

The In-Between Life

John 20:1,2, 11-18; I Corinthians 15:50-55

Back in the day when I was a full time student, I recall the number of books I would be required to read for each class, with each professor apparently assuming that not a single one of my other classes was using textbooks. So I would find myself at the beginning of each semester staring down at the thirty or more books which I was supposed to read from cover to cover sometime in the course of eleven weeks in order to meet the basic requirements of my assignments.

As with most students, with all the socializing and partying I was also obligated to participate in during college, this left little time to slog through each reading assignment with any degree of depth. So my solution to this academic dilemma was to read the introduction and last chapter of every book in order to pick up the main points and highlights. All the details in between I'd leave for the academic overachievers, who traded in their social life for good grades by proving their worth in the classroom, instead of the dorm.

My abridged approach to reading assignments allowed me, when called upon, to hone my skills at "manure shoveling," which is an acquired talent of exceedingly high value that prepares one for many possible careers, such as politician, government economist, Red Sox color commentator and, of course, preacher. We, and many others, can wax on eloquently with our "B.S." degrees based on very little substance—God as our witness!

Lest you think such shorthand thinking is limited to a subset of the human population, let me assure you it isn't. There's all sorts of people out in the world taking shortcuts so they can get by with what they think they

have to get done, while trying to fit in what they really want to do. It's called, "employment," or it's called, "cleaning up the house for company," or it's called "crash dieting before hitting the beach," or any other of life's many challenges.

Along those lines, there's a lot of folks out there who take shortcuts with their religious faith. They show up for services on the high holy days; in our Christian tradition, that would mean Christmas and Easter (I know, I've got a few of them in my family!). It's done mainly to appease Mom or Dad, or to relieve one's own conscience when work and other activities have taken precedent over regular Sabbath-keeping. Though good intentions are genuine—that coming to church is something one has on the proverbial bucket list—life's priorities and demands haven't lined up with making this more than a semi-annual visit, at best.

That's why there are "C & E" Christians everywhere—those who come to church on the major Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter. I'm not being critical, mind you, because given the lives people have to lead with work and other demands, if that's as good as it gets, then, in itself, this is an achievement worth celebrating (remember that, Mom).

However, much like speedreading my college textbooks, flipping through the introduction and the last chapter doesn't tell the whole story. Christianity, as a source of meaningful faith, really isn't about Christmas and Easter. It's about all that matters in between—the life, the teachings, the perspective, the mission, the meaning of Jesus, as well as the spirituality of being in community with others. Christmas, of course, is only about Jesus coming out of the womb—it's the same thing every year; likewise, Easter is only about Jesus coming out of the tomb. Jesus' leaving the womb and the tomb doesn't tell the whole story, or even what the story

is about. If these holidays didn't dictate the themes for each day, if we're weren't reduced to hearing the same old same old, then those who are only hearing about the womb and the tomb year in and year out might find something in the story and spirit of Jesus that would pique their interest and connect with some relevance to the daily rush and chaos that each of us call our "life."

Frankly, what happens in between the holidays (as well as between our childhood Sunday School experiences and adulthood) is summed up in the difference between *acknowledging* faith and *living* it. Similarly, all the stuff in between the womb and the tomb, between Christmas and Easter, is what makes Christianity so compelling, so relevant, and so transforming.

For one thing, basic to our human nature—true the world over—is the yearning for *coherence*—a sense that everything is related and interdependent, that human existence is not random, or isolated, or without purpose. As adults, we try to make sense of the world as we live in it, as we view it, and as we'd like it to be. We do this on a personal level in our households and in our relationships, priorities, and commitments, including providing some moral guidance for children—helping them to acquire necessary wisdom for life. We also do that on a macro-level, with ideas about how society and the world could be better. Relational coherence is how we structure meaning into our lives so that everything doesn't seem fractured or random.

