
MONOLOGUES AND DIALOGUES

ON TIME AND ETERNITY

By Robert Rees



If I have to live forever, let me do it one stretch at a time.
Give me my immortality in doses.

*Time is but the stream I go a fishing in.
I drink at it; but while I drink I see the
sandy bottom and detect how shallow
it is. Its thin current slides away,
but eternity remains. I would drink
deeper; fish in the sky whose bottom
is pebbly with stars.*

—Thoreau

What's freedom for? To know eternity.

—Theodore Roethke

ETERNITY IS ONE of those ideas that sounds great until you take time to really think about it. I mean, who could be against living forever? Eternity is probably an idea that has greater attraction when you have just

ROBERT REES is a former editor of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* and is currently the bishop of a single adult ward in Los Angeles.

fallen in love or are just about to die, but most of the time, at least for me, it's pretty scary.

I've never had much experience with madness, but sometimes when I wake up in the middle of the night and start thinking about eternity and can't shake it from my consciousness, I feel like I might actually go mad. Perhaps this is because the idea of going on and on, forever and ever, and not ending is ultimately impossible to grasp. Not ever to end! It is really as frightening, if not more so, than ending. That is, there are lots of people who don't believe in a life hereafter who seem perfectly content about it. More content than I sometimes am with the idea of eternity. They just figure that they live their lives, and then it ends. It was great while it lasted, they feel, but nothing lasts forever, does it? But we believe it *does* last forever, and at times I can't hold on to that realization without feeling that I can't stand it.

I have only met a few people in my life who react the same way I do to the thought of eternity—or at least only a few who have been willing to admit it. I remember my son Maddox coming into my bedroom in the middle of the night when he was four or five. He was crying and when I asked him what the matter was he said, "I was just thinking. You wake up and go to bed and wake up and go to bed, over and over and over, and it never ends. It's so scary." He started to cry again. Pulling him into bed and putting my arms around him, I said, "Maddy, I really know how you feel. I feel that way myself sometimes."

It is not that I don't want to live forever, it's just that the idea of always living frightens me. Is it really possible for us to think of something that has no end? Everything we know, time-bound as we are, Time's fools as we are condemned to be, concludes somewhere, some time. We know beginnings and endings. We even think of our eternal "beginning" as starting somewhere. Oh, we were something called "intelligences" before we were who we are, but our creation or organization as individual spirits or personalities began somewhere when we were spiritually begotten of heavenly parents. It is hard to conceive of ourselves as always existing, because that would make us co-existent with God. On one level we believe this, but I don't think we ever feel it, not really.

When I was in the mission field a visiting authority explained to a group of us missionaries how much more logical were the Church's ideas about the divine origin and eternal nature of our existence than were the concepts of people who believed that we came out of some primordial ooze and would vanish back into the earth at death. This belief was so patently absurd to the speaker that he laughed out loud at the idea of it. But I remember thinking as he talked that our concept that God had always existed was a lot harder to accept. If God didn't have a beginning and if he has existed as far back as anyone can imagine before madness starts to creep in, then things have been going on forever. No beginning. No end. That's hard to believe, impossible, at least for me, to comprehend.

If I were in charge of things, I would give people the option. Let them decide how long they wanted to live and then let them die for a while. After so long they would be awakened (perhaps by someone who is living forever?) and asked if they would like to wake up and live or just go back to sleep. Me? I'd like to live for about ten million years and then end it for a couple of thousand or so, just to rest a bit.

When I was awakened I'd decide whether I'd need a couple thousand more years of rest by looking around and seeing what kind of condition the world was in. If we were just entering a period like the golden age of Byzantium or perhaps the Italian quattrocento, I might like to wake up and stick around for awhile. On the other hand, if a group of people were just getting ready to push a bunch of handcarts across some wilderness, I might elect to sit that one out. Or, if I had progressed to the state of being a god and I had a world as bad as this one, I might drop out for seven thousand years or so, leave the business up to the ministering angels or to those people who didn't quite make it into the top degree of the Celestial Kingdom but who were otherwise pretty good administrators. That is, if I have to live forever, let me do it one stretch at a time. Give me my immortality in doses.

There is only one thing that I can think of that makes eternity halfway palatable, and that's learning. When I contemplate all the time I would have in eternity, I think of how much fun it would be to learn everything. Maybe that's why it takes so long to become a god. When I consider how long it has taken me to learn the little bit of French I know, I think of how long it would take to learn Greek, Hebrew, Sanskrit, all the Germanic and Romance languages, to say nothing of Chinese, Hopi, and Finnish. And when I had finished with Finnish and all the other languages, I would learn how to write novels, poetry and plays in each one—that would take another good while, especially if I wanted to learn to write as well as Dante or Shakespeare. When I got the languages and literatures down, I would turn to math and science. It would probably take *me* a near eternity to learn quantum physics, microbiology or astrophysics, but it would be fun learning how things work. Next, I would take up music and learn all the instruments and all the musical systems (and perhaps even invent some new ones). How long would it take me to learn how to compose like Bach or Mozart? Or would I, by the limitations of talent and genius, be condemned to write endless second-rate compositions like Salieri? That would certainly make eternity less interesting. I'd rather die than be mediocre or bored.

Eternity is such a hard concept to grasp that we keep inventing absurd metaphors to understand it. I remember when I was young someone tried to get me to comprehend eternity by telling me that every thousand years a bird flew over the world's highest mountain with a silk scarf in its beak and brushed the top of the mountain and when that mountain had been worn to the ground by that process,

one second of eternity had passed. That seemed to work except when I started thinking about how birds would know how to do that and where the silk scarves came from, and how boring it would be to wait for that damned bird to come by every millennium.

My interest in eternity has increased as I have grown older. I suppose we cross a psychological boundary in relation to time when we realize that we have fewer years to live than we have already lived. Our mutability creeps into our consciousness and begins to

affect the way we see our days. Now that I hear time's winged chariot hurrying near, the idea of eternity is not quite as disturbing as it was when I was younger. I still don't understand it, and I still can't think about it very long, but it doesn't bother me quite as much as it used to. I guess that I have come to the conclusion that it will probably work out okay. If it doesn't, and I go mad trying to comprehend it, it won't matter, for with the mad as with God, there is no such thing as time. ☞

WHISPERS TO LAMAN

This day, as ever, I strain
to be heard, small one
listen, I
place delicate hands,
fearfully,
on a raw soul, brush
lips tender. Want
you to bloom, pregnant
with joy, will place
my cheek
to yours, you could feel
my breath, swirl 'round
your closed eyes.
Sympathy, I know
and will feed it
gently, as to a baby.

You knew
the pleasure of angels
in hard pews,
straight lines
formed of straight
words—did you not
praise me often
for a world
that spun slowly, easily
around a warm sun?

To be dragged
into a bleak
wilderness,
where intelligible cries
came from the dark,
the skies broke, and wings
of angels beat
feverishly,
frantically,
like hard, blind bats.
What else but to steel-plate your
self in a dark cocoon,
lash out with fire
and steely knives?

I wish to peel
the hard wax
from your eyes, wipe away
the encrusted grime;
these are my whispers
of salvation: I would
kiss your lips
until they blossomed rose-red;
I want your prayer breath again
and to place my hand
on your heaving chest.
Do you not see God,
quivering,
in the shadow of trees,
the crossing of clouds,
behind the bright sun?
I would plunge
into your steel depths
and soften your heart,
watch it melt.

I would wash you in water
until you sputtered
joy, I would press
you against rocks
until you knew the earth
pounding beneath you
and heard heavenly cries
in every call and whisper.

—PILAR A. STEWART