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Matters of Life and Death

Anna Strhan

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Introduction

In his 1909 essay ‘Bridge and Door’, the sociologist Georg Simmel describes the human being ‘as the connecting creature who must always separate and cannot connect without separating ... And the human being is likewise the bordering creature who has no border’ (1994: 174).¹ We are beings who make sense of the world through our capacity to connect and to separate things, and Simmel argues that this guides all human activity, shaping our physical, symbolic, emotional and imagined spaces and leaving material marks in the world around us. Exploring the nature of modes of connection and separation is perhaps particularly pertinent to understanding the relations between ‘atheism’ and ‘religion’, or between ‘non-religion’ and ‘religion,’ as it is indexed in the very act of naming these as fields of exploration. In my writing ‘non-religion’, for example, what modes of uniting and disuniting shape my instinct to hyphenate the word (or not)? As the prefix ‘non’ carves out a space of separation from religion, it also draws attention to the doubled nature of lines of division: ‘the separation of objects, people or places is always shadowed by the idea – the “fantasy” or the danger – of their connection’ (Tonkiss 2005: 31). Drawing out deeper understanding of the (simultaneous) practices of connection and separation between religious and non-religious cultures can enable us to develop more nuanced understandings of the everyday realities of members of these groups, which move beyond common assumptions that their interrelations are *necessarily* antagonistic, and instead open up common grounds of human experience, as well as the lived experience of modes of difference.

¹ This chapter expands on themes which formed the basis of a post at the NSRN blog, available at <http://blog.nsrn.net/2014/02/26/launch-series-what-do-we-do-when-we-do-life-studying-relations-between-religious-and-non-religious-cultures/#more-332> (accessed 22 December 2015)

Matters of life and death have often loomed large in oppositional modes of relationship between the religious and the non-religious. Religions are often stereotypically characterized by their critics as immortality cults, attempting to escape or deny the inevitability of death through focusing on a putative transcendent realm that is perceived to diminish the fullness of this life. The question of life is also a key source of tension, for example, in the culture wars clashes, as life has become caught between technocratic explorations (for example, of the human genome) and religious oppositions to abortion and stem cell research on the basis of ‘sanctity of life’ (Bennett 2010, Pyyhtinen 2012, Thacker 2010). Concepts of life reverberate throughout religious traditions. In Christianity, this is expressed in Jesus’s telling his followers, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’ (John 14: 6) and ‘I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly’ (John 10:10), while in Hinduism, Shakti represents the creative, all-pervading life force. The idea of life also resonates throughout non-religious cultures. Olli Pyyhtinen suggests that if in the Renaissance, the decisive form of reality was ‘mechanism’, for the modern era it has been the category ‘life’ (2012: 79). He notes that French vitalism, under the influence of Bergson, and German Lebensphilosophie were among the most influential philosophies in Europe in the early twentieth century, to the extent that Simmel wrote in 1916 that ‘the concept of life now seems to permeate a multitude of spheres and has begun to give, as it were, a more unified rhythm to their heartbeat’ (cited in Pyyhtinen 2012: 79). While these ideas languished under the taint of Nazism for much of the latter twentieth century, ideas of vitalism and philosophies of becoming, emphasizing the vibrancy of life, are firmly back, under the influence of Deleuze, and permeating a wide variety of disciplines (ibid.).² At the same time, a different inflection of life is given in the form of Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘bio-politics’ (1990) together with Giorgio Agamben’s (1998) concept of ‘bare life’. Agamben deployed the concept of ‘bare life’ to address the fact that biopolitical states can strip someone to bare or naked life, which produces bodies that can be killed with impunity. This approach to life has expressed (and perhaps intensified) the gloomy spirit of political diagnoses in the ‘post-9/11 era’ (Singh 2015: 55), as Agamben’s analysis has been used to try to articulate that which in life is irreducible to either social processes or living biological organisms.

² Examples of work in this turn include: Deleuze and Guattari 1987, Deleuze 2001, Bennett 2010, Connolly 2011, 2013, Lash 2006.

