

Life after Afterlife

A Sermon by Fritz Hudson
Presented April 23, 2000

*"Come sweet death.
Come soothing rest.
Come and lead me homeward."*

Jesus of Nazareth could have said, even sung, our choral responsory this morning, as he reached his ninth hour on the cross. "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit," the last words Luke recorded from Jesus there, sound like "come sweet death" to me. There may come a time when I too will be able to say such words. Several times in my ministry, I have heard them from others, in one form or another. I really should say that I hope I am fortunate enough to be able to say such words someday - to live so long as to use up all the physical and psychological resources which this life has granted me, and to still have just enough self-awareness to know, echoing John's recorded last words of Jesus, that "it is finished." Intellectually I can imagine myself coming to such feelings. Some of you, I know, may be feeling now such words beginning to rise from your own soul. But, you will be my teachers. For I must confess that I have never yet felt such words within me. Up to this point in my life my feelings toward death have been far removed from those of allure and attraction.

As were some of you, I was raised religiously in the Christian tradition. Up to the age of seven or so, my feelings toward death were schooled by the comforting message of that tradition. As we recited it every Sunday in my church, "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

Deep in the nights of my seventh, eighth, or ninth year, however, cracks began to open in my comfort and assurance. Somehow I found my spirit pulled toward the terrible possibility that I might not live forever, in some "world to come." I began to feel, and simultaneously to desperately fight, the gnawing apprehension that my death might be the absolute end of my conscious experience - the end for me of all beauty and joy - that I would simply one day disappear, in all ways I could experience - love no more, hurt no more, thrill no more, sorrow no more. I would be gone, forever. By the age of 10, I know, the year I first saw death on the face of my friend Randy Farina, who died of cancer that year, and the year I also undertook my church's confirmation, I know I more fully believed that this new story, not my church's old story, was the truth of human destiny.

Fear was my primary feeling toward death at this stage of my life - fear because I wanted deeply to believe that my life would continue after my death, because I wanted to believe that by choosing to believe and act in certain ways, I could win myself joy rather than pain in that life - fear because I knew in my heart of hearts that I just couldn't trust my deepest self to be able to muster up that "leap of faith." I was afraid of myself.

Several things have changed for me, and within me, in the forty years since those feelings first arose. I have lived 18 thousand 501 days by now, if I've done my math right, and I expect, even hope to some extent, that I have not quite that many days before me. (I've seen more miserable 100 year olds than happy ones.) And, as with many of you, I no longer fear death in the way I did as a child. I am no longer teased or haunted by the idea that I might will myself into an afterlife if I could just choose to believe that it was there. I still feel fear, but now fear somewhat of whatever physical pain may attend my final steps

(though I've believe I've seen modern medical pain management now effectively saving the vast majority of us from that future), but far more fear of the psychological and spiritual pain I know will come when I feel my body pulling my spirit from all that life might still hold for me, or I imagine it still holds for me, at that time. My fear now is not of death, but rather of the process of dying.

I still have feelings about death, but they don't come easily any more. I seem to have learned largely to suppress them now, completely unconsciously. From time to time, I recognize just the whisper of a wistful hope, a wish really, that some conscious life awaits me "in the world to come." And sometimes, always when I am alone, and most often late at night, a little hidden door in the floor of my soul seems to slide silently open, and I find myself free-falling, slowly then faster, into anger, and sorrow, and pure, pure pain as the conviction that all that is me and all that is my life will one day all too soon come to an irrevocable and eternal end.

When that door opens now, in this my 50th year, I often try to hold onto the feeling as long as I can stand it, to go as deeply into it as I dare. I know I can suppress it. The question I ask is can I face it. It's light here and we are not alone, I know. But I wonder, now, if you could try to face that feeling within yourself, with me, in this moment - to face your own extinction.

(Silence)

And now I ask: Do you see, do you feel any life beyond that death? Is there life after belief in after-life?

Let me pause here, just a moment, to acknowledge and affirm that your experience and your feelings toward death may not be at all like mine. Hear me now: Hold onto your experience. Hold onto your feelings. To use the words recorded as Siddhartha Gautama's, the Buddha's, last: "Hold to the truth within yourself as to the only lamp." More than 70% of Americans consistently report believing there is a life beyond this one. In the 1960s, when Unitarian Universalists were last scientifically surveyed as to their convictions, 10% avowed a conviction of personal immortality, and my personal experience of the past thirty years among us would suggest that the percentage may well be higher today. Again, I say, hold onto your truth, as long as it holds onto you. Your feelings and convictions have the same standing here as mine do; your search for truth and meaning is free here, as mine is; your conscience has the right to rule your soul here, as mine does to rule mine; you are accepted here, in dignity, no less than am I.

