever may be.

One of my Unitarian heroes, mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell, had these thoughts on “Growing Old.” I quote from his article:

Some people are oppressed by the fear of death. The best way to overcome these feelings – so at least it seems to me – is to make your interests gradually wider and more impersonal, until bit by bit the walls of personal ego recede, and your life becomes increasingly submerged in the universal life. An individual human existence should be like a river – small at first, narrowly focused within its banks, and rushing passionately past boulders and over waterfalls.

Gradually the river gets wider, the banks recede, the waters flow more slowly and quietly and in the end, without any visual break become submerged in the sea and painlessly lose their individual being. Men and women who can see their lives in this way, will not suffer from the fear of death, since the things they care for will continue, and if with the decay of vitality, weariness increases, the thought of rest will not be unwelcome. I should wish to die while still submerged in work, knowing that others will carry on what I can no longer do, and content in the thought that surrounded by those we love, that what was possible for us to do, has been done.

I love those words. My final thoughts are from Morrie. A few years ago, many of us read the best seller, *Tuesdays with Morrie*. There were several ideas related to life, death and immortality, including the following four.

The first is that we are part of nature: our atoms and molecules will be recycled as beautiful trees, or as fish or insects (I read somewhere that there are 300 pounds of insects for every one pound of human beings.) More than that, the ideas, feelings and emotions will be experienced by others as well, and we live on in recycled forms – we are part of nature.

The second idea from Morrie is that a certain peace can be achieved through the process of dying. We detach from life and experience the letting go; a peaceful acceptance can take place. Our minds and bodies will break through the barrier of pain, and we will find that we are ready to go, crossing the bridge to whatever comes next. A certain peace.

Third, if our lives were well lived, if we have generated a little happiness, if we have made the world a little better through the support of good causes, good ideas, and good people – then we can die without regret. Life and death are not two separate issues. As Morrie said, once you learn how to die, you learn how to live.

Finally, though Unitarians differ in their view of an afterlife, we all agree that there is a type of cultural immortality. The good that we do – our good ideas – our values – our humanity and spiritual beliefs – are transmitted to those around us – our children, our students, our friends – and will live on through them and their families and friends. Love and respect are the linkages between the living and the dead. In this way, immortality is possible for us all. I know this from personal experience. When my father, who spent much of his life as a carpenter and as a gradeschool janitor died, we took his body back to our hometown in upstate New York; and we had a memorial service. I was a little bit apprehensive about this, but it turned out to be a beautiful experience. For many of the school children who had been part of his life and the widows he had helped with carpentry work, spoke up and told what a beautiful a man he was.

That's the kind of immortality I'm thinking of. It's the kind of immortality that's available to us all.

Immortality

As many of you know, I have been suffering from some medical problems. A week or two ago one of my Chinese colleagues from the University came to visit me. And she brought along her eighty year old grandmother. Grandma said “I have just the thing to cure you. I have a special medicine for you, a medicine made from the spores of the mushrooms that grow on certain trees.” I found out later as I read about this medicine that it is called the “mushroom of immortality.” That is my hope for each of us, for you and for me, that as you live your life, you will develop a “mushroom of immortality” that will make your life more significant to you and those around you. Thank you very much.