

Conversations About Survival: Novel Theoretical, Methodological, and Empirical Approaches to Afterlife Research

William Braud ¹

Chapter Abstract: In this chapter, a fictional, storied, conversational format is used to address various alternative and novel approaches to survival/afterlife issues. Among the treated topics are ideas on the possible nature and modes of survival (including possibilities that only some survive, that survival may be “contentless,” “witnessing,” or even “unconscious”); the role of thoughts, beliefs, and expectations in influencing the nature and experience of survival; and suggested expansions of research methods and empirical approaches for exploring survival (including a novel experimental design that addresses both investigator and participant expectancies, new uses of hypnotic regression and evocation, experience-simulation contrasts, and life-impacts of “acting as if” with appropriate follow-ups). The discussion also addresses extensions and limitations of “super-psi” arguments (including typically-ignored time-displaced aspects), personification and dramatization (mythopoetic) aspects; selective suggestions relevant to several varieties of afterlife evidence (e.g., apparitions, hauntings, mediumship, OBEs, NDEs), and alternative conceptualizations of the nature of “reincarnation.”

In mystical literature words are frequently confused with things, and symbols with realities; so that much of this literature seems . . . to refer to some self-consistent and exclusive dream-world, and not to the achievement of universal truth. . . .

What elements are due to the suggestions of tradition, to conscious or unconscious symbolism, to the misinterpretation of emotion, to the invasion of cravings from the lower centers, or the disguised fulfillment of an unconscious wish? And when all these channels of illusion have been blocked, what is left? (Evelyn Underhill, 1920/1960, pp. 1-2)

Erica and I arrived at our pre-arranged lunch site almost simultaneously. It was good to see her again. We had known each other since graduate school days, when we had been fellow students in a very behavioristic psychology department. We often joked that we were recovering behaviorists. Erica had left her behaviorism behind to move into cognitive research and teaching. I had added other approaches in following my path as a clinical psychologist.

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Erica was in town to attend a four-day conference sponsored by the National Research Academy (NRA) and devoted to research and issues involving death and dying. The last day of the conference had been set aside for presentations and discussions of survival and afterlife research. Knowing my long-term interest in parapsychology and psychical research, Erica had told me about the conference, thinking I might wish to attend. I was able to shift some appointments, making it possible for me to attend the last day and a half of the conference.

We spent the first part of our lunch time catching up on each other's lives since Erica's last visit to California. As we sipped our coffees, I turned the conversation to the topic of the conference.

"I'm surprised that the National Research Academy is including sessions on survival/afterlife research in its program," I commented.

"Yes; curious, isn't it?" Erica replied. "I suppose that, since the conference is in San Francisco, the conference organizers must have assumed there would be a lot of interest in such a topic, among both professionals and the public."

"Now, Erica, I hope you haven't bought into that stereotype of California." I grinned.

"Well, Alan, you must admit," she paused for a moment. "Your beloved state has given birth to a lot of very strange ideas and practices."

Erica was an eternal skeptic—but, fortunately, an open-minded one. She was suspicious of even slightly outlandish ideas. However, in the face of sufficient evidence, she could change her mind and eventually embrace "strange" ideas—sometimes tentatively, sometimes even enthusiastically.

An Overview of the Subject Matter

“You know I’ve never understood your keen interest in life after death and all this psychic stuff.”

“Erica, believe it or not, I’m skeptical about a lot of it myself, as are many parapsychologists. Many experimental parapsychologists accept the reality of different forms of psychic functioning—telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and psychokinesis—in the living, but they draw the line at the possibility that some aspect of ourselves might survive the death of the physical body. Some parapsychologists—actually, it would be better to call them psychological researchers—are willing to explore the possibility of some sort of survival of aspects of our personality or individuality after physical death. They have devoted considerable effort to studying the evidence for phenomena consistent with survival or an afterlife—phenomena such as apparitions, hauntings, mental mediumship, physical mediumship, poltergeist incidents, past-life recall, near-death experiences, and out-of-body experiences.”

Erica interrupted, “I noticed that many of those things are mentioned in the program for tomorrow’s sessions.”

Erica extracted a program from her thin leather satchel and handed it to me. This part of the program seemed well-organized, with sessions devoted to theory, research methods, empirical findings, interpretations, implications, and even possible practical applications. From the names of the presenters and discussants, it seemed the conference organizers had achieved a reasonable balance of views. I recognized some well-respected researchers and advocates of survival, along with some thoughtful skeptics and counter-advocates.

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“It’s almost time for the afternoon sessions,” I said, glancing at my watch. “What’s next, and what do you think of the conference thus far?”