But you know why I can make that statement, don't you, how I can affirm that you and I, members of the same spiritual body, may with equal affirmation here hold diametrically opposed convictions as to what awaits us after death? It has to do with the essence of our religious identity. Other religious bodies, the dominant religious bodies in our culture, may test true membership and purport to grant or deny salvation by asking the question: do you believe in "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." Our faith community, however, proclaims another gospel - we proclaim for all the world to hear that the worth and meaning of the human soul, regardless where it goes after death, is still fundamentally not to be measured in a resurrected world to come. Our progenitors in this faith - deists and founders of our nation such as Benjamin Franklin, Unitarian Christians and Universalist Christians, founders of our community, such as William Ellery Channing and John Murray - did personally believe they would, as Franklin's gravestone reads "appear once more, in a new and more elegant edition, revised and corrected by "The Author." Nevertheless the gospel of our faith was uttered by one in the following generation of our early prophets, by Henry David Thoreau. When on his own death bed, asked by his friend

Parker Pillsbury whether he could see anything "on the other side of life," Thoreau's near final words were these: "One world at a time, Parker. One world at a time." That is our gospel.

The good news of Unitarian Universalism is that this life, time-bounded, space-limited as it is, nonetheless holds all we need to feel ourselves worthy, all we need to find for ourselves meaning, all we need to know, for ourselves, peace. At many of the memorial services I lead among us, I speak Eustace Hayden's words:

"We are often blinded by loss so that death wears too much mystery. Yet it is no more than a return to our home in nature. Life is the real mystery, hidden from us because the veil of familiarity covers our eyes. That a fragment of the materials of the earth should grow into forms of beauty, feel love and joy and sorrow, become a temple of ideals and dreams, send thought messages out through all the reaches of space and time, mold meanings and patterns of beauty into the lives of others, and gather the threads of friendship devotion, admiration and loyalty from the hundreds of hearts, to weave for itself a garment of happiness - this is the marvelous mystery, the supreme poetic achievement of time and nature. Death merely restores the borrowed materials to the earth."

Our faith calls us, first and forever, to recognize and to fully appreciate the wonder, the "wow" if you will, of the gift of life we already have in hand - of this life, of our current place in time and space. Our faith calls us, at least from time to time, to close from our consciousness any greedy apprehensions for any life beyond today's here and now, and to know it most fully.

Susan Ertz is our goad. *"Millions," she observes, "long for immortality who do not know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon."*

Our faith knows what to do on a Sunday afternoon. We live in the time invested to keep ourselves alive - to provide ourselves food, and shelter, and health. When we wash the dishes, as we have been taught by Thich Nhat Hanh, we focus fully on that experience. We really "wash the dishes." We also live in the time invested simply attending to and taking in the gift of life. And still for us, there is a life, after our own, in which we are called to invest - not a resurrected world, rather a continuous world, this world, as it will be, after we die. Roman Catholic Christians teach salvation for another world by works done in this world. We teach salvation for this world by works done in this world.

Perhaps there'd be some value for you in hearing something of my growth in this faith, through what I've come to call my "immortality projects." My sympathies are with Woody Allen, who once said *"I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve immortality through not dying."* My sympathies are with Woody, but my soul is invested with Thomas Wolfe's. *"If we would have any immortality, it will depend on what we do here and now to continue what influence we have created out of the work of our hands."*

As for all who take on parenthood, the immortality project closest to my heart is as father to Sally, step-father to Eric. If I and they are lucky, and to some small extent if Ginny and I do our work well, their lives will extend beyond our own. I don't count too heavily on how my investment may take form in them. Its shape will probably be finally clearer to them than it ever will to me. And I know that, in large part their lives will be their own project rather than Ginny's or mine. Nevertheless I work, in some way, on my immortality through them.

