

Beyond the Brain VIII: Self and Death – What Survives?

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**Conference held by the Scientific and Medical Network in association
with the Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group**

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Fourteen years ago we gathered at St John's College Cambridge for the first Beyond the Brain conference. The powerful impetus generated on that occasion has fuelled further meetings every other year, three in all last century and five this. So this year's event marks the beginning of a second set of seven, providing an apposite moment to take stock. Has the cultural climate shifted? Were topics and themes discussed this year that could not have featured 14 years ago? Do we now have a clearer and more complete map of the territory that lies 'beyond the brain', or indeed beyond the grave? Can we speak of progress?

At first glance we might note with satisfaction the contrast between the titles of the first and eighth Conferences: *New Avenues in Consciousness Research* and *Self and Death – What Survives?* One cautious and non-specific, the other much more focussed and daring to assume the fact of survival.

But then some of us may recall that opening address in 1995 by Willis Harman, then President of the Institute of Noetic Sciences, who so sadly died between the first and second Conferences. He had written extensively about what he called the new metaphysical foundations of modern science. At that first Conference he talked about the need to change the assumptions and presuppositions that make up the 'central myth' of our culture, but to change it wisely, without falling back into superstition. He described the beginnings of a unifying vision that might draw together emerging findings in, for example, the understanding of the causal efficacy of consciousness and the role of non-local effects in psychical research, with the already established discoveries of science.

Against this background we may wonder whether we can speak of progress. What today are our metaphysical foundations? Do we have a coherent, or indeed an evolving, 'central myth'? How far on are we with the journey that brings us closer to a unifying vision? So let us return to the eighth Conference.

To anticipate a little my conclusion, the physical setting for this meeting was curiously appropriate to its content. We arrived on a showery Friday afternoon to face daunting difficulties in locating reception, the accommodation, the dining hall, the lecture theatre; all spread over three separate sites. Especially if elderly or disabled, as many were, getting from place to place, even later during the weekend when we hoped we knew where we were going, was often a lengthy and frustrating procedure. A signposting for disabled access led no further than to a long featureless corridor. Room

numbering failed to conform to the conventional integer sequence. Vast windows gave sudden provocative glimpses of a distant and unattainable city clustered round its cathedral, far below and bathed in damp sunshine. Yet as it turned out the accommodation was comfortable, the food particularly tasty, the lecture hall quite satisfactory, the format and presentations of high quality (thanks - for the eighth time - to our indefatigable Programme Director David Lorimer), the technical and general arrangements excellent (thanks to Martin Redfern and Charla Devereux), and the city was Canterbury, for some of us the spiritual centre of England.

Following custom, on the first evening **David Lorimer** introduced the topic before enabling the speakers to introduce themselves. He noted, following Freud, our inability to envision our own death, an event that Freud as an atheist took to imply extinction, though many at this conference might regard it as a process of transition or even transformation. Much evidence suggested enhancement rather than diminution of awareness once the body had dropped away.

The following morning we enjoyed a lucid and balanced presentation of some of that evidence by **Professor Bruce Greyson**, Director of the Institute of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia. Belief in post-mortem survival is based not on wishful thinking but on much experiential evidence. Founded forty years ago by Dr Ian Stephenson, his Institute continues to amass data relating to previous lives of people now living, to people now dead who continue to manifest to the living, and to the independence of the mind from the brain, including near death experiences. He outlined some of Dr Stephenson's meticulous work with young children who manifest cognitive and personality characteristics of deceased people unknown to them, sometimes including birthmarks and bodily features relating to the mode of death. He recounted striking examples of 'drop-in' apparitions who manifest unexpectedly through mediums with subsequently verified accounts of events quite unknown to those present. While evidence that mind may function separately from brain provides only indirect evidence of post-mortem survival, it is nonetheless a necessary if not sufficient condition - and it is there in profusion, from demented people who become lucid before death, through severe hydrocephalics with normal intelligence, to complex, vivid and verifiable NDEs while heart and brain are 'stopped' and the body is empty of blood.

One of the strengths of Professor Grayson's presentation lay for me in the depth of detail he gave to the tales he told, by many of which both he and his audience were visibly much moved. Our next speaker, **Dr Peter Fenwick**, impressed us rather with the range and variety of accounts he provided, drawn from his now extensive research into End of Life Experiences. He spoke of premonitions of death, death bed visitations and dreams, death bed scenes, cultural attitudes to death, readiness for death in relation to a 'life task', coincidences, and the odd behaviour of animals and of mechanisms such as clocks. He then turned to the hospital and hospice management of death, drawing on carers' accounts of ELEs: their initial difficulty and later relief at talking about these relatively common events with investigators and colleagues, and the lack of training for those who assist professionally at the process of death. Death is a profoundly spiritual experience, and yet its

significance both in itself and for life is still ignored and marginalised. The evidence he presented amply justified his plea that it should be brought into much clearer focus, both scientific and cultural; a plea we ignore at our peril.

However, as a commentator from the floor pointed out, neither of the first two speakers really addressed the question of the *nature* of that element of the self that survives. Certainly we have massive evidence that something survives, but how should we characterise it? In the afternoon **Dr Andrew Powell**, founder chair of the Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, which co-sponsored the conference, began to address this issue. Speaking calmly and clearly, he used his experience of past lives, both his own and those of patients, to illuminate the distinction between the mundane self, which as its name suggests is of the earth and dies with the body, and the soul self, which does not. Whether or not reincarnation is a reality, recollecting past lives can sometimes foster evolution and growth of the soul self, provided unfinished business is dealt with, reconciliation achieved, and the death itself worked through. His stance was gently pragmatic rather than dogmatic, reminiscent of the inclusive and pluralistic 'many spiritual worlds' approach of Jorge Ferrer rather than the more hierarchical and unitary 'perennial philosophic' construction of Ken Wilber.

