Pie in the Sky when you Die

Patti Whaley asks what do we want from an afterlife, why do we want it, and does it help us live better on Earth?

I was chatting with a fellow SOF member several years ago, and the question came up about where we would spend our retirement. 'Oh, my American friends and I have a plan,' I said, 'once we get old enough to draw our pensions and not do each other any harm, we're going to buy a big house in the country where we will all live together, grow tomatoes, study classical Greek, and sing Schubert every night after supper.' I then heard myself say, though I had never considered it in these terms before, 'Of course, it won't happen…it's just a dream to console myself for the fact that there is no afterlife.' Crikey, I thought, where did that come from? And yet, I recognised it as true.

For some time, I've been interested in what it is we really want, when we want an afterlife. Most books about heaven that I've been able to find seem to be written from a top-down historical / theological viewpoint – i.e., what the different religions tell us we will get (the Bardo, Purgatory, hell-fire, an unlimited supply of virgins or whatever your version of Pie in the Sky When You Die might be). This article is more of a bottom-up approach – what do our chance remarks, popular songs, stories and images tell us about we want from the afterlife, why do we want it, and does understanding this help us to live better lives?

Although post-theist SOFers, and most secular people today, don't believe in a 'real' afterlife, the idea of heaven still has broad popular appeal. There are various strategies we use to console ourselves for the lack of an afterlife. We can, for example, 'live on' through our children, or in the minds of others who have loved us, or through our good works, financial legacies, or artistic creations. We can contribute to a tradition we find meaningful, and train others to carry on that tradition after we are gone. We can follow Cupitt's admonition to live life to the full, burning out like the sun, and celebrate the very transience of our lives. And yet…the idea of eternal life hangs in there, refusing to set a good example and just *die*.

Most of us don't simply want our current earthly life to go on forever – if we do, it's a sign that we are among the very fortunate few. Rather, talking about heaven is a way of expressing a wish for things that we don't think we're going to get in this life. The heaven-substitute that I was discussing with my SOF friend bundled up a number of these wishes: I want to get all my favourite people in one place, and make them stay put; I want time to do beautiful things that don't have immediate practical use, like learning ancient Greek; I want to get past the competition for sexual partners

Fresco of a Christian Agape (love feast). Catacomb of St Priscilla, Rome, 4th century
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and the worries about financial stability; I want to stay in one place and be content. I'd like to take a look at the idea of heaven from this bottom-up angle, spell out what different experiences or different writers suggest we really want, and invite you to suggest things I might have missed.

First, obviously, we want to be re-united with our loved ones. Humanist funeral celebrants are often surprised by how many people want a non-theist, non-religious funeral, but also ask to include one of those poems that says, more or less, 'I am just on the other side of the veil, waiting for you.' It doesn't really make much sense in a humanist context, but making sense isn't what this is about. Don Cupitt talks in *Impossible Loves* about our love for the dead; we go on talking to them, arguing with them, apologising to them, imagining them observing us, hoping they approve of what we are doing.

One of the most heartrending episodes of the podcast 'This American Life' (one-last-thing-before-I-go/act-one) tells the story of a Japanese man who installed a traditional British phone box in his back garden to talk to his dead cousin. When Japanese families lost family members in the 2011 tsunami and earthquake, word of the phone box gradually spread, and now people regularly come to his garden, often from considerable distances, to use the telephone and talk to their dead. Sometimes they dial specific phone numbers. Families queue up and go in one by one, often breaking down in tears as they talk to their lost loved ones. Everyone knows this phone is not connected to anything. You talk into the phone, and no one talks back to you. And yet, people keep coming. The phone box owner noted that the majority of people who come are men; very often it is Japanese farmers, not known for being the most communicative of people. They talk into the phone, and they promise to come again.

The opposite view of our love for our own dead is our regrets about leaving behind those who will live after us when we die. We worry about how they will cope; men worry about whether they have provided enough for their family to manage. A SOF member told me many years ago that she did not fear her own death, but she hated not getting to know how her grandchildren would turn out.

