

“Living On”

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Opening Words: Helen Volz

In last week’s Easter service Mark spoke about some ways of viewing resurrection. To continue in a Christian metaphor this week we’ll be looking at views of everlasting life.

Several studies have shown that around 80% of Americans believe in an afterlife. Alan F. Segel, a Barnard college professor and author of Life after Death: A History of Afterlife in Western Religion says that most Americans think that the afterlife will be a continuation of life on earth—perhaps “like a really good assisted living facility”.

I expect that most of us have wondered what will happen to us after we die. What will happen to our essence--the “I” that is each of us? If, as many UU’s believe, there is no afterlife in any traditional sense, what are some other ways in which we might live on?

I hope I won’t dash your hopes too much when I tell you that we’re not going to give you any definitive answers to the above questions. Nevertheless it seemed to us that this would be an intriguing topic to explore.

First let’s take a look at what some of the world’s religions have to say about life after death. Please realize that I will be giving very brief descriptions which are not necessarily representative of all subgroups of a particular religion. My goal is to show a variety of beliefs that our brothers and sisters on this earth hold.

Some religions teach that this life is not our only one on earth. **Hindus** believe in reincarnation, meaning that after this life the soul will be reborn in another form. The Karma one builds up in this life through good works and actions determines the soul’s progress or lack of progress in the next life. When the soul finally becomes pure it can join with Brahman.

The **Buddha** accepted many of the Hindu beliefs about reincarnation and Karma. One difference was that he did not believe that individuals possessed eternal souls. Instead he thought people consisted of a bundle of habits, sensations, desires, and so on. The goal of an individual is to free him or herself from all the desires of this world. Some **Native American** cultures also believe in reincarnation and it may even have been a part of early forms of Christianity.

Other religions teach that one’s soul lives on, but not on this earth. **Islam** teaches the continued existence of the soul in a changed form after death. On the final Day of

Judgment one's eternal destination to either heaven or hell depends on one's balance of good and bad deeds in this life.

In **Judaism** the idea of an afterlife is mentioned in the Jewish Scriptures, for example in Jacob's visions of angels going up and down the ladder and of heaven, but it is not well developed. Later writers have speculated on the afterlife without agreement. Judaism is much more focused on fulfilling one's duties to God and one's fellow humans in this life. The focus is on actions rather than beliefs. However, when the Jewish Kaballah was translated from German into English in the 1990s it brought with it a greater understanding of Jewish mysticism and included the idea that the transcendent part of the body leaves at death and is greeted by the souls of others such as family members and close friends.

The more **Conservative Christians** believe that one's entrance to heaven is determined by acceptance of the belief that Christ is the divine son of God and that he died for our sins. Those who do not believe in God and hold Jesus as their savior will end up in hell. Many believe in the resurrection of the body. Roman Catholics have a belief in Purgatory as a third option—a place where one stays while becoming fit to enter heaven.

Liberal Christians see inconsistencies in the Bible descriptions of heaven and hell and believe hell more of a concept, rather than a place. They believe that a loving God would not punish someone for minor oversights or lack of exposure to the Christian Scriptures.

This makes an excellent segue to the **Universalists**, the second U in UU, who had that idea earlier. Both the Unitarians and the Universalists had a common enemy in Calvinism. They were especially opposed to the idea of "election to Grace", the belief that God had chosen people to be saved before the dawn of time. In 1790 John Murray arrived in this country and began preaching a message of hope. He believed that although many might go through a brief period of suffering after death, all would eventually be saved. And with this message Universalism was born. Hosea Ballou the next Universalist leader went a step further and said that the punishment for sin was in the consequences of sin in this life and that after death there would be *immediate* salvation for all—universal salvation.

The early **Unitarians** held beliefs about the afterlife that were similar to Protestants of the time, even though they differed in other matters such as the Trinity. One guest speaker we had some years ago said they were a bit more reluctant than the Universalists to give up the idea of Hell. Of course as we all know they eventually did and most discarded Heaven too.

