

Death And The Continuity of Consciousness

The call came around 5:45 on the Saturday morning before Thanksgiving. My mother had just died. Being closest to her nursing home – my sister lives at the Jersey shore -- I dressed hurriedly and in the November dark I drove to her bedside. By the time I reached mom's room it was around 6:30 – so about an hour after she had been pronounced dead. Dead. After many years of steady decline into the dementia of Alzheimer's, Mom was dead. The moment of her death came peacefully, I was told, drawing her last breath cradled in the arms of the duty nurse. I am grateful for that.

I walked into the quiet of her room – lights dim. Mom lay there still, of course, her head on two pillows ... her arms at her side. But for the news of that phone call, she could've been sleeping a deep and restful sleep. But she was dead. The doctor had said so and so it was.

But there seemed so little of her that was dead. Oh, I know that she was no longer breathing; her heart, no longer beating. And I suppose an EEG would've shown a flat line. But the warmth of life was still there – her feet, her fingers, her cheeks. Most of the 50 Trillion cells that I called Mom were still alive. But she was dead. I accepted that – at least according to the accepted definitions.

Waiting for my sister to arrive, I sat alone with Mom for well over an hour. I sat mostly in unthinking awareness. And as I sat, I was graced with a profound sense of my Mother. But not precisely of her presence. Rather, of her passing. Let me try to be even more precise. Not of her having passed – but of her passing. It seemed so clear to me that Mom had not died at 5:45. Rather in that moment of her heart stopping and her taking her last breath, Mom began to die. That at that moment, the consciousness and the life force that was Mom – that life force connected to all things – that force which Dylan Thomas in another poem describes as

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
The force that drives the water through the rock
[That] Drives my red blood

That force, manifest in life as my Mother, was by moments and by inches disentangling from her body. Was in transition. In passage. How blessed I was to be witness to it.

It was somewhere around 8am by the time that my sister arrived, and by that time Mom was almost gone. Some little warmth remained in her and, you know, her cheeks still had a slight flush of color. But I knew that she was just about gone.

After a few private moments of her own, my sister and I had to turn to details. For me the spell – perhaps more precisely, the connection – was broken.

Experiencing those moments was a privilege, a grace, and I think anyone who has shared this experience would say the same thing. And the experience offered two lasting gifts. One of how ultimately peaceful dying is. The other, the gift of knowing that when we describe death as “passing away,” it’s truth, not euphemism.

Today, as you know, peoples around the world, especially but not exclusively in Hispanic countries, are celebrating the Day of the Dead. And just two days ago we all celebrated Halloween. As you’ll recall from Rev. Smith’s service last week, both of these modern celebrations actually overlay much older traditions. Scholars trace the origins of the modern ‘Day of the Dead’ back thousands of years to an Aztec festival dedicated to the goddess Mictecachihuatl (translated as “The Lady of the Dead”). And our “Halloween” is known by today’s Wiccans and by the ancient Celts as Samhain.

As Rev. Smith reminded us, both of these ancient holidays rest on a shared belief that this moment of the year is a time when the veil between the world of the living and the world of the dead becomes thinner, at times even fading away completely, allowing spirits and other supernatural entities to pass between the worlds to socialize with humans. It is the time of the year when ancestors and other departed souls are especially honored. And in both traditions, family celebrations include special meals and rituals with a place reserved for their dead.

On the Day of the Dead, for example, people will go to cemeteries to communicate with the souls of the departed, and will build private altars, containing the favorite foods and beverages, and photos and memorabilia, of the departed. The intent is to encourage visits by the souls, so that the souls will hear the prayers and the comments of the living directed to them. Celebrations can take a humorous tone, as celebrants remember funny events and anecdotes about the departed. Samhain is celebrated in a similar fashion. Often a meal will be prepared of the beloved dead’s favorite foods. A place is set at the table, and traditional songs, poetry and dances performed to entertain them. A door or candle-lit window may be opened to the west to guide and invite the dead home.

The striking similarity is not so surprising when you consider that what they share at the deepest level is the belief – or perhaps the experience – that something of the dead – their souls, their spirits – something lives on. And this primordial notion – this hope, or belief or perhaps experience – is central to the idea of reincarnation, a core belief of Hindus, Buddhists, most Taoists, New Agers and – according to recent polls -- even about 25% of Christians. In other words, approaching half the world’s population.

The prevalence of the belief that something of us transcends the death of the body is easy to understand. Reincarnation in particular seems to offer one of the most attractive explanations of humanity’s origin and destiny. To know that you lived many lives before this one and that there are many more to come is a very attractive perspective from which to judge the meaning of life. On the one hand, reincarnation is a source of great comfort, giving assurance for continuing in further lives and thus having a renewed chance to attain liberation. On the

other hand, reincarnation is a way of rejecting the supposed final judgment by some supreme and perhaps vengeful God.

