

Suppose you knew that although you yourself would live a long life and die peacefully in your sleep, the earth and all its inhabitants would be destroyed 30 days after your death in a collision with a giant asteroid. How would this knowledge affect you? (Samuel Scheffler, "The Importance of the Afterlife," NY Times, 9/21/13.)

This is a thought experiment posed by NYU philosophy professor Samuel Scheffler.

We have several members here at UUMAN who work at or for the CDC. I think of them as infectious disease super heroes - always thinking about battling bacteria (even while they're here); conjuring cures for a whole host of deadly ailments. But in this thought experiment, with humanity's demise 30 days after their peaceful death, how might this knowledge inform their work? Would they still be inspired to look for cancer's cure? Would they still be determined to search for that critical flaw in the genome?

With such knowledge would writers write? Painters paint?

In this thought experiment, all your loved ones would perish 30 days after your death. That's not a comforting idea. That would likely give one cause to despair for their loved ones. So let's change up the thought experiment with a little twist. Instead, let's say that 100 years from the day of your death, humanity would cease to exist as a result of some cataclysmic event. With this, everyone you know and love would likely have the full opportunity to live out their full lives prior to humanity's demise.

In this scenario, how would you feel? Would you then be inspired to tirelessly search for that Alzheimer's cure? Would you still work to protect the environment? Paint your Mona Lisa? Compose your opera?

According to Mr. Scheffler, this scenario doesn't sit to well with most people either. It doesn't sit well with me.... And maybe it doesn't sit well with you. Why not? Everyone you know and love will lead out their full lives. Why shouldn't it sit perfectly well with you?

Why would it seem pointless to find that Alzheimer's cure? Build that Taj Mahal?

If humanity continued well beyond 100 years after your death, who would benefit from your medical research? Who would enjoy your photography? Who would read your poetry?

Well, if it's 100 years after your death, the answer is simple – complete strangers. Complete strangers would be the beneficiaries of your efforts.

So what are we saying here? Are we saying that any present meaning to our lives may be at least partially contingent on the future existence of people we will never come to know? People we can only imagine? People we most likely won't even take the time to imagine? Complete strangers?

We UUs pride ourselves on being a rational lot. How is this rational?

Ok. Let's shift gears here for a minute.

Some behavioral scientists did a study where, over a given time period, they measured how the frequency of social interactions with others affected ones feelings of happiness. They divided the interactions into two groups. One group consisted of those social interactions with whom one had "strong ties" (e.g. loved ones, friends, co-workers, etc.). The other group consisted of "weak ties" social interactions (e.g. cashiers, store clerks, fellow commuters, strangers, etc.).

The researchers determined that for both introverts and extroverts higher feelings of happiness correlated directly with the higher number of social interactions. They also determined that people expressed equal feelings of happiness even if those interactions were with the “weak ties” group (i.e. complete strangers). (Gillian M. Sandstrom, *Social Interaction and Well-Being: The Surprising Power of Weak Ties*, University of British Columbia, 2013.)

Here’s an experiment you can do yourself. When you go into a coffee shop, Publix or Kroger; as best you can, intentionally behave according to one of two scenarios. In one scenario, don’t interact with anyone in the store; just go in, get what you need and leave. In the other scenario, make an effort to interact with people even, even if it is in the most mundane way. Say hello to somebody. Ask the barista at the coffee shop which roast would they recommend on that particular day. Say something about the weather. Many introverts and extroverts alike don’t like to make small talk but this is not about the subject or the quality of the conversation. It’s just about registering an interaction with a stranger. In both scenarios, after leaving the store, try to determine if there was any shift in your disposition. Keep doing this, increase the sample size and see if you can identify any trends.

Such a study was done which concluded that when one has even the most mundane interactions with strangers, they generally were left with a more cheerful disposition than when they had no interactions with strangers. (Sandstrom, Dunn, “Is Efficiency Overrated? Minimal Social Interactions Lead to Belonging and Positive Affect”, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, September, 12, 2013.)

What does this mean? It’s as if strangers help us in some unexplainable way. It’s as if, in cases such as these, strangers are like some type of guardian angels put here on earth specifically as helpers of some sort. Is God up there in heaven shaking her head saying to her guardian angels, “Oh my goodness! Can any of you go down there and help these people?”

(As a sidebar and not related to this sermon, this reminds me of a Far Side cartoon where God, with one of his angels, is looking down at his creation and at the chaos “man” has made of it. A disappointed God shakes his head and says something like, “You’re right. Give control to the hippos.”)

Perhaps strangers are the Buddhist bodhisattvas. The bodhisattva is one who has transcended the endless wheel of samsara; the endlessly deluded wheel of birth, death and rebirth. The bodhisattva, instead entering Nirvana however, chooses to stay behind to help others who are still bound to samsara.

There’s a beautiful flip side to all this. If we allow ourselves to think that strangers might, perhaps, be our guardian angels and bodhisattvas, what might we be to them? Could we not then think of ourselves as guardian angels and bodhisattvas to others? That our interactions with strangers can, in some small way, add meaning to their lives? That our interactions might help reconnect them to their path of happiness?

So many strangers need our help right now – today! If you and I don’t believe in any of this guardian angel and bodhisattva stuff, or if we later learn that such beings don’t exist, then we need to take it upon ourselves pick up the slack and fill that role because somebody has to do it. Might as well be you and me! And, in my opinion, this can be a matter of life and death.

We have, next door in Discovery Hall, our teenagers and our coming of age youth. We have to know that all of them are struggling with something...because that’s the nature of adolescence. Every one of them struggles with something. So when we see them at coffee hour or when we see them walking about outside, make an effort to acknowledge them, say hello, ask them how their doing. If you see a pack of them, they are usually found in packs, go ahead and insert yourself into the group for a moment and say hello. They may give you a weird look – in fact they probably will – but later on in the day, they’ll remember that you “saw” them, that you acknowledged their presence. This can mean a lot to them.

With a smile, a nod , a hello; like superheroes, through the simplest of interactions, we could be saving lives each and every day; just like those folks at the CDC. It's the least that we can do.

So for some unexplainable reason, the strangers of 100 years into the future matter to us. They are calling us. They are urging us on to be the best people we can possibly be. They're relying upon us to save them from cancer, to thwart climate change, to inspire them with our music and poetry.

For some unexplainable reason, strangers in our midst are here to help us. If we allow them they can lift our spirits and inspire us to be better. They can help us reconnect to our path of happiness. And we are here to help them, see them, reconnect them to their path of happiness.

May we be open to the unexplainable. May we be open to the mystery. May we be open to the power of the stranger.