

# Does “What Comes Next” Matter to How We Live Now

Rev. Ken Read-Brown  
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
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## Readings

“When Death Comes” by Mary Oliver

When death comes  
like the hungry bear in autumn;  
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;  
when death comes  
like the measles-pox

when death comes  
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:  
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything  
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,  
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,  
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common  
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,  
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something  
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,  
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

from *A Year to Live: How to Live this Year as if it were Your Last*, by Stephen Levine:

I have heard many people speak of who they believe they were in previous incarnations, but they seem to have very little idea of who they are in this one. Let's take one life at a time. Perhaps the best way to do that is to live as though there were no afterlife or reincarnation. To live as though this moment was all that was allotted.

What difference does it make if nothing happens after death? Would that in any way diminish the value of mercy and awareness in this moment? Even if this was the only level of existence it would not change the nature of the heart...

### **Sermon**

When I was young, perhaps eight or nine or ten, I developed for some period of time a serious fear of going to hell. It wasn't that I thought I'd done anything so terrible as to think I might deserve it – at least I don't think so. I'm not even sure where I had heard about hell. I'm pretty sure it would not have been my parents. Might have been at our Presbyterian Church, but I sort of doubt that too. More likely was one of my schoolmates.

In any case, it really weighed on me, kept me awake at night.

It was my mother who helped the most. I remember it very clearly. One wakeful night, she simply told me that because God is good, God would not have made us just to send us to hell.

I'm not sure if at that point, wavering between the Presbyterian church of her upbringing and our soon-to-be membership in a Unitarian church, she believed in God as traditionally portrayed in Christian scripture. But she did know all about – and lived – love (God's other name, after all). So in that spirit she was, as I much later learned to put it, a Universalist without having that name for it.

You see, the early Universalists – part of the Protestant reformation and active in this country beginning in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century – acquired their name because they believed in universal salvation. This was by stark contrast to those who believed some would be saved and some would be damned. But, like my mother, the Universalists affirmed a good and loving God who would not condemn any of his children, his creation, to eternal suffering and damnation.

Now, there were some differences of opinion among the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century adherents of a universalist theology here in America. There were universalists who were what was called “restorationists.” They looked around (just as the composer of the song we sang earlier, “Farther Along,” looked around) and in the spirit of fairness and justice it seemed to them that there were a fair number of people who had done really bad things, but didn't seem to have received any significant punishment or suffering as a consequence of their deeds: “never molested though in the wrong.” With this in mind, the restorationists believed that after death these folks would suffer some period of purifying punishment before being welcomed into the loving arms of God.

Well... then there were the “death and glory” universalists who believed that bad folks experienced suffering enough in this life, if only inwardly, maybe not visible to the outward onlooker's eye, so they would be welcomed into heaven immediately upon their death. Death and glory for everyone.

But my question today is whether what we believe about the afterlife even matters when it comes to how we choose to live.

We heard a few words earlier from Stephen Levine, who was quite clear that maybe it shouldn't matter much at all. To paraphrase Levine: Would what we believe about what happens after we die in any way diminish the value of mercy and awareness in this moment?

I don't know about you, but I don't think it should.

I'll return to that point, but first I will note that a case can be made that what you believe about "what comes next" might make a very big difference indeed as to how you choose to live in this life.

For example, if you believe that you go to heaven or hell depending on how well behaved you are in this earthly life, you would surely be motivated, would you not, to behave well? To follow the rules of whatever your religion dictates.

But if you believe in heaven or hell and that we have already been chosen for one or the other before we even were born (as the Calvinists, with their doctrine of predestination and the elect, believed), well then it wouldn't seem to matter much how we behaved. So why not just have a good time!

Next, if you believe in reincarnation, I suppose the question of how we should live in this life could go one of two ways: Wanting a better incarnation next time around, you might be motivated to do lots of good deeds, to improve yourself morally, store up lots of good karma. Or you could figure that since there will be plenty more future lifetimes during which to catch up on your moral homework... there is no rush in this one. In fact, years ago I spoke with the parents of a grown son who held precisely this belief, and so had become unmotivated to make much of his life this time around.

Then, finally, if you believe that when this life is over it's over, well some might think that anything goes. Likewise, if we are all "preapproved" for heaven as the death and glory universalists believed, it would also seem that anything goes: just have fun, because there are no ultimate consequences awaiting us.

The universalists had a counter argument, though, which was that if it is happiness you seek, in fact the happier life is the one lived morally, the one lived in service to others, the one lived in which we use our gifts to be of use in the world.

I think they are correct, which begins to lead me back to the implication of the quote from Stephen Levine.

