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Lake Shore Chapel Sermon, delivered on August 23, 1987

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My father died two years ago, two months before his 90th birthday. During his long career he was President of Central College in Iowa for eleven years and President of Hope College in Holland, Michigan, for eighteen years. Consequently, a memorial service celebrating his life was held on both campuses. At a reception after the Central College service a friend whom I had known since childhood, and whose mother and father had been in a dinner club with my parents, said to me, "I know my mother and your father are having a great time right now reminiscing and laughing about the fun everyone had at the dinner club."

I was startled by her comment. I know she is a person of strong belief, yet I had never thought that life after death was a simple transference of life here to another place. Something like moving from Chicago to New York without any telephone lines or mail service to keep connections. People who appeared to be dead and were revived have given witness to their experience, yet no one, not even the scriptures telling of the resurrected Christ, give us a first hand account from someone who has been there and returned.

There are many theories about life after death as it will be experienced by us and is by those who have preceded us. Some theories have been and are vigorously held, and elaborately explained. Dante, in one of the first great works in the Italian vernacular rather than the usual Latin, drew from centuries of legend and thought to fix in the human mind for centuries to come a clear idea of the nature and sufferings of Hell. Since we have only records written by people, the authors of those works that were selected to be holy scriptures are imbued with divine inspiration, and the authorities who selected them were guided by "the hand of God." Doubt and fear originating in our knowledge that there is so much we do not know is alleviated by the content of holy writings, for we know then that which we
cannot prove. What we believe to be true without all the knowledge necessary for scientific truth is given credibility by a concept we call faith. Faith then is nurtured and protected by the theory of divine revelation; divine revelation that is made manifest in the holy scriptures, in history, in natural phenomenon, and in the human instinct. Most people find a compelling need for faith, and in numerous ways lay out a religious or secular epistemology explaining it. The most compelling reason arises from our lack of knowledge about life after death. There is no evidence that other animals ever think about eternity, or an individual's role in it. But from the evolution of human consciousness there appears to be a concern about it. Rituals and sacrifices, elaborate burials and burial sites are part of the human story. Which of us today can say that our future death has never crossed our minds? I believe it is the ultimate concern. I wish I knew as certainly as my friend did that her mother and my father were engaged in a heavenly discourse as we were drinking coffee and eating cookies in the middle of Iowa. I think it may be rather fruitless to speculate on what it's like "up there," about who is doing what with whom, yet I doubt if it is harmful to do so when one considers the destructive mental processes available to the human brain.

Looking at a religion is much like excavating the site of an ancient society. As the years pass there is layer added to layer telling the story of life. Religion is the story of faith, and our religion tells about handling this ultimate concern. The most dramatic moment as told in the Gospel account is the death and resurrection of Jesus. In that perceived act the God whom we know and do not know solved the problem, but for each of us to solve it we need to believe that God really did it. What to believe about that act and the consequences of the various approaches to belief have provided the Christian faith with many layers to explore. The immediacy of death
and the individual's faith in dealing with it has a history that dates to the beginning of human consciousness. The Christ Act is an event in that continuum that has affected the way people cope with their ultimate concern. Whether the account in the Gospels is accurate history or an allegorical presentation of a profound truth is the theological issue that tends to be most divisive today amongst those who claim Jesus as the origin of their faith. The passions surrounding this issue can destroy relationships or prevent them from being established when theological position becomes a requirement for acceptance. No matter what the individual believes, that belief has a man-made label on it, and he or she still has the ultimate concern to confront after this elaboration of what I call the first reason for faith. I wish I could finally, once and for all, tell you what was in store for all of us, and end the speculation as well as expose as true or false the absolute theories about life after death. As a person cradled in a Christian home, inspired by heroes and heroines of that tradition, and made familiar with its writings, I refer to the words I read earlier that Jesus is reported to have said. "Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places. If this were not so I would have told you. For I am going away to prepare a place. And when I have gone and have prepared a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself so that where I am, you also will be...."

Even in an account where Jesus refers to the time when he will no longer be on earth he doesn't describe life on the other side, but says in essence "Don't worry, have faith, and know that there is a place for you." He seems to be talking as a person with extraordinary spiritual depth and understanding; a person whose experience and insight is so profound that it appears to bring faith in harmony with knowledge. That, I suppose, is why throughout the centuries his words, as reported in the Gospels, reflect the highest measure
of understanding for so many.