Relevance to Bereavement Applications

Erica replied, “This afternoon’s sessions will address various approaches to working with the dying, and there will be some presentations on bereavement and ways of helping people in their bereavement processes. About the first two and a half days, there’ve been the usual boring conference presentations, with a few exciting and memorable ones interspersed.”

Erica had described earlier, in an e-mail, her own conference contribution. She had presented her research on lucidity preceding death and summarized findings that indicated greatly increased cognitive, intellectual functioning just before death. I had been impressed with these findings, which were not at all consistent with the accepted view that our mental life is completely dependent on healthy and optimally functioning brain and body systems.

We left the coffee shop and made our way to the rooms where the afternoon sessions were to be held. I was pleased that my freed schedule had allowed me to partake of these dying and bereavement presentations, and I hoped that I might learn new approaches to use with my own bereaved clients.

One of the most exciting presentations—and one that even had parapsychological implications—was by a team of researchers at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in nearby Palo Alto. The researchers explored a so-called “psychomanteum process” that involved 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. The study’s main finding was a significant reduction in bereavement responses for the entire group of research participants. These included unresolved feelings, loss, grief, guilt, sadness, and need to

communicate. Participants also reported significant impacts on their lives following the session. About half of the participants reported contacts with the sought deceased person. These took the forms of a variety of images appearing in the mirror, experiences of dialogue, sounds, light, body sensations, and smell. Several participants reported specific messages that they believed were from the sought persons.

The final portion of the conference began with an early evening presentation, for both conference attendees and the general public, that provided a good overview of the major methods, findings, and theories of survival/afterlife research. Erica and I had arranged to have a late dinner after the presentation. I hoped I would be able to help bring Erica up to speed on this topic. In earlier meetings, she had shared the latest information about what was happening in her field of cognitive psychology. I always appreciated these briefings, and I hoped to return the favor.

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It turned out, however, that it was Erica who did most of the talking. The evening presentation had triggered many thoughts for her, and she was eager to share them with me. While waiting for and then nibbling on our appetizers, she launched into what turned out to be a lengthy and useful discussion of some of the foundational aspects of psychical research.

“That presentation was interesting,” she said. “I scribbled a few notes to help me remember some things I wanted to ask you about.” She removed a couple of sheets of paper from her always-present satchel and placed them on the table. “I suspect many of these things will be covered in tomorrow’s more technical sessions. I hope so, because I have quite a few questions at this point.”

I encouraged her to go on.

“OK,” she said. “I want us to discuss three main points, and they are interrelated. The first has to do with the nature of survival, the second involves reincarnation, and the third concerns alternative interpretations of the evidence suggestive of survival.”

I smiled, knowing I was in for a treat. Erica always had been good at generating possible alternative explanations of things. In fact, she was almost too good at this—violating a kind of Ockham’s Razor of theorizing by positing plurality without necessity. She was especially good at exposing hidden assumptions, questioning them, sometimes turning them on their heads, 180 degrees. This always reminded me of quantum physicist Niels Bohr’s comments about two kinds of truth. To one kind, he said, belonged statements so simple and clear that the opposite assertion obviously could not be defended. The other kind, the so-called “deep truths,” are statements in which the opposite also contains deep truth (Bohr, 1959).

On the Nature of Survival

“I can only discuss these things from the viewpoint of my training and work in cognitive psychology, of course,” Erica began. “It’s important that one’s constructs be defined carefully. So, when we speak of ‘survival,’ what are we talking about? Just what is it that is supposed to survive?”

“I might be able to help out here,” I offered. “The usual referent for survival is some recognizable aspect of personality or individuality. Of course, the body’s matter and energy ‘survive’ in some form, and eventually undergo various changes and transformations. And the deceased’s progeny and works survive—as actual persons, cultural artifacts, or memories in the minds of others. These sorts of survival are obvious, but trivial in relation to the kind of personal survival that we’re addressing here. This personal survival should be such as to be recognizable by the person herself or himself, in alleged past life recall or reincarnation instances, or by

others, in cases of ostensible communications from the deceased. The latter might be extended to identifiable physical or behavior characteristics of the deceased—things such as appearance, mannerisms, behaviors, and perhaps things such as attitudes or preferences.”

“For such things to be identifiable,” Erica pointed out, “there would have to be persistence of certain physical or quasi-physical forms or patterns, in cases of apparitions, or persistence of certain specific cognitive content or memories, in cases of communications.”

“Yes,” I agreed, “that would be necessary.”