The concept of life – and life’s interrelation with death – are of course implicated both in metaphysical orientations and also in existential and ethical questions about what it means to live a good life, or a life filled with meaning, as opposed to bare life, and it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide an exhaustive survey of how these ideas figure across religious and non-religious traditions. While questions of life and death might appear perennial concerns for religion, in what follows, I explore the particular contemporary significance of ideas of life and death within the moral landscapes of different religious and non-religious groups. I draw here on qualitative sociological research I have conducted, which is largely in the field of contemporary Christianities, with the hope that these ideas might find resonances beyond the contexts I address here. The chapter considers the significance of the idea of ‘life’ for an ‘open’ evangelical church, the Sunday Assembly, and the School of Life, and practices of reflecting on ‘death’ in Death Cafés, drawing this together with Simmel’s writing on life and its interrelations with death. I conclude by suggesting that attending to modes of practical engagement with ideas of ‘life’ and ‘death’ across these different religious and non-religious groups, rather than focusing solely on the propositional content of beliefs about life and death, opens up opportunities for reflection on common existential grounds of experience, moving beyond assumptions that relations between these groups are necessarily antagonistic.

What do we do when we ‘do life’?

I have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork with different kinds of evangelical³ church in London since 2009, and through this, I have often been struck by both particular affinities and acts of distancing from non-religious and other religious groups that members of these churches engage in across different contexts. At an open evangelical⁴ church where I carried out fieldwork from 2013-14, which I call ‘Riverside’, for example, one Sunday morning, the minister said to the congregation

³ I use the term ‘evangelical’ here, following David Bebbington, to refer to the tradition existing in Britain since the 1730s, marked by the characteristics of *conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism* (1989: 3).

⁴ I use the term ‘open evangelical’ to characterize a movement dissatisfied with dominant evangelical understandings of faith, in whose view ‘evangelicalism has suffocated itself through a tight hold on propositional belief, personal salvation, and overheated conviction’ (Engelke 2013: 20).

that some of them may have heard about ‘atheist churches that have started meeting to celebrate life together’. He said that one of these was having a harvest festival, and would be giving the food they collect to Riverside’s food bank, and so a member of the Riverside staff was visiting them that morning to collect the food ‘and to build links with them’. This incident not only reveals the friendly institutional relationships between atheist and open evangelical churches; the description of the atheist congregation as gathering together ‘to celebrate life’ also opens up a wider point of connection in relation to the contemporary significance of life for both.

The Sunday Assembly is perhaps the most notable contemporary example of a network of ‘atheist churches’, which seeks to ‘replicate the “positive” aspects of regular churches’ – such as the sense of community belonging and rituals – but without the belief in God (Alexander 2014). The Sunday Assembly describes itself as ‘a secular congregation that celebrates life’ and as having ‘a mission to help everyone live life as fully as possible’. Its website sets out its ‘charter’, stating ‘We’re not here to tell you how to live your life—we’re here to help you be the best version of you you can be’, and its charter includes the ideas that it is: a ‘100% celebration of life. We are born from nothing and go to nothing. Let’s enjoy it together’; ‘has no doctrine’; ‘is radically inclusive—this is a place of love that is open and accepting’; ‘has a community mission. Through our Action Heroes (you!), we will be a force for good’; and ‘we won’t tell you how to live, but will try to help you do it as well as you can.’

The ways in which ‘life’ figures here in many ways mirrors how members of both Riverside and the charismatic evangelical churches I have studied in London talk about life. These different congregations name their small group study and discussion meetings ‘life courses’, and ‘life groups’ is commonly used as a title for small group meetings across global evangelicalism. The leaders of Riverside describe the materials developed for use within the life courses, ‘Life Resources’, as intended ‘to enable you to become the best possible version of yourself’, resonating with the Sunday Assembly’s aims.⁵ The Riverside leader who developed these resources introduced them to the congregation one Sunday morning. Her first slide posed the

⁵ This language pervades contemporary evangelical cultures, with US pastor Joel Osteen’s book *Your Best Life Now: Seven Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (2004) having sold over 4 million copies. It should be noted, however, that not all evangelicals agree with Osteen’s theology (see, e.g. Strhan 2015: 127).

