

# WHY DIE? THE QUEST FOR IMMORTALITY

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Cedars Unitarian Universalist Church  
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**CHILDREN'S STORY** (chosen and presented by Betty Petras, Worship Associate):

*LIFETIMES: The Beautiful Way To Explain Death To Children*  
By B. Mellonie and R. Ingpen — ISBN: 0553344021 — 1983: BANTAM DOUBLEDAY DEL

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## READINGS:

From the Omaha Indian Tribe:

*No one has found a way to avoid death,  
To pass around it;  
Those old [ones] who have met it,  
Who have reached the place where death stands waiting,  
Have not pointed out a way to circumvent it.  
Death is difficult to face.*

“Dirge Without Music” by Edna St. Vincent Millay

*I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.  
So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been time out of mind:  
Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely, Crowned  
with lilies and with laurel they go but I am not resigned.*

*Lovers and thinkers, into the earth with you.  
Be one with the dull, the indiscriminate dust.  
A fragment of what you felt, of what you knew,  
A formula, a phrase remains - but the best is lost.*

*The answers quick and keen, the honest look, the laughter, the love—  
They are gone. They are gone to feed the roses. Elegant and curled  
Is the blossom. Fragrant is the blossom. I know. But I do not approve.  
More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in the world.*

*Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave  
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;  
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.  
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.*

“*Gestalt at Sixty*” (closing excerpt) by May Sarton

*I am not ready to die,  
But I am learning to trust death  
As I have trusted life.  
I am moving  
Toward a new freedom  
Born of detachment,  
And a sweeter grace –  
Learning to let go.*

*I am not ready to die,  
But as I approach sixty  
I turn my face toward the sea.  
I shall go where tides replace time,  
Where my world will open to a far horizon.*

*Over the floating, never-still flux and change.  
I shall go with the changes,  
I shall look far out over golden grasses  
And blue waters.*

*There are no farewells.  
Praise God for His mercies,  
For His austere demands,  
For His light  
And for His darkness.*

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## ***SERMON: WHY DIE? THE QUEST FOR IMMORTALITY***

by Rev. Barbara Wells ten Hove, ©2012

Death is ultimately about balance. It is the dark other side of life. It is a mystery that generations of humans have sought to understand. It happens to us all, yet it is something most of us deny, even to the very moment it takes us.

*I am afraid to die.* There, I’ve said it. But I don’t say it easily. I’m a minister. I’m supposed to know how to face death. I have dealt with death often. I have seen it come unwilling and unasked for like a villain, and I have seen it come as a welcome friend. But I have only seen death come to others. I can’t be a witness at my own deathbed. I must leave that job to others.

Just because I’ve seen death a lot, doesn’t mean I understand it. I get it intellectually, but the reality of it is hard to fathom. I remember reading a book in seminary with the title, *How Could I Not Be Among You?* I think that’s how a lot of us must look at death. It just seems impossible to imagine the world without me in it. And yet, it existed for generations before me and I hope it lasts for generations beyond me. But right here and now, it’s the damndest thing. I, like everyone else in this room, will someday be dead. It’s just very weird to contemplate.

Perhaps because it's so weird, people have tried to figure out a way to cheat death. I saw a show on PBS once about one of the great ancient leaders (or so they say)—Ramses II of Egypt. How do they know so much about this pharaoh? Because he created for himself and for his loved ones lavish tombs, filled with incredible paintings, sculptures and hieroglyphics of Egyptian life, circa 1200 BCE. Even Ramses' body was preserved in hopes he might thus escape death. Today his wizened mummy lives on (sort of) in the Cairo museum. But Ramses II, I'm afraid, is still dead.

Ancient people in all places around the globe made much of death. Anthropologists often look for death rituals to determine the kind of culture that was present at the time. There seems to be something in the human spirit, going back into the dark recesses of history that calls out to remember in some way those who have died. Thus, burial cairns are built, graves dug, tombstones erected, and names recorded, as if by doing so we might keep the dead alive.

But death rituals are only one way we humans have dealt with the scary reality of death. Even more interesting to me are the ways human beings imagine an afterlife, how they seek immortality. I am not an expert in this by any means, but it does intrigue me the way religious people in particular approach the concept of immortality. For an example, we might look at Hinduism, one of the most ancient religions still practiced today.

Hindus believe that the soul passes through a cycle of successive lives (*samsara*) and its next incarnation is always dependent on how the previous life was lived; this is the concept of *karma*. In a lifetime, people build up karma, both good and bad, based on their actions. Such karma affects their future lives. Thus, people must take responsibility for their actions either within this lifetime or the next. Death is a key part of this cycle and is treated with specific importance.

