

# “Looking Beyond the Great Change”

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Today is Mozart’s birthday. I am glad that he was alive, more than two hundred years ago. The after-effects of his life have touched and inspired so many in the intervening years, and continue to be part of the soundtrack of many lives, down to this very hour. His life stands as a symbol and representative for so many others in the choir invisible, whose names are less remembered, but “whose music,” as George Eliot has assured us, “is the gladness of the world.”

Back in the 1960s the then-young songwriter Tom Lehrer said, “It is a sobering thought that when Mozart was my age, he had been dead for two years.” Today, I am further sobered by the thought that when Mozart was *my* age he had been dead for over thirty years.

It kind of makes you think. We all have such a short time to do what we are called to do. At the very end of his brief thirty-five year span, Mozart was writing, on commission, a great Requiem—parts of which we are hearing today. It is important to note that he did not have time to complete it. It is an unfinished work. No matter how much we do in life, as was the case with Mozart, we will always leave something undone.

It would be comforting to think that we can finish our unfinished business in another stage of life that lies after our death.

But is there an afterlife? Is there a heaven? Is there more Mozart to come? Is there pie in the sky after you die? Hamlet, in his “To be or not to be” speech calls death, “The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns.” We have, as Shakespeare tells us, no reliable evidence of the nature, or even of the existence, of an afterlife.

There are a number of reasons why we should be extremely skeptical about the possibility of an afterlife. For one thing, all we have to do is to consider our before-life. What do we know, from personal experience, about the time before we were born? To me, it seems pretty much a blank. If there is nothing of us before our

lives began, then why should we assume that we continue on in time in one direction when we do not in the other?

In our ordinary everyday consciousness we can see or hear or feel nothing beyond the boundary of our present short life. But there other ways of thinking or feeling, which we call mystical or religious experience. We get from that experience, several kinds of reassurance, which make the shortness of life and the imminence of death more tolerable. One message that I can attest from my own experience, a message which seemed to come from the allness of the universe, is that, no matter what happens, everything is all right.

It came to me one day in a kind of a dream. I was being hunted by a carnivore, I think a dinosaur, perhaps an allosaurus, Albertosaurus, or a T. rex. In my waking dream-state I didn't inquire too minutely as to its species. But this was not a nightmare. I was overwhelmed by the knowledge that nothing could happen to me that was amiss. I might live to face another day. Or I might perish in the jaws of the predator. Either way, with me, all would be well. What was really important could not be threatened or destroyed by even the most awful of fates.

The message for me, then, was: No harm can actually come to us, for to die is natural, and whether we are in life or in death, we are, always and ever, enfolded in the arms of the universe. Nothing can wrench us away from the All. For—and this is yet another message—we are all part of the great Allness, and, even in life, when most of the time we feel divided from other things, we can occasionally be put in touch with that inclusive whole, sensing that existence which underlies and supports our daily life. And we can bask in that allness that will receive us back when our existence as individuals is done—an existence which forms but a momentary interlude, a sort of vacation adventure outside of our normal, peaceful state.

When I have been on a vacation, especially one that takes me far away, across an ocean, to another continent, I feel that for those short few weeks I am in another existence, living another life. As I enjoy myself, living another life, trying to deal with situations and customs different from my own, courting adventures that I would studiously avoid in my more peaceful life back home, I also see the clock ticking away. I am living a life away from life, and I know that this life must and the adventure must die. Here we have a model, a parable for life and death, but with comfort of knowing pretty much exactly what awaits us back home, after our return flight, our mini-death, so to speak.

But, talking like this, it still seems as if I am claiming that there might be some individual spiritual afterlife for us once we have returned to the oneness of everything. But it is much more likely, and more logical, to consider that, before and after death, there are no boundaries marking individual souls within the universal whole. Having taken the big trip home, having rejoined the allness, it is likely we will actually retain no remaining shred of individual existence. We will be like a drop of water rejoining the vast ocean.

From our present point of view, loving—as I trust we do—our individual existences, this sounds pretty hopeless, so far as a future afterlife is concerned. But that word, “future,” and indeed the word “after,” forming part of the word “afterlife,” should alert us that we need to re-examine our general understanding of time. Our consciousness runs along with the arrow of time in the four-dimensional space-time universe that we experience. But what if we could take a different path through these dimensions, not following time’s arrow? What if we could step beyond our four dimensions? Then, just as we can now see a three-dimensional object, all in one glance, we will be able to see a living being in all of its phases of life at once: conception, birth, growth, achievements, decay, and death.

Because such an object, say a book, has boundaries, because it has a limited extension in space, does not mean that elsewhere it ceases to exist. It has, as they say, object permanence. We can put it down, and look away from it, and then we can look for it and fetch it back. In the same way a life, considered as a four-dimensional object, always exists and does not cease to be. The analog of its left edge is birth and the analog of the right edge is death. There are places and times where it is, and other places and times where it is not, but a life is always there where it was put, where it is ever happening. It can be gone back to, and looked at again.

This is comforting in the sense that we know our life will always exist and will never be lost. The universe, can read over that life, wallow in the achievements and the fun, while skipping over the dental appointments. As the poet and preacher John Donne said, “all mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; . . . God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another.”

We can get a sense of this by reading biographies. In reading these books we can relive many other lives, cheering on their protagonists' struggles, sympathizing with their sorrows, and rejoicing in their achievements. People live, in us, again and again as we read about them, study them, and even just think about them. Of course, not everyone has a biography written about them. But in the universe encompassing all of time, all existences are important, and exist forever in what amounts to an eternal library.

By living just once, we are creating something permanent. If we blot our copybook, those blots will be there for all time. If we earn a star, that star will ever shine, casting many a blot into insignificance. Thus it is a grave responsibility, while living, to shape a life. When we are outside the blotted, yet shining existence, we are no longer that existence, and have no particular responsibility for it. There is no extra-life punishment, for there is no one to punish, and it would, in any case be a meaningless, unproductive activity. But within the blotted, or well-shaped and luminous, existence there is consciousness of having done well and not so well. It is our job, in the now, when we are still inside the flowing stream of time, to create something lasting in the universe. To have done a good job makes our lives lasting achievements that the universe can revisit time and again.

How do we do well? There are many ways to do this. We are all given different gifts and opportunities. We must all follow our various forms of genius. No one can instruct us as to how to be the ideal versions of ourselves. We must, and we can, find that out for ourselves.

But how do we avoid the blots? A clue is found in the same meditation of John Donne: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." The very fact that when our existence is done we are a part of the whole means that we are mingled with everyone—with every man and woman, with every human and non-human creature that exists, not only on earth, but to the very ends of the universe. We will have lived all lives. All of those translations that are bound up together are equally our own. Therefore, what we do unto one another in our lives, we do unto ourselves. If we keep this in mind—that, underneath, we are each other—we may make many mistakes, but we will never do so very badly.

And, as the Christian scripture says, in words set to music in Handel's oratorio, *The Messiah*: "The trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed." We shall indeed be changed. We shall be vastly

different from who we are now and what we now know. I shall be you, and, equally, you shall be me. I shall have nothing. But we, together, shall have everything. To be too attached to what we think we as individuals own, as Buddhists know, is to suffer. There is also suffering, in this life, if we are attached to, and anxious about, fantasies of individual existence in the afterlife. What we most need is trust. We are always and forever a part of everything. As the mystics know, the great change is actually no change at all: in this life, or beyond this life, we safely dwell in the allness of everything.