Of course just because so many people believe it to be true, doesn't make it true. I for one, even at the time of my mother's death, held the belief that death brought finality. That the only thing that transcends death is memory -- the loving memories held in the minds of the departed's family and friends.

But what if there were some reason – some reason based in science – to believe that something of us – you and me – something of the person, more than just others' memories, does continue beyond the death of the body? [*Consider asking for responses*] This is exactly the thought – in various versions – emerging from consciousness research being done today by some of the world's most illustrious physicists, neurologists and neurobiologists, and psychologists – scholars such as Roger Penrose (renowned for his contributions to mathematical physics, relativity, cosmology and author of "The Emperor's New Mind"), Stuart Hameroff (director of the University of Arizona's Center for Consciousness Studies), Karl Pribram (a neurosurgeon who did pioneering work on the brain's limbic system, and the "association" cortex of the brain) and Henry Stapp (a particle-physicist and protégé of Pauli and Heisenberg). Not one crackpot among them! Collectively their work has become known as "Quantum Brain" research. Too complicated too over my head to do their work justice in detail, let me paraphrase and sometimes quote from a very excellent summarizing of their work written by Pim van Lommel, appearing in the 2004 book, "Brain Death and Disorders of Consciousness." Edited by Machado and Shewmon.

A Dutch cardiologist, van Lommel seeks answers to some very big questions: Does brain death really mean death, or is it just the beginning of the dying process that can last for hours to days, and what happens to consciousness during this period? Should we consider the possibility that someone who is clinically dead during cardiac arrest can experience consciousness, and even whether there could still be consciousness after someone really has died, when the body has gone cold? How is consciousness related to the integrity of brain function? Is there a start or an end to consciousness? Like so many others, van Lommel's interest was piqued by the phenomenon of the 'Near Death Experience' and in particular 5 common elements of the NDE:

1. *The Out-of-Body Experience.*
2. *The Encounter with Deceased Relatives*
3. *The Disappearance of Fear of Death.*
4. *The Holographic Life Review*, as he calls it, during which the subject feels the presence and renewed experience of not only every act but also every thought from one's past life, and one realizes that all of it is an energy field which influences oneself as well as others.
5. *The Return into the Body* during which some patients describe how they returned into their body, mostly through the top of the head, after they had come to understand through wordless communication that "it wasn't their time yet" or that "they still had a task to fulfil.

Van Lommel acknowledges that it is a scientific challenge to discuss what could explain the reported *interconnectedness* with the consciousness of other persons and of deceased relatives during the NDE. It is a challenge to scientifically explain the experience of instantaneous and simultaneous review and preview of someone's life in a *dimension without our body-linked concept of time and space*, where all past, present and future events exist. It is a challenge to scientifically explain the possibility of perception out and above one's lifeless body.

But explaining these and other puzzles is precisely what drives the "quantum mind" research mentioned a minute ago. Van Lommel starts with a detailed summary of three relevant principles of quantum theory that for our purposes I'll just ask you to accept as given:

First, everything that exists can exist either as particles or waves, and waves and particles are *complementary* aspects of existence.

Second, experiments have established the quantum reality that all potential events are simultaneous, interrelated and influential to each other.

Third, the zone of these potential events where every past and future event is available as a possibility is known as 'phase space.' Within this phase-space all possible -- or potential -- existence is manifest as only the wave-function; that is, no matter [no particle form] is present. The act of observation instantly changes a probable or potential into an actuality by collapse of the [non-local, non-material] wave function [into a very local, material particle

In short, ***everything visible in particle-form-state emanates from the invisible wave-form-state.***

Now this is where the research of the list of notables that I mentioned a few minutes ago comes in. But first a point of neurobiology: there are microtubules within our neurons and our neurons do their work within continuously fluctuating electromagnetic fields. So, according to Hameroff, Penrose, and others:

these microtubules within our neurons, acting as receptors of these electromagnetic fields, may be the elementary "carriers" of consciousness.

Van Lommel cautions that Quantum physics cannot explain the essence of consciousness or the secret of life, but that it is helpful for understanding the possibility of a transition between a wave-form of consciousness in the phase-space and the body-linked, -- ie particle-form -- waking consciousness in the real-space, because these are the two *complementary* aspects of consciousness. He goes on:

["Quantum Mind" researchers] speculate that our whole and undivided consciousness with its memories finds its origin in, and is stored in, this phase-space, and the cortex of the brain serves as a relay station for parts of our consciousness and parts of our memories to be received into our waking consciousness. *In this concept consciousness is not physically*

rooted. This could be compared with the internet, which does not originate from the computer itself, but is only received by it.

