

If this life, this world, is all there is



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

On his deathbed, Thoreau supposedly whispered: "One world at a time." With so many in our culture almost completely distracted by the "before-life" and the "after-life," it may be important for rational people to consider the possibility that there is only one life and it's here, now.

Even a soap opera is called "One Life to Live."

The great agnostic orator Robert Green Ingersoll said: "We can be as honest as we are ignorant. If we are [honest], when asked what is beyond the horizon of the known, we must say that we do not know."

In their description of "Humanist History," the Pluralism Project at Harvard states: "The view that this world is all there is" was present throughout the Greek era as well as during the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment. That philosophy may be disturbing for some, indeed, depressing or even despairing. Many of us have been taught since childhood to put our hope in "eternal life." Billions of believers around the world pin their piety on the promise of heaven and fear the fires of hell. Major branches of Christianity, Islam and Hinduism lead the way to that firm, "undying" belief. It can be a scary notion to consider: if this world, this life, is all we have, then what do we really have?

If this world is all we know, perhaps it holds everything we can ever know. I find that an exciting call to discovery, to perpetually learn, to ceaselessly search with curiosity and wonder. The universe spreads before us and we find we are awed, even without a god.

What happens to religion or religious faith? What of God? What's the value or purpose of faith if there is no "reward" for a life of faith? Faith fueled by the promise of forever or the fear of the fires of punishment, can never be healthy. If faith is present-world-minded, it has potential to be a positive force for a person, a community, the world.

Jesus of Nazareth was an apocalyptic prophet, at least as interpreted by some biblical scholars. Some of his teachings seemed predicated on a belief in another world with his "heavenly Father." Though some choose to emphasize these otherworldly and mystical sayings, Jesus also seemed to be fairly grounded here, on earth (even if that earth should somehow be "as it is in heaven"). Encouraging words to the poor—"theirs is the kingdom"—and to the meek—"they shall inherit the earth"—suggest a new order of things in the here and now, not somewhere later, beyond, above. If, as some tell us, the healing stories in the gospels were merely to verify the divinity of the healer, then there is a manipulative quality to them, as if Jesus was showing compassion only to point to himself and what he would someday do for the world. A self-serving Savior may not command respect. Yet, if the healing stories (as well as parables and instructions) were planted in good rich soil in order to grow here on earth, to produce fruit for a healthier human community, the assurance Jesus

spoke has more meaning: "Go your way, your faith has healed you." This could essentially mean: "Go live your life, continue on, don't be stuck on your past sickness or get caught up in the sickness of hero-worship. You're better now, so go live a better life." Something like that. No heaven necessary. No reward. So we might read the text. Tradition protests.

Traditions are based on "acceptable interpretations" of scriptures that support those traditions. Their "correct readings" of the text point beyond this world while maintaining a firm grasp on the material (including power, position, prosperity). Yet, ironically, tradition depends on handing something down to succeeding generations, something lasting for the benefit of the institution—the "kingdom" in concrete and creed.

As I see it, the phrase "This world (life) is all there is" can be a helpful reminder, motivator and even help a person have a more fulfilling life with faith or without. Try it as a meditation or mantra: This world ... this life ... is all ... there is ... Rinse (the mind) and repeat. When it stirs up fear, face it, don't deny it. We all have moments when our mortality causes us to be fearful. When it brings a dread, a feeling of dark despair, face that too. Then find some light. Literally, light a candle, turn on a lamp, go out into the sunlight and breathe a deep grateful breath. Thank God, thank Good, or simply be content to be alive right here, right now.

What if we chose to live "as if" this world is all there is?

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