“As an aside,” Erica added, “there does exist evidence that at least certain forms of individually acquired learning and memory actually can ‘survive’ the death of the individuals that initially acquired these. This evidence comes from so-called memory transfer studies that were conducted back in the 1960s and 1970s. These findings always were quite controversial, and they tend to be forgotten or dismissed nowadays. However, if one examines them carefully and objectively, one cannot but conclude that quite specific information could, indeed, survive transfer from one organism to another in some of these studies. In summary, naïve recipient animals injected with brain extracts from trained donor animals showed signs of the types of learning and memory that had been acquired by the donor animals. The best of these studies included proper controls to rule out various artifacts. It seemed that the carriers of the transferred and ‘surviving’ information were small-chain proteins, polypeptide molecules. These findings were too much for those who oversubscribed to the views that were prevalent at the time. Additionally, I think such work was about 5 or 10 years ahead of its time, being done before the various neuropeptides such as the endorphins and encephalins were discovered. So, for various reasons, the work was not accepted. I mention this because, if we assume for a moment that these findings were real, such studies did demonstrate survival of knowledge and memory. Of course,

there was a physical substrate for such survival—the physical chemicals served to encode, carry, or catalyze the surviving information. Yet, these studies provided proof of principle—the principle being that knowledge or memories of one individual might survive the death of that individual and show up elsewhere, provided the detection system were appropriate. It occurs to me that the various pathways through which the knowledge and memories could be ‘revived’ in other, naïve organisms, in these memory transfer studies, could be studied as possible analog methods in which survival of individuality or personality might manifest in these human afterlife investigations.”

“Hmmm. I think I see what you mean. The key would be how the survival evidence tends to be manifested—as a kind of passive, direct presentation to be ‘discovered’ by just about anyone or, instead, as a more active creation—or catalyzing, as you put it—of the information in the percipients or investigators. The first case would imply a kind of continuation of the personality or individuality of the deceased, whereas the second case would suggest a kind of recreation of a simulacrum of the deceased or partial characteristics of the deceased. This is a subtle distinction, but it seems an important one.”

“Yes, this is very similar to something I was going to mention later. But could you say more about what these psychical researchers think might survive, and in what forms?”

“Well, there’s a view that the specific mind, for want of a better word, or individual consciousness of the deceased continues to survive death. It might do this for a lengthy period—perhaps indefinitely—or, more likely, some believe, it might persist for a while and then gradually fade away, like the prolonged echoes that can occur in certain mountainous regions. Another view, that is gaining in prominence, is that what survives might be a form of pure

consciousness or witnessing consciousness—present and aware, but devoid of content. This would be analogous to a searchlight beam that is not illuminating anything particular.”

“Ah,” Erica interjected, “this suggests an interesting possibility: that what survives might not be “conscious” in the usual sense of self-conscious; that there might be some contentless awareness, without individual memories—in which case, would it even make sense to say that this would be a form of individual or personality survival? It might even be the case that something survives, but that something could be completely unconscious.”

“What we’re now addressing,” I mentioned, “are areas where psychological research overlaps topics in Hinduism-Buddhism and mystical studies—each of these concerns itself with different forms of consciousness: some very content-determined and local, others content-free and nonlocal. These are areas where these various disciplines can cross-communicate and mutually enrich one another.”

I continued, “Other than a first-person appreciation of the nature of surviving consciousness, I think the closest we might come to determining its possible form might be through studies of responsive apparitions, which seem to be aware of and respond to particulars in the environment, and through studying cases in which particular motives or needs seem to be present in apparitions or in communications ostensibly from the deceased.”

“I suppose,” said Erica, “there might be quite a range of forms of survival. They needn’t be all of the same kind. Perhaps only some ‘persons’ survive, but not others.”

“Yes,” I agreed, “and it also seems possible that the thoughts, beliefs, and expectations of individuals might influence the nature of their survival or survival experiences or whether they even survive at all.”

“Regarding the nature of survival,” I added, “I know many feel that it would be a shame if nothing specific were retained—knowledge, memories, perhaps aspects of important relationships. They feel that the meaning and significance of life and of existence itself might be reduced if something ‘individual’ did not survive. I certainly appreciate that view. On the other hand, I have to recognize that such a form of survival might be what we wish would happen, rather than what might actually occur.”

This reminded me of a concern that had haunted me for a long time—that the presumed nature of survival seemed too much like business as usual, that the usually-presumed form of afterlife existence was human, all too human, as Nietzsche might have put it. It seemed presumptuous to assume that the afterlife would so closely resemble our physically embodied life and our familiar lived experiences. Perhaps there would be continuity—but to some variable extent. Perhaps an afterlife, if such indeed existed, might be very, very different from our customary experiences—difficult or impossible for us to conceive or appreciate while still in our present, embodied form. It also might be possible that the nature of what might survive death, and the nature of the afterlife itself, might not be static. There might be change, development—even degradation. These change possibilities didn’t seem to be addressed much by survival researchers.

