

2017 - Lenten Study

# Life Beyond Death

*Let's Dig a Little Deeper*

By the Faith Formation Committee of Appleby United Church

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# LIFE BEYOND DEATH

In life, in death, in life beyond death.  
God is with us.  
We are not alone.

*The United Church of Canada (A New Creed)*

When we've been there ten thousand years  
Bright shining as the sun  
We've no less days to sing God's praise  
Then when we first begun.

*Hymn – Amazing Grace*

## Introduction

*“The subject of eternity has taxed minds  
great and small for centuries and  
will forever be of human interest,  
intellectually, spiritually, and viscerally”*

As Christians, we (specifically we of the United Church denomination) in our creed, liturgy, and hymns that we sing, profess to believe in an afterlife.

In this season of Lent, a season devoted to reflection and preparing our hearts and minds for Easter, it may be appropriate to reflect on that belief and consider whether, or how, that belief has changed the way we live today. Talking about this subject may help us clarify our thoughts and have a response that we can articulate to those interested in how we, as Christians, live and why.

## Study Format

**This study is intended to help us “dig a little deeper” and to encourage you to tax your mind a bit and join the conversation!**

You can study on your own or perhaps better, join a group and join the discussion. The concept of death, renewal and transformation is the essence of our Christian belief particularly at Easter and indeed as is noted in the introduction “*has taxed minds great and small for centuries and will forever be of human interest, intellectually, spiritually and viscerally*”.

To help the conversation we will refer to the Bible (at times Jesus’ words) poets, philosophers, novelists, theologians, songwriters and performers, scientists, and current news.

Referring again to the opening quote in the introduction the word “**viscerally**” is interesting. It may be that the more you look into this subject the more you will feel that deep within us, in our gut, there is something there, but something that always eludes our grasp. You may find that **poets** best describe this feeling.

Part of the poem “**Intimations of Immortality**” by William Wordsworth:  
**“Our Birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:  
The soul that rises with us, our life’s star  
Hath somewhere else its setting,  
And cometh from afar:  
Not in entire forgetfulness.  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home”.**  
(Chew on that for a bit)

This isn’t black and white, concrete stuff but rather  
**“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 fully  
known. I Corinthians 13:12**

(Don’t skip over the last little bit ... “**even as also I am fully known**”  
How do you feel about that?)

***Some thoughts to get us thinking about why the concept of Eternal Life is important; or, for some why it is not.***

- The world is frequently unjust. An afterlife is necessary to correct things. Reward/ Punishment/ Peace.
- The world is terribly unfair and unequal; some people are born into misery, others into a favoured life.
- The ruling class can control lower classes by teaching that a better afterlife is to come.

The diminishing of traditional Western ideas concerning the afterlife which began after WW1 resulted in more support for people who wanted to make the world a fairer place in this lifetime not in the next lifetime. It may be worth discussing the observation that the USA probably the most religious of all developed societies has the poorest social programmes of all developed societies.

- Comfort –  
A loved one is in a better place.  
(In the arms of Jesus)
- Challenge – We are in this life to learn and how well we learn will affect what our next life will be like.
- Forget about the next life. Just get on with trying to fix this life!
- This life is all there is folks! Smarten up; he who has the most toys wins!
- The Ouroboros conception.  
A depiction of a serpent swallowing its tail and forming a circle. From nature: creation out of destruction, life out of death, eternal renewal and destruction.  
(Ancient)
- Mankind's fear of nothingness.  
Without some kind of eternal life all that we loved, feared, worked for, struggled for; the achievements, the failures eventually amount to nothing.
- For those who are not finished with this life there may be anger at death. *Dylan Thomas' famous poem "Do not go gentle into that good night", expresses rage against the end of life "Rage, rage against the dying of the light". Also Neil Diamond song "Done too soon".*
- Reunite with loved ones.  
(*We'll meet again*)

## First Dig – Reuniting With Loved Ones

Which one, or more, of the previous thoughts resonate with you? Let's pick one.

I'm guessing the one most chosen is *"Reuniting with Loved Ones"*.

Let's dig in, think about, discuss.

To help get in the mood, type –

**Song "We'll Meet Again"** in Google.

Play the **Vera Lynn** version on *You Tube* first (It's the best) but also Johnny Cash.

The lyrics are included in the appendix at the end of this study. Go to Wikipedia.

