

Weekly Zoroastrian Scripture Extract # 197 – A Psalm Of Life by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow - words to live by - Stanzas 1 - 4!

Hello all Tele Class friends:

Growing up in our beloved M. F. Cama Athornan Institute, we were blessed by having unbelievably dedicated, humble, enthusiastic, knowledgeable teachers like Kantilal, Daruwalla, Sanjana, Sidhwa, Patel Sahebs. They barely made their living but never complained about it. What we all are today, we owe to these wonderful teachers.

Daruwalla Saheb was our teacher of English and he taught us from the prescribed books of prose and poetry with backgrounds about the authors, their lives, the circumstances under which they wrote the prose and poetry, etc., a well rounded knowledge of the lesson at hand. Many of the poems we had to learn by heart.

One of my favorite was always: **A Psalm of Life by that amazing American Poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow!**

(please see the attached for the complete poem)

This was not just a poem to me as taught by Daruwalla Saheb. This was a poem to be used to spend our day to day life!

The poem has 9 stanzas. We will cover the first 4 today and the rest in our next WZSE this Friday so as to give you the full poem.

I have selected the following website for the poem and its background and its analysis stanza by stanza.

<https://englicist.com/summary-analysis/a-psalm-of-life-longfellow-summary>

A Psalm of Life: About the Poem

“A Psalm of Life” is an inspiring poem written by the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The poem was **first published** in the October 1838 issue of The Knickerbocker or New-York Monthly Magazine, a magazine published in the New York City.

A psalm is a religious or sacred song or hymn, in particular any of those contained in the biblical Book of Psalms and used in Christian and Jewish worship. But here **the meaning** of “a psalm of life” is a song of life, where the poet glorifies life and its possibilities.

It is an invocation to mankind to follow the path of righteousness, the right way to live this life. (added color and accent by me)

The poem is **didactic** (moralistic) in tone.

The poem ‘A Psalm of Life’ often takes the subtitle “**What the Heart of the Young Man Said to the Psalmist**”. This is very important in suggesting the context of writing this poem. Here, the speaker (a young man) responds to the Biblical teachings that this human life is not important and that we are made of dust and eventually return to dust. So, we may take it as a psalm in response to a psalm.

In the poem, A Psalm of Life, the poet sees life from **an optimistic outlook**. To him this life is full of possibilities, as we can achieve higher goals by making the full use of our time and by working hard, and of course, by keeping faith in the power and potential of life. He does not have faith in those who hold the pessimistic view of life. Throughout the entire poem, the poet Longfellow conveys his view of life, instructs the readers to make the most out of this life, and inspires us to participate in the work and activity of life. (My Comment: same as the outlook of life taught by our Prophet Zarathushtra!)

The poem consists of nine stanzas of four lines. The poem is also lyrical in nature. The **rhyme scheme** followed is A B A B, where the last words of the first line and the third line rhyme, and alternatively the second and the fourth line rhyme in each stanza.

A Psalm of life: Summary and Line-by-Line Analysis

**(1) Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream!
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.**

(Instead of me reciting the poem and attaching the audio file, I have selected to use a very moving presentation by a Reverend whose family migrated to USA from Barbados, West Indies, during the most difficult of times, the Great Depression Years. The family, as you can imagine, suffered many hardships, taunts, etc. but they survived in spite of all the difficulties. The mother wanted to visit one last time their ancestral village and home in Barbados and the Reverend, the eldest son, takes her there. He roams through the village and sits on a tomb stone of his ancestors and recites this poem with some background. So, here is the background and the recitation of the poem by Rev. Michael Haynes at:

http://www.favoritepoem.org/poem_APsalmofofLife.html)

The poem begins with a verb 'Tell' in an imperative manner. And the very first sentence strikes the positive keynote of the poem. It also indicates that the poet is going to give us some instructions on what this life actually is and how we should take it. The poet asks us not to tell him in sorrowful verses that life is a hollow and meaningless dream. Here Longfellow slams the pessimists who sing melancholy songs, write sad poems, or thinks that nothing can be achieved in this life. According to the poet, a person who spends all his time sleeping is already dead. Such worthless examples of life often misguide others. And he assures that life is not so shady or worthless as it looks like, and it has much more potential than we think of.

**(2) Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust thou returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.**

The second stanza begins with the line, 'Life is real! Life is earnest!' This also conveys the poet's positive attitude towards life. According to him life is real and serious, not baseless or useless. So we should not take this life lightly. To him, grave is not the ultimate goal of life; life does not end with death. He wants to indicate that our works remain in this world even after our death. He thinks, "Dust thou art, to dust thou returnest" (You are made of dust, and you

will go back to dust after death) is only spoken of the body and it is not applicable to the soul. So the poet makes it clear that he believes in the existence of the soul after our death.

**(3) Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each to-morrow
Find us farther than to-day.**

The third stanza of A Psalm of Life is about the ideal way of living. The poet suggests that neither enjoyment, nor sorrow should be our ultimate aim or way of life. He means to say that in an ideal life there should be both enjoyment and sorrow in a balanced way. But that is not crucial. The most important thing is to work, and work diligently so that we can always be a better-learned, better-skilled and better-mannered human being with every passing day. The poet in The Psalm of Life doesn't want us to waste even a single day. We should crave for going forward farther each day in our journey of life.

**(4) Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.**

The fourth stanza of the poem A Psalm of Life is about our responsibilities in this life, about the work assigned to us. "Art is long, and Time is fleeting" means that the work given to us is vast and time consuming, but the time is running away fast with every moment. The poet then says that though our hearts are brave and stout at other times, we fear death and our heart beats when we realize that Death is certainly coming our way bit by bit. Longfellow compares this situation of our heart to the beating of the clothed drums at the funeral marches to the grave. Here he means to say that we should utilize our limited time span to the fullest instead of wasting it in the thought of death or other such thing.

So, going through this poem, we now realize [how inspiring and motivating this poem has been](#). The poet conveys his message all over the poem. But I feel, the first two lines, and the very last line of the poem are enough to give an impression of what this poem is all about: we should not spend our priceless moments sitting idly and doing nothing, rather we have to work hard towards reaching our goal and to make the most out of this short life.

SPD Explanation:

1. This is the most famous poem of Longfellow.
2. The poem points to some Zarathushtri principles like righteousness, fighting the evil and be victorious, helping mankind even after death, etc.
3. In stanza 4, the poet beautifully compares our beating heart to muffled drums used during a funeral march!

May the Flame of Fellowship, Love, Charity and Respect for all burn ever eternal in our hearts so we can do HIS work with humility, diligence and eternal enthusiasm!

Atha Janyaat, Yatha Aafrinaamahi! (May it be so as we wish!)

(Aafrin Pegaamber Zartosht, from [Ervad Kangaji Gujarati Khordeh Avesta Baa Maaeni](#) – Page 424, adapted Aafrinaamahi - we wish instead of Aafrinaami – I wish, in the original)

Love and Tandoorasti, Soli