

*After Life*  
**Dr. Brent A. Smith, @ April 24, 2022**  
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My wife Pat says I am obsessed with death and maybe she is right. One of the things I have spent the better portion of the last 40+ years is planning my Memorial Service. At the bedside of dying parishioners while a minister I saw my role as that of Charon from Greek mythology, who ferried newly deceased souls across the River Styx and dropped them off on the other side in the land of the dead. In those situations I saw my role as doing whatever I could to assist in the good death of others, and it required me to do things I had no preparation for. But do them, the moment required. And my spiritual practices over the years have all included as their aim, being as fully present as possible at the moment of my own death. To be aware, despite knowing that my body may vigorously resist as I've witnessed life systems are want to do when shutting down. I confess, I don't want to be so anxious and fearful that I miss the chance to experience that unrepeatable one time when I board Charon's boat and he takes me across from the land of the living to the land of the dead and into the underworld.

Death is on the mind of many Grand Rapidians these days and should be on the mind of us all. No traffic stop for any reason should end with an armed policeman shooting an unarmed person. No armed man for any reason, who is straddling atop of another man whose face is flat on the ground, should shoot the face down man in the back of the head. Sometimes death is a simple matter. It was wrong. In a society that claims to value freedom, safety denied to anyone anywhere is freedom denied to everyone everywhere. Because freedom from fear is the first freedom. All liberty sprouts from that soil whether that's Ukrainian ground or Grand Rapids ground. Those who are not safe from the threat of death at the hands of others anywhere, bear witness to this everywhere.

Death is on the mind of many these days and should be on the mind of us all. To everything there is a season and now is the season. It is the one true common experience we all share, that Charon will ferry us all in due time, a time we do not and cannot know. We are the only creatures we are aware of that know we will die, and yet must somehow live with that knowledge. It is the low-level anxiety carried every day, and suppressed that the awareness of it might not overwhelm one. Maybe Pat is right. I do obsess over death.

As human beings have for ages.

Largely before the 20<sup>th</sup> century the obsession was not so much about death as it was existence on the other side of the river Styx. The history of the afterlife includes addressing questions we cannot answer but nevertheless ask. Do we survive death in some form? Will we recognize ourselves as the me that I am, be conscious in any way as we are now as individuals? Will we be punished or rewarded? What would that measuring stick be? And if there is no punishment or reward measuring what we do here and now, why not fulfill all the animal desires that fill Sigmund Freud's Id? Why be altruistic, care for others if there is no incentive on the other side?

Will we have an opportunity after death to make amends or change our ways? Will our lives continue immediately after death linger in limbo until some future appointed time? And finally, where will we be, the location? And there, will we be reunited with loved ones?

These have vexed human beings in all cultures at all times. The Egyptian Book of the Dead, a collection of spells one uses to navigate through the deceptive corridors of the underworld after life. The Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Buddhist text which can be read to the recently deceased to guide them through death and towards a favorable rebirth.

Here in the West, where existence is material and real, life is one and done and final, the history of the afterlife is the history of the hope of some kind of continuance or bliss, and the fear of being held too accountable for the misdeeds performed here. There are two notable narratives. Either one immediately gets ferried across that river and there is immediate judgment regarding virtue and vice lived, bliss or torture, the doctor will receive you now with results of your test; or, as in some other historically developed corners, destinies will be determined at the end of days, the apocalypse, an imminent but “not yet” end-time, a kind of waiting room after death until the doctor is ready to see you, the appointed date changing with each date declared and then passing without the end having come about.

As one scholar noted, “With these two general narratives in place, the history of the afterlife within the west becomes the history of a constantly fluid series of negotiations, contestations and compromises between these two versions of our futures after death (Philip Almond, *Afterlife: A History of Life After Death* (I.B.Tauris, 2016).” We bargain with death as if we hold any chips. We contest death and do not go gentle into that good night. We compromise with death by not doing things we deem we should not do, or realize if we don’t do them now we may never get the chance. Amidst the nagging uncertainty that honestly, we just don’t know.

Time is not our enemy and yet it is not ours to give or take. Place and location, we think we hold sway and so are confident we aren’t concerned about the land on the other side but I know a few people who should be.

The history of the afterlife in the West evolved from the Greek idea that human beings are composed of the transient and the permanent in an awkward movement, body and flesh dancing, or is it the wrestling of spirit and soul? So integrated is the body with mind, nervous system with brain, flesh with consciousness, and so difficult is it to maintain a complete duality, that the soul was given a body after death. This “two entities in one,” one succumbing to the deteriorations of time while the other unsullied, can be traced to Plato and before, so it is as old as the 400’s BCE and probably much earlier. But, the ancient Greeks held that the afterlife was so bleak that they cultivated “a high premium on ‘survival’ in the memory and honor of the community—a practice reflected in our [modern] reference to deceased celebrities as (for example) “the immortal Babe Ruth (Stanford Encyclopedia: ([William Hasker, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/afterlife/](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/afterlife/)),” writes one scholar, or in obvious evidence in yesterday’s assurance that now Detroit Tiger Miquel Cabrera will join the Babe as enshrined in the baseball Hall of Fame forever.

