

Unitarian Universalist Church of Bowling Green

Immortality for Real  
Sermon by Dr. Matt Foraker  
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“All men are mortal – Socrates is a man – therefore Socrates is mortal.”

Students hear these words as they embark on a journey of mental gymnastics. Yes, this talk is cerebral. I am going to tickle the gray stuff.

Are we all mortal?

Actually, in Plato’s *Phaedo*, Socrates argued that humans have an immortal soul. It existed before they were born and does not die. Socrates called philosophy a meditation on death. On marriage he said, “If you get a good wife, you’ll be happy. If you get a bad wife, you’ll become a philosopher.”

An academic treatment of immortality would take us through the ideas of influential thinkers and the beliefs of the major religions. We’re going to take a different approach.

Regarding the simple question, “Are we immortal?” what is generally considered the single best publication is Corliss Lamont’s “The Illusion of Immortality.”

Lamont noted how the concept of immortality and the belief in God are so intertwined that philosopher William James asserted that belief in God for almost everyone MEANS belief in immortality. Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, said that without immortality God isn’t worth a mushroom.

Is there a chicken egg relationship between immortality and belief in God? Did we believe in God first, and then arrive at immortality? Or did we insist on immortality, as Immanuel Kant did, and then propose a god to provide it?

Kant asserts that for death to be the end of it all is ethically unsound. It doesn’t seem right that we go through what we go through, to learn, to love, to suffer, to struggle, to grow into better human beings. Only to be snuffed out?!

Also, it is just unacceptable that horrible people who inflict great suffering can live long happy lives and never face justice. The good deserve the fruits of doing right. Justice demands that the evil be held to account.

That said, the notion that death is just a blip of some kind followed by more of the same has many issues.

To start looking at that, I am now going to perform a ludicrous play.

But first, one more philosopher, the German Ludwig Wittgenstein. From the preface to his masterpiece *Tractatus*:

*My propositions serve as elucidations in this way: he who understands me recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up over them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must overcome these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.*

So, he presents nonsense. But in considering it, you arrive at valuable insights.

This play, and in fact a lot of this talk, is Wittgenstein light.

This is Tom (look right). This is Dave (look left), and this is your humble narrator (look straight ahead).

N: After Tom and Dave are killed instantly, they find themselves in a clean, well-lighted place. The concierge informs them that they are in heaven. They are free to do whatever they want.

N: They spend the first week of this freedom arguing with the concierge and other staff, insisting they are not dead and that the joke is NOT funny. When Dave realizes they have neither ate nor drank nor slept nor required a restroom, they ponder what to do.

Dave?

Yes, Tom.

I could never afford the golf course fees when I was alive.

N: They play golf. 6 years pass.

Dave?

Yes, Tom.

I don't think I can play any more golf. In fact, if I have to tee up -

Okay, well, I've always wanted to get good at chess.

N: They play chess. 4 years pass.

Dave?

Yes, Tom.

I really hate chess.

Okay.

I don't just hate it.

Okay.

A deep primordial loathing.

All right! What do you want to do?

I dunno.

Well, use your intelligence.

N: Tom uses his intelligence.

We can do anything, right? We could (makes face) fool around!

Uh, I don't think about you that way, Tom.

Not with each other!

N: 100 years go by.  
 Dave?  
 Yes, Tom.  
 I don't think I can do this anymore.  
 Yeah.  
 Well, what do we do now?  
 What do you want to do?  
 I don't want to do anything!  
 N: Dave uses his intelligence.  
 Tom?  
 Yes, Dave.  
 Let's do nothing.  
 Nothing?  
 We'll just sit. Zen style.  
 Like the Monks?  
 The Buddhists.  
 Enlightenment.  
 Nirvana.  
 Samadhi  
 The Dalai Lama will seek us out.

Tom tries to meditate.

N: 15 minutes go by.  
 Dave?  
 Yes, Tom.  
 This is worse than chess!

Ridiculous, but I invite you to consider that finding yourself anywhere with the same body and thoughts and feelings as occurred during life here makes no more sense than death being final.