You will learn that this song, which was immensely popular during World War 2,

has been sung by many artists and included in many movies to make

a point. (e.g. the movie *"Dr. Strange Love"*)

The song as performed by Johnny Cash, reportedly was the last cut in the final

album he made before his death and

shortly after the death of his wife.

It was played at his funeral and perhaps

the funerals of others.

**Ozzy Osbourne** is probably not to your taste, or mine, but you may want to go to *You Tube* to hear and see him sing **"See You on the Other Side"** or, perhaps, better for most of us, just have a look at one verse of the lyrics.

**Or for something more direct – Google "See You On The Other Side – Shaun Canon" It's by the Mormon Channel.**

You may recall when Debbie Reynolds died, within a few days of her daughter's death, her last words, according to her son, were **"I want to be with Carrie"**.

So a visceral belief in **life beyond death** by many religious, non-religious, Christian, Non-Christian. Comforting, at least for some.

**So; what do you think? You like? Comforting? Wishful thinking? Let's dig in and discuss!**

## Second Dig – Let's Dig A Little Deeper

### How about this thought?

*“The world is frequently, perhaps, some might say, mostly unjust and for many cruel. Life beyond death is necessary to correct things”*

Let's get in the mood. Google Wikipedia – **“Death of Alan Kurdi”** (The refugee boy found drowned on a beach). Then go to Amazon.com Books **“The Shack”** for a description of that story. You may have read **The Shack**; it was very popular in churches a few years ago. The deaths and suffering of the subject two children; **Alan** see above and **Missy** from the Shack and the agony suffered by their parents, are representative of, unfortunately, millions of people in history.

God gave us **free will**, which was necessary, but He, no doubt, knew the suffering that would cause. Perhaps Jesus described how the pain and suffering would be healed.

**“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.”**  
**Jesus (John 14:1-2)**

### Questions For Discussion:

The writer of **“The Shack”** seems to be saying, “God is good and humans embraced evil and God responded with goodness”. In the struggle between good and evil, bad things happen to good people. God let it happen. **Is that it?**

**Might the place where Mackenzie saw Missy be one of the “rooms” that Jesus described? Do you think that there may be “rooms” for all of us where we go to be healed and loved?**

**Does the idea of a life beyond death and “rooms” where others and we are healed both physically and mentally from the bad effects of free will help you to better believe in a loving God? Or not?**

For a novelist's interpretation of Jesus' words a few pages (pages 164-169) from **“The Shack”** are attached. In part of the excerpt, Mackenzie, Missy's father, is angry with God (Papa). Sarayu, the Holy Spirit, is challenging Mackenzie quite forcefully.

Mackenzie: *“But I still don't understand why Missy had to die”.*

Sarayū: *“She didn't have to, Mackenzie. This was no plan of Papa's. Papa has never needed evil to accomplish his good purposes. It is you humans who have embraced evil and Papa responded with goodness. What happened to Missy was the work of evil and no one in your world is immune from it”*

In the pages attached you will read that Mackenzie is taken to a beautiful place where Missy is playing happily with other children.

**“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”**

Barack Obama, Martin Luther King and others have used this quote in speeches, which has its origins from 1800s in the US. The battle for justice has been going on a long time with no end in sight and with much collateral damage.

### Third Dig

*Let's dig some more.*

**What happens after we are healed?**

**How about:**

*“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.”*

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Let's discuss this quote because it turns things perhaps upside down. People sometimes say they want to be more spiritual. Sorry, you already are spiritual; God sent you here to learn to become human. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talked about human things; giving to the needy, murder, adultery, divorce, an eye for an eye, love your enemies. In today's world, there is much better than before, if we read the news, clearly they're still much wrong that needs our "good works", even in our own community.

In Ephesians 2:10 Paul tells us *“For we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance to do”*.

Jesus also tells us *“To be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Matthew 5:48. You may notice the following note in your study Bible. Christ sets up the high ideal of perfect love – not that we can attain it in this life.*

#### Questions:

**Do you ever think, even in maturity, that although you have learned a lot, that you are an unfinished work of God and nowhere near perfect? I know that I do! Perhaps you did not work as hard as you should have with God on the good works he had planned for you?**

**What about those whose lives were cut short?**

**After a talk with Jesus about our shortcomings and, perhaps, some time of healing, do you think He might have some more good works in mind for us?**

## **Fourth Dig – End of Life Experiences**

**There are several movies and many books about end of life experiences perhaps better known as Near Death Experiences (NDEs) where people describe their experiences during the time between dying and being brought back to life.**

Two articles to provide the material for our discussion our Fourth Dig are attached.