For the sake of finding coherence, every week in this Meetinghouse we join with others who may or may not share every detail of our personal beliefs, but with whom we can wrestle with and discern the wisdom and meaning for life that we believe God has inspired in the pages of Scripture and in our moral reasoning as a community of faith. Our mutual search for

meaning helps create spiritual community. Unlike a lot of arenas in life where everything operates on a competitive basis—sometimes even with a mindset of a survival of the fittest—a beloved community of Christ surrounds us with those who cooperate and care about each other—where good relationships matter. Life begins to make sense when we can discern a pattern of coherence as to how things are or can be as we live in right relationships with God and others.

Equally transforming is being able to discover how relevant ancient wisdom is to our daily existence. When we discern the richer meaning in stories, we come to realize our Sunday School recollection isn't enough. There's so much more to explore beneath the surface of these texts which helps us make sense of life.

For example, interpreting Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount for our current times will absolutely catch your breath when we are told to “love our enemies” or to “do good to those who harm you.” Where would we ever hear this kind of moral logic today—especially in the current political climate? Or when Jesus instructed his disciples not to worry about the material needs of their lives, but to share freely and generously with one another—how is this not a wake-up call to generations who spend money frivolously on themselves, or who fear that their debts will bury them?

Recognizing that Jesus taught us how to love one another, how he lifted up people's dignity, forgave them, healed their wounded souls, restored their lives, and gave them another chance has no end to its application or relevance to each of us as we live and work with people every day. Life, if it's lived in caring community with others, can turn around from its most troublesome worries. Who doesn't need a safe place to come to spiritually center themselves as often as they can?

Again, it's the stuff that we don't hear about on Christmas and Easter that actually impacts us. The in-between life is what matters. Being a part of a spiritual community that values such wisdom and hope, that promotes love and kindness, justice and mercy, while caring for each other and for people of all walks of life (especially the most vulnerable and "least of these" on earth), is so central to our sense of wellbeing and coherence as a human family. This is why we keep Sabbath on a regular basis—because our lives are the better for it as we reorient ourselves from the daily tussle to the wisdom of God we find in Jesus that inspires a better outlook and engagement with life.

Now with all of that said, since it is Easter (and you came expecting to hear something about it), let me return to the customary theme, i.e., Jesus' resurrection. There's an in-between element here as well that speaks to the realities of human life, hinted at by Jesus' comment to Mary Magdalene that she could not hold onto his resurrected body because he had not yet "ascended to the Father." What does that mean; was Jesus in some in-between state of existence?

Admittedly, resurrection stories are hard to understand, largely because it is difficult to imagine what we're really talking about—what actually occurred, what it's for, and what was its nature. It doesn't help that none of the stories recorded in the gospels match up; each one varies from the others in detail, setting, witnesses, and whether or not Jesus was even recognized by his followers. Secondly, we have nothing to compare it to within human existence. Resurrection from the dead is a not a common phenomenon (notwithstanding the zombie apocalypse). Since the stories of Easter often do seem more fantastic than fact, we often are left using metaphors to try to explain it.

However, over the past year I've been exploring the topic of quantum mechanics and I began to ponder the underlying truth behind these Easter accounts. Quantum theory helps with this because, by definition, on a subatomic level, what is real in particle form is complemented by an endless array of possibilities that simultaneously exist in wave form. What we see is not all there is.

For those familiar with Schrödinger's cat, we could even pose a similar question as that famous experiment. In this case, is Jesus dead or alive? Is it only determined by what the observer sees, even though both possibilities exist at the same time? Could it be that for those who believed, they actually perceived the risen Lord as real and present as much as those who concluded him to be dead? Reality is largely defined by what one perceives, according to quantum physics.

Let me take this a step further. Another way to account for the resurrection is to recognize that in the indeterminism between waves or particle states (i.e. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle), could there not be a dimension to reality that we're exposed to in these accounts that actually exists, but in energy form? What I mean is, is the perception of a resurrected body the energy waves that always exist, even when their particle (i.e., material) form no longer does?