After tea **Professor Betty Kovacs** continued the theme of personal disclosure in sharing with us some of the remarkable and enlightening experiences surrounding the death, in separate car accidents, of her mother, husband and son, all within a three year period. Following an early vision, she characterised herself as an academic who before these experiences was 'addicted to the rational mind', for ever requiring one more proof, one more demonstration of the spiritual nature of the universe. Her husband she described as initially a natural sceptic who could not understand or share those early experiences. Then a series of pre-cognitive dreams, waking visions and synchronicities, many shared between herself and her husband and involving the presence of her son after his death, transformed all of them, bringing to her the understanding that the whole universe is alive, alive with love. The miracle of death is that there is nothing but life, to paraphrase the title of her book. Concern about the earth in its current struggle to bring forth a new form of our species is reflected in the characteristics of many of the souls now coming to incarnation.

Some might consider that the contributor to the conference who provided the most satisfying and synthesising answer to the question posed by the title was **Sir John Tavener**. He also provided continuity, in that his composition of the piece of music we heard after dinner on Saturday was provoked by the striking conversation between him and musician **Paul Robertson** that took place on the Saturday evening two years ago at Beyond the Brain Conference VII at Bath. In introducing a recording of this recently premiered work, entitled *Towards Silence*, Paul told us of the serious indeed life-threatening illnesses that recently had struck both Sir John and himself, and from which Sir John is so sadly not yet fully recovered. The work comprises four movements that may be called Waking State, Dream State, Deep Sleep and Unity, and draws on the resources of four string quartets and a large Tibetan bowl. Listening to

it provided an indescribable yet fulfilling counterpoise to the words that overflowed around us for the rest of the weekend.

Next morning, Portuguese diplomat **Dr Anabela Cardoso** told us of her remarkable experiences with Instrumental TransCommunication (ITC). This it appears is a term referring to the emergence chiefly of voices against background noise in electronic devices such as radios. These phenomena are thought to be one way that people who have died attempt to communicate with us, the living. Although she found it somewhat difficult to convey the impact of her results, given that her examples were chiefly in Portuguese and necessarily within a noisy ambience, she provided a useful and interesting account of recent growth in this field. As Paul Devereux commented during questions, messages that emerge through the 'modulation' of steady noise have occurred through history, as far back if not further than oracles in ancient Greece whose utterances were to be heard in the little cave behind a waterfall.

Our last speaker was **Dr David Fontana**. His was the most systematic attempt to answer the question posed by our title, and indeed to describe the characteristics of the life that awaits the element of us that survives in the afterlife. He drew confidently and fluently on a very wide range of sources, from the great spiritual traditions through mediumistic accounts to experiences of his own with a playful poltergeist, painting a picture of an hereafter in which at least initially we retain our personal characteristics while we continue to absorb and benefit from the lessons of this world as we pass through the four lower planes of the hereafter. Our state of mind at the time of death may well significantly influence in what sort of place we find ourselves: violent death or suicide may tie the bewildered and distressed subject to the earth as a haunting spirit, trapped until they call for help. However, progression through the lowest planes of repentance and remorse (sometimes pictured as Hades or purgatory) will lead to the plane of illusion, where we meet with people of like mind to conjure up a world of our making and from which it may be that if we choose we can reincarnate; and then on further to the glorious plane of colour and to the formless planes beyond. 'In my father's house are many mansions' as David aptly quoted, and one might add don't get stuck in one room - the principle of non-attachment applies as much in the next world as in this: 'don't be attached to results; angels fly because they take themselves lightly'.

In addition to the formal sessions, we had the opportunity to debate Conference themes in small groups, and also enjoyed a partial and tantalising viewing of a documentary based on the Scole report, that concerns a long series of remarkable 'conversations' between a group of the living and a cohort of the dead.

In closing the conference David Lorimer remarked how natural it was for us to want to know a little of what may await us when we die. He hoped, though not it struck me with much confidence, that after this weekend we might have a better conception of the map of the territory that lies beyond the grave. My impression was that although the delegates generally much appreciated what they heard, and enjoyed the Conference, the individual presentations, however powerful and intriguing, lacked explicit coherence amongst

themselves and thus did not yet offer, to use Willis Harman's terms, an emergent unifying vision, much less a central myth. Rather like the physical arrangements, each element was good, even excellent, in itself but did not readily come together with the rest of the set-up to make a convenient and easily functioning whole. The difference, of course, is that the physical arrangements can be improved and given a little trouble a map devised to show their relationships clearly and unambiguously. My personal inkling is that *what lies beyond the brain and beyond the grave cannot be mapped because there is no territory*: after all 'territory' relates to the earth and to the persistence and consistency that the dimensions of space and time imply. This does not mean that we must do without a vision or a myth, nor does it deny that there was much implicit overlap between the different accounts, but it does suggest that we look towards Jorge Ferrer rather than Ken Wilber to be our guide: streams that feed the many-shored ocean of spirituality rather than quadrants and levels that tower progressively over each other; both/and logic rather than either/or.

So, in two years time I hope that we shall meet in a place where sleeping, eating and participating are located no more than a stone's throw apart, to discuss how we may preserve and nurture that ocean of spirituality rather than how we may clamber further up a possibly illusory and perhaps only too individual mountain of enlightenment.