I continued to ponder these things as we slowed our discussion to better concentrate on the main course of our seafood dinner. As we were finishing our light desserts, Erica returned to our survival topic. She mentioned that she was tired, and that she would postpone her other two points—about reincarnation and evidence interpretations—until tomorrow.

“I do want to mention two thoughts that pestered me as I listened to this evening’s overview presentation,” she said. “One thing is that psychical researchers and others might be taking the

idea of ‘life after death’ too literally. Perhaps that should be taken symbolically or anagogically: There are many ways of ‘dying,’ ‘surviving,’ and even being ‘reborn’ other than literally and physically. There are many ways of leaving old ways of being behind and taking on new ones. Exploring these could be just as interesting, exciting—and probably more useful—than focusing so much attention on what might happen after physical death.

“Another thing that bothered me is the seduction toward reification in all of this,” she continued. “These psychical researchers, and many, many others, use terms such as ‘mind’ and ‘consciousness’ so frequently—and, I fear, so thoughtlessly—that these come to be considered as very concrete entities, rather than as dynamic processes; as nouns, rather than as verbs or gerunds. I wonder if views would change if gerund forms such as ‘minding,’ ‘consciousing,’ ‘individualing,’ or ‘personing’ were used rather than noun forms such as ‘mind,’ ‘consciousness,’ ‘individuality’ or ‘personality’? Such terminology changes might allow us to emphasize processes more than entities (for example, conscious minding or unconscious minding, rather than conscious mind or unconscious mind), and this might allow us to think about psychic functioning, survival, and consciousness itself in alternative, and possibly more useful, ways. Immediately, this would raise the question of which other processes or entities—especially, possible physical or other supporting substrates—might be necessarily or sufficiently involved in the minding processes and, hence, in the possible surviving processes.”

“Erica, these thoughts are making my head hurt! Or maybe it’s a sugar rush from this dessert!”

With that, we paid our bill, left the restaurant, walked out into the clear, chilly evening, and said our goodnights.

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The next morning, I arrived at the conference center only minutes before the first session was about to begin. I looked for Erica but didn't see her. I found an empty seat near the front of the room just as the first speaker was being introduced for what was to be a set of presentations on the various research methods currently being used in survival/afterlife investigations. The presentations were pleasant enough, but because I had been keeping up with such things through the years, I didn't learn anything that was really new or exciting, methodologically.

A few minutes into the break, I spied Erica at the end of the short line of people standing before the coffee urns, and I joined her. We commented briefly on the session that had just ended.

"Before I forget, Erica, I have a synchronicity to report. Last night, after our discussion, I was reading Barbara Hannah's (1991) biography of Carl Jung. There were sections that seemed to speak to what we were discussing last night, about whether what survives might be conscious, semi-conscious, or unconscious. I copied some of these. Let me read them to you."

"The eternal Self needs the limited ego in order *to experience itself in outer reality*. It can thus, in earthly form, 'pass through the experiences of the three-dimensional world, and by greater awareness take a further step toward realization.'" (p. 171)

"But we can also see here just how important the ego is to the Self, for it was the former that became *conscious* of the impression, that gave it three-dimensional existence, *definite* existence, whereas five thousand years are as yesterday to the Self, whose knowledge may indeed even be absolute, without ever registering in the here and now, in this moment, and thus giving it definite or objective existence." (p. 173)

"Thank you," said Erica as we reached the coffee urns and helped ourselves to two large cupfuls. "Those two quotes are quite apropos. They're also relevant to my point about certain

substrates being necessary for the realization of certain processes. And if something is considered a process, rather than an entity, there is less temptation in thinking that something might ‘survive’ on its own, without its substrate(s).”

“That’s a forceful argument, Erica, provided one has identified the true substrate. In the case of survival, for example, advocates of survival often like to present an analogy. In watching a television program, there is a tendency to think of the program as being intimately connected with the television set itself. Yet, if the television receiver (like your ‘substrate’?) is smashed, that does not destroy the program; the program still exists ‘in the air’ (like your ‘process’?). The TV receiver allows the expression of the program—the signal—but is not necessary for its generation or its existence. A similar argument often is proposed for the mind/body issue—that the brain may be necessary for the *readout* of consciousness but not for its generation or existence. In such a view, consciousness is not an epiphenomenon of brain functioning. Rather, the brain might be a kind of transmitter or expressor of consciousness.”

“That’s an interesting position, Alan, but it isn’t taken far enough. If there were no television sets, the signal never could be received; the program never could be known or experienced. It would be like the Self—in that Jung quotation you just shared—that cannot be known or realized without an ego. This is not unlike the nonlocal Schrödinger wave before it collapses and is localized or particularized by an observation. Without a detector, read-out device, or substrate—to use my term again—the ‘process’ would have no recognizable characteristics. To extend this to survival research, without a ‘detector’ of some sort, what ‘survives’ would have no individual, unique, or definite qualities that could be experienced—in either a third person or first person manner.

