

Considering the Afterlife

By Lesley Harris,

This text is an adaptation of a service on this theme which was given on 30 December 2012, at Oat Street Unitarian Chapel, Evesham.

I hope that we have all had at least a reasonable Christmas. This is normally the time of year in which we would be considering New Years Resolutions and I would imagine that most services today will be on the theme of looking forward and making a fresh start. So why am I choosing to look even further forward and to consider something that many people do not believe even exists.

I'm doing it because of all the times that life can be prematurely and tragically cut short. The suicide of the Royal Hospital nurse - Jacinta Saldanha this December, and also the killings of the primary school children in the United States are what first come to mind. No doubt action will be attempted to make the press more responsible in Australia and to curb the freedom of gun ownership in the States. But what about the lives of those people so tragically lost and the feelings of their loved ones who remain? If you die violently, tragically by suicide, murder or accident, or even if you just die prematurely from an unexpected illness, like my late friend Beverley is that really it? Finished just like that and nothing to look forward to?

During December 2012, I repeatedly watched a Bollywood film – Talaash – starring the intellectual, forward thinking actor Aamir Khan. On the surface this film was a crime thriller about the mysterious death of a famous actor and it appeared as such in the trailers. But actually it was about how a father was haunted by the death of his child by drowning in an accident, for which he everlastingly reproached himself, even though it was not in the least his fault. I don't want to give away what happened in the film, which is now available, but it was impressive to see how the father, by unknowingly working with elements of the after life, solved the mystery of the death of the famous actor and was able to

come to terms with the death of his child, save his marriage and move on in his life.

Even in the cases of peaceful death of our loved ones, it can be difficult to cope, and finally there is also the problem of the death of “those who were not as loved as they should have been and by whom we did not do as right by as we should have”. For all the situations I have cited, counselling can only go so far.

It would seem to me that the next stage is to consider whether there is a chance that the afterlife exists and we can do this by considering what has been seen, what has been “felt” and what has been heard.

Some of us may remember the famous Douglas Adams character Arthur Dent as saying “It’s not so much an after life as an après vie”. Well more than one Arthur in this world has considered the afterlife. I do not know the Douglas Adams books well enough to quote extensively from them but I will be quoting from another Arthur – Arthur Findlay, a famous academic Spiritualist historian and author of several books about the after life and the significant effect it has had on religion and history. At this point I would very much like to thank Stourbridge Spiritualist Church who let me borrow his books until I bought them for myself. One of his books, “The Psychic Stream”, traces the development of Christianity, and amongst many other things it considers “Apparitions”, or ghosts and I’d like to share the following passage

Near the old market town of Great Dunlow there lived a woman who shot herself one evening, Monday, 5th December 1938, after having shot her husband. They were alone in the house at the time and the discovery was not made until 7.45 on the following morning when the daily help arrived at the house to find the woman in the garden with part of her head shot away. The police were on the scene at 8.30 with a doctor who certified that both must have been dead since the previous evening

There is therefore no doubt that these two people were dead at 8.30 in the morning. Friends of mine, a husband and wife gave me the following information: They were motoring to London on the morning the discovery was made, and they passed the house where the tragedy occurred, about 9.20. As they came in sight of the house they saw the woman who had shot herself walking along the road towards them, dressed, but without a hat. As they passed within six feet of her, they smiled in recognition and she acknowledged this with a bow and a smile.

They thought nothing more about the affair, and, after spending the day in London, they bought an evening paper on their way home, in which they read the story of the tragedy. This was the first they had heard of it and my friend went to the police on his return home and told them that the woman could not have been dead at the time stated as he and his wife had seen her at 9.20 that morning. The police however assured him that they were in the house by 8.30, and that the doctor had certified that the woman they saw had been dead since the previous evening. Nevertheless, my friends have not the slightest doubt that the woman they saw was Mrs....., who had died the previous evening. There was nothing about her dress which occasioned my friends any surprise, and when I asked if she looked happy or sad, I was told "She looked just as she always did". All the details as to time of death came out at the inquest and are to be found in the local newspaper. But when my friends saw the apparition, they were unaware that the woman was dead, and because they remembered when they had left home to go to London, they knew the time they saw her. Thus we have two witnesses who saw the apparition at the same time.

Moving to the present, and on a less violent note, a famous quiz programme was recently deluged with dozens of letters asking why a couple of audience members in dark, old fashioned clothes had been ignored by the presenters. The answer was because neither the presenters nor the television audience had

seen them, and when the film was re-run they did not appear to be there. One could have put the letters down to cranks, except that a friend of mine who is not a hysterical type who looks for ghosts round every corner, had been watching the programme and had also seen those two individuals, but thought nothing of it at the time.

