

Is there hope beyond death?



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Naturalist John Burroughs once wrote about death: “I shall not be imprisoned in the grave where you are to bury my body. I shall be diffused in great Nature, in the soil, in the air, in the sunshine, in the hearts of those who love me, in all the living and flowing currents of the world My elements and my forces go back into the original sources out of which they came” (Accepting the Universe, 1920). This seems to be a reasonable, secular and perhaps even spiritual view of death.

All cultures have beliefs about death and the afterlife. For most people on the planet, death is not the end. But what happens after? There are almost as many perspectives as people.

Our fears about death and our tendency to deny it (or put it out of our minds) drive many of our beliefs. Non-religious people can share some of the same fears, but secular folks tend toward a more scientific understanding. That might sound rather cold and cruel, but as we hear from Burroughs, it can be quite wonderful. Why shouldn't the beauty of anatomy and physics be a source of joyful wonder too?

A good agnostic might simply acknowledge “I don't know,” though, like all of us, they may join in speculation. Our wild imaginations (often fed by science fiction stories) can be fun and fanciful ways to wonder, but in the end we're left with The End, without final answers.

Traditional views of “heaven” present many problems and questions. Where is that? What is it like? Who goes

there? And, if we're honest, we might ask, Would I want to go there?

Though Jewish tradition doesn't say much about the afterlife, most Christian views have their origin in highly imaginative allegories such as in The Revelation. The last book in the Bible may be the most confusing story ever written with its dragons and horses, harlots and heathen, chosen and damned, rivers, trees and a golden city in the sky (Paul said he went to a “third heaven” – Second Corinthians 12 – but no one can make sense of that either).

Without making light of the serious sense of loss, grief and fearful uncertainty faced at death, I do think it helps to give a lighter touch to some of what we've absorbed from our culture. If you are a member of one of the following communities, I hope you can keep a smile.

Ask most Fundamentalists about the heavenly realm and they can pretty much give a tour of the grounds, though, as we know, they will be the only ones there.

Evangelical Christians will describe heaven as if it's a massive megachurch with an eternal worship and praise service. They too believe the doors will be closed after they get in, taking comfortable seats in the front.

Mainline Christians are fairly confident that all types of Christians will make it in there, though they have no idea where “there” is.

Progressive Christians say if there really is a “somewhere” out there, all Christians will be “in” and God will probably let everyone in, if there are enough seats.

Other religions have dozens of different descriptions of what is “across the river.”

For humanists, “The Good Place” sounds more bad than good.

This beckons me back to the naturalists and their more “earthy” understanding of mortality. We are born, we live, we die. As I like to say, we are human—humbly made of the humus: the ground, the stuff of life, the “elements and forces,” as Burroughs puts it. With only one life to live, what great value is Life! How precious is living!

John Muir, steeped in the Bible, was no denier or dreamer when contemplating death. Life was too “glorious” and earth was too much a “heaven” to think of other worlds. Why should we fear losing our fragile lives among countless species of other fragile creatures on a fragile rock that seems so stable but spins through space balanced on fragility itself?

In his beloved mountains, Muir wrote: “Even death is in harmony here. Perhaps there is more pleasure than pain in natural death” (Journals, 1872).

Another voice in the chorus, presenting a gritty and grounded view of death was Walt Whitman (poets can say difficult things in ways we can imagine and accept – were ancient stories of the afterlife also poetry?). Whitman wrote,

“And as to you death, and you bitter hug of mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me And as to you corpse, I think you are good manure, but that does not offend me And as to you, life, I reckon you are the leavings of many deaths” (Song of Myself, 49).

Beyond fear lies a natural poetry of hope.

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