“We could take this analogy even further. In the case of the television program, there still are *other* physical substrates for the signal: There is a physical transmitter and antenna, and there is an electromagnetic carrier of the signal. Without those, the signal vanishes. So, in a sense, the perceived and appreciated TV program still is an epiphenomenon of the *entire system* of transmitter, carrier, and receiver. To shift this to a computer analogy, both hardware and software are necessary for information exchange, for intelligibility.”

We had to stop at this point, for the next session—another one on research methods and representative findings—was about to begin.

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Following the second morning session, Erica had promised to have lunch with some of her colleagues, and so we couldn't continue our conversation until just before the first afternoon session began. We decided to visit a room where several posters of research projects were on display. As we walked slowly along the aisles, stopping to read the posted findings, Erica mentioned her luncheon meeting:

“While Marsha, John, and I were having lunch, we talked a bit about how survival research methods might be extended. I told them you might be interested in the four of us getting together at the end of today's sessions, to explore these further.”

I agreed that that would be interesting, and Erica said she would make arrangements for us to meet after the last session.

Regarding Reincarnation

“Erica, we still have a few minutes before the next session begins. You had mentioned earlier that you had some thoughts about reincarnation and about alternative explanations of some survival findings. What did you have in mind?”

“Regarding reincarnation, I was thinking of two ways of understanding *another life*. One way is to conceive of the very same entity—soul, spirit, personality, individual consciousness, or what have you—participating in both (or several) lives. According to this view, individual survival would make sense: Some aspect of the individual would continue, would persist in time, and that entity or aspect would be recognizable in the second life or in subsequent lives. According to another view, the second life would not be a persistence of the first, but would be made fresh, out of new ingredients, as it were, and would only *resemble* the first life—and the resemblance, in some cases, could be extremely close, could sometimes be virtually identical. The *pattern* would be the same or very similar, but it would be a different life, with different constituents, not a recycling of the original constituents. I don’t think ‘survival’ would be an appropriate way to characterize this second possibility.

“Let me try to clarify all of this with some examples. Imagine the countless waves that continuously emerge from the sea. If you looked long enough and carefully enough, you probably would find quite a few wave patterns that are virtually identical. Let’s suppose you observed one of these forming then disappearing, and then, shortly thereafter, you observed an identical one appearing nearby. You could say that one wave actually ‘died’ and then ‘was reborn as’ or ‘became’ the second wave—that is, the same substance survived, persisted, transferred itself from one to the other. But we know that did not happen. The second wave really was a new one, made up—afresh—from new materials, new water molecules. The only identical aspect is the form, the pattern, the appearance. Two different waves, but having virtually identical form, happened to emerge from a common ground.

“Even wave motions in general confirm the principle I’m describing. Drop a stone into a pond, and it seems that the same wave, the same set of water droplets and molecules, moves

across the pond from one point to another, but in reality the individual droplets and molecules stay in one place and simply move up and down; the pattern moves horizontally, but the constituents don't; the moving wave is created (then disappears) afresh, out of new materials, at each point. Continuity is an illusion.

“Applying this same principle to human reincarnation can yield a different view of the process: What reincarnates is a *pattern*, not necessarily a persisting, continuing individual ‘entity’ of some sort that survives and is reborn. What might be happening, in cases of the reincarnation type, could be multiple but fresh instantiations of a certain pattern, template, or archetype, rather than the persistence and recycling of a particular being.”

Once again, our discussion was cut short by the beginning of the next session. All this talk about sea waves had reminded me of an old Tennyson poem I had memorized in high school. As I walked to my seat in the meeting room, the last stanza ran through my mind and seemed particularly apropos:

Break, break, break,
 At the foot of thy crags, O Sea!
 But the tender grace of a day that is dead
 Will never come back to me.

* * *

As I waited for the first afternoon presentation, Erica's wave analogies continued to flow through my head. The idea of waves replaced by other waves reminded me of an old Buddhist text in which King Milinda was questioning the sage Nagasena. Among many similes that Nagasena used to help the King's understanding was one about whether the flame of a lamp that burned later in the night was the same as the flame that burned earlier. The answer was yes and

no. One flame ceased and another immediately took its place—simultaneously, continuously. The simile could be applied to “rebirth” or even to consciousness after death. The “new” consciousness might be neither new nor the same, or both new and the same.