The Morville Arms pub in Shropshire is supposed to be one of the most haunted pubs in Britain. Its staff, who seem to be a pretty prosaic bunch, have occasionally seen 17th century entities come through the walls, have often felt “that there is something extra around” and are accustomed to constantly having to put back tables and chairs which have been moved. They shrug and accept it as part of the job.

My late friend Beverley, who was not a professional medium, did not have a website, did not keep a New Age Crystal Shop, who was not the fanciful, hysterical type, who never thought of herself as anything more than an ordinary Bewdley housewife, used to see and sense spirits all the time round the house, and accepted it as a normal part of life.

Even the Unitarian Nightingale Centre in Great Hucklow, Derbyshire, has a ghost whom staff have occasionally seen, and one night, when one of our Unitarian Ministers was staying there by himself, he felt such a strange, unexplained presence around him, that he packed his bags in the middle of the night and set off for home

Having considered “what can be seen”, let us move onto “what can be heard”

With regard to what can be heard, I’d like quote another passage, this time from Arthur Findlay’s book “On the Edge of the Etheric”, which describes what happened when he went to a séance on 18 September 1918, held by the Scottish medium John Campbell Sloane.

It should be explained that Findlay stumbled across this particular séance by chance when in September 1918, he had come up to Glasgow from Essex to be near his wife who was ill in a nursing home. During one of his hospital visits, in order to have a break, he went for a walk and happened to pass a Spiritualist Church. He went inside and attended the service out of curiosity. He then told the organiser that what had gone on might be believed by the simple minded but it did not convince him, and asked whether the organiser prove anything that had been said. The organiser said that yes, he could and offered to take Findlay to a séance the following evening.

Findlay attended the séance and was told:

**Someone wants to speak to you, friend, so I said “Yes, who are you?”
Your father, Robert Downie Findlay, the voice replied, and then went on to refer to something that only he and I and one other ever knew on earth, and that other, like my father, was some years dead. I was therefore the only living person with any knowledge of what the voice was referring to. That was extraordinary enough, but my surprise was heightened when, after my father had finished, another voice gave the name of David Kidston, the name of the other person who on earth knew about the subject, and he continued the conversation which my father had begun. No spy system, however thorough, no impersonation by the medium or by any accomplices could be responsible for this, and, moreover, I was an entire stranger to everyone present. I did not give my name when I entered the room. I knew no one in that room and no one knew me or anything about me.**

Shortly afterwards in the book Findlay explains that this incident was that of his father refusing at the time to let him come into the business, because his partner David Kidston was not keen to have him.

Seances these days are much rarer than they were, and many readings that you may be given by mediums at some services are very general. But for our third passage I have an extract from an article by Tricia Robertson, the Honorary Secretary of the Scottish Society for Psychical Research. She describes how, in 1996, she was contacted by a lady who wanted to discuss the death of her daughter and to obtain a sitting with a medium. Since her daughter had been recently murdered, Tricia, instead asked the lady to bring a sealed envelope with a personal possession of her late daughter, so that Tricia could take the envelope to a medium and ask them to psychometrise it to gain a reading from it. (Psychometry is the skill of getting a reading from an object belonging to a person), Tricia did not know which medium she would have access to for this task. After she was given a sealed brown envelope by the mother, she visited a medium, unannounced and asked him if he could get anything from it. She did not tell him anything about the envelope nor why she had it in her possession.

Reluctantly, he placed his right hand on top of the envelope, and with a surprised look on his face, he immediately said, “I have a girl here with longish dark brown hair – he hesitated for a second, then looked straight into my face and said – she was killed!

“She is telling me that she had two tattoos, one above her left breast, in the form of two hearts intertwined, they are done in red and blue”.

“The other is on the back of her right arm. It is a simple rose in red and green”.

“She lives in a cul de sac, one up on the right. Telling me she misses he four cats”. She gave the name of her partner – Adam (pseudonym). “She is saying “The newspaper reports were wrong, the description of the clothes that I was found in were wrong. I was actually wearing a pink top, a grey skirt, and ankle boots. My photograph was moved from the

mantelpiece to the top of the TV today by my mum. Adam was the first one to know that I was killed, he phoned my mum”

She gave an account of her injuries which were all to her back and “told” the medium that a green car – possibly a cavalier and a red astra were relevant to her death. There were two men involved, a white man about five foot six inches tall and a taller and thinner Asian. The medium also gave me a specific address in Glasgow, a top floor of a tenement building on the right hand side. With that he said “She’s gone”. The total time taken for this delivery was less than 15 minutes

The rest of the article gives fuller details about the reading and what was correct in it (most of it) and points out that neither the medium, nor the authoress of the article knew anything at all about the people involved, far less the validity of the information.