These views of living on while held by many, are not the only ones. In this service we'll explore the ways in which some of us believe we may live on.

Sharing: Living On Amanda Richards

I am one of that rare breed—someone who was born and raised a Unitarian Universalist. My religious upbringing did not include a concept of heaven or any sort of afterlife, except as a cultural reference. I remember telling my mother, when I was about six or seven, that the problem with heaven was that nobody ever came back to tell you whether it was there or not. In any case, my parents and religious education emphasized that it is what we do now, here, on earth that is important. That is how we “live on.”

It is hard to think about our death, that one day we will “let slip that mortal coil” and we simply won't be here anymore. Hard to do, after a lifetime of learning how to live. We want to know that what we have accomplished in our lives will not vanish like a puff of air. We crave just a little bit of immortality, whether through our children, our work, our creative efforts, or people's memories of us.

I hope to find immortality through words. I have always wanted to be a published author. Having a book with my name on it, with its very own ISBN number and place on any library shelf, seems, to me, to be the ultimate in “living on.” Someday, I hope to hold my own book, preferably a Pulitzer prize-winning novel or poetry collection, and say: I did this; these are my words set down in black type on a white page. I envision a reader, wandering past a bookshelf in a library or store, looking for a story. This reader will pull my book from the shelf, open the cover, and lose him- or herself in my words, characters, images. I hope my readers dog-ear the pages, scribble notes in the margins, cheer on my characters, boo the villains, and stay up until 2 am just to read one more chapter. My values, my thoughts, what I consider sacred will live on through my readers.

Unfortunately, I have yet to accomplish this. I'm collecting a respectable pile of rejection letters, including last week's email from “The Fickle Muses” rejecting three poems (yes, that's really the journal name!). Somehow, these editors haven't quite caught on to my bid for immortality, my plan for “living on.” (Speaking as a freelance editor and writer, I

feel quite free to criticize my own profession.) But I'm confident that one day they will all come to their senses.

There are many different ways to "live on" after one's death. Most people will live on through their children and their children's children, their DNA passed down through generation after generation, into a distant future beyond our sight or knowledge. And we live on through the memories of our friends and loved ones—there is a poignant reading at the back of the hymnal called "We Remember Them" which speaks of remembering those who have died in the shaking of the autumn leaves, in the blooms of spring, in summer clouds scudding across an azure sky because we are of the earth and death is only one part of its larger cycle.

If I do not live on through books, I will still live on through the natural cycles of life and death. When I was a child, I devoured the Greek and Viking myths. I particularly liked the Viking funerals, where the deceased warrior is placed on a ship, set ablaze, and the vessel pushed out into a lake or the sea to burn. All the natural elements are there: earth, air, fire, water. I envision my physical body being consumed by flame, rising into the air in brilliant shower of snapping sparks that become soft, fragile ash falling back into the cool water, dissolving on the surface, I will "live on" by becoming part of the water molecules that evaporate into the sky and fall back to earth as rain to nourish the smallest plants and mightiest redwoods.

Upon my death, I hope that the energy I release in my final breath will become part of the wind currents of the world. I will swirl around the globe, cross the continents, become part of hurricanes, blizzards, and the lightest summer breeze. I will be the tone of a garden wind chime, the ripple in a flag's fabric, the unfurling daisy petal, and the smallest tremble of every aspen leaf. It is thus that I will live on.

Sharing: Living On Through Family Helen Volz

Since I suggested the topic of this service, it seems only fair that I let you look into the confused tangle of what I may or may not believe. I grew up in the Methodist tradition and until I was in my early 20's believed in heaven. Hell was rarely mentioned and I assumed that of course I wouldn't go there. Then I read all of Ayn Rand's books and decided maybe atheism made more sense and I gave up on religion for 30 years. During that time I did, however, develop some interest in the paranormal, as well as

near death and out of body experiences. Knowing a close relative who had a near death experience and seeing how her life changed made me even more interested in that possibility. I went back to the Methodist church at age 50 and heaven again seemed attractive, but since I'd also read a good bit about reincarnation I decided that life before life was as likely as life after life. I also like to think about the possibilities of parallel universes and other dimensions. Finding an answer is probably less important to me than the exploration.

