

WHAT SURVIVES? A HUMANIST PERSPECTIVE

“When the consciousness we know as life ceases, I know that I shall still be part and parcel of the world. I was a part before the sun rolled into shape... I shall still exist in substance when the sun has lost its fire. Why fear? The stuff of my being is matter, ever changing, ever moving, but never lost... I am one with the infinite and need no other assurance”

ZORA NEALE HURSTON, author



Humanists believe that even though death is the end of our individual existence, something of us can survive our death.

1. After our bodies break down, our **atoms** will go on to form new things.
2. Our **genes** can live on in our children and other descendants if we have them.
3. Our **actions, thoughts, and ideas** can live on in the **memories** of others.
4. Our **works** may survive us: this could include the words we have written, things we have created, or contributions to society we have made.

ATOMS

Once we have died, the atoms that make up our bodies will return to the Earth. An increasing number of people today are considering a ‘natural’ burial, in which one is buried in a biodegradable coffin and one’s body can support the growth of new life. The chemical elements inside us, created long ago inside stars, will go on to form new things once we are gone.

GENES

Something of us continues in our children if we have them. Our genes, which are responsible for the way we look and which influence our personalities, will be passed on to the next generation. Many people, once they have children, see their children’s survival as more important than their own. Opportunities for life are limited. Should we see value in making space for others?

IDEAS, ACTIONS, WORKS

Every idea we share, everything we create, every impact we have on the people around us and on the world we live in can continue to have significance after we are no longer here. Our influence does not have to be grand or global to be meaningful. Even if it is small, it may still be significant to someone. We should therefore consider carefully how we choose to live our lives. We are individuals, but we are also part of something bigger. This can be a source of comfort following the death of a loved one as we reflect on how they live on in our memories and the memories of others.

‘A little while and you will be nobody, nowhere... Nature’s Law is that all things change and turn, and pass away, so that in due order different things may come to be.’

MARCUS AURELIUS, philosopher

*‘I am the family face;
Flesh perishes, I live on,
Projecting trait and trace
Through time to times anon,
And leaping from place to place,
over oblivion.’*

THOMAS HARDY, poet

*‘I fall asleep in the full and certain hope
That my slumber shall not be broken;
And that, though I be all-forgetting,
Yet shall I not be all-forgotten,
But continue that life in the thoughts and deeds of those I loved.’*

SAMUEL BUTLER, poet

‘No one is finally dead until the ripples they cause in the world die away, until the clock wound up winds down, until the wine she made has finished its ferment, until the crop they planted is harvested. The span of someone’s life is only the core of their actual existence.’

TERRY PRATCHETT, author



QUESTIONS

- What would you most like to be remembered for after you are gone?
- How might the recognition that something of us survives our deaths affect how we live?