I think all the examples I have cited are evidence that at the very least there is a good fighting chance that some part of us survives death and that some sort of after life exists, so that even if we are bereaved, those whose lives seem to have been so tragically cut off, are not exterminated for ever, but go on in some form to continue life elsewhere. Most of us may never want to try to communicate with those who have passed, but we can take some comfort that all has not been lost for them.

With regard to “what part of us survives death”, it needs to be explained that according to Spiritualist theory, we are a “Trinity” of a physical body, a spirit or etheric body which is intertwined with the physical, and both are directed by our mind. When we die, the etheric body leaves the physical body and goes with the mind to the after life. Those with clairvoyant sight and those who have had Near Death Experiences claim to be able to see this happening.

For the second part of this article, I would now like to go on to consider some possible implications of the afterlife for religion and for history. I would like to draw upon material from two short books called *The New Revelation* and *The Vital Message*, written in 1918 and 1919 respectively and both by Arthur Conan Doyle, (another Arthur!!) who as well as being the author of Sherlock Holmes was also a famous Spiritualist at the Christian end of the Spiritualist spectrum. I would also like to continue with a bit more text from Arthur Findlay, who very strongly criticises Christianity. Both writers have rather different ideas about the role the Church has to play.

For Arthur Conan Doyle, basing his views on his own faith, and on communications from the after life, God most definitely exists and Jesus Christ was the Highest of His Spirits, who came down to earth at a time of great earthly depravity in order to give the people the lesson of an ideal life. Then He returned to His own high station, having left an example for the rest of us to follow.

Conan Doyle continues that lessons we can learn from the after life about the continued life of the soul and how it is influenced by our conduct on earth, are the very essence of religion and that they put it onto a basis of fact rather than faith. Indeed the after life has the potential to unify all religions. The true message of Jesus and of the New Testament was Spiritualistic but was corrupted by a lot of unbelievable and repulsive theological baggage. This defaced the truth of the Christ's original message that there is a better life after death which we should prepare for and a better life on Earth to be attained by concentrating what Jesus had to teach in His very beautiful and exemplary life

Conan Doyle hoped that with the actual certainty of a definite life after death and with a sense of personal responsibility for our own spiritual development, that there would come about a great reinforcement of human morality. He pointed out that the differences between different religious sects were very unimportant compared with the eternal battle between the spiritual and material view of life,

and that belief in proven life after death could help Christianity and other religions win this battle. Doyle also pointed out that the New Testament is saturated with Spiritualism and use of psychic gifts and considered that Jesus was a very great medium.

I'd therefore like to quote three psychical passages from the New Testament.

The Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 2, verses 1 – 4

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together with one accord in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Conan Doyle explains that this would seem to describe a séance. “With one accord in one place” is when people of like mind have got together and concentrated. In séances, because of the presence of spirits, the temperature drops and this causes a draught of wind. The “tongues of fire” are “spirit lights”. Being filled with the Holy Spirit is “becoming entranced”.

Corinthians, Book 1, Chapter 12, Verses 4 -12

Now there are varieties of gifts but of the same Spirit, and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of working but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of

miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are inspired by the one and the same Spirit who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

Conan Doyle explains that many of these are the characteristics a good medium would hope to possess, namely the passing on of good advice through the Spirit, the exercise of spiritual healing, the ability to tell the future, the production of phenomena (miracles) such as apports and levitation, the ability to distinguish between good and bad spirits, and possibly even the ability to speak in other languages.

The Gospel of Luke, Chapter 9 verses 28 – 36

Now about eight days after these sayings, he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became dazzling white. And behold two men talked with him, Moses and Elijah who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep but kept awake, and they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus “Master, it is well that we are here, let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah” – not knowing what he said. As he said this, a cloud came and overshadowed them: and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen One, listen to him!” And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silence and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen.

Now, the summit of a hill was the ideal place for such a manifestation because of its pure air and freedom from interruption. The drowsy state of the Apostles is paralleled by the members of any circle who are contributing psychic power. The transfiguring of the face and the shining raiment are known phenomena, the forms of Elijah and Moses were either apparitions from above or materialisations produced from ectoplasm. Having three booths, one for the medium and one for each of the other forms would fulfil the most perfect conditions for getting results.

Conan Doyle continues that if you translate Biblical language into modern psychic religion the correspondence becomes evident. “Lo a miracle”, becomes a manifestation or some other sort of psychic phenomena. “A voice from heaven” becomes the “direct voice” you hear in a séance. “His eyes were opened and he saw a vision” means he became “clairvoyant”.