There were three sessions that afternoon—a short one in which additional findings were presented, a lengthy session devoted to various theories and interpretations that might (or might not) account for various types of evidence, and another short session devoted to possible practical applications and implications of this kind of research. During the breaks between sessions, Erica and I had brief discussions about theory, explanations, and applications.

Alternative Explanations and Practical Applications

We covered three major interpretations of survival findings—that these were actually what they appeared on the surface, that is, manifestations and communications of the discarnate; that the findings might be the results of very accurate, complex psychic functioning on the part of the living persons involved in providing and collecting the evidence and only simulated survival (the so-called ‘superpsi’ interpretation); and that the findings might be productions of the personifying, dramatizing, mythopoetic tendencies of our ‘unconscious minds’—ways of communicating with ourselves in the service of providing needed lessons and satisfying important wishes.

Regarding superpsi, I suggested that this might account for some, but not necessarily all, survival evidence, and that a wise approach would be to evaluate the evidence on a case-by-case basis, to make judgments about when superpsi might or might not reasonably account for the given findings. I mentioned that there were well-documented cases in which psychic functioning in the living could be unconscious, accurate, and complex, and that it might, indeed, account for some afterlife findings. Additionally, we don’t know the range or limits of what might be

possible through psi in the living, so it would be unwise to place limitations on it in the face of such ignorance. I also pointed out that even advocates of the superpsi hypothesis did not devote sufficient attention to the possible actions of time-displaced (forward-in-time and backward-in-time) forms of psychic functioning in accounting for how and when crucial survival-simulating information might be acquired.

I shared my disappointment that parapsychologists and psychical researchers tended to view superpsi and survival in an either/or manner. I preferred a combinatorial, both/and appreciation of the matter. I saw no reason for psi in the living not to be mixed with the actual existence of some afterlife process. It seemed that aspects of the three processes—some afterdeath residuum, psi in the living, and the mythopoetic propensity of our psyche—were very likely to be mixed, happening all at once. The triggering source for living psi could be some surviving residuum. The trigger might also be some latent trace in the physical environment that suddenly became apprehended, as William Roll had suggested, in his notion that consciousness was embodied and also emplaced. And the mythopoetic skills of our psyche could weave their tales, personifications, and dramatizations—perhaps triggered by living psi, but perhaps also triggered by subtle, invisible contact with some surviving residuum—as ways of bringing those triggering aspects into our awareness.

In discussing practical applications, I felt it important to tell Erica that although I had had a nearly lifelong interest in psychic phenomena, this interest had been bolstered by the reports I almost constantly received from my clients about their own psychic experiences. What had struck me most forcefully were the profound impacts that such experiences had had on my clients' lives. Although I had once been most keenly interested in the veridicality of these unusual experiences, through the years it had become increasingly important for me to study and

appreciate the meanings and life-impacts of these experiences for those who had them. Certainly, it is a lot easier to study the side effects and aftereffects of such experiences, and to reach some fairly unambiguous conclusions about these, than it is to explore the reality status of the phenomena themselves. Each approach has its place, of course. But I had been increasingly thinking that psi researchers and psychical researchers—with a few notable recent exceptions—generally have overemphasized the need to establish the “reality” of their studied phenomena, as *events*, and have, usually, underemphasized the life-impacts of these experiences, as *experiences*. They have been behaving like *paraontologists* rather than *parapsychologists*.

It also struck me that psi researchers and psychical researchers have been subscribing to a very narrow view of “reality”—equating this with *physical* reality. It seemed much more reasonable, especially for psychologists, to honor William James’ view of reality as anything that we find ourselves obliged to take into account in any way. If an experience of X, whatever that might be, has a meaningful impact on a person, then X is real to that person. And if the effects of X on the person are important to us, as professionals or as friends or loved ones of that person, then X obviously becomes real to us, as well.

Whether occurrences such as apparitions, hauntings, mental and physical mediumship, poltergeist incidents, past-life recall, near-death experiences, and out-of-body experiences might be “real” in the physical reality sense is, of course, an important question to ask and to attempt to answer. Equally important, especially for those in the psychological, human, and social sciences, is the question of the functions such occurrences might serve in the lives of the experiencers.

I was pleased that some of these functions had been identified in the day’s final session. A number of investigators had summarized effects of survival/afterlife-related experiences that they had found in their studies. The experiences can open the experiencers to greater possibilities,

prompting them to consider whether—and, sometimes, allowing them to *firmly know* that—there is something More to reality than they previously assumed or understood. The experiences can provide affirmations, confirmations, and sometimes specific directions regarding courses of action that are being considered or undertaken. Sometimes the experiences provide warnings or help prepare the experiencer for future challenging events. If they involve deaths of family, friends, or loved ones, the experiences often help the experiencers deal with feelings of loss and grief, and help them deal more effectively with issues of unfinished business with the deceased. In general, the experiences appear to foster feelings of, and appreciation of, linkages, connections, and community—with others and with all aspects of nature.

