

It's only a number...

by Ian Woodley

Is age only a number? Perhaps. But why do so many people wonder what happens when their number is up?

I've just clocked up my fiftieth year. Trained as an accountant, I have told the story behind numbers for most of my working life. I have analysed the results of departments and companies, trying to understand what their published numbers represent. Then recently a simple number caught me by surprise. Fifty. Yes, just 5-0—fifty.

I felt ambushed by this small value. Why? I've never paid much attention to my age before. I never felt angst at 30 or 40. But on this occasion, my analytical side caught up with me—I have clearly lived more than half of my potential lifespan. Maybe I will get to 100, but the odds are against me. Especially when I remember that my Dad died before his 70th birthday.

If there is an afterlife, then perhaps my analytical side would put all this into a new perspective. Indeed, the old Christian hymn “Amazing Grace”, which I have sung at a couple of funerals, gives an interesting thought. The writer, John Newton, refers to 10,000 years being a mere drop in the ocean of time that would begin in the life that follows death. This hymn gives a Christian take on the afterlife that I personally find satisfying. But other versions of life after death have been proposed, ranging from the Vikings' Valhalla to the mysterious ghostly life of old Jedi, as seen in the Star Wars saga.

Of course, there are some who suggest that this life is all there is; when you die, you just end up being



fertiliser for the daisies. Someone I know well vacillates between two contrasting views. Often they think there can't be a heaven as it “would be terribly crowded” (as they put it). But then when they talk of their spouse, who passed away a few years ago, they are always described as “looking down on us”. And that got me thinking: I feel that having a belief in an afterlife brings hope. You may well disagree with me on the specifics of such matters, but if you think that there is life after death, then you have something to look forward to. I certainly have something to look forward to. In that sense, both you and I have an inner hope that gives me energy for today.

Perhaps you look forward to seeing loved ones who have passed away? I certainly want to catch up with my Dad. I find this gives me encouragement,

that the pain of missing him is only temporary, even if I do live for another 50 years. This is why I think my friend vacillates between two views. The first view (no heaven) offers only the pain of loss. The second view (some kind of heaven) places balm on their wounds, that one day they will meet their spouse again. And that makes everything worthwhile. Personally, I think there are only a few convinced atheists in the world. Most people without faith are agnostic: they don't see evidence for an afterlife, but don't want to rule it out. Why would you? Although vague, even agnostic views supply a little hope. If I may be bold: if you are agnostic, why not check out why the Christian faith has such a strong view of life after death? You may not be convinced, but you may just find that your hope is a little bit stronger than before. I miss my Dad, but my hope in an afterlife brings much soothing balm to my soul.