

Beyond the Threshold
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This is the fifth sermon in a series of six on theology, and today I take up the question of what is beyond the life we know.

In a number of ways this is not an easy topic. Most people don't like to think much about death, and the truth is, we don't really know what happens after we cross that threshold, so all the ideas are merely speculation.²

But we do know a little bit about what's after another threshold that (like death) all of us cross. We are born, and in that moment we cross the threshold into life.³

This crossing may not seem like much at first glance. But consider what birth must be like for the baby. A baby starts out as a fertilized egg, a group of cells smaller than the dot a pencil makes at the end of a sentence. But over a few months, those cells grow into an embryo, and then a fetus, and then into a being that is recognizably human and, at some point, aware.

Aware of what? The comfortable warmth and dark and constant flow of nutrients. Music and voices and loud sounds. The soothing vibrations of the mother's body: heartbeat, blood flow, vocal chords. By the time the unborn child is near birth, this secure environment is all it has known.

Suddenly the world changes. There are disturbing contractions that grow more and more forceful. The mother's body signals distress that surely must communicate to the child. What is happening? Then there is pressure and movement...down a channel...with a bright light that shocks even through closed eyelids. And the strange sensation of air, cooler than body temperature, and the unfamiliar touch of hands ... and gravity, new to a being that has been suspended in fluid for all of its awareness. And when the cord is cut, pain, and the sudden unexpected lack of oxygen, like a fish out of water, until the lungs begin to work and the baby gasps its first breath.

No wonder they cry.

What do we know about the world? Whatever we know is the result of our experience in it. We see the blue sky, the stars at night, the lightning. We feel the earth under our feet, touch the living solidity of a tree, shiver in the cold. We hear the voices of other human beings and the

¹ Minister, Second Congregational Meeting House Society, Unitarian Universalist, Nantucket, MA: The Unitarian Church on Nantucket Island. This sermon is subject to a Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivatives-Noncommercial License 3.0. For more information, go to <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>. The preceding four sermons in this "theology" series are: August 2009, "Life, the Universe, and Everything"; September 2009, "The Nature of God"; October 2009, "Why Evil?"; November 2009, "For Goodness Sake."

² Death is a topic, though, that concerns everyone. In the words of the incomparable Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens), death is "the only immortal who treats us all alike, whose peace and whose refuge are for us all. The soiled and the pure, the rich and the poor, the loved and the unloved."

³ An early English Unitarian, the scientist J.B. Priestly, said: "The people who pretend that dying is rather like strolling into the next room always leave me unconvinced. Death, like birth, must be a tremendous event."

song of birds and whales. Whatever burdens and troubles come into our lives, this is Life. It is our treasure and our playing-field and our artist's canvas. Sometimes it is our battleground and our undoing. But we know it.

We do not know what is beyond the threshold of death. We are reluctant to cross it. We are afraid.

There is a great deal of speculation about what lies beyond. I'm sure you are all familiar with most of the theories.

- Valhalla.
- 70 virgins, or raisins, depending on the translation.
- Reincarnation, and another turn of the Wheel.
- Angels sitting on clouds playing harps.
- Judgment day, where a frowning "God" separates the wheat from the chaff, or a Rapture when believers ascend and unbelievers languish behind.
- Or heaven, the place where, when you get there, you are greeted by all the dogs you have ever loved.

I visited my grandmother (my mother's mother) just a few days before her death. She was in her 90s and wondering why God had waited so long to "take" her. That's the way she thought of it. She was in good health, but she longed to be reunited with the husband who had died years before. She said, "I want to be with Edgar again."

There is an Inuit proverb I think my grandmother would have liked. Imagine all those hours in the dark in the cold northern regions of the planet. How clear the sky would be, how bright the stars. The proverb goes: "Perhaps they are not stars, but rather openings in heaven where the love of our lost ones pours through and shines down upon us to let us know they are happy."

I've thought about what might lie "beyond." The main conclusion I've come to is that we do not know. Just as we do not know whether there is something beyond that first creeping into awareness that occurs in the womb.⁴ We are not aware; then we are aware (and if we are lucky, paying attention); then, when death comes, the part of us that remains is no longer responsive.

One question is whether any part of that awareness—our consciousness, our sense of self—might carry on after we cross that threshold into death. Many people who reject the popular and very specific images of "eternal life" (angels and harps) do imagine a continuum of consciousness: a return to the creative Source, to the Love that pervades the universe, to the "oneness" of All-Being.

⁴ Anne Morrow Lindbergh said, "Why is it harder to think of his going to nothing than to think of his coming from nothing? One direction is just as dark as the other."

These conceptions spring from the idea that, here on Earth, we are not human beings who sometimes have a spiritual experience, but spiritual beings who are having a human experience. Perhaps we are larger beings, and for a while a fragment of ourselves exists in human form, only to return to the larger being of spirit and energy.

Some people are certain that there is nothing at all after death. What we know is all. “This is it.” And from a logical standpoint, the cessation of the complex biological entity we call a human being might seem to be the end, as well, of the consciousness that is the “self.”⁵

If human consciousness does end at death, if “this is it,” humanity is nonetheless part of a process that returns our physical being to the earth—to “nature’s compost heap,”⁶ and thus the source of what is necessary for growth and the creation of new life. We are, even in this least optimistic view, beings created from stardust and who return to stardust, continuing the cycle of life.

And yet...our newest understanding of the universe is rather inconsistent with the nothing-more-than-compost-heap theory. Quantum mechanics is only just beginning to understand the ways in which all the things we call “real” are in fact only energy: vibrating strings that make up everything in the universe.