Of course, these experiences sometimes are accompanied by “negative” side effects or aftereffects—feelings of fear, bewilderment, even guilt in some cases. It is important to understand these reactions, as well, in order to help persons better deal with these. Indeed, simply sharing what is known and not known about such experiences often serves to greatly diminish strong feelings of anxiety or uncertainty about the nature and meaning of these experiences. People often are greatly helped simply by learning that they are not alone or unique in having such experiences, that the experiences are much more common than previously assumed. Even in these relatively enlightened times, there are still many who consider these experiences signs of craziness or works of the devil. Removing such misapprehensions often can be extraordinarily healing.

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After the day’s final session, Erica, John, Marsha, and I joined one another in a small room to the right of the main conference area. After introductions and some general talk about the conference as a whole, we began discussing ways in which survival research methods might be

extended. It turned out that John was a health psychologist, with a strong background in hypnosis; he was able to offer some interesting suggestions for novel uses of hypnosis in survival research. Marsha had expertise in both cognitive science and neuropsychology, and she, too, was able to offer some novel suggestions for research designs.

Novel Research Approaches

“I’ll start with something obvious,” Erica began. “In any research project, it’s important to work with experienced and well-motivated research participants. After all, if one is interested in learning whether white crows exist—to paraphrase William James—one doesn’t set out by studying brown sparrows. Purposive sampling—as is done as a matter of course in qualitative research, nowadays—is an appropriate approach. I noticed, in many of today’s presentations, that experimental parapsychologists still seem to be following quantitative design drummers, with random samples of unselected participants, and so on. This might be useful if one were interested in discovering general, universal laws, but if one simply wishes to learn or demonstrate whether a particular phenomenon exists, it is not necessary to prove that it exists in everyone or is inevitably present at the .05 level of significance.”

“Speaking of purposive or focused sampling,” I added, “I find it curious that there has been so little research, among psychical researchers, in trying to ‘contact’ recently deceased psychical researchers. Quite a few very dedicated parapsychologists and psychical researchers died recently; many of these had very keen interests in survival. Of all people, it would seem they would be highly motivated to contact the living, if they did, indeed, survive in some form. It’s strange that there have been so few concerted efforts to contact such persons. This stands in stark contrast to what was attempted, in the early days, when some of the founding members of the Society for Psychical Research, such as Myers, Sidgwick, and Gurney, passed away.”

“Something else that could be done,” Marsha contributed, “is to simply ‘listen’ more often. If the discarnate continue to exist in some form, and are trying to communicate, how many of us are really listening? We keep our time and our minds filled to the brim, 99.9 percent of the time. Our phones are either busy or off the hook nearly all the time; if someone were attempting to call, it would be almost impossible for them to get through! What might happen if psychical researchers simply quieted themselves, unbusy-ed their minds, and simply made themselves available for possible messages, for some reasonable time periods each day?”

“And that also would require increased sensitivity and preparation on the part of the listeners,” added John. “The researchers themselves would have to become more adequate to the task, more skilled in becoming aware of and understanding subtle thoughts, feelings, and images that might carry information relevant to afterlives.”

“I was thinking,” said Marsha, “that one of the most direct ways to explore survival would be to find persons who might be really skilled at telepathic attunement, have them connect with the mentation of persons who are near death, and monitor this mentation as closely and as continuously as possible. If this would be done, keeping the telepathists ‘blind’ as to the time of death of those they were monitoring, it might be possible to note what happened at the time of death—whether the mentation continued, and in which form, and for how long. This seems far out, but I think such a study actually could be conducted, with the help of persons in hospitals, hospices, and so on.”

“I think this brainstorming is exciting. Thank you, Marsha,” I said.

“In the interest of further brainstorming,” John offered, “let me share some thoughts about how hypnosis might be used in novel ways. Hypnotic regression could be used to help people who have had near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, past-life recall, or other afterlife-

related experiences relive, recall, and better integrate those experiences. Another approach would be to hypnotically regress persons to early childhood ages, to help them recall possible past lives—given that past life memories tend to occur early, then disappear with age. Note that this differs from using hypnosis and suggestions for recall of past lives themselves. Still another approach might be to simply hypnotize persons and suggest that they be more receptive and less resistant to possible afterlife phenomena. This could increase their sensitivity and allow them to become better detectors of survival evidence.”

“In terms of gathering more and better information about experiences, persons with similar histories of experiences could be brought together for group phenomenological sessions,” Erica added.