Long before I ever entered Eric's life and before Sally was ever born, I knew that my work with churches was an immortality project. All religious institutions are built and sustained

to perpetuate faith and values forward into new generations, as are many secular institutions, universities, museums. When I served our church in Iowa City, approaching its 150th year, housed in the same building for over 80 years, my sense of living out the immortality of those who preceded me was palpable. When I served our church in Phoenix, approaching its 50th year, and just beginning to outlive its founders, we were also just beginning to understand ourselves as a vessel of history, carrier of their hopes and dreams. Here we represent people who have spoken in our name for 130 years, but we're housed in a building just approaching its 40th year. We're in the middle of my experience, clearly carrying others immortality, but needing to work to remind ourselves of this mission. I at least see our own work here as a gift and investment for those who will follow us as well. And that, of course, is why I suggested two weeks ago that perhaps our Easter bulletins should include, rather than inserts appreciating floral donations, rather forms on which we could amend our personal wills to perpetrate the work of whatever institutions we might choose, our church and others, to live our values for us beyond us.

Seven years ago however, when I served our church in Phoenix, I fell into a third project, which has taken its place in this group as well, one which seems to capture the fragility of these efforts even better than these other two. At first, I was just looking for a way to spend some of my days off, something beyond the maintenance work of fixing things at home, doing the laundry, and the very physical experience of playing tennis. In that outdoors oriented world, I thought I might look toward deepening my participation in the life of that "interdependent web of all existence" we U.U.s keep talking about. So I went looking for whatever would strike me as the most beautiful natural environment I could find within an hour's drive from my home, suspecting, hoping that it might need a little help to maintain its beauty in the face of human cohabitation. I found it to the east, in the Salt River Valley - an area, perhaps as you know, ringed by multihued mountains, a narrow green ribbon in the vast brown desert, with trees, shrubs and flowers, home to bird and beast, where, to borrow a phrase "a river runs through it," and with the river, enough floaters' and rafters' cans and bottles, shirts and shoes to keep me busy filling garbage bags on many a Monday, gradually, if temporarily, unclouding its beauty. One Monday, the week before that year's Easter, a passing rafter asked me why I did it, who was I "with." I considered saying "I'm with the UU church" but I didn't. "I just do it for myself," I said. "Doesn't looking at all that junk get old," she asked. "That's why I do it," I answered.

By fits and starts now, I'm transferring this project to my life in Nebraska. More than a year ago, I and my trusty little Nissan (whose oil pan still bears a huge dent from the Salt River bottomlands) began to search for a similar spot to uncloud within an hour's drive from home. By habit I again went east, drawn again to rivers. This past Friday, we tracked as close as we could the course of Stevens Creek, from its source just south of Route 2 at 120th street, through its confluence with our Salt Creek just north and east of 84th Street and the Cornhusker Highway, and then all its winding way, passing north of Waverly and Greenwood, just south of Ashland to where it enters the Great Platte next to Mahoney State Park. I haven't picked my spot yet, both the beauty and its degradations are more subtle here, and you need to fully feel the first before you can sense how best to fight the last, I think. Still, it was a Good, Good Friday, very Good.

Robinson Jeffers wrote:

*I am not dead, I have only become inhuman.
That is to say,
The delicate ravel of nerves that made a measurer
Of certain fictions
Called good and evil;
That's gone, it is true;*

*But all the rest is heightened, widened, set free.
I admired the beauty
While I was human. Now I am part of the beauty.
I wander in the air,
Being mostly gas and water, and flow in the ocean;
Touch you and Asia
At the same moment; have a hand in the sunrises
And the glow of this grass.
I left the light precipitate of ashes to earth
For a love token.*

I don't know what my children, or whoever is left with them, will do with the light precipitate of ashes I expect to leave. I like to think they might place some near the churches I have loved, perhaps some in the memorial garden in Phoenix, where one of my predecessor's already lie. Perhaps some here as well, if we indeed accept next week the gift now offered to help us create such a repository on our property. I also like to think they might place some wherever I have tried on my watch to uncover and protect some natural beauty, by then, there, here and beyond, perhaps - the passing mark of my very earth-bound life, a temporary life giving birth to other temporary lives, connected still in its continuous, dare I say immortal, universe.

"Come sweet death?" Yes someday. But not today.

Today I pray in another's words. (Clarke Dewey Wells)

*God of Easter and infrequent spring:
announce the large covenant to deceitful lands,
Drive the sweet liquor through our parched veins,
Lure us to fresh schemes of life.
Rouse us from tiredness, self-pity,
Whet us for use.
Fire us with good passion.
Restore in us the love of living,
Bind us to fear and hope again.*