I mean no offense to anyone and please don't feel insulted, but I invite you to consider that if you carefully, seriously, and authentically ponder the reality of living forever, you will reach a frightening place. You see that there is not enough golf, chess, sex, books, video games, to last forever. You will grasp that you will run out of *something*. Consider that you cannot as *currently constituted* handle eternity.

For us to handle a consciousness that never ends, a transformation has to occur. It cannot be a caterpillar to caterpillar thing. But transformation into what?

Lamont suggests that to be believable by the masses, the proposed afterlife requires emotional efficacy, imaginative reality, and intellectual acceptability. It has to feel right, and it has to be imaginable and understandable.

So that's what religions produced. In fact most religions propose a very caterpillar to caterpillar afterlife. Many suggest we have essentially the same physical bodies.

Physical bodies have to be somewhere physical.

Easy to handle when we lived on a flat world with an infinity above us AND below us.

Now what is below us is a pale blue dot in the lens of a space probe. The Hubble telescope now pierces the furthest reaches of what is above us. If the afterlife has to be somewhere physical, where? With adequate transportation could we travel there? Could they visit us?

Okay, say the soul that survives death is a disembodied spirit that lives forever in a transcendent heaven that has no physical space. Without a body we lack eyes, ears, and a mouth. How do we see, hear, or speak? Well, let's not worry about that and just say it's been handled.

Fine, they can see, but when two disembodied souls in the hereafter face each other, what are they looking at? Are we glowing orbs? How do we recognize each other? Okay. Let's handle this by saying we have recognizable, good looking heavenly celestial bodies. We live in a transcendent reality and have the communication thing handled.

There's more. Let's consider the soul. The notion of the soul is a powerful one. We feel it, most of us, especially those that develop the spiritual part of themselves. We have experiences that touch and nurture our souls. But when and how do we get these?

Does a 10-day old baby have a soul? This notion of Plato's that it's embedded, fully developed at birth, doesn't fit our experience. The experience of having and raising children really suggests that we develop our souls. Compare that 10 day old baby with your 12 year old Labrador. Which one has a soul?

Dog owners know what I'm talking about, and if all dogs go to heaven, then if you know Laura's kitty you know Princess gets to go too. The cats go. What about the hamster?

The animal / plant barrier also poses problems. Visit the redwood forest north of San Francisco and walk amongst those trees. I stood among those giants. They are 1000, 1500, 2000 years old. It felt like I was in the presence of advanced beings with a wisdom beyond language. So now what? Smaller trees? Big bushes. Brussel sprouts?

I am poking all of these holes NOT to suggest that there is no after life. I point to all of these problems to suggest that the existence after death that can actually be true cannot be something we here can imagine. It cannot be caterpillar to caterpillar.

**IT HAS TO BE CATERPILLAR TO BUTTERFLY!** And this butterfly and its reality violates the very requirements Lamont suggests are necessary to be believed. The afterlife that can ACTUALLY occur is NOT something we can envision and understand.

That doesn't mean it is not there. There's lot of reality that we don't grasp. What was before the big bang? Does the universe end? What's dark matter? Heard Stephen Hawking's recent

theory that when something enters a black hole, the thing goes in, but the information about the thing stays on the black hole's boundary? What in the world is he talking about?

I'm suggesting that immortality belongs on the same list as these other mysteries, subject to rigorous analysis and research.

What data do we have on the after-life? Anything? Is it just pure philosophy, faith, and speculation?

What factual events are pertinent to the notion of a person's consciousness continuing after death? Two in particular come to mind, the out-of-body experience and the near death experience.

In an out-of-body experience one has the sensation of leaving one's body and moving around without one. Can still see and hear! In a near death experience a person very close to death or in fact dead is resuscitated and survives, and remembers the experience.

Advances in medicine increased the number of near death experiences, and in 1975 Raymond Moody published "Life After Life" noting the similarities of survivors' accounts, which included seeing a white light, floating, having a sense of peace, seeing loved ones, as well as having an out-of-body experience. Moody suggested the similarity of these experiences across the globe proved they were legitimate. The book sold over 13 million copies, and many people regard these experiences as PROOF of life after death.

