

**The Afterlife**  
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Let us begin with a moment of “free association.” I invite you to say out loud the first thing that comes into your mind as I mention a few words. Boy. [pause] Up. [pause] Hot. [pause] Pearly. [pause] Indeed. We may not be certain whether there is a heaven. We may not be certain whether there is a security checkpoint at heaven’s gate, staffed by the meticulous Peter. But if heaven has gates, we know that they are *pearly* gates. Such is the influence of a dominant culture.

Even when I was oriented toward the literal, I never imagined that the pearly gates were decorated with whole pearls but rather with mother of pearl. “Mother of pearl” pearly gates would be interesting to look at – not lumpy and bumpy but rather subtle and shimmering. This morning I share with you a connection between pearls and the afterlife that is metaphorical, not literal.

This connection was made by the scholar Alan F. Segal. Alan Segal surveyed the history of the afterlife in Western religion in his book *Life after Death*. He looked at ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Iran, Israel, Greece, and beyond, tracing in detail the evolution of the afterlife in Judaism and Christianity, while not neglecting Islam and other religious traditions.

This morning, I will also share with you my best guess as to what happens when we die. Unitarian Universalists do not have creeds, but we do have “credos” – statements of personal belief based upon our free and responsible search for truth and meaning, tested in the give and take of congregational life. Some of us absorbed ideas about the afterlife from the religious instruction we received as children or youth.

We may have turned away from *those* ideas, but we would do well to replace them others. An encounter with death is just around the corner. The human lifespan is short; even if we reach 110 years old, the human lifespan is short. One day, we will turn a corner and run into that encounter from which we cannot escape. We do not know precisely *which* corner temporarily

obscures our encounter with death, but the encounter awaits us, our loved ones, colleagues, and strangers around one of these corners.

This is what I learned in confirmation class at Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod) in Wisconsin around 1970. “Why do we believe in the resurrection of the body? God has promised to raise our bodies. His promise is sure, for ‘with God all things are possible.’ What body will the believers have in heaven? The believers will have the same body they had on earth. How will their bodies be different in heaven from what they were on earth? In heaven their bodies will be perfect; they will be free from all sin, pain, and death. Whose body will our resurrection body resemble? Our resurrection body will be fashioned like unto Christ’s glorious body.”

“What does it mean to be in heaven? To be in heaven means to be with Christ forevermore. What will be the greatest joy in heaven? ‘We shall see Him as He is.’ How do we show that we regard heaven as our true home? By setting our hearts on things above, and not on things of this earth. Why should our heart evermore be fixed on God? The Bible says of God: ‘With Thee is the fountain of life; in Thy light shall we see light.’”<sup>1</sup>

This traditional Christian point of view is about resurrection of the body as distinguished from immortality of the soul. As it happens, this emphasis on resurrection of the body was also the emphasis of most of the earliest Christians. Paul was an exception.<sup>2</sup> His influence on later generations of Christians has somewhat distorted our understanding of notions of the afterlife in earliest Christianity.

In fact, the afterlife is not an antique idea gathering dust on the storage shelves of our culture. Brace yourself for this – *today more Americans believe in immortality of the soul than believe in God*. “These beliefs range from literal resurrection of the body to immortality of the soul, to deathless existence with flying saucers in the starts, to nothing specific beyond the confidence

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<sup>1</sup> *Growing in Christ: and Exposition of Luther’s Small Catechism*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, 1953, p. 194.

<sup>2</sup> *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*, Alan F. Segal, Doubleday, New York, 2004, pages. 400, 422, 439, 441-42, 476-77, 478-479, 536-37.

that we will have something to enjoy. Immortality of the soul, as opposed to the resurrection of the body, is inherent in most of our descriptions.”<sup>3</sup>

This seems all tangled up. How might we untangle resurrection of the body, God, immortality of the soul, whatever gets us through the night, whatever enables to hold deep shadows close? By “holding deep shadows close,” I refer to this excerpt from the poem “To Hold Deep Shadows Close (for Samhain)” by Peter Tufts Richardson:

“If we could only know, see past the veil, into the darkness numinous:

To hear cadence of my grandmother’s voice again;

To feel my child hand in my grandfather’s;

To ask my younger brother if it matters dying young, now;

To ask my second wife if cheerful greetings, all the tangibles of graphic art or of fresh cut flowers on trestle tables past matters now.

If only I could renew all the stories that once were so clear in my great aunt’s voice;

Or catch my father’s eye for an accounting, even a silent approval.

Would such a visit in the presence of loved ones leave any solace for *this* life? [emphasis added]

Perhaps it is enough to hold deep shadows close.”<sup>4</sup>

How can we untangle resurrection of the body, God, immortality of the soul, whatever gets us through the night, whatever enables to hold deep shadows close? We can try to understand history, and we can try to make history. That means raising our own consciousness and helping to raise the consciousness of others. There is no better place to do this than in religious community.

For the earliest Christians, the afterlife was about resurrection of the body, not about immortality of the soul. Immortality of the soul was a pagan idea. Immortality of the soul, in fact, was taken for granted among pagan Greeks and among the so called “Hellenized” people. “Hellenized” is a

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<sup>3</sup> *Life After Death*, page 12.

