

What it is to die (as I'm seeing it)

A revealing article on the meaning behind death and life written by Barry Long as he approaches his own death.

Mystics and poets down through the ages have told us that our real home is eternity. Our short stay on earth and our deepest longing would seem to confirm that we belong elsewhere.

As I approach physical death I'm looking at whether I can put the inspiration of the mystics into a context more easily understood by us ordinary - albeit temporary - people of the earth.

To do so I see I will have to draw on the same area of knowledge from which I wrote 'The Origins of Man and the Universe' more than two decades ago. As that knowledge extends from earth to eternity the concepts I'm forced to use will be outside normal rational thinking experience. But as rational thought has no explanation of what we truly are, what we're doing or where we're going, and since everyone must finally pass this way, it would seem fitting to introduce another paradigm, another way of looking at things.

Eternity

In reality, each of us is a point of intelligence in the deep space of eternity. If we were asked casually where eternity is, we'd probably point to the deep space of the stars. And we'd be right. For that space symbolises eternity - symbolises, because it is external to us whereas in reality we are one with eternity within.

It is undeniable that in our manifested state we are earthlings. And that while here we develop an attachment to the earth and its beauty. Even though eternity is our true home, after death our lingering attachment to the earth eventually pulls us back and our intelligence recurs in a new physical body.

So before birth, we are free unfettered spirits of intelligence in the wondrous unlimited space of eternity. But attachment (or karma) is a form of will and it determines our recurrence on earth, drawing our intelligence back into phenomenal time at the moment of biological conception. From then on we start to gather a body of past - a physical and mental body that enmeshes and cocoons the free spirit. All is not lost, however. In the passage of time, disease and old age take their toll of the body and mind and the dying begins - the dying to return home to eternity.

At the time of writing, this is where I am - dying of advanced prostate cancer. And I'm moved to set down the paradigm of just what this dying process suggests to me.

The Process

The disorientation and pain that accompanies dying is the slow shedding of the body of flesh and experience. The old zest for living disappears. Appetite and interest in the world diminish and vitality drains from the body. Weakness and need of sleep increase. Time on earth is coming to an end.

As the attachment or karma of the particular recurrence is lived out, the hold on the free spirit is weakened. As well, the spirit now resonates more and more at the speed of the eternal spirit of which it is an inseparable part. The incredible swiftness of the resonance dislodges and shakes off increasing amounts of the cloying biological body. This causes the final sickness of the body, with the debilitating side effects of the drugs and treatments being part of the whole process.

God Immanent

Meanwhile as the organising self - commonly called the ego - loses interest in the external to concentrate on trying to understand what's happening in the body, the God immanent arises. This is extremely gradual and subtle. It is signified by the dying individual sitting motionless and apparently staring ahead or into space for increasing periods.

The God or Lord immanent is the spirit of intelligence that entered the body at conception. It has no attributes. It is pure intelligence without the corruption of mind or knowing. The growing negation of all that the individual used to be, allows the Lord or God immanent to 'appear' in the dying body for sensitive loved ones to actually witness. But often the appearance goes unnoticed because of its extreme subtlety and absence of identifying attributes - combined with the sense of loss and grief in the loved ones which disturbs attunement. The closest that can be said to describe this divine metamorphosis is that an unmistakable sweetness and love appears in the patient, finer than anything ever seen in her or him before.

I, the dying patient, am now like the chrysalis approaching transformation into a butterfly.

The moment of death marks the release of the last flake of restraining past. The amazing transition is complete. I, the spirit of intelligence, burst free and soar through inner space to reunite with the eternal good or God transcendent.

But in truth I never left the eternal. I was simply the seemingly cocooned empowering genius that made the biological dream possible.

But how do I, the writer, know this when I haven't yet died? Where does this supposed knowledge of after-life come from? Is it wishful thinking, not just by me, but by hosts of people who have had such intimations?

Self-knowledge and self-knowledge

To me the knowledge comes from all of us having passed through physical death and birth many many times in recurrent lives. For that reason I call it Self-knowledge with a capital S. Then there's self-knowledge with a small s. Both refer to inner experience. Any other information we call knowledge relates to what we've heard, read or observed outside us.

Take self-knowledge. It arises from inner experience such as that of having had a severe attack of influenza. If you were a doctor who'd never had the 'flu you'd know all the symptoms but the knowing wouldn't be a result of your own self-knowledge, or self-experience. The knowing would be from what you'd learned and memorised by study and observation of others outside yourself. But if you ever got the 'flu you'd discover the effects were nothing like what you thought they'd be. This applies to all experience. Unless you've actually experienced something yourself, it's not self-knowledge.

When it comes to the profoundly traumatic experience of your own innumerable deaths and births over immeasurable time, the knowledge has the distinction of being Self-knowledge with a capital S. Why? Because the recurrent sequence of being born, living and dying represents everything I, the individual consciousness in your body now, have ever experienced, everything I've ever been - the sum total of what I am at this moment. Such Self-knowledge is inaccessible to the surface mind whose exclusive focus is on one living life - this one.

Spiritual Teachers

Self-knowledge with a capital S is permanently stored in the spirit of intelligence we are all born with. Spiritual masters and teachers speak from different degrees of Self-knowledge. This allows the individual listener to discover the depth of their own Self-knowledge - based on the fact that in truth (Self-knowledge) you can only recognise what you've already lived. If you relate to what the teacher says, you are with him in Self-knowledge and delight in hearing 'what you hadn't realised you already knew.' If his Self-knowledge is less than yours, or too deep for you to hear at this time, you will leave him.

Intimations of the invisible reality are quite common. But when the mind gets hold of these it builds conceptual structures more related to survival after death - for instance meetings with deceased loved ones - than the simple truth of inexplicable freedom.

