

# **Beyond Death: Does Consciousness Survive?**

**Open Conference organised by the Royal College of Psychiatrists  
Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group  
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Report by Dr. Julian Candy

Strong and healthy growth fosters confidence. Our Special Interest Group has, in the space of four years, attracted almost 800 College members, and puts on three or four well attended internal meetings each year. This remarkable evolution not only indicates that the Group meets a hitherto unmet need within the College, but also suggests that our patients and the public at large may also regard the links between psychiatry and spirituality as a significant yet neglected area of concern. These considerations emboldened us to plan an open meeting and to advertise it widely, inviting not just other psychiatrists, but GPs, psychologists, other professionals, and as the attractive leaflet stated 'anyone who has an interest in the death process'.

Nonetheless, to run a successful open meeting was a new challenge, and the organisers were understandably apprehensive. In the event, some 300 registered for the meeting, and the original venue had to be changed to a larger one.

This was very encouraging, but what of the day itself? Was the topic suitable? Would the speakers address it to the satisfaction of the audience? Would the audience participate actively and engage the speakers in dialogue?

Our first speaker was Dr Andrew Powell, founder chair of the SIG. He emphasised the pervasive nature of our concern about death, inevitably enhanced in those facing physical or indeed mental illness in themselves or others close to them. While conventional science and our still generally mechanistic and materialistic worldview must regard religious claims that something lies beyond death as illusory, we cannot and should not neglect the evidence from numerous sources that our everyday world forms a part, and perhaps only a small part, of a multidimensional universe. In particular, physics is now beginning to confirm the claims long advanced by mystics concerning the power of intuition and of focused subjectivity. Those in the healing professions should be aware of these developments and of their power for transformation.

Dr Peter Fenwick, co-organiser of the meeting, gave us some of the recent and firmly based evidence that suggests that consciousness may persist after physical death. Near death experiences seem increasingly unlikely to be merely the product of the dying brain, and studies now being undertaken into the various phenomena that may arise about the time death point strongly in the same direction. He reported, in some detail, studies into the power of prayer and of intentionality, making it increasingly difficult to hold to the materialist assumption that individual consciousness is confined to the brain and to the body it inhabits. He left us to puzzle over the implications of the extraordinary results of the study of retrospective prayer published in the Christmas 2003 edition of the BMJ.

In a characteristically witty address, Canon Beaumont Stevenson, chaplain to a mental health trust, spoke daringly but we hope presciently

about 'collaborative enquiry' between science and spiritual traditions regarding what may follow death. He suggested that much may depend on our own intentionality at the time, and stressed the importance of compassion at this transition. Like Andrew he spoke also of modern physics and string theory in particular. (For me, these reflections blur the distinctions between analogy, modelling and 'reality': it's no longer clear which is the map and which is the territory).

After lunch Dr Roger Woolger presented some of his conclusions based on extensive study of the processes of dying, of the worlds we may inhabit after death, and of past life or integral regression therapy. He spoke of 'expanded body experiences' in which archetypal entities and themes emerge. Acknowledging the controversial nature of this work, he pointed to its potential to bring together once again psychology and metaphysics in its traditional sense. At times the volume of his material and the associated temptation to digress threatened to overwhelm him, but he succeeded in submitting to the demands of conventional clock time by taking only a little more than his allotted 90 minutes!

Questions and comments from the broadly drawn and lively audience, both after each speaker and in the final open session, were stimulating and on the whole not merely sceptical or dismissive (though who knows the thoughts and conclusions of those who remained silent). Many professionals wanted to debate the clinical relevance and significance of what they had heard, especially the issue of distinguishing between mystical and psychotic experiences. Lay people were eager to reveal their own experiences, which until now might be well have been dismissed or pathologised.

Almost all I spoke with agreed that the speakers were well chosen and that the day was enjoyable and well run. Dr Nicki Crowley chaired and co-organised the meeting, and deserved the appreciation of the audience, and I'm sure of the whole SIG membership, for a great deal of well-directed hard work.

In conclusion, a remarkable day, a groundbreaking day, tackling a theme that until this millennium would never have been openly discussed in such a place and before such an audience. An optimistic portent in troubled times.

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