question, ‘how do I become the best version of me I can be?’, and she asked the congregation to consider who it was who looked at them in the mirror that morning, adding that when she looked in the mirror that morning, she had thought ‘when did I become so old?’ She repeated the question from the slide, and added ‘How do you become the best version of who you are and who you are created to be?’ She said that this question was what they were going to be focusing on that year in their services and small groups, and said ‘it’s something we need to be *intentional* about’. She said that when you learn to drive or swim, you initially have to be ‘really intentional about what you’re doing, and then it becomes second nature... It’s the same with being the best we can be. We need to *practise* it for it to become second nature to us.’ She said that we become like the people we follow, and added that when she was young, she had wanted to be like Kevin Keegan, and said that as a church community, ‘our intention is that we become like Jesus, so that the loving our enemies, forgiveness, love, joy, and tenderness that Jesus displayed become second nature to us.’ She said that over the coming year, ‘we’re going to take time to focus on being like Jesus. I’ve called it LIFE’. Her next slide had LIFE in bright yellow letters in the centre against a black background, together with other concepts that would form their focus over the course of the year. These concepts included: following, rhythm, belonging, giftedness, resources, ritual, wholeness, transform, image, inclusion, connection. She said that they were going to begin with the question of ‘following,’ and asked everyone to turn to the person next to them to ask ‘what footprints are you leaving behind you at the moment?’, and allowed some time for everyone to chat about that, before the service moved onto the Bible reading, and then the sermon that morning, which was on the theme of ‘bringing hope to local children and young people ... so that they live well in this journey of life.’

Riverside’s elaboration of what ‘becoming the best possible version of yourself’ as a central aim of LIFE means includes, like the Sunday Assembly, a strong focus on ‘inclusivity’ and ‘community’. There is a particular emphasis on the inclusion within the church of those who have been socially excluded through categories such as race, sexuality, disability, or social class, and Riverside repeatedly emphasizes that their vision is to ‘build inclusive communities’, where ‘everyone has hope, feels they matter, and is given the opportunity to achieve their potential’. Members of both Riverside and charismatic evangelical churches I studied also frequently spoke about ‘doing life’ with each other. When I asked my informants

what ‘doing life’ meant, they said it was about seeing faith as not just about being in church, or reading the Bible, but as something found in everyday moments of relationality, just hanging out with each other and doing very mundane things together, and implying a sense of ‘building community’ through these interactions.

The idea of ‘doing life’, ‘life courses’ and ‘life resources’ that we see in these churches resonates not only with the Sunday Assembly, but also with another non-religious organization, the School of Life. This was set up in 2008 by the philosopher Alain de Botton and others with the aim of ‘putting learning and ideas back to where they should always have been – right in the middle of our lives’, and ‘runs courses in the important questions of everyday life’.⁶ The School of Life runs a shop selling books, clothes, e.g. ‘The Philosopher’s Shoe’ and ‘The Philosopher’s Jumper,’ and a range of other items, such as ‘Philosophical Honey’ (priced at £20, which the website tells us ‘is food for the soul – connecting us with history and culture’, and is ‘sourced from the birthplaces of great Greek philosophers’),⁷ a ‘Comfort Blanket,’ and a ‘Writing as Therapy Journal.’

The School runs courses (with costs from £20 for ‘Secular Sermons’ to £700 for week-long intensive courses) about ‘things we all care about: careers, relationships, politics, travels, families’ and describes itself as ‘a place to step back and think intelligently about central emotional concerns. You will never be cornered by dogma, but we will direct you towards a variety of ideas from the humanities ... that will exercise, stimulate and expand your mind.’⁸ Riverside, the School of Life and the Sunday Assembly all present themselves as concerned primarily with a way of life, not *the* way of life or *the* meaning of life: they offer a way of ‘doing life’ that seeks to find and acknowledge meaning *in* life. While religious groups are often presented by those outside them as offering authoritative moral teachings about life and death, at Riverside we can see a more subjunctive mode of address that resonates with the turn away from ‘dogma’ that we see at the School of Life and the Sunday Assembly. There is little stated emphasis on ‘inclusion’ at the School of Life (and the costs of their courses and products would be prohibitive for many, with the ‘Comfort Blanket’, for example, priced at £170), yet we can see the focus on reflexive self-awareness and

⁶ From <http://alaindebotton.com/the-school-of-life/> (accessed 22 December 2015).