I'll get there via Socrates, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the Buddha:

You see, twenty-five hundred years ago, Socrates came to the same conclusion as Stephen Levine. In one of Plato's dialogues some of the conversation had to do with what makes a good and happy life. At the risk of over simplifying, one of those talking with Socrates asserted that the happy life is the one most full of pleasure. Socrates, on the other hand, affirmed that the happiest are those who live lives of virtue and goodness – in other words, as the saying goes, that virtue is its own reward. No need of warnings or enticements regarding an afterlife or future reincarnations.

In a similar vein, in Hindu texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Upanishads*, as well as in the teachings of the Buddha, the distinction is often drawn between the pleasant and the good, often put something like this, as a life challenge: What will you choose, passing pleasure or enduring good?

Now, I've got nothing against pleasure – and I don't think Socrates or the Buddha did either. But speaking for myself (I can't speak for those ancient sages) there is much in life that gives me pleasure, and I see nothing wrong with that.

But at the same time, I also see and I expect you do too, agreeing with those ancient ones, that completely organizing our lives around seeking ever more pleasure would end up being empty and not so fulfilling after all. The extreme of this never-ending seeking and craving, of course, takes the form of debilitating and life-threatening addictions.

Whereas, we all have experienced that seeking to organize our lives around what is more enduringly good brings deeper well-being: This begins with the ways in which we care for family and friends and extends to ways we are of use to others, the kind words we offer in the course of a day, contributions we make to larger causes. All these amount to a life of meaning and purpose, enduring good. And... circling back to my question today, it is a life of meaning and purpose no matter what does or does not come next.

Now, you may have noticed a paradox lurking here. And it is a paradox that raises its head whether we believe that a life of helping and healing and serving, a life dedicated to the well-being of others, of the community, of the natural world... gets us into heaven or a better incarnation, or just makes us feel good here and now.

The paradox? In either case, isn't this just another form of selfishness? For whether we are bringing canned goods for our food pantry basket or serving a meal at Father Bill's to increase our chances in the next life... or to make ourselves feel good now, isn't it selfish in either case? And if we were *really* good, wouldn't that mean we would be unselfish? How do we escape this endlessly circular paradox? Or can we?

Well, I think it is actually simple. It seems to me it hinges on our misunderstanding of who we are to begin with.

If we think of ourselves (as our contemporary materialistic culture encourages us to think of ourselves) as individual beings entirely separate from other individual beings, there is no way out of this paradox of selfishness.

But if it turns out that this idea of being a separate individual is at least in significant degree an illusion – you've heard me talk about this before – then as the illusion dissolves the paradox dissolves.

Everyone one of us has experienced at least a taste of this. After all, when we are entirely immersed in helping a child or our parent or a friend, or in serving a meal to a hungry person in a shelter, or in marching with others to protest injustice or to seek climate action... we may sometimes, maybe even often, notice that this experience of separateness does indeed dissolve, at least in good measure for a time.

And you know what else? Once we get past the surface rules and regulations of many of the religions, we discover that all the traditions spiritually teach this.

Two examples:

St. Paul, in his letter to the squabbling Corinthians, affirmed that we are part of one body, the body of Christ, and that though each of us has a unique role to play and are to that extent individual, we are playing our role as part of one body – hand or foot, eye or ear, and so on – no essential separation.

Buddhists, for their part, lift up the striking image of Indra's net. Indra is one of the Gods within the pantheon of gods and goddesses in the Indian religious landscape; and Indra's net represents the idea of the complete interdependence of all life, all beings, all things.

Imagine the net: an interwoven net of spider-like texture, and at each intersection of the net or web there is a jewel, and each jewel reflects all the other jewels.... complete interdependence, what contemporary Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh calls interbeing. And the assertion presented by this image, this metaphor, is that this is who we are, part and parcel of one another, of all beings, of everything, so that whatever happens to one jewel in the web affects the whole.

Okay then, I do have to say that I'm curious, as I expect most of us are, about "what comes next." But I'm in no hurry to find out, and in the meantime I hold to a few simple affirmations:

Whatever does or doesn't come next, I'm with the "one life at a time" school of thought when it comes to how to live this life.

I know and experience that my own sense of well-being is enhanced and deepened when I am helping and healing – at least doing my best at this, doing my best to be kind.

I have discovered that the more I can do to dissolve the illusion of separateness – through meditation, reflection, service – the better able I'll be to help and to heal, the more naturally will flow through me the stream of kindness.

Finally, to the extent I remember and try to practice these affirmations... the less I worry about or even fear death. Paraphrasing Mary Oliver in another of her poems, "In Blackwater Woods," yes holding tight what and above all who I love, but perhaps better able, as she wrote, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go – knowing I have not just visited this world.

So may it be. Blessed be. Amen.