I've also been mulling over two things I've read recently. In I Am a Strange Loop Douglas Hofstadter writes,

"In the wake of a human being's death what survives is a set of afterglows, some brighter and some dimmer, in the collective brains of all those who were dearest to them. And when those people in turn pass on, the afterglow becomes extremely faint. And when that outer layer in turn passes into oblivion, then the afterglow is feebler still, and after awhile there is nothing left."

Our book club recently read Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. In the afterword, which appears in later editions of the book, the author ponders where his son went after he was killed. He says,

"We think of people as something material—as flesh and blood. What I had to realize was that the son I missed so badly was not an object, but a pattern. Although the pattern included flesh and blood that was not all there was to it. The body that was gone was like a huge hole torn out of the center of it and that was what caused the heartache. The larger pattern remained."

There is one way, though, that I feel confident we do live on. When I look at the National Geographic maps of human migration out of Africa I get goose bumps. I am in awe that people have figured this out—that we know the trails our ancestors took in prerecorded history before they settled in the lands that we say we came from. One of the benefits of being interested in genealogy is the sense of continuity it gives you with who has gone before. Even though I can trace some of my ancestors back to Germany in the 1600's and a larger number to Germany in the 1700's that is admittedly, only a tiny slice of time. Still I do know some real names of real people from whom I am descended and in some cases the names of the ships on which they came to this country and the places they have lived since then. I'm grateful to the distant relatives who did part of the research and saved me a great deal of work.

I can give this information to my children and grandchildren and they too will have an idea of who came before. Because I come from a family of photographers they can see pictures of many of these people. They can look at the pictures of the mill near Loganton built by my great, great, great grandfather and read the obituary which details

my maternal grandfather's last few days on earth. I believe that I too will live on through my family.

I'll never know who the person was who gave me and some others in my supposedly German and Alsatian family the gene that resulted in a hereditary form of anemia usually found in people of Mediterranean descent. I'll never know those who gave me the DNA that makes me 18% Native American. I'll never know which ones of that relatively small group of Africans who ventured far from home are my ancestors. But still I get a thrill when I look at those maps and know that we are all related—we are all part of the same family.

Sharing: How I Want to Live On **Virginia Hubbs**

As a divorced woman with no children and long past the age of childbearing, I experience the issue of living on as both more simple and also different from that of people with progeny. Because I have no children, the notion of living on through them is irrelevant. Any sadness or disappointment about not having children is more from missing the experience of raising them than from leaving a mark on the world through my DNA.

And what does living on mean for me? It is not only about being remembered, which perhaps is just as well, because the overwhelming majority of the world's population is forgotten after a couple of generations. For most people, only their DNA continues. A few people do live on in ways other than DNA, of course, through their contributions to philosophy, the arts, political leadership, science, or another field. I believe, however that these individuals have a gift, and that something inside them insists they express this gift. In the process, they touch the world for years or centuries.

Still, most of like to be remembered and the experience of being remembered can kindle the desire for to live on forever, particularly when you're young. When I was in my early 20's I worked as a preschool teacher. After a couple of years, I left for another job, and when I returned to visit a few month later, my former students came running up, happy to see me. Soon they told me they had a new guinea pig in the classroom, bought from a pet store they'd visited shortly after I left. What did you name it? I asked. They replied with delight, "Miss Hubbs! We named it Miss Hubbs!!!"

Although being remembered through the name of a pet guinea pig was a modest start in living on, the experience gave me a hint that I *did* want to have some lasting impact on the world. And so, I have spent my professional life almost exclusively in nonprofit organizations, working with women in developing countries and promoting access to healthy food in inner cities, for example.

