

## UUCWI

**This I Believe, March 20, 2005**

Sarah suggested a scene-setting declaration. Here is mine. I define myself briefly in three little phrases: 1) a humanist (which means that we ourselves control our destinies, and that there is not any non-human (or at least supernatural) influence); 2) a rationalist and skeptic (being by nature and training a scientist, I need clear proof of cause and effect, not faith-based optimistic explanations); 3) as an environmentalist (someone who loves the earth and all the wonders it contains, and is deeply committed to sustaining it).

However, I want to focus today on one of Sarah's suggested themes for these talks: the view you take of your own inevitable death. That's maybe relevant for an ancient chap like Malcolm, you may think. But I'll immediately add that whatever age you are it's a wise idea to reconcile and accommodate to the reality of your own death. Get these tough and important considerations settled as soon as you can, then put them aside. I tried to do that many years ago, and I believe it was a good thing to have pretty well got the perplexities behind me. I commend to all of you that you be clear in your mind about this important topic. I'll try to tell you my path.

It's one defining human characteristic that we contemplate our own deaths and what may come after. Whatever your viewpoint, it's a major theme, and it's not at all morbid to give serious thought to it. It's pretty clear, I think, that there are two points of view, both of them fundamentally unanswerable, and therefore unsettling. Some don't believe in an afterlife, some do. You'll note that I don't link the afterlife topic to a belief, or disbelief in any sort of God. To me the questions of God and an afterlife are not coupled. In other words, the question is NOT Do I believe, or not believe, in God and an afterlife; it is simply Do I believe in a sentient life after I die. The two questions should be quite separate, though usually they are combined into one question.

Many will immediately protest that nearly all religions DO link the two concepts. That, I think is a fundamental problem, flaw, if you like, in many religions— ie that God (a

fundamental concept of most religions) will somehow see to a satisfactory afterlife. I can't bring myself to believe in things for which I can't find evidence - heaven, reincarnation, a divine plan for our lives - simply because believing these things might make death much easier to accept. I can find no proof of any conscious or physical afterlife.

Any way you look at these problems, it can be tough – there can be no sure answers, and you can easily therefore take the view that death is a fearsome prospect. I take a different, and I think more positive viewpoint, and feel OK about death. I set aside concepts of an afterlife, of which we can know nothing. There are ways to look at and feel the value of life without denying the finality of death. There are even ways to think of death that are comforting and give peace and solace, and give our lives meaning. As a bit of an aside: the days leading up to your death can have much solace. Drugs can keep things hazy and comfortable, and you can have family and friends close by. It should be quite like going to sleep, or sinking under the influence of an anesthetic before an operation. I quite like those!

## DEATH and TIME

Let me offer two points, both having to do with that deep, deep and profound mystery, Time. We live in time. Our existence is dependent on the passing of time. Time and change are integral to who we are. I can't imagine what life would be like without passing through time and being aware of it. You'll have noticed I slipped in the word change: Time and change and intertwined. Also inherent in change is loss. The passing of time has loss and death woven into it. Each new moment takes the place of the moment before it. There is, in other words, no way to exist in the world without accepting loss, even though only the loss of a moment in time – the way the sky looks right now, the sight of daffodils in the woods, the smiles of the people around you, a beautifully struck golf shot. You will never get to have this moment again. Like everything else in this world, it dies.

All the things that make life so worth living and give joy and meaning to it – music, conversation, the awe of Nature, children, reading – all are based upon time passing, on change, on the loss of an infinitude of moments passing through and beyond us. Without loss and death, we don't get to have these wonderful things come into existence; our experience of them coming into being, and then passing on would not be there. We see change – death in some form – all round us, something taking the place of what WAS just a moment before. All this helps me to understand and accept change and death. It's woven into life.

I don't think I would have it any other way: the alternative would be time frozen, a single frame of the film, with nothing to precede, and nothing to follow. And if we don't want that, it is worth our while to accept the world of change and the inevitable death that must follow, and allow our lives unfolding right to the end.

#### MORE ABOUT TIME

Now the second point about time. Imagine for a moment stepping away from time, the way you'd step back from a physical space to get a better perspective on it. You are outside Time, looking at the whole of history. The image is of a time-line, but going infinitely forward and back. Time will always be there, and your part in it will also always be there. Does your life go away as the time line unfolds? Of course not, any more than Nepal doesn't exist even though your Aunt Mabel has never seen it or San Diego disappears when one moves to Washington. Your being gone doesn't make anything disappear. The fact of your death doesn't make the time that you were here disappear.

I have no idea what happens when we die, though it's my belief that we crumble and our substance is reabsorbed into the universe. We may hover in some part of space time. I have no idea. And I don't think it matters. What does matter is that we get to be alive. We get to be conscious. We get to be connected with each other and the world, and we are wondrously aware of it. We get to have a slice of time and space that's ours. We are alive now, and nothing can erase that. My understanding of immortality, and I'm satisfied with

it, is the memories that you, that my other friends and my children and my grandchildren have of me. It can be reinforced and enhanced in that anything I may write or commit to an enduring record keeps me alive somehow, somewhere, albeit in someone's memory, even in a computer file.

We do not disappear, just because we cease to be sentient beings. And of course the triumphant part of all this discussion of life and death and our part in space-time is the joy and the privilege of living as meaningful, rich and contributing lives as we can, every moment. Living exuberantly is what really matters – what we experience, what we can do, how we interact positively with others. Death is something about which we cannot know, and so I think it a good, safe bet to get in with life and live it joyously. “One life at a time, brother, one life at a time” as our UU forebear Thoreau wisely said.

#### REGRETS

One last point: Regrets. Of course we all have things we would have liked to have done. But arithmetic shows we can do only a tiny fraction of what is on offer from life – a millionth of the books we'd like to have read, places we'd have liked to have gone to, interesting people we'd have liked to have met. The lesson is not to regret what we haven't done or can't do, but to immerse ourselves in what we CAN do, and be as supportive as we can be to everyone we meet.

I'll end with a little quotation from one of my top heroes, Bertrand Russell

“Happiness is nonetheless true happiness even though it comes to an end. Thought and love do not lose their value because they are not everlasting. The wise man should wish to die while still at work, knowing that others will carry on what he can no longer do, and content in the thought that what was possible has been done.”

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