When I realise immortality I realise my own Self-knowledge - that only the body/brain dies and that I, the spirit of intelligence, still am. When I realise God or Self I realise the ultimate of my Self-knowledge up to that moment - that I and God or Self are one.

The depth and scope of Self-knowledge varies in everyone and determines the degree of sensitivity to the invisible reality. Since the knowledge comes from having passed through many many recurrent physical lives and deaths, death finally is no longer seen as something to be feared, but a natural transition from the dark of ignorance to the light of life.

Recurrence is not the same as the widespread eastern belief of personal reincarnation. Recurrence produces Self-knowledge which is not accessible to the mind that believes or remembers. Self-knowledge is a totally impersonal and vaster thing than reincarnation. All personal traits the person identifies with die with the body, whereas Self-knowledge persists as the guiding light in the unconscious behind the existential scene.

The Basic Dilemma

The trauma of dying physically is due to our basic dilemma. On one hand we are the eternal spirit of intelligence or consciousness that enables the brain to think and perceive; on the other we are sentient creatures. We feel sensations of pleasure and pain and a wide range of feelings in between. As sentient beings we are mortal and must die.

That which causes the pain or discomfort in dying is the withdrawal of the abstract spirit of consciousness from the habit of attachment to the mortal. We must look at this with common sense. Breaking habits is one of the most painful of everyday attempts to improve ourselves - simple habits like attachment to food or certain foods; or trying to break the nicotine or drug habit. Only those who've made such attempts can appreciate the ongoing frustration and trauma.

But when it comes to breaking the habit of consciousness identifying with the mortal side of our nature over uncountable recurrences, we should be able to get an idea of the massively painful break involved - along with the wonderful relief when the identification is broken.

My Own Executioner

When you look closely, being born - coming in - is not that much different to dying - going out - except that one is pretty well the reverse of the other. Gestation in the womb takes nine months and the mother bears the pain and discomfort of the birth. Dying from old age and disease also takes months as the body and expectations - the products of time and experience - are slowly dissolved. In the absence of the enfolding maternal

flesh of love, the individual must necessarily bear the pain and discomfort. But not altogether alone, for it is the spirit of intelligence taking us home.

As I said, I'm dying while writing this. And the extraordinary justice is that part of what's killing me is the male hormone that supposedly made me a man. The hormone feeds the cancer that is spreading through my bones. Thus, I am my own executioner.

The same, I suspect, applies to woman. The female hormone seems to feed the cancers that afflict her. All this affirms for me that there is a greater justice behind the mortality of the males and females we are here; that in reality Man and Woman are already united as one lofty principle - a principle that towers above the two lesser reproductive genders on earth, as the sky towers over all.

Infinity of Spirit

As I'm seeing it, existence is a sensory enclave surrounded by an infinity of spirit, or real space. The image is something like planet earth being surrounded by the apparent infinity of cosmic space. However, cosmic space and all the space we perceive between objects is unreal because it is the product of our sensory mortal brain. Anything mortal must die and therefore neither the brain nor its effects can be real; for what is real can't die or pass away. Even so, for anything to exist there has to be greater reality behind it.

It is into this area towards the real that I'm looking.

The parallel I've given of earth in cosmic space, and the image of the sensory enclave surrounded by the infinity of spirit, shows how the brain - my brain - has to reproduce a sensory version or model of the reality behind the brain. And of course the parallels continue through every level of existence. If this is not so, everything ends with the grave.

What it finally comes down to is that in reality there is only spirit. Spirit embraces eternity and all the other superlatives relating to the unending wonder of God. Every object and thing in existence, from the starry heavens down to the smallest microbe, is spirit. We can't register this because the human brain is a vibratory sensory mechanism which can only reproduce an infinitely degenerated version of the unmoving power of the surrounding spirit. The brain - itself a creation of the spirit - repeats the infinity of spirit by producing infinite varieties of creatures, things and conditions in a ceaseless stream of perceptible forms.

This sensory version - the whole continuous moving scene of existence - ends with the death of the individual brain. At that moment, the spirit of intelligence loses its identification with what was not real and enters a new phase which has to be called the 'more real'.

The 'More Real'

The 'more real' comprises the increasingly abstract depths of the psyche. This vast invisible abstraction surrounds the entire sensory enclave like a great lake around a small pebble. The psyche itself is in turn encompassed and empowered by spirit which permeates everything. The reality of the 'more real' is revealed only after death has removed the vibratory brain and its vibrating physical world.

The 'more real' represents a much swifter time than that on earth and is an abstract extension of existence - meaning it contains the reality behind the existence of each thing. And it is absolutely necessary for several reasons.

The 'more real' is the place where at death the spirit of intelligence in everyone awakens after gravitating to a degree in the psyche equal to its own fineness and refinement of self-knowledge. This is its heaven, its utter and complete fulfillment. After numerous other processes, and in a time we can't comprehend, the particular intelligence is born again on earth, as described earlier. Thus this essential invisible part of existence makes possible the great cycle and drama of life and death - although to us it is really the great cycle or drama of living, death and life.

For us in existence, the levels of the abstract psyche also act as buffers between the sensory physical - the brain - and the blinding power of the spirit. The spirit in existence is paralleled by the majesty and fiery interconnection between the galaxies and stars as revealed by our brain-made instruments (giving further divine protection from the searing power). Nothing physical could stand the divine profundity and power direct. Here I am reminded of Arjuna's cry of terror 'Stop, stop!' in the Hindu 'Bhagavat Gita' when, at his request, the god Krishna reveals his awesome power.

This also applies after you die and is why your individual consciousness gravitates to a level that is heaven to you - whereas too much might be unbearable.

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