In recent years, I have stepped back a bit from the “how” of living on to explore a different question: “Why? Why is living on important?” Because, it is said, we want our lives to have had meaning; we do not want to live and then disappear as if we never existed at all. In a way it’s the human version of, if a tree falls in the forest and there’s no one there to hear it, does it make a sound? If I live my life yet produce no lasting memory in the world, does it make a difference? Why have I lived?

This is, of course, is where many religions step in to answer the question and provide comfort. Life has meaning, they say, because God loves you, God created you, and God will welcome you back home when you die. It is one of the mysteries and gifts of believing in an all-powerful, personal God for whose good will you live your life, for whom you try to be moral, ethical, and compassionate.

For those of us who do not believe in a personal God guiding and looking after us – what do we do with this issue of living on, especially if we do not have children or a legacy in the arts or science or some other field? My beliefs about this are still forming but here are some of the ideas that are shaping that process.

The first is found in several books by theologian Matthew Fox, who says that in fact, nothing disappears: we are all composed of atoms from that original explosion of life, the Big Bang. Everything is recycled, though typically into a different form. For example, ashes scattered fall to the ground and go into the earth, which produces and feeds new life.

Another idea is, that it is ok to die, that the concern about living on is a need of the ego, not of the spirit. Everyone dies. Mark Nepo in *The Book of Awakening* says, “To die is not a bad thing. Cells die every day. Paradoxically, it is how the body lives. Casings shed. Coverings fall away. New growth appears. It is how we stay vital.”

Nepo is speaking in terms of the individual. But what if this is a metaphor we can apply to humans as a whole? We die, and new babies are born. Is our leaving providing space, freeing up energy for new beings?

Physician and metaphysician Brugh Joy expresses this notion more strongly, saying it is our job to die and fall back into the vast ocean of everything that is and has ever been.

A third idea is that time and space are artificial constructs, which those who are truly spiritually awakened, do not experience. For such people, living on is not an issue. "Be Here Now" author Ram Dass speaks of the anguish expressed by himself and other students when their spiritual teacher was ill and dying. The students, cried out, "Teacher, don't leave us don't leave us!" The teacher laughed and replied, "Why do you cry? I will be right here. There's no where to go."

Unfortunately, I am not yet awakened, so I appreciate these ideas intellectually rather than truly understand them; even so I find them comforting. And what I do understand is that life is an opportunity to be fully who we are, to express whatever gifts we have. A Chinese proverb says: A bird does not sing because it has an answer. It sings because it has a song.

Further, all we have is now. We do not know what will happen in the future. Our job is to live with what we have, now.

Finally, I know that life has consequences, and the consequences of our decisions live on in large and small ways. A friend of mine was in continuing series of small yet angry disputes with a neighbor. She made the decision one day to choose peace rather than anger, and so she started offering him vegetables from her garden and smiling at him, even praying. At first, her overtures were met with hostility, yet she persisted, and slowly the neighbor's attitude shifted. Eventually he invited my friend and her partner to a party, where they met other neighbors, who were welcoming to them for the first time. Today there is indeed peace in her neighborhood. And it started with her decision to choose peace.

So, overall (with many sidesteps), I have tried to live my life so that the consequences of my actions are positive for others as well as myself. Working in the nonprofit world has been my way of doing that, though it is certainly not the only way. I have an acquaintance who took an alternate route: Also single and childless, she wanted to live on by making a difference to the world's environment, so she decided in her late 40's to take out a \$1 million life insurance policy at a cost that keeps her financially strapped but will fund an environmental conservation organization working in the Amazon rainforest when she dies.

While I don't go that far, I do want to live on through works that contribute to a better world. Singer songwriter Mark Erelli, who sang at our first Soulful Sundown service speaks to this in a verse of his song, "Passing Through." He says,

Now I wonder sometimes what will I pass on,
how much can one voice do with just a song;
sometimes injustice and indifference are the only things I see,
but I refuse to let my hope become the latest casualty.

So I'll sing of love and justice
and try to practice what I preach,
and if I can't change the world I'll change the world within my reach,
and what better place to start than here and now with me and you,
we are only passing through.

We are only passing through.