Perhaps some of the energy that animates our physical being is beyond the visible, just as some light is invisible to our eyes and some sound un-hearable to our ears. Perhaps logic requires that we consider scientific understanding of death still incomplete. Perhaps we should acknowledge the possibility that if we do know have all the answers about what brought our universe into being, and how it works, we may not have all the answers about death.

Setting aside the scientific for a moment, let’s consider the conventional, contemporary Christian idea of salvation and eternal life. This view is the predominant Christian notion, but it’s not the whole story.

In early Christianity, there were some groups that imagined human consciousness returning to the great All-Being. The Greek word “gnosis” referred not only to a way of understanding through connection with a vastness greater than ourselves, but also to the human spirit’s place as part of that vastness.⁷

There were also early Christian groups that emphasized the importance of being fully present to Life and the presence of God in it. The Gospel of Thomas: “Split open a piece of wood, and I am there; lift up the stone, and you will find me there.”⁸ For these groups, life-after-death was largely irrelevant.

⁵ The playwright Tom Stoppard put it eloquently: ““Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which will soon be over... Death is not anything... death is not... It’s the absence of presence, nothing more... the endless time of never coming back... a gap you can’t see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes not sound...”

⁶ Peter Weiss says, “Any animal, plant or man who dies adds to Nature’s compost heap, becomes the manure without which nothing could grow, nothing could be created. Death is simply part of the process.”

⁷ For more on Christian Gnostics, see Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (Vintage Books 1979).

⁸ Gospel of Thomas, verse 77. Thomas was probably written during the mid-second century CE, although there is an argument that it pre-dates the canonical Gospels. A number of translations with commentary are in print, for example, Marvin Meyer’s *The*

And there were some Christian communities who considered eternal life, in a refreshed physical form, as the primary reason to embrace Christian beliefs and practices. The writings of these groups emphasize that the only possibility for survival after death is to become a member of their group.⁹

The promise of eternal life as a reward for membership is a better offer than can be made by any health club on the planet. No wonder so many people have joined.

But for a long time it has seemed to me rather desperate, rather frantic, and deeply hollow to claim that a particular formula of belief is the only way to cross the threshold of death and survive.

For nearly 200 years, Unitarians and Universalists have rejected the idea of hellfire and damnation. In the 19th century this kinder, gentler form of Christianity was a rejection of Calvinism and its emphasis on the doctrine that only the “elect” would make it to heaven, and all others would be damned to a fiery hell. “Sinners in the hands of an angry God,” dangling over the burning pit.

Universalists, and then Unitarians, began to speculate more thoughtfully about the nature of God and what that might mean for the notion of heaven and hell. A loving God, a parental God, they thought, would not condemn most of humanity to hellfire. And out of this more open, more wide-ranging thinking came the movement away from fundamentalism.

Whatever our childhood religious training, as adults we are entitled and (here in this place) encouraged to think more widely about what might happen after death. We need not place ourselves in the tiny box of accepting what we have been taught or rejecting it all.

We can accept, instead, that there is much we do not know, and more that we know incompletely. That acceptance frees us to open our minds to a much larger box, to a range of possibilities, which may be neither as dire nor as absurd as what convention tells us to believe.

As the French poet Rabelais said, “Death is the vast *perhaps*.”

One of our members who died last year, Margaret Hitchcock, wrote a little poem just a few weeks before her death. Perhaps as she neared that threshold she glimpsed something we who lovingly remember her have not yet seen. Margaret wrote:¹⁰

Soon I will awake

Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus (HarperOne 2nd Ed. 1992). Elaine Pagels (in her usual highly readable style) places Thomas in a larger context in *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (Random House 2003). A number of translations are available online; a highly readable one is by T. O. Lambdin at <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/gthlamb.html>.

⁹ One example is the community that cherished the *Epistula Apostolorum*, written between 120 – 180 CE, probably in Greek in Asia Minor, Egypt, or Syria, and received in the Hellenistic Egyptian Jewish-Christian community, which was likely influenced by the Egyptian interest in fleshly resurrection. The extant versions are in Coptic (1) Latin (1 leaf), and Ethiopic (14 manuscripts). An English translation by G. Muller from the German translation by Hugo Duensing is in Wilhelm Schneemelcher’s *New Testament Apocrypha, Vol. I*, page 250, and an online English translation by M. James can be found at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/apostolorum.html>. The text is Gnostic in form, but emphasizes that “resurrection of the flesh” is the reward of all who believe and obey.

¹⁰ Margaret Hitchcock, “The Tao” (2009).

rise like a
brilliant afterthought
from my bed
of milkweed, shake out
elegant, orange wings
and amid a shower
of thistledown
sip from a late
flower. And begin
my long journey
to another hemisphere.

The larvae who weaves its cocoon surely cannot imagine that the final effort of its caterpillar life, and a little sleep, will transform it into a butterfly. What can we human beings imagine? Whatever our speculations, perhaps we are as unprepared as the caterpillar.

For me the answer to the question of death is very simple. I do not know; I cannot imagine; but there is no point in fear or desperation.

The only response I can offer to the mystery of death is to open my heart wide to life.¹¹ Embrace life, live it fully, cherish each moment. Hold close to my soul those I love, and when they are gone, remember them, speak gladly of the time I had with them, bring into my being who they were and what they taught me.¹²

This may not be a conventional idea of eternal life, but perhaps it is enough to help us pay attention while we are still caterpillars.

¹¹ In the words of the poet Kahlil Gibran, "If you would behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life. For life and death are one, even as the river and sea are one."

¹² The Quaker William Penn, who left his native England to found Pennsylvania, said: "Death is but crossing the world, as friends do the sea; they live in one another still."