The first article is by Brian Bethune who is a Senior Writer for *MacLean's* Magazine who wrote an extensive article on this subject including a short video where he is interviewed on his thoughts.

The second article is a reflection on the book "*Visions of Heaven*" by the author Lisa Miller.

These two articles should provide plenty of information for discussion for our *Fourth Dig*.

*Thanks to Lorne Robertson for the research for this Dig!*

## Some Quotes To Chew On

“Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything that science has taught me – and continues to teach me – strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual experience after death, nothing disappears without a trace.”

*Wernher Von Braun;  
Rocket Scientist*

“Now he has departed this strange little world ahead of me. That means nothing. People like us who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubborn illusion.”

*Albert Einstein (On the death of a friend and colleague)*

“That’s all there is, folks.”  
*Don Cupitt (Referring to our existing life); English, Former priest, philosopher and radical theologian*

“Self consciousness is both our crown of glory and the cross of our anxiety. One cannot be human without embracing both aspects of humanity. So it is the nature of human life to press the edges of reality in acts of gigantic courage and at the same time to shiver in our mortal boots as chronically fearful people, wondering if life has any meaning. We know that we are alive and we know that we will die. We cannot have one without the other. That is why human beings alone count their years. That is why human beings alone understand the concept of “I”. (Note: Writer is comparing humans with animals) That is why human beings alone seek to overcome or to transform death. That is why we dream of some continued life beyond the limits of this life. That is why death is never far from our conscious minds.”

*Excerpt from the book Eternal Life – A New Vision by John Selby Spong, pg 76*

“You do not want to die. And you want to pass from this life to another in such a way that you will not rise again as a dead man, but fully alive and transformed. This is what you desire. This is the deepest human feeling; mysteriously, the soul itself wishes and instinctively desires it.”

*St Augustine extract from The City of God: A very Brief History of Eternity; Carlos Eire, pg 64*

“Religion is the opium of the people.”

*Karl Marx*

“If a man (or woman) dies, will he (or she) live again?”  
*Job 14:14*

“My answer would be yes, yes, yes!”  
*Eternal Life – A New Vision: John Selby Spong, pg 212*

“It is one sacred universe, and we are all part of it.”  
*Richard Rohr; Paraphrasing St. Francis of Assisi*

## Some Quotes To Chew On (Continued)

“Life is but a luminous pause between two great mysteries which themselves are one.”

*Carl Jung; Psychiatrist  
(Referring to birth and death)*

“The deepest question at stake in the culture war is not abortion or Hell, nor evolutionism or homosexuality, but rather this: Does the universe operate on the principle of randomness, or under the rule of a transcendent Providence? Only in a random universe can the wicked get away with their wickedness”.

*A Very Brief History of Eternity:  
Carlos Eire, pg 206. Quote from  
David Klinghoffer: “Hell, Yes”*

*“Going home  
without my sorrow  
Going home  
sometime tomorrow  
Going home to where  
it's better than before  
Going home  
without my burden  
Going home  
behind the curtain  
Going home  
without the costume  
That I wore”...  
Words from Canada's  
Leonard Cohen:  
(Recently deceased).  
Part of the lyrics of the song  
“Going Home” written in  
2012 as he contemplated death.*

“Has this world been so kind to you that you should leave it with regret? There are better things ahead of you than any we leave behind.”  
*C.S. Lewis*

*The parable  
of the Prodigal Son  
Luke 15:11-32*

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”  
*(A verse from the Poem  
“The Death of the Hired Man”  
Robert Frost (poet)*

### Questions:

**Do you consider Heaven to be a place where you have to “earn” your way in, through good works and/or belief (to get past “St Peter at the gate”)?**

**Or rather, is heaven your home “When you have to go there, they have to take you in”?**

If you believe the latter, many theologians would disagree with you.

