

## THE FULLNESS OF LIFE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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I hope you saw the front page of the science section of *The New York Times* on Tuesday. Two-thirds of the page was devoted to an astounding photograph of Atlas, an underground particle detector built by physicists at the European Center for Nuclear Research, or CERN, near Geneva. Atlas is a 7,000-ton behemoth, shaped like a long doughnut lying on its side, 80 feet in diameter and 150 feet long. It contains as much metal as the Eiffel Tower and thousands of miles of wire and cable. Atlas is one of four detectors that lie along a 17-mile circular underground particle accelerator known as the Large Hadron Collider. One of the other detectors in the collider, the 12,000-ton Compact Muon Solenoid, is the heaviest scientific instrument ever made.

Between the four detectors run twin tubes lined with superconducting magnets, which accelerate huge numbers of protons through the tubes. As the tubes cross within each detector, they produce the potential for some 30 million proton collisions per second. The detectors have been dubbed “sunken cathedrals” by one of the physicists, who says the detectors are poised to capture the holy fire that will erupt when protons collide. His statement is not exactly hyperbolic. The tiny fireballs of primordial energy will, scientists hope, recreate conditions that last prevailed when the universe was less than a trillionth of a second old.

If the Large Hadron Collider performs as expected, it may help answer one of the most fundamental questions about the universe. While physicists have identified many of the elementary particles that were produced by the Big Bang, they do not yet know how the particles came to have mass. Even today, scientists do not know where most of the mass in the universe is, or what form it takes. If the detectors in the collider are sensitive enough, they may identify the presence of something called a Higgs boson, a shadowy particle hypothesized by Scottish physicist Peter Higgs in 1964 to explain how particles might gather mass through interaction with each other.

It’s true that no one has yet seen a Higgs boson. For scientists, however, the search for the Higgs is a high-stakes gambit—and not just financially. As one physicist put it, “If the Higgs or something like it doesn’t exist, then some very basic things like quantum mechanics are wrong.” On the other hand, if the new collider at CERN is able to confirm Higgs’ theory, scientists may be closer to understanding not only the nature of mass, but also how the force of gravity relates to the other elementary forces in the universe.

As I gazed at the photograph of the Atlas detector, I was struck by the irony that easily the most massive and arguably the most complex scientific instrument ever designed has set its sights on a realm of existence that is both mysteriously elusive and hauntingly ephemeral. Even so, the elementary particles and forces that constitute our world are fundamental: they are the basis of everything. This is why thousands of physicists spend billions of dollars building sunken cathedrals to try to capture the

primordial holy fire. From a scientific perspective, it turns out that the most elusive and ephemeral realms of existence may also be the most important.

It occurs to me that this principle applies not only to physical forces, but also to human experience. When I consider the astoundingly complex machinery of human life—our homes, cars, schools, offices, televisions, Blackberries, cell phones—I ask myself what sort of experience all this sophisticated technology is designed to produce, or capture, or detect. Though we often act otherwise, the stuff we accumulate is clearly not an end in itself. Rather, it is the means by which we try to detect a holy fire that lies at the center of human life. Like Higgs' boson, the meaning of life is difficult. But it, too, is fundamental to our existence.

Among the spate of reviews accompanying publication of Hermione Lee's new biography of Edith Wharton, I came across one (admittedly long) sentence from Wharton's short story titled "The Fulness of Life." The sentence reads: "I have sometimes thought that a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms: there is the hall, through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawing room, where one receives formal visits; the sitting-room, where the members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors perhaps are never turned; no one knows the way to them, no one knows whither they lead; and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes."

One of the questions posed by Wharton in her story is what would fill the holy of holies if someone or something did come to occupy it. Most of the story takes place in the afterlife, when the unnamed central character awakens after dying and discovers that death is not the end after all. She finds herself in an exquisitely beautiful landscape upon a sunlit plain, with a silver crescent of a river in the valley, a blue stenciling of trees along its curve, and mountains beyond. Wharton writes:

Her gaze lost itself in the ethereal remoteness of the mountains.

"How beautiful! How satisfying!" she murmured. "Perhaps now I shall really know what it is to live."

As she spoke she felt a sudden thickening of her heart-beats, and looking up she was aware that before her stood the Spirit of Life.

"Have you never really known what it is to live?" the Spirit of Life asked her.

"I have never known," she replied, "that fulness of life which we all feel ourselves capable of knowing; though my life has not been without scattered hints of it, like the scent of earth which comes to one sometimes far out at sea."

"And what do you call the fulness of life?" the Spirit asked again.

"Oh, I can't tell you, if you don't know," she said, almost reproachfully. "Many words are supposed to define it—love and sympathy are those in commonest use, but I am not even sure that they are the right ones, and so few people really know what they mean."

