

## Will a Belief in Immortality Survive?

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Lancaster, PA

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At the Unitarian Church on Sunday morning, Mr. Davis, preaching on the subject, "Will a belief in immortality survive," said in part: 1<sup>st</sup>. that a belief in the survival of human personality after death is one of the most widely held beliefs of mankind. In one form or another it is found in almost all religions. The fact of this widespread belief in immortality may of itself be significant. Many people think that this widespread belief in immortality is in itself a witness of the essential truth of the belief.

At the present time there seems to exist a very strong skeptical attitude due to the difficulty of adjusting our beliefs to the thoughts and practices of the modern world. It is fair for me to state at the beginning that I do believe in personal immortality. My belief rests upon my entire intellectual and moral attitude towards life. I believe that this world "has a rational, moral, aesthetic and religious significance;" that an undercurrent of purpose gives significance to our own purposes and our lives; that from whatever angle we approach life, the facts and the aspirations of life carry us through to a faith in immortality.

The first point to be noted is this: that we live in a world that is orderly and understandable. Our minds seem capable of discovery and, in a measure, interprets its laws. On the basis of this belief in an intelligible world, inhabited by intelligible people, all of our educational and scientific attainments are based. This is the first step. The next step is that out of our knowledge and experience there is continually emerging the idea of a great and unifying purpose at the heart of all things. Into this stream of purpose human beings have

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<sup>1</sup> There is no date on this sermon manuscript. However, a search of newspaper notices for sermons that Earl C. Davis gave at the Church of Our Father in Lancaster, PA shows that he gave a sermon with the title, "Things that Make it Worthwhile to be Immortal" on April 4, 1920. This may or may not be that sermon. It is the only sermon on immortality that I found in my search of newspaper notices.

come. They, by their efforts and fidelity, ideals and devotions, have contributed to its significance and meaning.

Now I believe that human personalities, conscious, thinking persons, are the highest expressions of the nature and character of the universe. Believing therefore as I do, that the universe deals honestly with us and that human personality is an expression of its highest qualities, I am forced to a belief in immortality as the essential rounding out of a process in the midst of which we find ourselves. Otherwise, the whole process of human history becomes, when it has terminated, a meaningless episode in an intelligible world. This I take to be the foundation upon which all forms of belief in immortality exist. It usually comes to us in a more intimate and personal way. We are always impressed by the significance of a great and noble character. Given a character such as Jesus of Nazareth is supposed to have been, we find there qualities of heroic proportions that seem imperishable. We cannot believe that the frantic efforts of a Jewish Roman mob can wipe out of the universe a person of such character. Here, I think, appears a part of the explanation and significance of the belief of the Christian Church in the continued existence of their leader after his death on the cross. In a less dramatic, but no less significant, manner is our attitude to those who are near and dear to us. We are quite bound to see in them at their best, qualities that are of great significance. I think that we are true to the nature of things when we feel that the deeper experiences of family life and domestic joys and sorrows carry an implication of immortality. Therefore, my own personal belief is quite distinct and clear that the accumulated logic of life makes a belief in immortality the most natural and justifiable faith by which we live.

There is another phase of this question to which our attention has been called increasingly during the past 75 years, viz; the possible significance of psychic phenomena. In this field we have accumulated a vast amount of information and facts. Attempts have been made to classify and interpret these facts. The results of these investigations, so far as they affect our belief in immortality, may be classed as follows: First, there is a considerable number of persons, some very eminent and scholarly in investigations in other fields, who are convinced, by a system of study, of these psychic facts, that not only does human personality survive after death but that we are able to communicate with them. Second, there are many others who, on the basis of their own personal experiences, are convinced of personal survival after death and the possibility of

communication under favorable conditions. Third, there is a large number of people who believe that up to the present time the most adequate explanation of the verified facts of psychic phenomena is to be found in the theory of personal survival after death and the possibility of communication. But these also hold that the investigations have not gone far enough and have not been sufficiently studied to warrant a general and unqualified conclusion. Fourth, there are others who have interested themselves in psychic phenomena who explain the facts by other theories than that of survival. Perhaps a conservative statement would be that in this field there exists the possibility of and the probability of some of the most illuminating discoveries of mankind.

In conclusion, my own conviction is that the belief in immortality is grounded in the nature of things; that subject to all sorts of modifications and variations, it will continue into the future as it has in the past, to be perhaps the most potent belief cherished by the human race.