If so, does this "spiritual" body consist of the actual person in consciousness and being—an energy state that is only contained for a limited period of time in a physical body, or mortal state? This is a real possibility in quantum, not Newtonian, physics. That would lend credence to Teilhard de Chardin's famous maxim that, in our essence, we are not human beings on a spiritual journey, but spiritual beings on a human

journey—the ideal essence of our spirits existing in energy form.¹ Was Jesus' spiritual presence before Mary in-between states of being (from mortal to immortal) and perceived by his disciples as “resurrection”?

Granted, all of this may make mush of our brains, but it is intriguing to me that when the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 15 explained the difference between the perishable and imperishable body—the mortal and immortal being—he used an unusual term in doing so. In our English translations of I Corinthians 15:51, 52, where it states, “we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye...,” the word translated “moment” is the Greek word *atomos*, from which we get the English word “atom.” It’s the only time in the New Testament that we find this word, *atomos*. It refers to the smallest element—something that is indivisible. This is an unusual choice, given that the customary Greek word used to convey “moment” in terms of time is *parautika*, which means “instant.”

Paul of Tarsus wasn’t a quantum physicist (nor is Paul of Noank), but it’s intriguing to ponder: was he somehow divinely inspired on a subconscious level (unknown to himself) to describe the metamorphosis from particle to wave for what actually occurs at death, when the mortal transitions into that which is immortal?

Who knows? I may be “quantum crazy” (as some have suggested), but I find this ancient biblical portrayal of the resurrected body remarkably consistent with what physicists are saying about the way everything works in the quantum universe, which may lead us to revisit our sense of what mortality and immortality, life and death, actually mean.

¹ The actual quote is, “You are not a human being in search of a spiritual experience. You are a spiritual being immersed in a human experience.”

If we follow this to its logical conclusion, it seems as if human existence is so much more than the pedestrian matters and dramas of daily life. There is a greater arc to our ultimate destiny—more purpose to our being in the present. Life for each of us, in light of the resurrection, doesn’t lie in the past, or even in who we are in the present. Instead, it lies in the future—of what we will yet become as spiritual beings. The stories of Easter point us in this direction, orienting us toward the future state of being—toward the life that is becoming in each of us and among us.

If this is true, then in a manner of speaking, you and I are in an in-between life. We are living in between our birth and our death, but we are also capable of living in-between a sense of mortality and immortality—that at our death we will become something far more essential to who we are as spiritual beings. We will be more like God in form and being, as well as like the essential nature and composition of the universe. What we are and what we come to be is meant to be in God, in right relationship, immersed in the living Spirit of Christ, experiencing and sharing the fullness of love, toward a destiny of completion and coherence with all of life as the divine spark initiated and intended it to be. Is that not what Jesus called his disciples to do and be—to follow him on the Way—the Way to Truth and Life?

From the womb to the tomb, I believe this is our destiny, our calling, our community, our best sense of becoming. This in-between life is not a religion we learn about or join; it is a life we lead among those who guide us along the Way. It is not merely an individual spiritual journey or quest for self-preservation in a survival of the fittest on this planet; no, it is a journey through mortal life toward immortality that we take and share together,

integrated into the entire created order, as part of God's redemptive charge for humanity.

As Christians, we see it symbolized in the reality of the resurrection and in the beginning and end of the Jesus story—from the womb and from the tomb; but we gain the moral nature of it in his life; we experience it in unfolding ways as we share in Christ's beloved community along our journeys through life. Much like the disciples who were able to perceive the risen Lord, it takes a cultivated and constant awareness to perceive God's reality in this in-between mortal existence we call our life. That, in itself, is a very good reason to keep Sabbath on a regular basis.

So on this Easter morning, may we continue to ponder this story, taking seriously its claims and fostering the truth of God's future for us each time we gather in the name of the Risen One, who transforms us into becoming who and what we were always meant to be.

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27 March 2016