

Death and the Afterlife

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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I want to start these remarks with getting one thing straight; and it's not just that I turned sixty last week. The thought of death, especially of my own, fills me with fear; it freaks me out, and I don't really mind admitting it. I love life, and have been told I have a healthy ego. When Diana and I talk about death, she admits that the thought makes her uncomfortable, but what really gnaws at her is the thought of our grandchildren: we'll die, and so will our children—does that leave our grandchildren alone in the world? We can only hope that there will be future generations with whom they will engage, nurture and be comforted.

If spring time, according to literary scholars, is the season for comedy—for birth, revival and resurrection, then autumn brings us its opposite. Now is the dying stage of the seasonal calendar; autumn is the time for tragedies—for the fall or demise of the hero; for darkness, dissolution, and death. And I can think of no better modern account of the unvarnished fear of death, than the poem “Aubade;” it was written by the English poet Philip Larkin in 1977. A slightly abbreviated version is printed in the order of service.

Aubade by Philip Larkin

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.
Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
Till then I see what's really always there:
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
Making all thought impossible but how
And where and when I shall myself die.
Arid interrogation: yet the dread
Of dying, and being dead,
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse
....
But at the total emptiness for ever,
The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

This is a special way of being afraid
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die,
And specious stuff that says *No rational being
Can fear a thing it will not feel*, not seeing
That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which none come round.

And so it stays just on the edge of vision,
A small unfocused blur, a standing chill...
Most things may never happen: this one will,
And realisation of it rages out
In furnace-fear when we are caught without
People or drink. Courage is no good:
It means not scaring others. Being brave
Lets no one off the grave....

Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.
It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,
Have always known, know that we can't escape,
Yet can't accept....

Larkin toys with and then dismisses two ideas—the first philosophical, the second religious. Larkin quotes the Roman philosopher Lucretius, whose stoic, common sense would have it that we should no more fear *not being, thinking, or feeling* after death than we fear *not having been* before birth. Larkin calls this line of thinking “specious stuff”—it’s misleadingly

attractive because, for Larkin, it misses the whole point: we may be reasoning, rational creatures; but *far more*, especially on this subject, and alone at four in the morning, we are *feeling*, *emotional* beings. We know and experience only sensuous life and the immediacy of consciousness and relations with the world and other people; that they—that we—that *I!*—should be forever deprived of these goods is unimaginable—it provokes a “special way of being afraid,” Larkin writes. From experience, I respect that view, *and* the raging, “furnace fear.”

The second idea, what Larkin calls a trick to dispel the fear of death, is what many religions have told us: that we, in fact, never really die. Now while I don't think people are necessarily religious because they fear death— we've created and cultivated religions for myriad reasons—it is true that an essential tool in the kit of most religions is a belief in some kind of afterlife. That belief can be profoundly consoling to those who've experienced the untimely death of a loved one; and comforting, as well, for the way it shores up the shambling, leaking edifice of our aging bodies and minds and our fears of extinction with promises of victory over death: “Death, be not proud, though some have called thee/Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;” wrote John Donne, neatly summing up Christian belief, “For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow/Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me....One short sleep past, we wake eternally/And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.”

And not just Western religions. One example: Buddhist monks first arrived in Japan in the mid 6th century and went on to enjoy spectacular success in spreading their faith due in large part because they taught the doctrine of reincarnation and provided funerary rituals for the dead. Japanese folk religion had no place for an afterlife and there were huge taboos about corpses. Buddhist monks stepped forward, handled corpses matter-of-factly and sent the dead on to the

next, reincarnated life with elaborate, deeply affecting rituals. Even to this day, Japanese people say they're born Shinto and die Buddhist.

East and West, North and South, such is the widespread human hunger for the message that we will go on living after we die; and believe me, I don't look down on our fear of death and our insatiable appetite for life. Who knows where and how it first began? Our own death and the possibility of an afterlife are matters that have deeply concerned and gnawed away at our minds and feelings; they demand sympathetic consideration. For millennia, we have simply demanded a reassurance of life after death and we've created myriad, moving ways to express it: from pre-historic tombs kitted out with spoons and bowls, to Viking ships set aflame and under sail bearing the dead away to Valhalla, to the loving laying out and washing of a body, and in the grave orienting the corpse toward the rising sun and the dawn of resurrection.