⁷ From <http://www.theschooloflife.com/shop/philosophical-honey/> (accessed 23 December 2015).

⁸ From <http://alaindebotton.com/the-school-of-life/> (accessed 23 December 2015).

intentionality that permeated Riverside's life courses as also present in these School of Life courses. The promotional material on the class on 'How to Manage Stress', for example, states that through participating, 'You'll become accurate in pinpointing the causes of your anxiety. You'll tame your unhelpful inner voices – and internalize better alternatives. And you'll discover how to spend time worrying about the things that really matter, rather than those that don't.'⁹

We might interpret the emphasis on reflexive self-awareness permeating these ideas of life as bound up with wider social processes of individualization. While both Riverside and the School of Life emphasize the communal nature of their Life courses and classes, there is also an emphasis on the individual's responsibility to shape herself or himself in order to 'become the best possible version' of themselves. While Riverside does also place an emphasis on forms of political and civic engagement in order to 'build more inclusive communities,' such that this individual responsibility for transformation is also bound up with the communal and political, at the School of Life, the focus is much more squarely on learning individual techniques to 'manage stress' or to deal with 'imposter syndrome.'

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that with the retreat of formerly dominant 'heteronomous' modes of addressing suffering and mortality, there has been a rise of 'autonomous' means, which are self-contained and self-directed, and aim to engage resources within the self's actual or potential possession (Bauman 1999: 42). We are unable to manage our recalcitrant existential fears in their 'pure and unprocessed form', and so we

slice the great, overwhelming fear into smaller and manageable bits – recast the big issue we can do nothing about into a set of little 'practical' tasks we can hope to be able to fulfil. Nothing calms better the dread one cannot eradicate than worrying and 'doing something' about the trouble one can fight (p. 44).

Whilst the School of Life is not necessarily focused on either ignoring or staving off existential angst, there is nevertheless a sense that individuals should seek to manage themselves better to deal with the struggles they face in life. While people have always faced struggles and problems in life, these, as Ian Craib (1994) notes, might once have been seen as moral choices in the context of a larger community or as

⁹ From <http://www.theschooloflife.com/london/shop/how-to-manage-stress/> (accessed 23 December 2015).

religious struggles with the forces of destiny, or as political problems to be solved through collective action. The cultural shift, Craib argues, was to start ‘seeing them in terms of individual morality with individual solutions’, as the modern person as an autonomous individual became perceived and experienced as increasingly isolated from wider society (pp. 98-99). In many ways, the idea of ‘life’ across these groups is inflected with this sense of individuals managing themselves better to deal with the struggles and disappointments of life, although we also see at the Sunday Assembly and Riverside a sense that this is inextricably bound up with a desire to work to help others also live flourishing lives, and Riverside encourages and enables different kinds of civic and political activism to these ends.

These connections across religious and non-religious organizations are in many ways not surprising, as both the Sunday Assembly and the School of Life situate themselves as drawing on aspects of religious traditions while ‘free from dogma’. But what might lie behind the specific contemporary prominence being accorded to ‘life’? We might interpret the pervasiveness of concepts of life as a strategy of differentiation from religious – and especially other Christian - cultures that place significant theological emphasis on life after death. Thus, in many ways, the identities of the open evangelical and non-religious organizations are both shaped through their acts of distancing from other, more conservative, religious traditions. The celebration of life and idea of ‘doing life’ can be seen as a means of finding modes of transcendence, enchantment and wonder in everyday, immanent life, rather than locating transcendence in some other-worldly realm. Simmel’s writings also capture this sensibility, presenting transcendence as immanent within life, as he describes life as ‘that which at all points wants to go beyond itself, reaching out beyond itself’, a form of pure potentiality, that is always *not yet*, being made and re-made (cited in Pyyhtinen 2012: 84). This dynamic sense of life-as-becoming is emphasized across Riverside, the Sunday Assembly and the School of Life. At the same time, Simmel also argues (1997) that the experience of fragmentation in modernity intensifies a desire for coherence across all spheres of social interaction. We could perhaps thus locate this sacralization of ‘life’ as also bound up with an existential desire to see all – even the most mundane, everyday details of our lives – as ultimately connected as part of ‘life’. This is not so much about finding a transcendent vantage point from which to understand life and death, but about finding the transcendent within the ordinary. Simmel describes how Rembrandt’s paintings vividly evoke this

illumination of everyday life: ‘Light does not come from outside (such light would inevitably fall unevenly); rather, in order to illuminate its ordinariness, from within, shining through equally in each path that leads from the core of life to life’s appearances’ (2005: 116).