As the Spirit of Life continues to question her about her unhappy life, and especially about her unfulfilling relationship with her husband, it becomes clear that the

woman had indeed experienced scattered hints of the fullness of life. The Spirit queries her further. When such experiences came your way, to what influence did you owe those exquisite sensations? She responds: “I can hardly tell. Sometimes to the perfume of a flower; sometimes to a verse of Dante or of Shakespeare; sometimes to a picture or a sunset, or to one of those calm days at sea, when one seems to be lying in the hollow of a blue pearl; sometimes, but rarely, to a word spoken by someone who chanced to give utterance, at the right moment, to what I felt but could not express.”

Whatever the cause of her feeling of fullness, the effect on her was always immediate and profound. On the rare occasions when the feeling was produced by a person, she says, the person “touched for an instant upon a certain chord of my being, and called forth a single note of that strange melody which seemed sleeping in my soul.” Another time she found herself in a church in Florence just before sunset during Easter week. Standing there, she was transfixed by the mystic light, the transcendent beauty of the marble and wood, and the indescribable silence of contemplation. She reports, “I felt myself borne onward along a mighty current, whose source seemed to be in the very beginning of things, and whose tremendous waters gathered as they went all the mingled streams of human passion and endeavor.”

Edith Wharton is on to something. Most of the time, we act as if the fullness of life is an issue of quantity. If it were, then the meaning of our lives would be determined by the amount of stuff in them—the number of appointments in our calendars, for example, or rooms in our homes, or channels on our televisions, or songs on our iPods, or cylinders in our cars. But the number of rooms in the house doesn’t much matter if the central room, the holy of holies, is empty.

Instead, the fullness of life is a qualitative issue. The question is not how many conversations we have in a day, but whether one of them strikes a chord deep in our hearts. Nor is it how many rooms we have in our house, but whether one of them is a place where our souls find solace and peace. The perfume of a flower, the sound of a melody, the sight of a sunset: these can give us an inexplicably satisfying sense of knowing what it means to live.

Will the Large Hadron Collider help us discover this kind of knowledge? For my part, I believe it will. The scientists at CERN seek knowledge that will expand our understanding of how things fit together and what part we play in the cosmic drama. When we look into a dark sky on a clear night, I believe it matters whether we know what is there and how we fit in. Science can make our understanding of the physical world and our place in it more complete, and therefore more satisfying. The word “complete,” by the way, comes from the same ancient root as the word “full.”

For us as individuals, an equally satisfying sense of fullness comes in those fleeting moments when we experience our own lives as complete. It usually comes when our attention is captured by the kind of singular experience Edith Wharton describes—the perfume of a flower, the cadence of a poem, the color of a sunset, or the feeling that comes over us when someone says what we feel but cannot express. These experiences give us a sense of what it truly means to live, if only for an instant. We somehow feel as if our world is complete, and we are whole within it.

Experiences like these do not come easily or by accident, however. Like Higgs particles, detecting their presence requires disciplined attention. That’s one reason we gather here each week for worship. Perhaps we should think of this sanctuary as a giant

detector of life's meaning and fullness. We listen to sublime music in order to detect the rhythm of eternity and the presence of God. We ponder inspired readings in order to detect the wisdom of the ages. In prayer, we listen for the brokenness in our hearts and in our world. In silence, we listen for our deepest longings in the presence of the Spirit of Life. What we seek here, and often find, is a sense that life is complete and whole—that all of our experience is accounted for, if only for an hour.

But one hour a week is not enough. One hour of fullness cannot make up for 167 hours that are merely stuffed with activity. For this reason, I believe we need to find a way to detect this spirit of wholeness throughout the week. I have two suggestions for how this can happen.

The first is that you designate a place of sanctuary at home. I'm not talking about building a chapel on the corner of your estate (though you shouldn't tear it down if you have one), but rather an architectural moment somewhere in your home that reminds you to look and listen for the fullness of life. It may be a favorite chair with a book of poetry alongside, or a photograph of a place that reminds you what it means to live, or a tiny sand garden, or a small array of scented candles. Whatever form it takes, it should interrupt your hurried rush from one room of your life to the next and remind you that a sanctuary lies at the center of your being. There the fullness of life will come to you.

My second suggestion is that you find a way to carry a sense of fullness with you when you are neither at church or at home. This is more difficult, because it means training ourselves to think and live differently. It means pausing once in a while to watch the play of light and shadow on a puddle or pond. It means greeting a friend with a genuine welcome or a stranger with an attentive smile. It means sharing a colleague's disappointment or a neighbor's grief. To be sure, it takes discipline to remember that life rewards those who pay attention to fleeting moments of meaning and fullness. But nothing in life is more worthwhile.

I hope they find the Higgs boson, or some particle like it. But more than that, I hope each of us discovers what it means truly to live. It happens when we look at a flower and realize that life is good, or gaze at a star and realize that we are part of it all. It happens when our help brings healing or our presence brings solace. For a moment, we feel strangely and wonderfully alive. We feel whole and complete. Sometimes the most fleeting of experiences turns out to be the most satisfying.