Second, we want all the good things we have been deprived of in this life – and that's a long list. Like the song, *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, heaven will include an endless supply of good food for the taking, perfect weather, and leisure without penalty.

> 'In the Big Rock Candy Mountains
> There's a land that's fair and bright
> Where the handouts grow on bushes
> And you sleep out every night
> Where the boxcars all are empty
> And the sun shines everyday
> All the birds and the bees
> And the cigarette trees
> The lemonade springs
> Where the bluebird sings
> In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.'

Or perhaps heaven will include a life without pain or handicap:

> 'Yet in an instant, all that blear review
> Marched on spotless, clad in raiment new.
> The lame were straightened, withered limbs uncurled
> And blind eyes opened on a new, sweet world.'
>
> Vachel Lindsay
> *General William Booth Enters into Heaven*

For others, simply the chance for a rest, or for peace, a wish that often shows up in the spirituals sung by American slaves:

> 'Gonna lay down my sword and shield,
> down by the riverside,
> study war no more.'

Beyond these immediate personal desires, there is a deep wish for justice, whether that be for oneself, or for humanity at large. Because the world is such a deeply flawed and unfair place, we want people to get what they should have gotten in this world – either a reward for their efforts and sacrifices, or punishment for the evil that they got away with. We want the sheep to be separated from the goats (confident in the knowledge, of course, that we will be with the sheep!).

One of my own favourite ideas of the afterlife that expresses this idea of personal judgement is that each of us will spend eternity perceiving life through the eyes of those whom we affected. Our judgement, or our reward, will be to feel the pain or pleasure that we caused other people to

feel. This particular longing for personal justice sees every earthly act as either 'laying up treasures for ourselves in heaven', or storing up condign punishments, as the cruelty or kindness we showed others is finally delivered back to us.

The frightening thing in this vision of justice is that we are not always aware of the impacts of our actions. I may have sailed through life in blissful ignorance or wilful denial of the effects that my habits of consumption or my position of privilege had on the less fortunate, but in this version of the afterlife, my eyes will be opened. T.S. Eliot recognised this fear, which he ironically dubbed 'the crown on your lifetime's effort':

> '…the rending pain of re-enactment
> Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
> Of things ill done and done to others' harm
> Which once you took for exercise of virtue.'
> *Four Quartets: Little Gidding*

And whether or not there is justice, surely we should at least get an explanation – why do things happen the way they do? Perhaps the things that seemed unjust and painful in this life will make sense when the ultimate truth is revealed to us, as St Paul promised in his letter to the Corinthians: 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.'

This hunger for explanation may range from the eternal macro-questions – Heidegger's 'why is there something rather than nothing?'– to the most minute puzzles of daily life. A patristics-scholar friend wrote to me once, saying that he had attended a lecture where the speaker noted that a certain irresolvable inconsistency between the sources for a classical text would probably only be resolved 'in the next world.' My friend wrote: 'I found this delightful – I knew of course that the blind would see and the lame would walk, but I had not realised that all our texts would be emended!' What a wonderful idea indeed, I could only agree.

Perhaps this wish for an explanation will also come with the chance to correct our shortcomings, as in Benjamin Franklin's famous epitaph:

> '…But the work shall not be wholly lost, for it will, as he believed, appear once more, in a new and more perfect edition, corrected and amended by the Author.'

We want the dross burned away, the true essence revealed, and the underlying reasons for things to be explained.

Again, there is a dark side to this particular wish – the revelation of what we could have been may break our heart. W. H. Auden's poem '*Had your life been good'* envisions a poet being judged, not by the poems he wrote, but by the poems he failed to write:

> 'Nevertheless…
> God may reduce you to tears of shame,
> reciting by heart the poems you would have written
> had your life been good.'