Remembering Death as a Way of Life

While the School of Life focuses on finding techniques to deal with the struggles of life, at the same time, there is also an acknowledgement of both the ultimate recalcitrance of life, and of the importance on reflecting on death as an everyday practice of life. The School of Life’s promotional blurb about its ‘Memento Mori’ paperweight states that ‘Many of the obstacles we face in our lives are rather like the waves of the sea: relentless, bleak, repetitive and, ultimately, not responsive to our wishes or longings’. It notes that this is ‘a basic premise of the human condition’ and we should not ‘be continually shocked and dismayed when life does not answer to our demands. We should learn to accept all we cannot change and face it with a degree of heroism and Stoic strength, as a sailor battling the waves might.’ The ‘Memento Mori’ paperweights are designed to be ‘vivid reminders of mortality and the transient nature of life’ and to ‘put our prosaic obsessions into question’ by measuring them ‘against the finality of death.’¹⁰ Practices of *memento mori* – reflecting on the condition of mortality – were developed in Stoic philosophy, and were taken up in Christian Europe, circulating throughout the visual arts, for example, as symbols of death in still life paintings. Acknowledgement of mortality is likewise inextricably interwoven throughout contemporary Christian practices, such as in the Ash Wednesday liturgy, when priests sign a cross with ashes on the foreheads of those attending Mass or Eucharist with the words ‘from dust you came, to dust you will return,’ or in the celebrations of the Mexican Day of the Dead festival, which draws on pre-Columbian as well as Catholic rituals of remembrance.

This idea of consciously reflecting on death is also found beyond the School of Life in other non-religious cultures, such as the Death Cafés movement, which was started in 2011 by Hackney-based former council worker Jon Underwood, inspired by

¹⁰ From <http://www.theschooloflife.com/shop/memento-mori-paperweight-sea/> (accessed 23 December 2015)

the *Café Mortel* pioneered by Swiss sociologist Bernard Crettaz.¹¹ Death cafés are largely pop-up meetings, run as a social franchise rather than for profit, and have spread across Europe, North America, and Australasia, with meetings having been held in 29 countries. ‘At a Death Café people, often strangers, gather to eat cake, drink tea and discuss death’, the Death Café website states.¹² When I interviewed Jon Underwood, he described their shared objective as ‘to increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their finite lives’. He said that some of the people who attend the cafés do have a belief in life after death, but that the groups didn’t tend to focus on discussing those, as ‘generally, it’s fairly unproductive territory, because people have their view, it’s quite strongly held, and that’s that’. Resonating with the avoidance of ‘dogma’ in the approaches taken to life at Riverside, the Sunday Assembly and the School of Life, Underwood said that they don’t seek to offer one way of dealing with death: ‘We don’t have any answers... We might suggest some things, and we might know of resources, but the only answers are people’s own.’

The popularity of death cafés might be seen as in one sense a response to a widespread cultural denial or avoidance of death in contemporary secular societies. Ernest Becker argued in *The Denial of Death* that death is so terrifying that we don’t want to think about it: ‘the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity – activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man’ (1973: xvii). Simmel likewise suggests that much of life might be defined as *Todesflucht*, a ‘fleeing from death’ (cited in Pyyhtinen 2012: 94). While religions have often been seen as denials of death, the acknowledgement of death – and of the fear of death – that animates many religious practices and the death cafés might perhaps also be seen as often bound up with the desire to become oriented towards the fullness of life, an inhabiting of and affirming of life in the present. Indeed, awareness of life perhaps requires, as Simmel argues, ‘death as its opposite, its “other”’ (cited in Pyyhtinen 2012: 87). While conflicting beliefs about death and teachings on the potential horrors or blessings of an afterlife tend to figure prominently in oppositional relations between the religious and the non-religious, practices of attending to the fact

¹¹ See <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/features/take-me-to-the-death-cafe> (accessed 23 December 2015).