Marsha offered the following: “The typical way of dealing with the possibility of investigator or participant bias or influence upon research findings is either to ignore this factor or to reject findings entirely. My suggestion is to deal with possible investigator and participant biases more directly by maximizing them, manipulating them, and assessing their possible roles and interactions. For example, we could use a 2x2 design to compare and contrast the types of past life recall findings that emerge from participants with two types of belief systems (reality of a past life existence versus subconscious construction of ‘memories’) who are studied by two types of investigators (those with strong beliefs in the reality of survival and past life recall versus those who attribute the information to subconscious construction). By studying the types of information that emerge within each of the four ‘cells’ of this 2x2 design, and by studying themes and details that seem invariant or variant across the conditions, we could emerge with a better idea of possible interactions of findings with the belief systems of investigators and participants. The principle could be extended to explore other types of experiences, as well.”

John contributed another interesting research idea: “Hypnotic, waking suggestion, and experience-simulation work could be done in which participants are asked to imagine and fill themselves fully with the cognitive, emotional, evaluative, volitional, and expectational accompaniments of three survival alternatives or scenarios, and then act and function on the basis of those different belief patterns, so that we might be able to observe commonalities and differences associated with three ‘as if’ answers to the survival question. The three patterns could be (a) consciousness is an epiphenomenon of brain functioning that ceases when the body dies; (b) consciousness may persist after death in a form in which fragments of individuality, specific memories, and personality characteristics may still be recognizable and which may fade after some duration; and (c) consciousness continues in a much more persistent but depersonalized, attribute-free, and nonlocal form. We could study possible life-impacts of acting as if each of these scenarios were true, and there could be appropriate follow-ups after various time intervals. Findings might suggest new insights about the three answers to the survival question that could lead to new research directions and possibilities not yet obvious to us.”

I offered another thought of my own: “There’s a very interesting assessment tool that could be used in survival research—the Projective Differential (PD), developed by Peter Reynolds. The PD uses choice responses to very briefly presented pairs of carefully designed, abstract images in order to register holistic, intuitive, affective (nonverbal, “unconscious”) reactions, preferences, and attitudes. It has features similar to those of Charles Osgood’s more familiar Semantic Differential; it resembles a tachistoscopic Rorschach presentation. The rapid and projective nature of the procedure serves to minimize deliberate, conscious distortions, and, therefore, the PD results may have greater validity than do many deliberate, verbal assessments. The PD procedures also include built-in indicators of the discrepancy or incongruence between its own

novel (imagistic, intuitive, affective) measures and more traditional (verbal, consciously and deliberately considered) measures. It can be used to provide profiles of idiosyncratic meanings of various target referents (e.g., myself, my home environment, my view of life after death). My thought is that the PD could be administered to various persons before their deaths. Later, should any of the deceased be channeled or their personalities taken on by mediums, the channelers or mediums could be asked to retake the PD when representing the deceased. The pre-death and post-life PD profiles could be compared—as an additional indicator of the possible identity of the source of the post-life PD. As far as I know, the PD has not yet been used in psychical research, but I think it holds great promise.”

A conference official approached us, indicating that they would be closing the rooms for the day. We gathered our belongings and thoughts and brought them with us—to continue our discussion elsewhere.

Coda on Reincarnation

Upon returning home, after the conference, I recalled that I once had read something similar to some of what Erica had shared in her discussion of reincarnation. After some searching I was able to find it. It was part of a letter that the Indian philosopher and spiritual teacher, Sri Aurobindo, had written to a student in 1933:

“You must avoid a common popular blunder about reincarnation. The popular idea is that Titus Balbus is reborn again as John Smith, a man with the same personality, character, attainments as he had in his former life with the sole difference that he wears coat and trousers instead of a toga and speaks in cockney English instead of popular Latin. That is not the case. What would be the earthly use of repeating the same personality or character a million times from the beginning of time till its end? The soul comes into birth for experience, for growth, for

evolution till it can bring the Divine into Matter. It is the central being that incarnates, not the outer personality—the personality is simply a mould that it creates for its figures of experience in that one life. In another birth it will create for itself a different personality, different capacities, a different life and career. . . . It is not the personality, the character that is of the first importance in rebirth—it is the psychic being who stands behind the evolution of the nature and evolves with it. The psychic when it departs from the body, shedding even the mental and vital on its way to its resting place, carries with it the heart of its experiences—not the physical events, not the vital movements, not the mental buildings, not the capacities or characters, but something essential that it gathered from them, what might be called the divine element for the sake of which the rest existed. That is the permanent addition, it is that that helps in the growth towards the Divine. That is why there is usually no memory of the outward events and circumstances of past lives” (Aurobindo, 1970, pp. 451-452).

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