

Consciousness Beyond Death?

Last year was a challenging one for me. Death came for not one, but a dozen of my friends and colleagues. I've spent a good deal of time since just trying to make sense of these losses. I can no longer pick up the phone and call my departed friends as I once did so regularly—or send a hurried email in order to keep in touch. Death, it seems, has cut me off from those who played such an important role in my life. Our communication, once so vital, is limited to a one-sided discourse. Or is it?

What happens when we die? Where does our consciousness go? Does it dissolve irretrievably into nothingness? Or does it continue to exist and develop, taking on some new and different form that can communicate with us in the living world? It would seem that the entire human adventure, with all its hopes, dreams, and ambitions, ends with a question mark, a mystery writ large.

Yet the mystery of survival can be explored with both critical distance and openness to relevant data—beginning, for instance, with what the world's great religious and spiritual traditions have reported about the possibility of postmortem survival.

Virtually all mystics, of all faiths, have maintained that human consciousness continues to exist in a disembodied condition after death. Some Taoist sages have claimed that just a few highly evolved spirits survive, while Hindu and Tibetan Buddhist yogis make strong arguments that all living creatures reincarnate. Considering such diverse beliefs, it is sensible to remain doubtful about the specifics of most pictures of postmortem existence.

Yet certain claims about survival of consciousness are founded on direct experience common to people with different beliefs about the afterlife. For example, individuals

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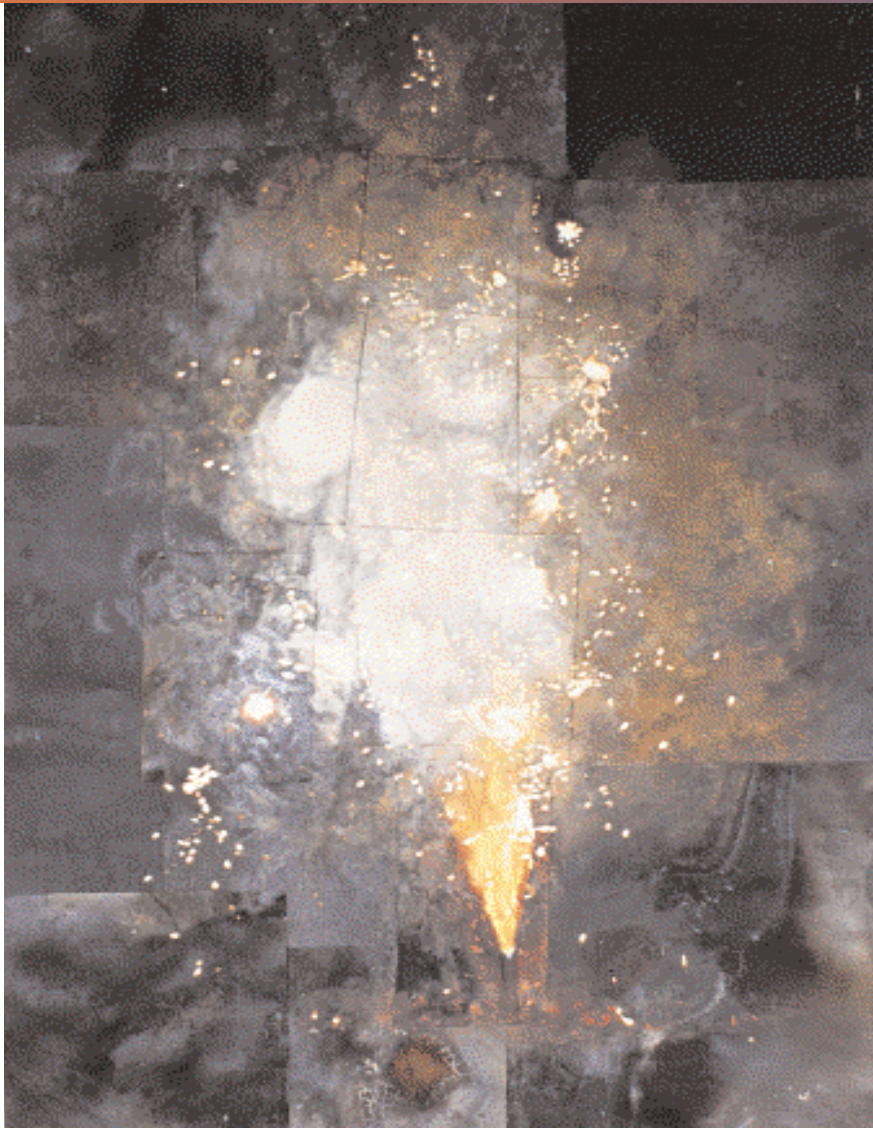
in many eras and cultures have enjoyed illuminations in which an eternal or immortal self was unequivocally apparent to them. "Some people imagine that they should see God, as if he stood there and they here," wrote Christian mystic Meister Eckhart. "This is not so. God and I, we are one in knowledge."

The practices of stone-age shamans, carried forth into today's few remaining shamanic cultures, are grounded in a belief that there are multiple levels of reality, multiple dimensions. By moving between various distinct existence domains, shamans assert, we can travel to the spirit world, identifying and connecting with our ancestors and the spirits of nature. Shamanism suggests that the line separating the living and the dead is arbitrary—less a hard edge than a common boundary.

Various domains of science also speak to the question of life after death—for example, the experimental work of psychologist Gary Schwartz at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Schwartz is testing several well-known mediums under controlled conditions to see if the mediums can accurately describe personal information about departed loved ones. In one of these studies, a medium was asked to contact a deceased person known to a client, but without the client being present so the medium could not adjust his or her reports based on the client's

S O F R E S E A R C H

DREW GALLOWAY. PHOTO: JEANNE CLAYTON



And the day came
when the risk it
took to remain
tight inside the
bud was more
painful than
the risk it took
to blossom.