## To Conclude

**John Selby Spong**

**Final words ending the book “Eternal Life – A New Vision”**

“Finally, to state as plainly as I know how to do, I believe deeply that this life I love so passionately is not all there is. This life is not the end of life. I cannot articulate the content of this concept more than I have done, but I want my readers to know that my convictions, however poorly or weakly described herein, are real and convincing to me. The only way I know how to prepare for death is to live in such a way that I enable each day to participate in eternity. I enter the realm of eternity only by embracing the finite. I walk into life’s meaning by being open to what lies ahead and beyond. I do believe that love is eternal and I am held in the bonds of love by my family, my friends and countless acquaintances. They are to me the windows into eternal life. I embrace them and I embrace eternal life through them.

So I conclude with the question with which this book began. If someone were to pose to me the question that was posed by the mythical biblical character Job so long ago – “If a man (or woman) dies, will he (or she) live again my answer would be yes, yes, yes!

This is far as words can take me, but that is enough for me. So I end this book by calling you to live fully, to love wastefully, to be all that you can and to dedicate yourselves to building a world in which everyone has a better opportunity to do the same. That is to be part of God and to do the work of God. That to me is to be a disciple of Jesus. Finally, that to me is the way to prepare for life after death. Shalom.”

## To Conclude *(Continued)*

**Carlos Eire**

### **Final words ending the book “A Very Brief History of Eternity”**

Unfortunately, poets, philosophers, and novelists – shy, quirky, retiring folk, given over to introspection and the occasional drinking binge rather than world domination – are not the only members of society who have feelings of eternity, or are affected by conceptions of it. Everyone is affected, whether they know it or not, like it or not. Feelings, concepts, beliefs, love and the price of oil are equally real, and sometimes equally inconvenient. As inconvenient as the self-evident truth of terminal temporality and the “I” who cannot fathom any other “now” than one that always eludes its grasp.

As inconvenient and as incongruous as a five-year plan in a worker’s paradise, or a sign that read “No trespassing: Monastic beach.”

And I, an incurable chronophobic. I prefer to sum up eternity somewhat brusquely, as one always must, with words left behind by William Blake. After all, when you are dealing with eternity, it’s only right to let a dead man have the last word.

“He who binds to himself a joy  
Does the winged life destroy  
But he who kisses the joy as it flies  
Lives in eternity’s sun rise.”

*(Note: You have to chew on Carlos a bit to appreciate)*

**To Conclude** *(Continued)*

**The Bible**

**Final words from the book of Revelation 21:1-4**

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heavens from God prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, *Now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, or mourning or crying in pain for the old order of things has passed away.*”

## Bibliography

Eternal Life – A New  
Vision; *John Selby Spong*

The City Of God: A Very  
Brief History Of Eternity;  
*Carlos Eire*

The Bible

### First Dig on Page 8

“We'll Meet Again”; *Vera Lynn* (With lyrics): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJKMji2688M>

*Duet with Vera Lynn & Johnny Cash* (Opening scenes from the movie “Dr. Strangelove”):  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pzt0\\_6edIS0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pzt0_6edIS0)

*Solo by Johnny Cash* (better video, poorer sound):  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bb7TJAyJJ0M>

*Solo by Johnny Cash* (better sound, poorer video):  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yf1NJTIXwDM>

*Wikipedia*, “We'll Meet Again”; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We%27ll\\_Meet\\_Again](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We%27ll_Meet_Again)

“See You on the Other Side”; *Ozzy Osbourne* (With lyrics):  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4apWJMVR0c>

*For those who would prefer not to listen to Ozzie Osbourne, I have attached a text file with lyrics only.*

“See You on the Other Side”; *Shaun Canon*:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ejeBAY8n-k&list=PLOYVUtUrp-G2Gm4BDLNrTKh1-H5EA8lpV>

### Second Dig on Page 9

*Wikipedia*, “Death of Alan Kurdi”:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death\\_of\\_Alan\\_Kurdi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Alan_Kurdi)

*Amazon.ca*, “The Shack”:  
[https://www.amazon.ca/Shack-William-P-Young/dp/0964729237/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1488386265&sr=8-1&keywords=The+Shack](https://www.amazon.ca/Shack-William-P-Young/dp/0964729237/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1488386265&sr=8-1&keywords=The+Shack)

### Fourth Dig on Page 11

An article by Brian Bethune, including a video interview with him at the end:  
<http://www.macleans.ca/society/life/the-heaven-boom/>

A reflection on “Visions of Heaven A Journey Through the Afterlife” by the author, Lisa Miller:  
<http://time.com/68381/life-beyond-death-the-science-of-the-afterlife-2/>