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This I Believe

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I have lived most of my adult life in a close loving relationship – first with Colleen, the mother of my children, and now with Mary Jane. I cherish my relatives and friends in varying degrees of closeness, but in a way we all live alone within ourselves as no one else has access to our thoughts and feelings.

I am not a true believer. That is, I try to approach new ideas or hypotheses with as open a mind as I can manage, so to say what I believe is a little difficult. I could do a little better by saying what I think may **be**, or perhaps that is what ‘believe’ means. We don’t talk about believing things that nobody disagrees about. I find it hard to believe that there is an intelligent principle behind the universe and world we know, but even harder to believe that there is not. I could classify myself as an agnostic deist.

All my life I have felt very close to nature and have been interested in the natural world around us with its many wonders. I cannot help but believe in God the creator. I see too many things that fit to believe it has all just happened: the periodic table, the water cycle, the carbon cycle, the calcium cycle, photosynthesis and so many more. When I was in high school, my geology teacher suggested that we might think of evolution as the way in which God created life upon the earth, and I haven’t been able to improve on that idea.

Our minister in Olympia has a collection of New Yorker cartoons that he refers to occasionally. One shows God looking down intently on the antics of humans while a higher echelon god is asking, “And for this you expect a PhD?”

The Question

As I look out upon the world, I wonder
Whence came the trees that grow in glorious stand?
Whence came the flowers of perfect form and color
And all the other plants of sea and land?
Whence came the creatures of the field and forest?
Whence came the others of the sea and air?
And whence came we, imposing our dominion
And altering the landscape everywhere?

Some think that God created every species
And breathed his life into each blessed one
Some think that accident and evolution
Account for all that live beneath the sun.
While I do not expect to solve the riddle
Upon a life of pondering I lean
Toward thinking that that most elusive answer
Lies somehow in the somewhere in between.

The other evidence I see for spiritual essence beyond what we can observe is the existence of my own individual consciousness. If I could believe that evolution just happened, I would still have a problem with the fact that I am here.

Eternal Quest

I am a consciousness known to myself as me.
I can't imagine never having been
Nor yet conceive of ceasing still to be.
My knowledge and the span of memory available to me now
Coincides exactly with the lifetime of a certain human being,
Born, raised, and tutored,
fingerprinted, numbered, and recorded
As Robert Weaver Allison
A less than perfect being -
Physically defective, mentally limited, and emotionally frail.
I can predict by watching others born, matured, and gone
That such will be his story.
But when he dies, what then of me?
Will I go then to sit upon the council of the great,
Or merge into the universal mind?
Will I know other lives in other realms,
Or will I fade into oblivion?
And what of all of those I know and love?
Does each embrace a consciousness like mine?
And will we be together in the vast beyond?
How then will each one recognize the rest
When face and form have crumbled into dust?
These things must wait until their seasons come.
Till then I will content myself with this so human life -
Its pain and pleasure anguish and delight -
And know whatever fate unfolds beyond
It will be right.

My parents were not conventionally religious people. My dad was an avowed agnostic and my mother didn't talk much about religion. I have been told that I attended the Presbyterian Church with them in Camas, Washington where I was born. I have a certificate that shows that I was baptized in that church. The minister there was a personal friend of theirs. We moved to Tacoma and a little later he moved to a Methodist church in Tacoma and I attended Sunday school there. I remember singing "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so" and coloring pictures of Jesus and lambs. I am not anti-Christian. I did not feel betrayed when I found out that the exclusivity of most Christian belief doesn't fit with the rest of the world.—perhaps because I had not made it my own.

In the Army a good friend quoted someone as saying, "There is some truth in all religion or no truth in any of it." I like the concept and I tend toward the "Some truth in all." As a young adult I attended church services now and then. I went to a nondenominational chapel when I was in the Army occasionally, but I always listened as an outsider interested in what **they** had to say. I had heard about Unitarians as a child. Some of our good family friends were Unitarians. My parents seemed to feel that Unitarians were a good bunch and regarded them highly, but we never went to any of their services or activities. Most of my adult life was spent in Centralia, Washington where there is no Unitarian presence. After my first wife died I thought I might look up the Unitarians in Olympia if I ever got my act together again, but before I got around to it, I met Mary Jane and she introduced me to the Fellowship there and the rest is history. As one of those who have been a Unitarian all his life but didn't know it, I feel comfortable here feeling free to agree or disagree with the way the rest of you look at things.

When I was young, I was very much terrified of the idea of death. I remember asking my mother, probably with a quivering lip, "What happens to you when you die?"