Finally, related to the search for knowledge and explanation is the quest for meaning and fulfilment. Unpacking 'the quest for meaning' is too complex for this little meditation, but let's touch on three aspects that relate to our hunger for the afterlife. First is the desire for boundlessness. Life is full of limitations and disappointments, and a sense of greater depth that is always just out of our reach. Tolstoy described this in the moment that Prince Andrey falls in love with Natasha: 'a sudden, vivid sense of the terrible contrast between something infinitely great and illimitable existing in him, and something limited and material, which he himself was, and even *she* was.' Give the difficulty of grasping this boundlessness now, it must be something that is postponed to the next life: as Robert Browning said, 'a man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?'

Eternity is a specific form of boundlessness that is obviously associated with the afterlife. We habitually assume that things that last a long time have more meaning than things that come and go. We see this in the way that lovers pledge to love each other 'forever' and give each other 'eternity rings' to symbolise a commitment that will outlive time itself. Rose promises her dying lover at the end of the Titanic shipwreck that 'my heart will go on/ we'll stay forever this way / you are safe in my heart / and my heart will go on and on.' By extension, a life that is transient

seems to have less meaning than a life that goes on forever, and so death 'robs us' of the meaning that we attach to permanency.

A final form of this yearning for meaning is the wish that, even if life is temporal, it will have been observed, understood, recorded in the Book of Life for all time. Nietzsche noted that even if we 'live on' in our children and our works, in time the sun will run out of steam and the planet will die. And what then? The universe will simply continue on, uncaring, unremembering, unmindful of all we worked to achieve; all our languages and our words, all our monuments of mental and physical labour – it will be as if they had never happened at all. When I contemplate the end of the world, I inevitably find myself thinking that somehow, somewhere, surely the memory of Schubert's songs must survive, because it is unthinkable that they could utterly die out. I need a God, sometimes, just so she can remember us at our best when we are gone.

As I come to the end of this list, I am aware, of course, of some answers to these various wants and desires. We should accept transience, indeed, we should rejoice in it, and burn ourselves out like the sun itself. Death, rather than robbing life of meaning, is what gives life its meaning, because a life that stretched on forever would drain us of all motivation; why get out of bed today, when we could lounge about until the next millennium? In my head I do accept this, but it doesn't negate all the desires listed above. The best I can arrive at is that this list is a memo to myself of all that I value most, which suggests that the way to give myself eternal life is to use the list to focus my life on the things that mean the most to me. I may not get 'cigarette trees and lemonade springs,' perfect justice, or all the people I love in one house at one time, but if I at least know that's what I want, I can spend more time on those things and strive to appreciate them more when I have them.

In one of my favourite meditations on death, the quirky little Japanese film *After Life*, the dead are checked into a rather drab institution and instructed to examine their lives, and select one moment of perfect happiness; this moment will be recreated and the dead soul will be placed in that moment 'for eternity.' It doesn't matter if that moment is a fireworks-and-champagne celebration, or a moment of simple fireside contentment; they must simply make their choice, forever. If they can't think of such a moment, they must stay and help run the institution until they are ready to make their decision.

One young man has been in the institution for some time; his young life was cut short by World War II, and he felt he had failed to achieve happiness. But while helping another of the dead come to a decision, he recollects a quiet moment sitting with his betrothed, and recognises that the perfect promise of happiness in that moment was, in fact, happiness itself. Anyone who watches the film must, like myself, reflect on their own life, and what has brought them true happiness. The film has made me much more attentive to my life, much more grateful, much more inclined to accept the moment for what it is.

Patti Whaley has been a member of SOF since 1995. She has retired from non-profit management and now divides her time between being a charity trustee, playing the organ, and trying to read Russian.

Vespers

Vesper is the Latin for evening
were this not to be known; Evensong
for the Anglican, a balcony
on Rome gracing the rampart
Chorale and the marsh valerian.

There can be a sunset in the West,
pale yellow and streaky orange.
The importance of every evening.
Death is a lottery. Wild garlic.

A sparrow is flying in the hall.

Christopher Truman

Christopher Truman is a North London poet and artist.