Nearly 70% of Canadians believe in some form of life after death—with our beliefs running the gamut from western religious notions of resurrection to eastern belief in reincarnation to the vaguely agnostic “could be.” Hell may have largely disappeared and no one even really noticed; but the afterlife is something else again—it's alive and well in our home and native land. (<http://www.reginaldbibby.com/images/PCReleaseEaster03.pdf>) Organized religions once provided us with a near monopoly on post-mortal scenarios; today, first-hand accounts of near death experiences and returning from death have stepped forward to assure us that the after-life is real. According to one poll, 5% of Americans—that's fifteen million people—have returned from a near-death experience, and most of them seem to be writing books about it.

Robert Gottlieb has read scores of them, from Todd Burpo's *Heaven is for Real* that's sold over 8 million copies in the past four years to *Hello from Heaven!* and *Embraced by the*

Light. He finds some of the books preposterous, and as an example cites Kat Kerr's book *Revealing Heaven*, where Kerr not only sees John, her late husband, laying golf with Jesus, she also watches a heavenly movie with John Wayne. But Gottlieb also finds a number of these first-hand accounts absorbing and quite moving. In *I Knew Their Hearts*, Jeff Olsen talks about the overwhelming guilt and remorse he felt for causing a car crash in which his wife and infant son died. Olsen spent four months in the hospital, underwent eighteen major surgeries, lost a leg and had multiple skin grafts. On the first night, and in incredible pain, he floats in spirit through the hospital, wanders down the halls, and comes to his own broken body, where he hears the voice of God saying to him: "choose joy." (Eventually, Olsen repaired himself emotionally, remarried, adopted two sons, and went on to live a life.)

Gottlieb finds plausible physiological and cultural explanations for near death phenomena in works by neurologists like Oliver Sacks and Kevin Nelson—the kinds of explanations that may speak to sympathetic, sceptical reader—which may include many of us—but he also comes to the conclusion that we're dealing with the extraordinary power of a vision of life and death that has and will withstand science, and what he calls the "reality principle." There is a "potent hunger for the kind of reassurance that the more substantial NDE narratives provide," Gottlieb writes. "Humankind has always been happy to receive [this one and] same message: you can go on living after you die—in the short run, by returning from death or near death; and in the long run [by living forever] in heaven." Elisabeth Kubler-Ross summed it like this: "my real job is to tell people that death does not exist." (see Robert Gottlieb, "To Heaven and Back," and "Back from Heaven—The Science,"

New York Review of Books, Oct. 23 and Nov. 6, 2014)

But let's think about that for a moment—the not dying part. Imagine that you could pick a time in your life when you were or are at the height of your powers: good health, full wits,

youthful looks and strength, etc. and then not die, but live in the full vigour one year after another without end. Have you ever imagined that? Wouldn't it be something all of us would wish to possess?

When I was a kid, I remember seeing a single TV show—I don't recall whether it was on the *Twilight Zone* or *The Outer Limits*—it was set in the present and its main character—a handsome male seemingly in his mid thirties—was, in fact, over fifteen hundred years old. Step-by-step the viewer learned his story: he had been a Roman legionnaire mortally wounded on an ancient battlefield, where miraculously he recovered and then discovered that he could not age or die. At first, this unique gift was thrilling, intoxicating: imagine it! But then the reality of living on and on through the centuries in the full bloom of life while all around: those he knew and loved withered with age and died—it became an unbearable curse. What this immortal ended up wishing for above all else was the gift of aging and death. That story haunted me for years.

During the past couple of months, I've been sharing with you my enthusiasm for the writing of the Czech author Karel Capek. And it was Capek, as well, who imagined this never-dying-in-life scenario in his play *The Makropulos Affair*, written and produced in Prague in 1922. (The composer Leos Janacek was in the audience in Vinohrady Theatre in Prague and was so inspired by the story that he wrote what's become an opera classic of the same name.)

The Makropulos Affair tells the story of the last days of a fabulously successful, rich and beautiful opera singer called Emilia Marty who, unbeknownst to everyone, is over 300 hundred old. Emilia, as the story goes, was the daughter of the Court alchemist to Rudolf II back in the sixteenth century. The alchemist had created an elixir that would extend life for 300 years. The Emperor, suspecting it was poison, demanded that the alchemist's daughter should drink it first with the result that she has lived through many lives, under many names. Now the effects of the

potion were weakening; she needs another fix in order to go on living through another 300 year cycle. So the question is: will she do it? Would we, if we were in her place?