In 1993, consciousness scholar Susan Blackmore published "Dying to Live." Grounded in science and the study of consciousness and the brain, Blackmore examined the near death experience and reached the conclusion that what people experience can be entirely explained by powerful chemicals released in the brain as it is dying.

Her work is solid. The dying brain does release chemicals with potent hallucinogenic properties. The debate continues to this day. Is it brain chemistry, or is it a transition to the beyond?

The debate is not over the legitimacy of the experiences. They do occur and the people who have them are not lying. If it can be proven that a person can become a conscious entity outside of the physical body, we have a game changer. It does not prove immortality, but it raises extremely profound questions.

To rigorously examine Near Death Experiences, The Human Consciousness Project's AWARE study is set up in 25 major medical centers throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. In addition to the standard practices during the resuscitation of people who die, the project has additional data collection practices. In a period lasting over 4 years they were present in 2,060 cardiac arrests which had 330 survivors. Of those who survived, 40% reported being aware while they were dead.

A compelling case involved a 57 year old social worker who was dead for over three minutes. After recovery the man recalled in considerable detail what had happened in the room while he was dead, including hearing two beeps of a machine that beeped every three minutes. His account was confirmed as accurate.

Another well published case involved the operation on Pam Reynolds, who was put to death deliberately for a brain operation that could not succeed on a living person. After being revived she recalled in great detail a vivid out-of-body experience, while they were preparing her for death. She accurately described the actions to prepare her, including how her hair was cut, having to switch from one leg to another to find a suitable vein to drain her blood, and the use of a bone saw, including the sound it made.

As her blood was drained and her body cooled to 60 degrees, her brain stem became completely unresponsive, and the out-of-body became a near death experience, with the light and the floating and seeing loved ones who had died. She wanted to stay, but soon her deceased uncle led her back to her body, which felt like plunging into a pool of ice.

Proof? Close, but not quite. The details get complicated, but among other things it has to do with timing. Blackmore would argue that her entire experience occurred before the actual death – as she was dying. We have not quite closed the deal. What is enough?

What is enough is an out of body experience that provides information that could otherwise not be obtained. Here in the sanctuary, I have an out of body experience. I fly next door to a poker game downstairs where Kerry has a full house, but Nolan has four jacks and wins a nice pot of chips. After resuscitation I regain consciousness and tell everyone, and what I saw is verified.

That's enough. The AWARE project has set up the resuscitation rooms with odd items on the top shelves, in adjacent rooms or rooms in the floor above or below, items a person would not make up, like two Barbie dolls dressed in GI Joe clothes, a teddy bear wearing a tiny rock band T-shirt, odd items which would be easy to remember by an out of body consciousness. This would do it.

It hasn't happened, yet.

Returning to the soul.

In Arizona I belonged to an esoteric spiritual school for over ten years. It asserts that we do not have a complete soul at birth, but only the potential, the seed, of one. As we live life, the ecstasy of successes, the agony of failures. As we gain understanding and wisdom, our experiences are perhaps feeding and nurturing something of a higher nature growing inside of us. Do we not experience a certain spiritual hunger? Why experience hunger if there isn't something to feed?

This notion of something starting undeveloped and growing over time is consistent with the life we understand. So much of life starts with a seed. Our own bodies started with seeds.

The caterpillar lives its life, not knowing that inside it is developing what will become a butterfly. Perhaps our life is about more than our outward life of career, house payments, and television. Perhaps we also have an inner life, a spiritual life, associated with the growth of something inside that is more than and deeper than our thoughts and feelings.

This matches our own notions of spiritual growth and the development of a certain wisdom. The ten day old baby has possibility, but so little has occurred. Animals and perhaps all life may have some element of a higher nature, perhaps not what humans have, but something

appropriate to what they are. Those 2000 year old redwoods may indeed have a wisdom our intellects cannot grasp.

Do we know that there is a spirit growing inside of us, something of a higher nature that continues after we die? No. If there is, it may lie beyond our ability to understand, but we can feel it. We feel our souls. Doesn't it make sense to live our lives in a manner that helps it become something wonderful? Something that deserves to last?

Whatever it is that we become on the other side, I believe I can say the following with confidence:

It doesn't play golf.

Thank you.