ANNAIS NIN

verbal feedback or body-language cues. After the medium's reading, the client read several transcripts. One of the transcripts was the medium's report upon contacting the client's departed loved one, and the others would be similar readings conducted for other people. If mediums are really in contact with disembodied spirits, then clients should, on average, be able to select their session's transcripts more often than decoy transcripts. In repeated tests with different mediums and clients, this is precisely what Schwartz has found. Schwartz is now designing new

experiments to see whether mediums gain information through telepathy with the client rather than contact with the departed loved one.

In another interesting line of research, psychologist Arthur Hastings and his colleagues at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology used psychomanteum (mirror gazing under conditions of sensory deprivation) as a research tool in bereavement. The study, recently published in *Omega Journal*, was designed to explore apparent facilitated contact with deceased friends and relatives, and to

collect data on the phenomena, experiences, and effects on bereavement. A pilot study with five participants resulted in strong experiences and four apparent contacts. The main study took twenty-seven participants through a three-stage process: remembering a deceased friend or relative, sitting in a darkened room gazing into a mirror while thinking of the person, and finally discussing and reflecting on the experience. Data were collected with pre- and post-questionnaires, a follow-up questionnaire at least four weeks after the session, interviews by the facilitators, and two personality measurements. Contacts with the sought person were reported by thirteen participants. Participants noted that a variety of imagery appeared in the mirror, as well as experiences of dialogue, sounds, light, body sensations, and smell. Several specific messages were reported by participants who believed that they were from the sought persons. Statistically significant reductions in bereavement responses were found over the entire group, including unresolved feelings, loss, grief, guilt, sadness, and the need to communicate. Participants also reported significant impact on their lives following the session.

Still another intriguing direction related to the survival hypothesis comes from the study of reincarnation. Studies of children said to remember previous lives have been done for decades by psychiatrist Ian Stevenson, who has published thousands of documented cases. In one study sponsored by IONS, Stevenson investigated instances of biological markers of ostensible reincarnation, such as birthmarks. In a current IONS study, Antonia Mills is examining psychological correlates of young adults in India who, as children, were said to have remembered a previous life. Ian Stevenson and Narender Kumar Chadha noted that parents of children said to remember a previous life in India frequently tried to suppress a child's previous-life memories, but that their efforts were not successful. In an age when, in the West, past-life regression has become an increasingly prevalent form of therapy, it is appropriate to ask "Why do parents of children said to remember a previous life in India seek to suppress such memories?"

Although the child's memory of what he or she said about a previous life typically fades by the time the child is seven-and-a-half years old, and such children do not make new statements after this period, Satwant Pasricha notes that there is no cultural expectation in India that children will forget previous-life memories at a certain age. Indeed what Stevenson calls "behavioral memories" (phobias, phobias, or other personal characteristics) often persist

In the West, past-life regression has become an increasingly prevalent form of therapy.

longer, sometimes into adulthood, reminding the child and the child's family of the earlier identification with the identity of a deceased person.

Some of the questions this study hopes to answer are: Does this group of children in India perform better in school as children, and, if so, do they continue to manifest higher school performance if they continue and complete high school, or is the proficiency diminished as they grow away from the stage of being said to actively remember being another person? Do they, by their own report as well as by their parents' report, demonstrate greater dissociative tendencies than a control sample? Is there a relation between dissociation and the perception of whether they are still acting in terms of the previous-life identity or remembering a previous life? Do they show evidence of greater dissociation? Do they, as young adults, think of themselves as having greater psychic abilities than the control group? Are they more hypnotizable? And how have the experiences of being said to remember a previous life impacted their lives now that they are young adults?

Alike in some respects and different in others, the research assumptions and methods of Schwartz, Hastings, Stevenson, and Mills—and other original investigators—speak to the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to the survival question. For as Michael Murphy writes in *The Future of the Body*: "Without data from many domains of inquiry, without various kinds of knowing, our understanding of human development will be incomplete."


'Gut Feeling?' It May Be a Fact

People frequently report a “gut reaction” to some emotional event, even before they consciously know about it. Starting in the 1960s, researchers began to explore ways of unconsciously detecting psychic or “psi” impressions based on physiological responses.

Most DMILS studies to date have relied upon the use of electrodermal responses to detect psi effects; a smaller number have also studied peripheral vascular activity (generally fingertip blood volume as measured by a photoplethysmograph). But given the fact that many people describe intuitive or psychic impressions as “gut feelings,” it is somewhat surprising that no psi experiments have directly studied visceral perception, or more generally, the enteric nervous system (ENS), the nervous system responsible for the digestive process. Recent studies suggest that the ENS is capable of such sophisticated control independent of the central

and autonomic nervous systems, such that the ENS may be considered a “second brain” (Michael Gershon’s term).

In a current IONS study, we are exploring possible relationships between psi perception and visceral perception using cutaneous electrogastrography (EGG) as a detector of a distant person’s emotional state. Reports of “gut feelings” associated with intuitive hunches are phenomenologically similar to reports of psi perception, raising the possibility that visceral perception and psi perception may be related. The objective of the experiment, conducted by Marilyn Schlitz and Dean Radin and funded by the Bial Foundation of Portugal, is to test the hypothesis that electrogastrography is an effective means of detecting a distant person’s emotional state.

Marilyn Schlitz, PhD, is vice-president for Research and Education at IONS 



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