

## Message: Intimations of Immortality Dennis Perkins - 06/16/24

Maybe it was driving down to Phippsburg, Maine, at the end of May to plant new flowers on my parents' grave. Or maybe it was thinking about the wonderful members of this congregation who have passed on since Sarah and I joined this church. Perhaps it was that remarkable Memorial service a few weeks ago, where we heard read the names of church members long gone into the mists of time. It could have been the poignancy of reflecting upon the thousands of young lives—Ukrainian, Russian, Israeli, Palestinian, Sudanese or of our own young people dying from overdose—cut off in their youth from a promising maturity in the lives they should have lived. Or, even more likely, it is because I have moved past the midpoint of my eighth decade of life, that I have thought more deeply about what mortality and therefore immortality means to me. The moment of death may come as a surprise, but the fact of death never fully escapes the attention for a single moment of living.

From my travels into the concept of life after death, I have returned with both good news and bad news. The good news first: it seems incontrovertible to me that we are all immortal. The perhaps bad news is that immortality may not, in fact, does not, in part at least, lie in the way most of us have thought about being immortal. And that the indisputable aspect of immortality carries with it an awful responsibility.

First, there is the more common and more historical idea of immortality, which is that in some form, either as a disembodied soul or as a bodied soul, an individual continues on after death to live as that individual in a comforting place for eternity. The idea of the individual disembodied soul is most likely Greek from the first millennium BC while the embodied soul is even older. Egyptians buried their most important people, their pharaohs, with all of the accoutrements necessary for life after death: food, drink, money, weapons and even servants. They also mummified the bodies to assure that the immortalized would have his own body. These ideas have found their way into the two great religions of the Middle East and the West: Christianity and Islam: the first, since the time of St Paul, leaning more to the disembodied soul, while Islam has maintained the decidedly Egyptian idea that the person travels into immortality with their body. This difference explains why the Catholic Church now accepts cremation while Islam still does not.

It seems to me that there are only three ways to think about these concepts of immortality. One, I believe in my soul continuing either bodied or disembodied into eternity 100%. Or two: I absolutely do not believe at all in immortality as described. Or three: I have no idea. Count me firmly in the third group. This is an immortality that seems to me like a giant bet and I could have stopped there and said I have nothing else to consider. But that did not seem correct to me.

For there is another type of immortality—hidden in plain sight. And it lies more toward the intuitions of the ancient Vedas and Upanishads of Hinduism as well as the later

refinement of Buddhism: that somehow the person who has died remains connected to the world she's left behind and returns to it again and again reincarnated. Further that the actions of the person while living bear directly on the effects they will have even after their bodies have been consumed whether by fire or by vulture. That there is an eternal connection between today's action and tomorrow's effect. Hindus and Buddhists call this relationship "karma." Let's look at this relationship between temporal cause and eternal effect a little more closely.

Everyone here in the sanctuary this morning has one or at most a handful of common ancestors that lived more than a 150,000 years ago. An aspect of these prehistoric women has continued on until it arrived here right now, today, in the person of Sarah or Annabeth or me. And if through some magic of time travel one of these little African Homo sapiens women should walk into the sanctuary this morning and look into our white faces atop our tall bodies, she would not recognize herself in our faces, nor we in hers. Still, it is indisputable that a part of who she was lives still, though she in all probability could not be convinced of that fact. The connection is of course much easier to see at less remote distances. I clearly have some of the physical characteristics of my father's great great grandparents whom he never met. Not one of you here today is not carrying around physical characteristics conveyed by generations before you. But physical characteristics along with their genetic determinants are actually the less interesting—and less important—aspects of the immortal lines of which each of us is a part.

There is a much more important aspect of the "immortal touch" that each of us lays upon the world. Think of a grain of sand which at this very moment lies, let's say, at Popham Beach. It lies of course among hundreds of millions of its fellows. But its specific location was determined by the sum total of all of the previous physical events by which it was touched: changes in directions of tide and wind on each day of its pre-existence and of course further back by the timing, speed and direction of the glacier as it scraped northward from the granite coast 12,000 years ago. Had any of the previous events in the existence of this grain been any different it would at this moment lie in a different place.

In reality you and I are human grains sitting at this moment in this beach of a sanctuary. Every aspect of our existence—including the simple fact that we ever came to exist at all—is the sum total of all that preceded us. And if that is true, then the future human grains that sit upon their beaches a moment from now, a year from now, a generation from now, a millennium from now will be decided by the totality of attitudes and actions taken by each of us at this moment and in the remaining moments of our individual lives. None of us has any problem agreeing that had the wind at Popham Beach on a Sunday morning a hundred years ago blown strongly from the East instead of from the West that that grain of sand would now be in a different place. Nonetheless we find it difficult to believe that a smile at a stranger or a frown toward the same person would slightly, but inevitably, alter the course of that person's history and therefore through their countless interactions alter the course of thousands of lives. If what I have just

said is true, just think how powerful it would be if anyone today spoke to someone we had injured by word or deed and apologized for our action.

There are some stirring lines from English poet Percy Shelley about the continuing effects of an action even after the original source has disappeared:

Music, when soft voices die,  
Vibrates in the memory;  
Odours, when sweet violets sicken,  
Live within the sense they quicken.

We are immortal for sure—at least up the moment of our death. That is both the glory and the burden of our UU Principles : if we strive to treat every person we meet as worthy of respect and act accordingly, in justice, equity and compassion; if we understand that at their core every person is thirsting for spiritual growth, no matter how difficult that may be to believe at times; if we have the courage to seek for the truth in every situation we encounter; if we insist on promoting and defending the wisdom of political democracy in decision-making; if we continue to insist that we are part of world community every member of which has a right to peace, freedom and justice, then the powerful reality of our seventh principle and what it means to have respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part will more and more guide our actions as they become part of an eternal design. If everything you do or say, or even leave undone or unsaid, lives on immortally though hidden in the fabric of the future, then surely we must pay attention