<sup>4</sup> Sunday Meditations for Liberal Religious Worship by Peter Tufts Richardson, Red Barn Publishing, Rockland, Maine, [www.redbarnrockland.com](http://www.redbarnrockland.com), 2009, p. 99.

shorthand way of saying that many people in that era, across a wide swath of geography and time, were not ethnically “Greek” but nonetheless shared the classical Greek world view. To generalize, by the time of Jesus, the Romans were the carriers of classical Greek culture.

The Greek philosopher Plato died around 347 BCE. He emphasized introspection and the importance of memory. Plato “proved” that the soul is immortal to the satisfaction of the best minds of his generation and of later generations, continuing even into the present. Flash forward from Plato’s time to the time of Jesus. Immortality of the soul still made sense to most people, though generally not to the Jews. When Jews contemplated the afterlife, they looked to the prophecies regarding resurrection of the body in the book of Daniel.<sup>5</sup>

The death of Jesus was a “game changer.” To be a messiah was one thing. To be a dead, failed messiah was beyond anyone’s imagination. The followers of Jesus interpreted their visions of him after his death as consistent with his bodily resurrection and his “angelification.”

“Angelification” is the divinization of a special human being, who is transformed into a special angel. They were expecting this “angelification” to happen at the end of time. However, shockingly, it occurred in their lifetime! This could only mean that the apocalypse was imminent.

The followers of Jesus were apocalypticists. “‘Apocalypticism’ whatever else is implied, has meant the revelation of the secret of the ending of time, the violent ending of the world, and the establishment of God’s kingdom.”<sup>6</sup> For the followers of Jesus, persecution was on schedule. It did not take too many missteps, voluntary or involuntary, to wind up dead on account of one’s religion. The apocalypse was delayed.

Since the apocalypse was in dilly dally mode, Christians in the first centuries after the death of Jesus had to refine their ideas about the afterlife. Alan Segal notes, “As Christianity moved out of Judea and up the social ladder, Hellenistic philosophical and intellectual conflicts with pagan

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<sup>5</sup> *Life After Death*, page 287.

<sup>6</sup> *Life After Death*, page 285.

society became more and more important. Resurrection started as a liability in the pagan world; [however,] the [church] fathers turn it from an irritation to a pearl of theological reflection.”<sup>7</sup>

The pearly gates are made of philosophical irritations made smooth and beautiful by religion. The delay of the apocalypse led Christians to incorporate the pagan concept of immortality of the soul into their beliefs about resurrection of the body. Given that more Americans today believe in immortality of the soul than in resurrection of the body, we could say that the pagans won the contest for shaping contemporary views of the afterlife.

Alan Segal writes that “Images of the afterlife – resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul – had enormous consequences within the thought world of early Christianity. They began by defining pagan as against Christian. But they did so much more: Over time, the symbols mediate gender, identity and gender identity. They help distinguish between those who are willing to endure martyrdom and those who feel avoiding martyrdom is better. They help assess those loyal to establishment virtues and those who will rebel against them. They mediate asceticism of various kinds; if one factors in Judaism, they even mediate asceticism over against sexual fulfillment. They help discuss how much Christians have in common with the other humans on the planet.”<sup>8</sup>

Turning to the personal now, these are my beliefs about what happens when we die. At the least, death is a loss of ordinary consciousness. Hallelujah, the loss of ordinary consciousness! I say this as someone who has had trouble sleeping upon occasion. The best way to start a day is to be able to say, “Ah, that was a good night’s sleep!” To the degree that death resembles sleep, it will be welcome indeed.

As a minister, I have been present at the moment of death of people beloved and cherished, as has been the case regarding members of this congregation. I have also been present at the moment of death of people previously unknown to me, as was the case for patients at a hospital where I served as a chaplain. This is my “bottom line”: We come from love and we go to love.

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<sup>7</sup> *Life After Death*, page 536.

<sup>8</sup> *Life After Death*, page 588

Sometimes I say it this way: We come from intelligence and we go to intelligence. I believe that we come from and return to a melding of love and intelligence -- loving intelligence or intelligent loving.

I believe that, collectively, all sentient beings constitute God. That is the good news. The bad news is that we are not very good at being God. I believe that the sum total and the nature of this loving intelligence/intelligent loving waxes and wanes with the consciousness of all sentient beings. I believe that the blessings or burdens of the afterlife are not fixed. They vary depending upon the thoughts, feelings, and actions of sentient beings from moment to moment. Enlightenment evolves. Heaven evolves. Hell evolves.

I once read that the moment of death will be a happy surprise for us. I believe this. The moment of death will be a happy surprise because we will understand the place of our unique personality in the great scheme of things. We will simultaneously see the place of the personalities of others in the great scheme of things. Our great joy will be to know that we were incarnate; we lived. We did what we did. We had the opportunity – and we took it! – to learn from history and to make history. I do not happen to believe in reincarnation.

We do not know all there is to know about matter, energy, and consciousness. I believe that the disembodied personality lingers for a time after death, usually a matter of minutes to a matter of days, occasionally longer. I believe that we have immortality of influence, to use the phrase of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian humanist minister John Dietrich (1878 – 1957). This immortality of influence is not merely influence in the memories of loved ones or influence in culture. I believe it is another kind of influence, influence which operates through a mechanism that we do not yet understand.

We come from love, and we go to love. We come from intelligence, and we go to intelligence. However, neither love nor intelligence exists outside collective love and intelligence. Therefore, it matters how and how much we love. It matters how intelligently – how skillfully – we live. We practice these skills in religious community, in this congregation. May we be ready for our

encounter with death when we round that last corner. May we hold deep shadows close. May it be so!