Faith is not compatible with the concept of absolute knowledge. Who needs faith if he or she already knows? People often try to erase the limitations of their knowledge by believing absolutely what they really do not know for sure and call that faith. Blind belief, as it is called, is just a mechanism for dealing with the fear, and particularly useful to some when facing the ultimate concern. We are more honest when we use what knowledge we have to give quality to our faith. For faith is available to us because we do not know completely, yet faith is no hindrance to our seeking and discovering increased knowledge. That, in some ways, is the paradox. The more we know, the more profound the possibility of our faith. Faith becomes an extension of our knowledge. To acquire increased knowledge leads to understanding that opens the way to still deeper understanding, and the belief in that process is faith. There is nothing to refute or scientifically prove that the process continues after death. All the experience leading to our theories about death are human, earthly experiences, even those attributed to divine revelation. Most people opt for a belief in the continuing life of the spirit. That is not so unusual I suppose.

If life is difficult for us, it is natural to hope for something better. If it is good it is natural to want an extension. The ego is so strong that it usually recoils at the concept of its obliteration. These reasons for faith are related to, but lesser than, the desire to count for something. Why is all this consciousness given to us if it doesn't count for something in the scheme of a good reality? The knowledge it leads to, the loving relationships that are possible and do exist, must be more than the grass that withers and blows away. Are we vessels that hold for a time all the possibilities that are eternal only to be broken and cast aside without being a part of eternity?
We have difficulty accepting our existence and experience as a happen-
stance. There is too much order in what we know, too much cause and effect
to think that the whole of life has any less. We discover too many meaningful
relationships in nature to accept that our experiences and relationships do
not have meaning in a larger scheme we do not fully comprehend. In this
way too people are pushed to faith by what they know and what they do
not know. Their faith is an extension of their experience and knowledge as
they deal with the primary need to have their lives count for something.

Another way to put it is that our human consciousness makes us aware
of our limitations. We, unlike other animals, know what a speck the earth
is in a universe whose vastness we probe. So far we are limited by time
and space, yet our self-conscious nature, with its accompanying reason, lead
us to the conclusion that there is no cliff at the end of the last universe
where one can fall into nothingness. We live with endings as well as beginnings
here, but can there be a final end, a state of nothing? That doesn't make
sense. So what our reason and instinct reveal to us in these matters is
excellent fodder for feeding a concept of faith. There must be dimensions
to life beyond our present knowledge. What we do know through our reason
hints at that, as does some new mathematical work that has been recently
published. Again we see that our search for knowledge can be important to
our search for faith. What we learn is a wonderment and an occasion to have
faith that there is more to know that will enlighten, enrich and extend our
consciousness. Our knowledge, with both its limitations and insights, combine
to propel us toward a faith in something powerful, unlimited, and life-giving
beyond ourselves.

The reasons for faith - death, purpose in life, and the titilating yet
limited nature of our knowledge - have a characteristic in common. They all
have an uncertain quality about them. We don't know specifically what the
experience of death will hold for us. We might claim a purpose for our lives, but we cannot be sure we are right. What we know always leads us to the edge of discovery. There is one reason for our faith that is not uncertain though, unfortunately, not everyone has it. That reason grows out of loving relationships. To love and be loved is life generating. To be unloved is life destroying. The closest we come to an encounter with the power of the spiritual dimension is in the love we have for one another. When we have the experience it is the one we most want to extend and most fear losing. Those who have had it always seek it and protect it. We want it forever, and that strong commitment encourages a faith in love's eternal quality. The fact that humans have the opportunity to feel and understand love most completely in a few relationships encourages perhaps the belief of my friend that life in heaven picks up where life here ends; a meeting place for individuals who loved and liked each other.

Facing the inevitability of death, the need to have meaning for our lives, the honest appraisal of the knowledge we have and the doors it opens to further discovery, and the experience of love in our lives are for me the part of the human condition from which faith springs. The theological or philosophical positions held by people may vary, but the nature of their faith comes from this shared condition. And faith itself is an affirmation of life reflecting in each of us the strong primal urge to survive. Love, purpose, knowledge and wisdom are our roads to survival, giving us our best opportunity for a good life here and in a dimension that is beyond our complete understanding.