And she replied, "Whatever God thinks is best."

Not terribly reassuring, but how would a Unitarian answer that question?

As a young adult I discovered that writing poems about some of the things that bothered me and reciting them to myself as a sort mantra was helpful.

Brood Not

Brood not on death, but think, just now and then,
That someday you will cease to breathe the air
And smell the fragrant earth
And watch the day pass into night - and night to day
Then see the seasons change
Through winter, spring, and summer, fall
And winter once again.
To hear your children or your children's children shouting at play and watch them
grow in wisdom and in stature year by year. Then will the present seem more dear
The future, more a prize to win
Made richer by your every effort now
To live as one should live -
At peace with self, and fellow man, and God.

I am not preoccupied with death now. I don't think about it a great lot. When my mother died at 65, I wrote a poem that began:

Dear God may I grow old and tired and full of life before I die.

I think of life and death as two parallel mysteries – life incomprehensible and death unknowable. A poem written in recent years reveals a little different perspective at a different time of life.

Perspective

When I was young skull-headed avid death lurked in the dark
A dark much deeper than the total lack of light
Devoid as well of consciousness and time
The thought of him brought terror to my heart.
Now I am growing old and death stands nearer by
His eye-holes fixed in patient unemotional stare
I do not mind so much that he is there
And when my flame of life burns to an end
It's possible that I will call him friend.

I do believe that we should take good care of our physical bodies – not simply out of reverence for God, but to enable us to enjoy life to its fullest. I believe we should be as kind and helpful to others as we can. Not only to add to their enjoyment of life, but also to minimize the burden of guilt and regret that we carry along with us in our lives.

I believe we should be as respectful of the earth as we can, but I recognize that while we are a part of the interconnected web of life, we have put ourselves outside of its limitations and controls with medicine and agriculture, science and invention in general. The current population of the earth is too great to be maintained as an integral part of the web and I fear that our lifesaving advances have created a burgeoning population that cannot be supported even with those advances.

I tried writing a poem to put this in perspective, but it took its own head and turned out a little differently than what I had originally intended to say.

Decisions

Children cry.
Bins are empty and the fields are powder dry.
In the past
There was no one looking on to stand aghast
At the loss of human life to drought and flood
And especially those lives nipped in the bud.
We have food
Which we proudly dedicate to human good.

They are grown
And the ones we saved have children of their own
Till the numbers that would starve exceed the ones that we can save
And we share their deprivation and we face a common grave.
But what choice?

Can humanity deny a pleading voice?
So we find
That our knowing makes us one with all mankind
And at last
With the lot of all mankind, our lot is cast.

The earth will survive with life upon it. Apparently the earth has survived greater catastrophes than the current infestation of human beings. I believe that even human beings will survive, but in what numbers and under what conditions I would not dare to predict.

When Mary Jane's father was alive he almost always began grace as we held hands around the breakfast table with these words: "Our heavenly father, we thank thee for another beautiful day which you have made and caused us to see." and I cannot really take issue with the concept, although I suspect that any purpose the prayer may serve is within ourselves and I tend to think more in terms of a beautiful system set in motion by some mystic power beyond our understanding.

This is my most recent poem. I shared it with my daughter and her comment was: "What kind of a poem is that?" But of course she is at a different stage of life with life extending far into the indefinite future .

Time

I mark the passage of time
By the lowering level of pills in my prescription bottle
By the thickening pile of news papers to recycle
By my need for a haircut and attention to my fingernails.
It is spring; it is summer; it is autumn, winter, and spring again.
Whether we are nine or ninety,
Each day lived brings us one day nearer
To the answer to the riddle or oblivion.
Hope offers one and reason the other
Though reason has little to say about the nature of consciousness.
Life is so amazing.
The Earth is so beautiful.
I melt into the ecstasy of being.
How many times will I recycle the newspapers
And refill my prescription?

And in conclusion a poem entitled:

The Gift

Our loving caring God, if such there be,
Has surely blessed us with uncertainty.
Around the corner happiness or sorrow
And none of us has promise of tomorrow.
No longer need we flee the local lion,
But we have local interstates to die on.
While we may rest assured that we will go,
Just how and when is better not to know.
What worthy contests would not be begun
Were we to know that they could not be won.
And though the major goal is not attained,
A wealth of other blessings may be gained.
To know our lives are parts within a play
Would take the joy of living them away.
Oh God of love,
Oh mystic power implicit in the workings of the Universe,
I pray, withhold the curse
Of knowing what will be.
Preserve for us your greatest blessing.
Keep us guessing.