

Beyond Death: Does Consciousness Survive?

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The meeting:

Death is a subject that touches humanity as a whole. Whether something lies beyond that which we ordinarily perceive is of interest to many people, not just psychiatrists. That is why this meeting was made open to any interested person, and in order to start to more fully explore this area, not all of our invited speakers were psychiatrists.

We aimed to provide an atmosphere of exploration and critical thought, together with an evidence base, in preference to setting up a debate with its inevitable distinctions between 'right' and 'wrong'. Clearly there were more perspectives than could be adequately addressed on the day, and the discussion provided as many questions as it did answers.

The meeting was able to bring about a dialogue between people and disciplines: psychiatry, psychotherapy, theology, mysticism, spirituality and science which, having studied the positive feedback from the 300 participants, seemed to provide a rich and inspiring matrix within which people could consider their own experiences.

Relevance to psychiatry:

Psychiatrists and other mental health professions work, amongst others, with people who are depressed and suicidal. This alienation and rejectedness has reached epidemic proportions in our society:

'The biggest disease today is not leprosy or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for and deserted by everybody'

Mother Theresa of Calcutta (1910-1997) from 'The Observer',
October 3rd 1971 UK

'Unipolar major depression will be the world's second most debilitating disease by 2020. As a cancer is a malignant growth, so depression is a malignant sadness.'

W. Christopher Murray, Head of Epidemiology, World Health
Organization from *The Economist*, December 19th 1998

This malignancy in various forms affects us all, directly or indirectly. It is the existential dilemma that psychiatrists face in their work every day. Life, death, a deep understanding of the nature of it and hence how to truly work with it, is not something for which our current Newtonian biomechanical paradigm has answers.

Neither is talking about or hoping for 'life after death' an adequate response to the grief and pain that follows separation and death. The denial of grief, like the denial of medicine's limitations, is at the cost of being able to evolve through the experience.

Ancient wisdom as a way forward?

There are ancient texts specifically dedicated to the problems of death and dying, which are referred to as 'Books of the Dead.' The oldest of these is the Egyptian Book of the Dead, based on a body of literature called the *Pert em hru*, while the best known of these documents is probably the Tibetan Book of the Dead (*Bardo Thodol*). From research into non-ordinary states of consciousness and near-death states (Grof 1994), it has become clear that these texts are actually maps of the inner territories of the psyche. This work opens up new vistas in terms of understanding the psyche and our potential to work experientially with it.

Despite our day- to-day preoccupation with securing our material future, few people living in Western society embark upon their own emotional soul-centred preparation for death and dying, which was an integral part of becoming a man or woman in ancient spiritual or cultural traditions.

The Native Americans cultivated fearlessness and awareness of death with a death chant throughout their adult lives. Hindu and Buddhist traditions offer daily practices of meditation and powerful mantras. Each tradition has developed and cultivated its own specific methods that are applicable to its own particular cultural 'personality'. There is a lesson for us in this diversity. We have no precedent for the culture that is developing in today's rapidly changing computerized information age, and we are not so culturally well defined or homogenous as our predecessors.

To quote Joseph Sharpe, in his book 'Living Our Dying':

It's no surprise that our spiritual life has not kept stride with our cultural evolution. In this time of changing millennia, our Western culture must discover and create practices to prepare for death and dying that are practical and workable in its uniquely modernized society.

We are talking about the importance of recognising levels of consciousness and reality beyond the material, physical and even psychological worlds. We are talking about making room for the Divine Mystery and Greater Process to live and breathe at the very centre of our mechanised lives.

Perhaps we as a culture, and psychiatry as a speciality, would do well to place more interest in modern consciousness research, and in regaining some of the deeper aspects of the perennial wisdom. In doing so, we might do more than try to avoid death and survive. We might evolve.

References:

- Grof S. (1994) *Books of the Dead: Manuals for Living and Dying*. New York: Thames and Hudson
- Sharpe J (1996) *Living our Dying: A Way to the Sacred in Everyday Life*. New York: Hyperion

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