The Makropulos Affair was, in a sense, Capek's rebuttal to George Bernard Shaw who had argued a generation earlier in his play *Man and Superman* that human beings needed to live hundreds of years in order to enjoy the cultural riches of our civilization. Capek's tragic hero, though romantic and dazzling, is someone with whom we can hardly sympathize. Emilia is corrupt, vain and above all, bored. Sated beyond measure with an impossibly long life, love affairs, adulation and all that so-called civilization could offer, she has become a tormented soul inured to truly human emotions who ends up yearning for the very thing we fear. "You fortunate men," she says, "you get to die." Perpetual youth has led to an exhausted apathy, and she resolves at the play's conclusion to allow natural death to come, understanding that a sense of transcendence and purpose comes from that short span of years we call a human life.

True enough—I fear death; but have come to see that because it has an ending, life acquires meaning. A gift in my work is attending to our deaths. And it's been members of this congregation, in the days of their dying and in the wake of their deaths, who have been my teachers and benefactors. I think of their courage, acceptance, their sense of ripeness, their anger and loss *and* their humour—and I marvel; marvel and am deeply grateful for the awe-full privilege of presiding at memorial services where the architecture of an individual's life—its beginning, its story, its ending—is seen and celebrated.

One more story, with some reflections on the afterlife, and then we'll conclude. The English crime writer P.D. James wrote a speculative, futuristic novel called *The Children of Men* that was reworked into an even better, though harrowing movie in 2006 by Alfonso Cuarón.

James imagines what the world would be like if, one day, the human race suddenly and everywhere became infertile. Those living would die a natural death; but no more births, no more children, no more succeeding generations to follow us. A moment's reflection on it—and the outcome of this imaginative thought experiment is, I believe, disturbingly clear and frightening. I think it very likely that such a world would be characterized by deep and widespread apathy and despair; by the erosion of social institutions and solidarity; by the deterioration of the environment; and the loss of conviction about the value or reason of many things we dream of and do.

It could be that we'd rage against the dying of the light, and in a fit of defiance in face of this dreadful destiny, see an outburst of last-ditch, creative energy. More plausible: I think the world would be drained of its colour, zest, piquancy, and purpose.

I see a worldwide swansong for the ebbing ego: innumerable goodbyes, a last bottle of wine, a favourite book, a final toke, a stroll on a beach in Hawaii—if we were rich enough to get there—but can you imagine the scene at airports around the world?

These dreary thoughts, I believe, reveal something quite profound: we need others in order to really live—people we don't know, people even not yet born—we need others in succeeding generations to survive us, to live, breathe and flourish on this planet—so that our own lives can have value and meaning. This “collective afterlife,” as Samuel Scheffler calls it—if we think about it, actually matters more to us than the continued existence of ourselves and anyone else now alive. Without the implicit faith that the human race will long outlast us, all the collaborative, multigenerational projects and pursuits of the sciences, arts, education, environment, communication, religion, etc., all these things we have created and cultivated to

explore and preserve what is valued beyond the life span of any individual or generation would be sucked dry of their energy, power and meaning.

For this reason alone, religious doomsday scenarios, heedless wastage of our planet's resources, and reports from those who've been to heaven, telling us it's so much better there that they can't wait to die to get back fill me with dismay....

Once upon a time, I believed death was just a phase transition; in the twinkling of an eye I'd be *here*, then I'd be *there*. It was a consolation, that, *and* the belief that one day, finally, in the hereafter, all the tears would be wiped dry and the scales of justice balanced. At times, I feel the loss of that faith acutely; (and I don't mind admitting it). Well, I've aged now roughly enough to where and who I am; and while I'm sympathetic to those who believe that death shall have no dominion, or that "one short sleep past, we wake eternally/And death shall be no more," it's enough for me *now* to play my part in that multi-generational vision of our collective afterlife on this earth, and to do my part to make it so.

A couple of suggestions: philosophical approaches: see Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, 2013, and Bernard Williams, "The Makropoulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972*, 2006; besides PD James' *Children of Men* and the Cuaron movie of the same name, a really fine book-length approach to death, immortality and an appreciation for *this* world (appropriate for all ages) see Ursula LeGuin, *The Farthest Shore*, the last book in *The Earthsea Trilogy*.