

INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY

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The story is told that when Henry David Thoreau was lying on his deathbed, a friend inquired, “Henry, you are so near to the border now, can you see anything on the other side?” And Thoreau replied, “One world at a time.”

I suppose all of us have wondered what must lie on the other side of death. Certainly, it is one of those perennial questions that human beings have pondered since they have had the awareness that they will one day die. What could be more natural? And it is not in the least surprising that most human beings have supposed that death would not be the end of life. It could be argued that myths, religions and philosophies have sprung up precisely to answer that question in the affirmative.

In so far as I pondered the question myself as a child, the answer I was given by the church I attended was not particularly comforting. Quite the contrary; I was sure that I was going to hell. I was convinced that God not only witnessed every mistake I made, but was even capable of reading the misguided thoughts of my decidedly unruly mind. Religion may have offered the hope of heaven, but my chances of getting there were as slim as winning the lottery.

But religion in this sense is based on a fundamental mistake. It is obsessed with the self and not with the soul. It is based on the premise that what humans want is the survival of the ego at all costs and in optimum conditions. It is a premise that is shared by not only by Christianity and Islam, but also in the popular understanding of most of the world’s religions. Of course, this is perfectly understandable. What is more precious to us than our personal identity, and what are we more afraid of losing than our unique, individual consciousness with its own store of memories?

The notion of a highly personalized afterlife seems to be getting stronger in the popular mind, not weaker, even among those who are not particularly religious. According to a recent poll, 82 percent of Americans said they believed in heaven, and of these, 63 percent said they were likely to go there. Only 1 percent thought they were going to hell. In a bit of an overlap, 27 percent of Americans believe in reincarnation, mostly as another person.

As a reflection of this point of view a cottage industry has sprung up describing in detail the life beyond the grave. There are popular TV shows by psychics like John Edward and best-selling books such as *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* by Mitch Albom. All of these describe a pleasant existence that mirrors the society that produced them. Commenting on

this phenomenon, sociologist of religion Wade Clark Roof observes that “our images of heaven have shifted in two directions. On the one hand, it’s become infused with ideas of affluence, a happy, consuming place, reflecting our obsession with consumption. And at the same time, there’s a sense that one will be rejoined with family and friends. Heaven is a projection of things that people feel deprived of in this life and there’s an unease with the lack of strong community ties.”

It used to be the case that notions of the afterlife had an element of judgment in them. The promise of heaven and the threat of hell were used to mold behavior here on earth. And reincarnation as a human being as opposed, say, to a cockroach, depended on the preponderance of good versus bad deeds, or *karma*, in one’s life. There are very few sermons on hell these days, and, as I said before, most of those who believe in reincarnation are pretty sure they’re coming back as human beings and not as cockroaches. It would appear that everyone’s a Universalist today when it comes to heaven and the afterlife.

I can understand why people believe in personal immortality. Fearful of oblivion, they cling to the hope that death is not the end. Burdened with care and unfulfilled dreams in this life, they envision a future state in which they will be happy and content. Grieving the loss of loved ones, they desire to be reunited with them beyond the grave. But the great religious teachers have not promoted such a belief themselves. Not Jesus, not the Buddha, not Confucius, Chuang-tzu, nor Emerson. All of them taught enlightenment, not resurrection, and insisted that the eternal was to be found in this life, not the next one.

Jesus did not preach bodily resurrection. He said that the kingdom of heaven was here and now. He did not look for a perfect condition of things beyond the grave. He looked for it here in the only life we know. Entrance to this kingdom does not depend on a creed or sacraments, but only on self-transcendence and compassion for others. “The kingdom of heaven cometh not by observation,” he says. “If they say, Lo, here, or Lo, there, pay no attention to them; for the kingdom of God is within you.”

Jesus taught that eternal life is a matter of quality and character, and not of duration either in this world or the next. For Jesus there is no such thing as a future life. The universe exists in this instant and only in this instant. We are immortal now. Though we are here on this planet and inhabit these bodies, we are living — or capable of living were we aware of it — the immortal life. Eternal life, according to Jesus, is the only true human life, the one that we should aspire to here and now.

When the Buddha was asked about life after death, he replied that speculation on the afterlife was not conducive to enlightenment. In the Buddha’s teaching, reincarnation was something to be avoided or transcended. It was the eternal round of suffering known as *samsara*. The aim of Buddhist practice is to attain release from the endless cycle of birth and rebirth by achieving *nirvana*. Like Jesus’ notion of the kingdom of heaven, *nirvana* is

not a state or a condition apart from this world, the world of *samsara*; it is here and now in the midst of it.

Nirvana, like the kingdom of heaven, is found within each person's inner being. It is the peace that comes from annihilation of the self and compassion for all living things. Once people are able to access this oasis of calm, they will no longer be driven hither and yon by conflicting fears and desires. They will have achieved immortality; or, in the Buddha's words, "the unborn, unageing, deathless, sorrowless, incorrupt, and supreme freedom," from the bondage of normal life.

Confucius, too, was questioned by his disciples on matters concerning the afterlife. His response was, "Until you know about the living, how can you learn about the dead?" Like Jesus, the Buddha and other sages, Confucius was concerned about the immortality of the soul, but, like them, he did not believe that we had to await death to experience immortality. We have within ourselves the ability to transcend the constraints of time and space, suffering and mortality, and experience inner peace and serenity here and now. In Confucius' view this was accomplished through the practice of the Golden Rule and the cultivation of *ren*, or benevolence, a self-transcending regard for the welfare of others.

