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## Imagining faith as celestial retirement plan misses the point

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Lawrence Brown

Columnist

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We were nearing the end of my theology class with the Academy of Lifelong Learning at the college. One of my students wrote me a very tender and tactful email. Given my struggle with cancer, would it be possible to use the next class to talk about what happens when we die? We're all adults and have increasing reasons to be thinking about these things.

Shame on me for not having thought to include it in the curriculum already. Maybe it was a subject I was unconsciously avoiding. For the religious skeptic, of course, there's nothing to discuss. To imagine life after death is to imagine that when computers finally fail, there is some magical place in the clouds where they continue to think about things forever. How ridiculous is that?

For most of the world's faiths, there seem to be two options. One is to believe that life is like an arrow. You get one shot - and you'd better aim right because wherever the arrow lands, it sticks there forever. One life ... one afterlife. We die; maybe we get judged; and then we spend eternity in the place we deserve.

For other traditions, nature seems to work in cycles. There are celestial cycles, seasonal cycles, life cycles. Mark Twain is supposed to have said that history may not repeat but it certainly rhymes. Maybe the rhyming part is when historical cycles loop around and we keep feeling there's something vaguely familiar about what's happening to us.

So for the reincarnation religions, soul works in cycles too. There is no heaven or hell. We just keep getting sent back until we finally learn the lessons we need to learn. The problem isn't disobedience; it's ignorance of our true nature.

During our class discussion, someone brought up the experiences of people who have clinically died and then come back. If death is not only a stoppage of the heart but a flatlining of brain waves, it's hard to explain how people who flatlined on the operating table can revive and describe to the doctors what they did and what they said while getting out the paddles.

And then, lo and behold, we find an article in *The Week* magazine, May 10. It's titled *The Final Minutes*

and was originally published in *The Guardian* newspaper. The author, Alex Blasdel, gets us up to date on what modern medical

science is learning about the death experience. The heart stops. Brain waves flatline. Cells begin to die. Consciousness has been thrown off a cliff.

But suddenly, high frequency signals in the brain seem to jump back to life. Brain waves synchronize; areas responsible for cognitive function, attention and memory seem to communicate with each other intensely. Fading and flaring, heart stopped, it lasts over five minutes.

In the operating room, someone with a clipboard is soberly chronicling the day and time of death. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to everyone, the brain is awash in memory, reflection and empathy. Is there some way in which consciousness continues after the brain has failed? Some of the very latest data suggests that somehow it does. Then, is consciousness over — or has it moved on?

Listen to Alex Bladel. 'The spiritualists, along with other kooks and grifters, are busily peddling their tales of the afterlife.'

Ah, well. But then we'd have to ask how any of these new findings make sense from a Darwinian point of view. What possible survival advantage could be conferred by something that happens while we're dying?

Imagine two scientists, one devoutly religious and the other a complete skeptic. They have been lifelong friends growing into late old age together. The believer dies first, followed shortly by his atheist friend. The atheist experiences being drawn down a long tunnel toward a bright light. He arrives somewhere and is helped to his feet by his old devout friend. The experience is almost ecstatic. He gets a tour.

Finally, the religious friend can't help himself anymore. 'See,' he cries out, '*now do you believe me?*'

'Well,' says his skeptical old friend, 'I don't know how you knew about this place but look, I've been studying reality all my life just like you. If this is some new reality, then I'm going to study it the way I always have. Why you have to drag religion into it, I just don't know.' In short, I think even if you brought someone to heaven, it wouldn't automatically make them religious. It's a choice. It's a way of living in the world.

I happen to believe that we are all souls in body suits. But to imagine that faith is some kind of celestial retirement plan misses the whole point. If I am kind or honest just to secure my place in some kind of heaven, then I've missed the whole purpose of being a soul on earth. And if you could somehow convince me that when I die there will be nothing left, I wouldn't want to change a thing in what I've done. I would only wish I had done it better.

*Lawrence Brown is a columnist for the Cape Cod Times. Email him at [columnresponse@gmail.com](mailto:columnresponse@gmail.com).*

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