[web source: about.com, Michelle Baskin-Jones]

Hinduism was the parent of Buddhism, which also has a belief in the importance of freeing the spirit from the desires of the world and of the body. To the Buddhist, karma is also a way to walk through many lives in search of nirvana, which is not heaven in any sense, but rather a state of pure freedom, which is nothingness. An important thing to remember is that life, death, and rebirth are a continuum in the Buddhist and Hindu faiths. They don't believe that a soul has only one life and one existence [ibid].

This idea that the soul has only one life and one existence, however, *is* a key part of the Christian view of death and the afterlife. Many Christians (though certainly not all) believe that God, through Christ, will judge people after death and either send them to heaven or to hell at the Last Judgment. Those who are good and believe the right things will find happiness and everlasting life with Jesus. Those who don't are sent to hell, a place of fires and everlasting torment.

Our Universalist ancestors rejected the idea of hell, but I find the concept interesting. If you ever get a chance to compare artists' visions of hell to that of heaven, you'll have to admit that hell seems a far more fascinating place.

Another interesting view on the afterlife has emerged in Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* novels. Meyer is a Mormon, and for them the afterlife is a place where we go to live after death in bodies that look like us but are more beautiful. Where we can be with the ones we love forever. Where we are strong and capable and, well, not dead. If you've ever read the *Twilight* novels you might notice that Mormon heaven looks a lot like the "life" of the good vampires but without all that blood. But I digress.

Afterlife concepts are interesting, but they do require one thing: death. And there are those in our world today whose view of immortality is not related to death at all. One of the reasons I decided to do this service was my growing concern over the scientific rationale beginning to emerge that suggests that humans might be able to not only extend life to unimaginable lengths (200 years anyone?) but also the belief that we might prevent death altogether. Some of this thinking seems wacky, like the cryogenics movement made notorious when the great baseball player Ted Williams' head was frozen after his death.

But there is a part of this that is far more mainstream. Certainly, much of modern medicine today has expanded our lifespan, at least in highly developed nations like our own. There is much of that for which I am grateful. Modern medicine's ability to take my father's heart out of his chest while doing by-pass surgery extended his life for seven years. I know many of you could tell tales of modern medical miracles like that.

As grateful as I am for such things, I admit to some trepidation when I recently read about a group called "Transhumanists." When I first heard their name, I assumed they might be something vaguely UU—transcendentalist humanists, maybe? But no. Transhuman is short for "transitional human" and it "refers to the day when our species will be a blend of biology and machine" [Utne Reader, May/June 2005].

Believers in this idea are becoming more mainstream, as nano-technology (to use just one example) allows things to happen that seem unbelievable, at least to me. For example, in an experiment in 1998, a neurosurgeon

"implanted a device into the brain of a 'locked-in' patient who couldn't eat, drink or talk on his own. Before the surgery, the patient could communicate only by blinking his eyes; afterward he could send messages via a computer simply by thinking them out" [ibid].

It seems monstrous to even be critical of such advances. It must be good and right to help those who are suffering. But I can't help but wonder at the ideology—one might even say the *theology* that lies behind this. On the surface, it looks as if these folks love humanity, and all it stands for. James Hughes, a transhumanist and author of *Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond to the Redesigned Human of the Future*, writes,

“Human intelligence, in the form of technology, is about to make possible the elimination of pain and [create] lives filled with unimaginable pleasure and contentment” [ibid].

The elimination of pain would help me a lot. And a life of pleasure and contentment doesn't sound so bad, either. But I can't help but be skeptical. Like one critic [Jeremy Rifkin] has noted, I wonder if “transhumanism [isn't] the ultimate illustration of how Enlightenment rationalism can easily run amok.”

Our faith tradition, Unitarianism in particular, emerged in its modern form from the Enlightenment. And we are the best educated of all religions (if surveys are to be believed). Many in our congregations are scientists, most of us are extremely rational, and few of us believe in any traditional concepts of heaven and hell. This being so, it might seem logical that we should embrace transhumanism, and do all we can to lengthen lives and create a perfect society.

And yet, humans are not perfect, and we have a lousy track record of trying to make others or ourselves perfect. Eugenics, used by the Nazis in their attempt to create a genetically “pure” race, comes to mind as just one horrifying example. But I think the move toward creating a “transitional human” has roots less in the desire to perfect humanity (which, on the surface at least, is a noble goal) and more in the great, long-standing fear of death. Yes, I'm back to our lovely topic.

Death, to transhumanists and to many people, is the enemy. It is always to be feared, it is always to be defeated. Yet, death can't be defeated. And I would argue that death *shouldn't* be defeated. Yes, it's scary; yes it's so very sad that our lives are finite. But without death, there would truly be no life. I mean, just imagine it for an instant. What if all of us in this room were to chance upon a magic well that would make us immortal. Would you drink from it? Think about it for a minute. No death. Sounds great. But what would it mean for our world if no one ever died?

In her marvelous children's book *Tuck Everlasting*, author Natalie Babbitt addresses this issue directly. Without giving the plot away, here's the meaning of the story as spoken by the immortal Mr. Tuck:

“You can't have living without dying. So you can't call it living, [this immortality] we got). We just are, we just be, like rocks in the road” [pg. 64].