Five hundred years after Jesus and not in the Jerusalem area of his life and death, but in North African and European Christianity, it became obvious that the good deserved an eternal heavenly

reward and the evil hell forever, and yet with most in-between who, in good capitalist fashion, should be able to earn their way up or down. Thus, was born the afterlife's middle management.

While in the traditions of South Asia – the much older 10,000 year-old South Asian practice of yoga and yoga rituals, which became what we call today Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism – all held in common that the things of this world are secondary phenomenon and an illusion veiling the primary reality of Brahman or Nothingness depending upon the tradition. Here death was part of a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, a Groundhog Day if you've seen the old 1993 Bill Murray/Andie MacDowell movie, with this cycle repeating until the person sheds ignorance, gains enlightenment, and arrives at the recognition that their individuality was part of a larger Really Real; and after this enlightenment, death no longer initiating a cycle from which one had been liberated, called *moksha* yielding *nirvana*.

While thoughts of what's over on the other side are speculations the human condition cannot help but force upon us, research in neurology has uncovered a provocative find. Brain research recently uncovered a twist on memory and the moment of death, when one is in the middle of the River Styx, equidistant from either side.

There are recorded accounts of near-death experiences but no scientific findings on the moment in the middle of the River, midway between this life and the next; until now. A new study published in the *Frontiers in Aging Neuroscience* tells of the transition of an 87 year-old patient who had developed epilepsy. Doctors employed continuous EEG...

“to detect seizures and treat the patient. During these recordings, the patient had a heart attack and passed away. This unexpected event allowed the scientists to record the activity of a dying brain for the first time ever.

“We measured 900 second of brain activity around the time of death and set a specific focus to investigate what happened in the 30 second before and after the heart stopped beating [reported the University of Louisville neurosurgeon organizing the study]. ‘Just before and after the heart stopped working, we saw changes in a specific [area of the brain]’

-Frontiers Science News, February 22, 2022

<https://blog.frontiersin.org/2022/02/22/what-happens-in-our-brain-when-we-die/>

In the middle of the River Styx “rhythmic brain wave patterns [occurred] around the time of death that are similar to those occurring during dreaming, memory recall, and meditation (IBID).” The old idea that your life flashes before your eyes is not quite accurate in that we do not remember all things of all experiences we have had, only a select few. But memories seem to be called up, given the kind of neurological firing involved.

While dreaming includes what is locked in the unconscious being let free. And meditation amplifies activity in the part that sees this room as a unity, a whole, a one, rather than the discreet particulars of you and me and the diverse persons around us. But, this was the area of brain where memories are stored and retrieved. And while that might not describe a destination, if neurological activity is a response to stimuli and sensation as it is during life, it is an intriguing

addition to the history of the afterlife. With a bodily freedom from this earthly life, everyone passes through the realm of memory as the River Styx, to a Unity upon the far shore.

Finally, in Jesus' time and location, and in the Christian sacred text of the New Testament, comes a story of his confrontation with the Sadducees, a group of his fellow Jews who held there was nothing after death, no reanimation of any kind. They were trying to pin Jesus down, to declare what side he was on in the afterlife argument. Is there one? And if there is, what would it be? They asked him if a woman marries seven times and each time her husband dies, when she dies whose wife will she be in the afterlife? To which Jesus replied what God had said to all of them in the Jewish text they together held then, and hold now as sacred: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob [all of whom being dead at the time, where ancestors of all including Jesus]. God is not the God of the dead but of the living." No division from a God's eye view. From a God's-eye view, all on both sides of the River Styx are living and loved.

AMEN. SO BE IT. SHALOM. SHALEM. NAMASTE.

## **BENEDICTION**

And now, seeing there is naught to fear, and bearing witness to what can never die, let us go forth in the world in peace.

Be of good courage,  
 Search all things  
 And hold fast to that which is good.  
 Render unto no one evil for evil.  
 Strengthen the faint-hearted,  
 Support the weak,  
 Help the afflicted,  
 Love all souls,  
 Serving the Most High,  
 And rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.

## **Resources used:**

<https://blog.frontiersin.org/2022/02/22/what-happens-in-our-brain-when-we-die/>

[https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnagi.2022.813531/full?utm\\_source=fweb&utm\\_medium=nblog&utm\\_campaign=ba-sci-fnagi-what-happens-in-the-brain-when-we-die](https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnagi.2022.813531/full?utm_source=fweb&utm_medium=nblog&utm_campaign=ba-sci-fnagi-what-happens-in-the-brain-when-we-die)

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