He adds:

It is life – the act of living – that creates the possibility to receive the fields of consciousness (the wave-form) into the waking consciousness which belongs to our physical body (the particle-form). This particle-function of consciousness is what is measured by means of EEG and other scans. The wave aspect of our indestructible consciousness in phase-space, with its simultaneous, non-local interconnectedness, is inherently not measurable by any known physical means.

During cardiac arrest, the functioning of the brain and of other cells in our body stops. Stopping, too, are the fluctuating electromagnetic fields of our neurons and other cells, and the interface between consciousness and physical body, is interrupted. This triggers a phase-transition, breaking the connection of wave-form consciousness and particle-form consciousness. **So, when we die, our consciousness can no longer have the aspect of particles, but only the eternal aspect of waves.**

It's worth mentioning that my wife's mother, Betty, died earlier in the same year as my mom. The nurse on duty at the time of Betty's death mentioned to us that she knew the very moment that Betty died because she saw a momentary flash of light coming from her room – the same flash of light that she always sees when someone dies. That's interesting because phase-state transitions always involve energy transfer.

In his conclusion Van Lommel states that:

.... grounded on the reported aspects of consciousness experienced during cardiac arrest, we can conclude that our consciousness could be based on fields of information consisting of waves, and that it originates in the phase-space.

Such understanding fundamentally changes one's opinion about death, because of the almost unavoidable conclusion that at the time of physical death, consciousness will continue in another dimension, invisible and immaterial -- the phase-space -- in which all past, present and future is enclosed.

Think about that. Admittedly, this research is only in its infancy. But what might it imply if consciousness can exist independently of brain function? Might it well force a huge change in the scientific paradigm in western medicine? It certainly could have practical implications in actual medical and ethical problems such as the care for comatose or dying patients, euthanasia, and the removal of organs for transplantation from somebody in the dying process with a beating heart in a warm body but a diagnosis of brain death.

And finally, we would have to consider the fact and the implications that **death, like birth, may well be a mere passing from one state of consciousness to another.**

What might that mean for what Emerson called the ‘oversoul’ or what Teilhard de Chardin called the ‘noosphere’ -- both intuitions of a supreme unity of consciousness that is accessible to us? What might that mean for notions of prayer and wisdom-seeking.

In a moment we will bring today’s service to a close with a ritual of remembering, embracing the memory of our loved ones who have passed on. What might all this mean for them and our relationship with them?

Ponder that as I bring this sermon to a close with these words from Rumi:

"Everything you see has its roots in the unseen world,
the forms may change yet the essence remains the same.
Every wonderful sight will vanish, every sweet word will fade
but do not be disheartened, the source they come from is eternal,
growing, branching out, giving new life and new joy."

Blessed be.

“ABOUT THE CONTINUITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS,” by Pim van Lommel

SOURCE: In: Brain Death and Disorders of Consciousness. Machado, C. and Shewmon, D. A. , Eds. New York, Boston, Dordrecht, London, Moscow: Kluwer Academic/ Plenum Publishers, Advances in Experimental Medicine and Biology Adv Exp Med Biol. 2004; 550: 115-132.

“During cerebral activity, electrical and magnetic patterns of the 100 billion neurons change each nanosecond. Neither the number of neurons, nor the precise shape of the dendrites, nor the position of synapses, nor the firing of individual neurons seem to be crucial for information processing properties, but rather the fleeting, highly ordered 4-dimensional (space and time) patterns of the electromagnetic fields generated along specialized neuronal networks ... Localized artificial stimulation with real photons (electrical or magnetic energy) disturbs and inhibits the constantly changing electromagnetic fields of our neuronal networks, thereby influencing and inhibiting the normal functions of our brain. Consciousness and memories may be the product or the result of these constantly changing fields of photons. These photons may be the elementary carriers of consciousness.

“**Phase-space** is an invisible, non-local, higher-dimensional space consisting of *fields of probability*, where every past and future event is available as a possibility. Within this phase-space no matter is present, everything belongs to uncertainty, and neither measurements nor observations are possible by physicists The act of observation instantly changes a probability into an actuality by collapse of the wave function. The phase-speed in this invisible and non-measurable phase-space varies from the speed of light to infinity, while the speed of particles in our manifest physical real-space varies from zero to the speed of light. At the speed of light, the speed of a particle and the speed of the wave are identical. But the slower the particle, the faster the wave-speed, and when the particle stops, the wave-speed is infinite. The phase-space generates events that can be located in our space-time continuum, the manifest world, or real-space. Thus, everything visible (in particle-form) emanates from the invisible (the wave-form).”