

The River of Life

'An individual human existence should be like a river – small at first, narrowly contained within its banks, and rushing passionately past boulders and over waterfalls. Gradually the river grows wider, the banks recede, the waters flow more quietly, and – in the end – without any visible break, they become merged in the sea, and painlessly lose their individual being. The man or woman who, in old age, can see his or her life in this way, will not suffer from the fear of death, since the things they care for will continue.'

Bertrand Russell, How to Grow Old

The humanist philosopher **Bertrand Russell** describes the way our lives are all part of something bigger than ourselves. We are all part of the human story. His words help to illustrate the humanist belief that, even though there is no afterlife, the way we live can continue to have an impact on other people and the world after we are gone. In this sense, something of us does survive our death. We should therefore think carefully about how we choose to live our lives and what we might leave behind.

- 1) After our bodies break down, our **atoms** will go on to form other things, including new life.
- 2) Our **genes** can live on in our children and grandchildren (if we have them).
- 3) Our **actions** and **ideas** can live on in the memories of others. We have an impact on other people while we are alive, and that impact lives on after we die.
- 4) Our **works** and **contributions** may live on after we die. This could include the words we have written, things we have created, or our influence on society.

Activity

Think about Russell's description of the river of life. Look at the pictures of rivers to inspire you. Draw the river of your own life and fill it with words and images that are important to you.

Questions to think about:

- 1) What direction has your river taken? Have there been any changes along the way?
- 2) What have been the waterfalls you have rushed over with excitement and the dams and blockages that have slowed you down?
- 3) What other rivers has your river crossed and woven with?
- 4) Where would you like your river to go in the future? What do you want it to be filled with?
- 5) What might you contribute to other people's lives and to society? What would you like to leave behind?

Understanding questions

- 1) How might a humanist believe something of us can survive our death?
- 2) What contributions can individuals make that will continue after they are gone?
- 3) How might the potential impact of our choices and actions influence how a humanist might say we should live?

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