

MORE OF EVERYTHING

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
September 18, 2016

When more or less the same thing happens several times in a row, it's worth paying attention — especially if you are a preacher.

On Monday evening of this past week, on a rare evening when neither Holly nor I had work commitments, we decided to watch the recent movie titled *The Man Who Knew Infinity*. It's the story of the self-taught mathematical prodigy Srinivasa Ramanujan, who grew up poor in Madras, India, and eventually developed a relationship with the mathematician G. H. Hardy at Cambridge University. Ramanujan was widely viewed by his contemporaries as having made pioneering contributions to mathematics. When he died in 1920 at the age of 32, he left behind a vast body of work that has taken mathematicians a century fully to comprehend.

At one point in the film, several Cambridge PhD students are discussing their own contributions to mathematics. One of them bemoans the fact that he is already 26 years old and thus probably over the hill. He notes that mathematicians usually do their groundbreaking work by their mid-20's. From here on out, he says, it's a long slide into increasing mediocrity.

On Tuesday evening, Holly and I had dinner with longtime friends, and the same issue came up in a different guise. One member of the couple had recently faced a medical issue that fortunately turned out to be more annoying than consequential. Nonetheless, she said, it prompted her to realize that, at age 49, her body was beginning to show signs of being half worn out. I don't know what the next half-century is going to be like in terms of what my body can do, she went on to say, but I know that it's not going to be anything like the last half-century.

And, she added, someday this is all going to be over. She said that sometimes she lies awake at night, not able to sleep, thinking about when her life as she knows it will end. I'm not worried about dying, she said, but I can't stand the idea of being dead — not being able to play golf with my husband, or talk with my children, or have dinner with friends, or walk on the beach.

She wondered what I thought about the possibility of reincarnation. I responded as I usually do to questions about what happens after this life is over. The universe we call home is exponentially more immense than anyone can comprehend and infinitely more amazing than anyone can imagine, even Ramanujan. Compared to what we know, our ignorance is virtually complete. We don't even know what we don't know.

Even so, I said, my own view is that death represents the end of our ongoing experience. Our physical substrate will continue to exist, of course, but life as we know it will not. When we die, the odds are that our experience of life will come to an end.

On the morning of September 11th, 2001, which was a primary election day here in New York City, a woman named Hilary North decided to stop on her way to work in order to vote. As a result, she was late getting to her office on the 103rd floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center. If she had arrived on time, she almost certainly would have died, along with 176 of her coworkers.

Shortly after 9/11, Hilary North sat down and made a list of the ways her life had changed as a result of the attacks. The Sonic Memorial Project, an audio archive of reactions to 9/11, includes a recording of her reading the list aloud. Her list, titled “How My Life Has Changed,” includes the following:

I can no longer flirt with Lou.
I can no longer dance with Mayra.
I can no longer eat brownies with Suzanne Y.
I can no longer meet the deadline with Mark.
I can no longer talk to George about his daughter.
I can no longer drink coffee with Rich.
I can no longer make a good impression on Chris.
I can no longer smile at Paul L.
I can no longer confide in Lisa.

And so on. She ends her list:

I can no longer say hello to Steven every morning.
I can no longer see the incredible view from the 103rd Floor of the South Tower.
I can no longer take my life for granted.

At some point in our lives, whether it's in our mid-20's, our late 40's, or at some other time, we come to the realization that we can no longer take our lives for granted. However many days we have left, it's not an infinity of days. Our days are numbered by integers even a small child can count. Having come to this realization, we want more — more time, more days, more life, more of everything.

The contemporary American poet Marie Reynolds reflects on this desire in her poem titled “Still, I Give Thanks.” She writes:

Day fourteen in the radiation waiting room
and the elderly man sitting next to me
says he gives thanks every day because

he can still roll over and climb out of bed.
We wear the same cotton gowns — repeating
pattern of gold stars on a field of blue — that gape
in back, leaving our goose bump flesh exposed.
Lately, I too, give thanks for the things I can do —
sit, stand, take my next breath. Thanks for my feet,
my fingers, the ears on my head. I give thanks
for the scrub jay's audacious cries outside
my window at dawn. He is a hungry soul,
forever foraging to feed his mortal appetite.
Like him, I want more of everything: more light,
more life, another cup of Darjeeling tea and a silver
teaspoon to stir it with. I want to see my mother again,
before the winter settles in, and when she's gone,
I want her porcelain Madonna. I want my doctor
to use the word "cure" just once. Each day, supine
on the table, I listen to the razoring whine
of the radiation beam. It hurts to lie still,
the table sharp as an ice floe beneath the bones
of my spine. Still, I give thanks for the hands
that position me, their measurements and marking
pens, the grid of green light that slides like silk
across my skin. I close my eyes and think
of the jay. We wear the same raiment: blood, bone,
muscle. Most days I still feel joy. I give thanks
for that bird, too — invisible feathers, invisible wings —
a quickening, felt deep within the body, vigorous and fleeting.

I want more of everything, the poet says: more light, more life, another cup of tea and a silver teaspoon to stir it with. I want more days to do all the things I can. Set against the backdrop of incurable disease, the poet expresses the human longing for an infinity of days.

As Ramenujan was able to demonstrate mathematically, infinity is not concerned with how large the biggest number is, but rather with the fact that there is no largest number. As someone once said, infinity is a floorless room without walls or ceiling. Aristotle put it more precisely: "The essence of the infinite," he said, "is...the absence of limit."

This sounds like the founding creed of Western culture. Anything is possible. Not only that, everything is possible. The touchstone of our society is the conviction that there should be no limit to the extent of our freedom, or the range of our opportunities, or the vastness of our personal or collective wealth. Not even the sky should be the limit.

On these terms, no wonder we feel dissatisfied with less than an infinity of days. We want more of everything.

But maybe the problem is that we are looking for infinity in all the wrong places. Perhaps infinity lies not in the quantity of our experience, but rather in its simplicity. The poet William Blake suggested something like this when, in his *Auguries of Innocence*, he wrote of the ability —

To see the world in a grain of sand,
And Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

In order to hold infinity in the palm of our hands, we must become aware that each element of our experience connects us with the experience of everything. This level of awareness requires us to practice what in today's parlance we call mindfulness.

Look carefully at a grain of sand, and you can see the rock from which it came, and the mountain in which it was uplifted, and the vast world of which it is part. Look at a wild flower, and you can see the truth about light and motion, the beauty of color and texture, and the adventure of growth and flourishing — heaven itself awaits in a single glorious flower. Look at one moment in your life, and you can be mesmerized as moments become hours, and hours become days, and time becomes eternity. Before you know it, you hold infinity in the palm of your hand. If you look carefully at what is close at hand, you suddenly realize that you already have more of everything, here and now.

While it's true that the time will eventually come when you won't be able to sit, or stand, or take a next breath, it's not today. And it probably won't be tomorrow either. Today, you get to have more of everything.

Today, you can drink coffee with Chris, confide in Lisa, and get to know Carlos. Today, you can laugh with Alicia, complement Shonda, and trade voicemails with Juan. Today, you can gaze at a cloud floating across the sky, watch a bird flying through the air, and wonder at a flower waving in the breeze. Today, you can have brunch with a friend, make dinner for someone you love, and spend time doing something you enjoy. Today, you get to have more of everything.

The gift of awakening to a new day is ample reason to rejoice. The gift of being able to draw another breath is ample reason to be glad. We have more of everything, here and now. As we say at the close of our time together each and every Sunday, this is the day we are given; let us rejoice and be glad in it.