We do not have to get too bogged down with all the above, but we should think about how the after life might have contributed to Christianity and other religions.

Arthur Findlay views things from a totally different perspective, considering that what we call God is really Mind – the all moving Force of the Universe. We Unitarians would call this Spirit of Life. In his book “The Psychic Stream”, he considers that religion came about because of psychic phenomena. Men saw apparitions, which were really the etheric bodies of humans who had passed but mistook them for gods. Men also heard voices from those who had passed, and who in some cases those became their Spirit Controls, because these former beings still had an interest in what was happening on earth, but again men mistook them for gods.

Therefore, according to Arthur Findlay, “Jehovah”, who directed various prophets throughout the Old Testament was not really a God, but a very strong Spirit Control

According to Findlay, psychic phenomena led to **all the various types of religion, including the “Saviour God” religions like Christianity.** However mediums were upstaged by priests, who, after the fourth century, put an end to all the psychic practices which had been part and parcel of religious practice to that date. Men, who were greatly worried about the fate of their spirits after death fell under the control of the priests, instead of being able to take natural advice from mediums.

Arthur Findlay considers that Jesus was never a God, but that he was a religious reformer and medium who, after his sacrificial death at the hands of the priests, appeared in his etheric body to his followers, and thus gave them the impression that he had conquered death. This fired them up with an enthusiasm far greater than you would get from mere hallucination and delusion. When St Paul, another great medium saw an apparition of Jesus, and continued to hear him thereafter, he became convinced that Jesus was a new Saviour God, and that he, Paul, had the task of carrying out his Mission. A chain of events which had begun with Jesus appearing to his disciples and later to Paul, continued to Christianity holding sway over the entire Roman empire and its descendants. If you believe Findlay's theories, then the after life, in this case, led to the shaping of history.

We can also wonder about when else discarnate influences may have contributed to historical events. A passage from Arthur Findlay's history of Mankind, “The Curse of Ignorance” describes how Joan of Arc led France to victory against the English, and how she was strongly mediumistic, claiming, even in the face of life threatening interrogation and forthcoming terrible death that she was guided by military entities from the next world. Personally, I am inclined to believe somebody who would stick to their guns like that under such terrible circumstances.

On a lighter note, we could also consider to what extent discarnate influences could have contributed to success in other less heavy going fields. A few years

ago, the Psychical Society hosted a speaker Peter Underwood who described “Discarnate Influence in the Arts”. I had not heard that when Kipling wrote “Kim”, he considered himself to be possessed while he wrote it and that he trod carefully to prevent the inspiration from stopping. Samuel Taylor Coleridge said that his poem Kubhla Khan was inspired by a source outside himself in a dream. Robert Louis Stevenson claimed that he never knew how he got the idea for his book “Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde”. Paganini was believed to have sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for his skill and the Church refused to have him buried in consecrated ground.

A more modern example of work under discarnate influences is Rosemary Brown, composer of “Music From the Spheres”. She wrote and played several hundred pieces of music, although she herself had previously been unable to either read or play. She claimed that Liszt and Chopin had been working through her since the death of her husband in 1961. Even Paul McCartney has claimed that many of his songs have come out of nowhere and that feels like a sort of magic that has written them.

To sum up, most of us rational Unitarians may retain scepticism about the after-life. But after this service in which we have considered apparitions past and present in the street and on the TV, haunted pubs, friends who see and sense spirits, the Nightingale Centre ghost, a séance from the past, a psychometric reading from the present, Spiritualism in the Bible, the possible influence of psychic phenomena in the formation of religion and history, and possible discarnate influences in the arts, I hope to have convinced you that is a good fighting chance that there is something after death, be it an after life, or reincarnation, and that it would be a good idea to prepare for it just in case. That life which has been prematurely cut off on earth has probably not been permanently exterminated in heaven and that those who have passed and whom we may not have loved enough at the time are having an easier time of it.

Regarding my own attitude to life after death, I personally do not try too hard to communicate with the next life, despite my interest in Spiritualism, because for me, there is usually quite enough lecturing happening on earth without a second layer of it from the next world! I go to Spiritualist divine services primarily for the hymns, the guidance in the address and the performance by the medium. I have been given messages and good advice which I have taken on board but I would be unlikely to ever take part in a full blown séance.

I think it is important to know however that the after life is likely to be there, and that those who need to can try to get in touch with it. I would end by stressing that it is equally important to consider that sometimes those who have passed, might at some time wish to communicate with us, have done so many times in the past, and are likely to continue to do so in the future.