Rocks in the road can't hurt or grieve but they also can't feel the wonder of life, either. Rocks aren't mortal. But people are. In a peculiar way (and one which many of these scientists would hotly deny), transhumanists remind me of some fundamentalists, Christian and otherwise, who have such a fear of death and such a loathing of the human body that they seek to find any way to move beyond it. One critic [Mark Dery] has said that transhumanists see our bodies (and these are his words) as "meat puppets" to be shed when we become immortal. That feels uncomfortably close to some of the ways fundamentalists describe our bodies and their "sinful" nature that can only be purified in some wonderful (or horrible) afterlife.

Part of the problem with bodies, dear ones, is that bodies are mortal. Every "body" dies. That's the way life works. So one essential aspect of dealing with death is dealing with our bodies—bodies that are wonderful when they are working well; eyes that see the beautiful world; ears that hear marvelous music; hands that touch and reach out in loving embrace; feet that take us to incredible places; minds that learn so much.

But bodies can be hard to bear when they don't work well. My mother has been getting more and more blind as years pass. My colleague and mentor Leon can't hear clearly anymore and due to Parkinson's has trouble walking. Here at Cedars many of our members struggle with health issues from joints that need replacing to hearts that don't work so well. My mother-in-law is quietly losing her mental faculties to Alzheimer's. Jaco's sister is struggling with her third round of lung cancer. And these folks are thankfully still with us. But think of all those in our lives who have died in this past year—young people, middle-aged people, and the old alike. People are precious. But people's bodies fail and ultimately die.

I think the challenge for us as religious people is to live with an incredible paradox. Life is extraordinarily wonderful, a gift beyond measure, something to give thanks for every day. *And* life is hard, ending, for us all, in death. That's just the way it is. We don't have to like it. We can, with Edna St. Vincent Millay, "not approve" of death. But we also can, with May Sarton, turn our face to the sea as we learn to let go.

Because death is necessary for life to continue. The recently deceased Steve Jobs, founder of Apple Computers and no slouch in the brains department, spoke these words at a college graduation. I find them fascinating, particularly in that context, with so many fresh-faced young students preparing to take on the world. And they listened to one of the greatest advocates of technology speak these, in my opinion, deeply spiritual words. Steve Jobs said:

"No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is how it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is

Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now the new is you but someday not too long from now, you will gradually become the old and be cleared away. Sorry to be so dramatic. But it is quite true." (Stanford University, 2005)

And so it is. That doesn't make it easy. As our opening words reminded us, facing death is difficult. I know that. But it is something we all must do.

I'm still scared to die. It frightens me to think about Jaco dying, or my mother, or my sisters or anyone else I love. But fear of death is something I think I am going to work to overcome or at least accept better. Death, I know, has baffled and haunted humans as long as we've been around. I expect it will continue to do so long after those of us in this room are gone.

But here, in this interval that I've been given to live, I want to face death with more than fear. I want to face it with love, and with hope. And I want to face it knowing I don't face it alone. Community is a blessing for all of us, and being together can make the fact and experience of death seem easier to take.

And this must be said as well: I don't know what happens after death, but whatever it is, it is natural and right and it happens to all of us, no matter our religion or lack thereof.

In the meantime, perhaps death can remind us to treasure life. For that is perhaps its greatest gift. Nothing lasts forever. And things that don't last forever are the most precious of all. And so, this passage from the play by Michael Cristofer, *The Shadow Box*, may say it best:

*And then you think,  
Someone should have said it sooner.  
Someone should have said it a long time ago.  
When you were young.  
Someone should have said, this living...  
This life....  
This lifetime...  
It doesn't last forever.  
A few days, a few minutes...  
That's all.  
It has an end.  
Yes.  
This face.  
These hands.  
This word. It doesn't last forever.  
This air.  
this light.  
This earth.*

*These things you love.  
These children.  
This smile.  
This pain.  
It doesn't last forever.  
It was never supposed to last forever.  
This day.  
This morning.  
This evening.  
These eyes...  
These things you see.  
It's pretty.  
Yes.  
These things you hear.  
This noise.  
This music.  
Yes.  
Yes. It doesn't last forever.*

Let us give thanks for the extraordinary gift of life, for birth and death and all the lifetimes that come between. Let us give thanks for the caring of community, where we can share our journey with others, and reach the end in the company of those we love.

And may the spirit of life be with us, even in the face of death, for it is the ongoing cycle of life that blesses us with roots that hold us close and wings that set us free.

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**Cedars Unitarian Universalist Church** has been a presence in this locality for over 50 years, meeting 10 am Sunday mornings at [The Island School](#) (8553 NE Day Road, Bainbridge Island) with offices at the Katz Building (571 Ericksen Avenue, Winslow).

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