¹² From <http://deathcafe.com/what/> (accessed 23 December 2015).

of mortality across religious and non-religious cultures provide an alternative mode of connection and a means of acknowledging shared existential grounds of what it is to be human.

Conclusion

In this brief sketch of modes of engaging with ideas of life and death, we can see that although the terms may carry different resonances in particular contexts, attending closely to concepts such as these that are prominent across religious and non-religious cultures may help deepen understanding of affinities between groups that we are often tempted to treat as separate. Although the discursive strategies of particular religious and non-religious groups are often acts of distancing from another culture, in each act of ‘othering’ there is also, as Simmel highlights, a haunting by the possibility of connection, and these modalities of otherness, separation, and desire raise important questions about the kinds of subjectivity and experience these relations enable and foreclose. Studying these modes of interrelationality can help us draw more precisely into focus the question of what is delimited as ‘the religious’ in everyday social life, in which engagement with ideas of life and death figure prominently, for example, and thus often continue to permeate non-religious cultures.

Theologian Philip Goodchild argues that the ‘death of God’ in contemporary society and culture affects the believer and unbeliever alike, and that the philosopher of religion therefore has to be concerned with the conditions under which the mind is set in motion. He questions whether the concept of life might set the mind in motion, and suggests that this would require ‘an attention to life... and the thinking of life would also be the life that thinks, the awakening thought that arises from the swirling depths of consciousness and expresses its vital power in thought itself’ (Goodchild 2012: 174). He goes on to question whether the concept of life might perhaps today fulfil functions formerly attributed to God:

it replaces God, or rather, as a biblical and philosophical name for God, the concept is one of the few acceptable names under which God can be thought outside of the confines of institutional religion, in all God’s transcendence, immanence and inspiration. If life does play such a role, then perhaps our sharpest divisions are not between theists or atheists, nor between participants and non-participants in religious practice, but would arise from the thinking that undergirds our ways of life. For the substitution of concepts such as ‘God’ and ‘life’ are less significant than our frameworks of thinking insofar as these

constrain or enable us to perceive reality, to touch it, participate in it and live it. (Goodchild 2012: 174)

Following Goodchild, attending to different ways of engaging with life and death, and the existential and ethical effects of these, cuts across the religious/nonreligious and theistic/nontheistic/atheistic divides that have so often focused on the propositional contents of beliefs about life, death, and im/mortality.

Attending to practical, lived engagements with concepts of life and death might open up not only modes of connection between the religious and the non-religious, but also more nuanced understanding of common human concerns with what it means to live a good life within the limits of human finitude, and of what it means to be human. The concept of 'natality' might here also provide a useful further point of connection. Hannah Arendt argues that it is natality, rather than mortality, which reorients our social imaginaries to fully perceive our human interconnectedness, as our being born means being welcomed into a whole 'web of human relationships which is, as it were, woven by the deeds and words of innumerable persons, by the living as well as the dead' (Arendt, cited in Jantzen 1998: 149).

Exploring engagements with life and death might also entail, following Foucault and Agamben, examining the ways in which some lives come to count for more or less in specific contexts. As the anthropologist Veena Das describes, we can see the dangers of modes of dehumanization 'as if stitched into everyday life when one withholds recognition from the other, not simply on the grounds that she is not part of one's community but that she is not part of life itself.' (2007: 16). In Europe, this is a question of particular contemporary relevance as we witness a proliferation of dehumanizing framings of migrant lives associated with the swelling of far-right political movements in Europe and elsewhere. And we can also see how the concept of 'life' can provide a means of resistance to such discourses, for example, in the Migrant Lives Matter movement. Further reflection on the varieties of ways in which people reflect on and engage with 'life' and its interrelations with mortality thus has the potential to help us understand better the kinds of practices and orientations that unite (as well as divide) us from each other across religious and non-religious cultures, and might encourage a deeper affirmation of, appreciation of and attentiveness to life and its wonders, as well as acknowledgement of its struggles and tragedies. As Mary Oliver expresses this in *Red Bird*:

Instructions for living a life:
Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it. (cited in Moody and Shakespeare 2012: 176).

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