The Taoist sage, Chuang-tzu, held that it was futile to try to prolong one's life indefinitely or to seek immortality beyond the grave. Everything is in constant flux and is continually in the process of becoming something else. Life and death, joy and sorrow succeed each other like night and day. He came to the realization that when he died and ceased to be, nothing would change. He would remain what he had always been — a tiny part of the endlessly changing pageant of the universe. The key to this discovery was selflessness. Once the ego was starved, one could experience what he called the Great Knowledge, which was free of the constraints of time and space.

For Ralph Waldo Emerson, human beings are but individual rivulets "before the flowing surges of the sea of life." Although he believed in immortality, it was not in the form of a post-mortem existence of the self or individual consciousness. At death we lose our individuality as we are dissolved back into the Over-soul, or consciousness itself. "I confess that everything connected with our personality fails," Emerson writes. "Nature never spares the individual; we are always balked of a complete success: no prosperity is promised to our self-esteem. We have our indemnity only in the moral and intellectual reality to which we aspire. That is immortal, and we only through that."

For the most part, people are not prepared for the immortality they seek. "Will you offer empires to such as cannot set a house in order?" Emerson asks. "Here are people who cannot dispose of a day; an hour hangs heavy on their hands; and will you offer them rolling ages without end?" Emerson's advice, like that of so many other spiritual teachers and sages is to live in the moment: "Sufficient to to-day are the duties of to-day. Don't waste life in doubts and fears; spend yourself on the work before you, well assured that

the right performance of this hour's duties will be the best preparation for the hours or ages that follow it."

Immortality belongs only to those who live life to the fullest. "It is not length of life, but depth of life" that counts for Emerson. "It is not duration," he writes, "but a taking of the soul out of time, as all high action of the mind does: when we are living in the sentiments we ask no questions about time.... A deep integrity makes us immortal: an admiration, a deep love, a strong will, arms us above fear. It makes a day memorable. We say we have lived years in that hour."

In all of these teachings, the ego is a stumbling block to the eternal life, and it is definitely not something to be preserved either in this life or the next one. To prepare ourselves for immortality and to achieve it in the here and now — the only time and place in which it can be had — we must transcend selfhood altogether. Karen Armstrong summarizes this point of view in her Ingersoll lecture on immortality given at Harvard Divinity School:

There is...a widespread agreement that the quest for immortality should not concentrate on self-indulgent and exclusive fantasies of paradise but should focus on this world. Just as we experience the divine in our very selves, we can experience the peace and enhanced vision of eternity, freed from the constraints of space and time, in this world of suffering and death. We cannot understand the doctrine of immortality in a purely notional way. We can only achieve true knowledge of our immortal souls by undergoing a long discipline of self-emptying, a training in inwardness and self-effacement, [together with the exercise of] compassion and benevolence.

What does it mean, as these teachers suggest, that the soul might survive but not the self? The teachings of the mystics and sages are not the only obstacle to believing in the immortality of the individual self; there are also the findings of science. Mainstream neuroscience has concluded that consciousness is an epiphenomenon of the brain. In this view, consciousness is produced by the brain and ceases with death. To the extent that contemporary popular thought persists in believing in a personalized after-life, it would seem that science holds the stronger hand.

In my own view, much of the popular thinking about immortality and life after death suffers from what philosopher Alfred North Whitehead called "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness." It envisions a life pretty much like this one, under better conditions and, of course, of infinite duration. Seen in this way, it is hard for me to dispute the claims of science to the contrary. But if we are willing to let go of our dependence on the ego as a condition of survival in the afterlife, then I think we can make a case for the immortality of the soul.

A little over one hundred years before Karen Armstrong's lecture on immortality, William James was invited to give the annual Ingersoll lecture himself. James addressed the very

question that bedevils those who insist on a personal afterlife, namely (in his words), “How can we believe in life hereafter when Science has once for all attained to proving, beyond possibility of escape, that our inner life is a function of that famous material, the so called ‘gray matter’ of our cerebral convolutions? How can the function possibly persist after its organ has undergone decay?”

But if consciousness is a function of the brain, James asks, how does the brain function? Is it like a light bulb or a tea-kettle that, when activated, produces light or steam? Or is it rather like a prism or a radio that receives waves of light or sound and refracts or amplifies them? That is to say, does the brain *produce* or *transmit* consciousness? James didn’t think it could be proven either way. Thus, when we consider that consciousness is a function of the brain, we are not required to conclude that it exists only in the brain. In James’ view, consciousness may well exist separately, independent of the mind.

This is the view of the mystics and sages, also, including Emerson, who writes: “We lie in the lap of an immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity. When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams.” As Emerson said, we are but individual rivulets before the vast sea of life. It is through our existence as unique human beings that the Over-soul or Cosmic Consciousness finds expression and realizes its own infinite existence. Life itself is a process of individuation and dissolution, of coming into existence as a finite being and merging again with the infinite when the course of life is run. It is not our individual consciousness that survives, but consciousness itself. Consciousness is the thread on which the beads of life are strung.

Knowing that consciousness has incarnated itself uniquely in each one of us as human beings gives life its preciousness and poignancy. On the one hand, it is comforting to know that we are part of a larger, grander whole from which we have come and to which we return; on the other hand, we know that we must make the most of the one life that we ourselves are aware of. I say “aware of” because awareness is the key. Will we sleep thorough this life thinking that we will be awake in the next? Or will we awaken to the miracles that exist all around us and savor the only life we know for sure we have? One world at a time, as Thoreau would say.

This is the message of the poets, too. I took the title of this sermon from Wordsworth’s famous poem on immortality. Walt Whitman also comes to mind. But I chose to read earlier a poem by Mary Oliver, a contemporary poet, who says that our work is shedding our egos, keeping our minds on what truly matters, which is “standing still and learning to be astonished” by the wonders of the world that surrounds us. This is why we were given “a mind and a heart and these body-clothes”: to be a witness and a messenger, telling one another and all of creation “over and over, how it is that we live forever.”

