

Survival of Bodily Death
An Esalen Invitational Conference
December 6 - 11, 1998

Philosophy and Meta-Issues

This discussion was directed towards what Myers (1903) called a Tertium Quid, a theory that does not attempt to reconcile ontologically distinct domains but discovers an underlying principle or theory under which differences disappear. Whatever worldview supplants the current scientific materialism must adequately account for all those things that science currently knows about the universe while expanding the framework to encompass data now ignored. Poortman (1978) outlines his seven basic candidates for a Tertium Quid, drawing upon various contemplative traditions.

The idea of creating a philosophical bridge between evolutionary theory and survival research generated significant excitement at the conference. Such a bridge could alleviate some of the tension between scientific and religious worldviews, a tension that has undermined the empirical exploration of the topic. The dichotomy between the two paradigms promises to dissolve with a system that is inclusive of much of the evolutionary and scientific framework while allowing for metanormal, transpersonal, or spiritual agency in the universe. Michael Murphy (1998) has coined the term "evolutionary panentheism" to describe the canon of works which point in this direction.

Michael Grosso shared his thoughts on the survival question in relationship to evolutionary theory, a subject he has explored in his recent book (Grosso, 1992). His basic thesis is that we can see survival of bodily death as an evolutionary emergent, a product of life's relentless drive to free itself from physical and biological constraints. Just as consciousness and free will evolved, so might the survival of self in non-physical form. He is interested by a number of questions. First, is psi preadaptive to the postmortem environment? Psi does not appear to be highly useful or evolutionarily advantageous in the incarnate world since it is fleeting, sporadic, and largely unreliable. Perhaps the existence of psi, then, is tied to needs in the postmortem world rather than the incarnate one. Charles Tart brought up the question of how much of the personality survives and whether that may be changing; in earlier times, a crude or simplified version of survival may have prevailed and only now are we able to survive more fully intact. Better quality spirits? Michael G. agreed that the degree to which we survive may vary, and that we may still be in the process of evolving the "organs" of immortality.

Survival is probably not all-or-none and it may be influenced by life conditioning. For example, one interpretation of garden-variety "ghosts" is that they are stuck and confused in a timeless limbo realm, whereas dead saints are reputed to be capable of miraculous healings from the other side and exist in higher realms. Highly evolved individuals, then, might survive more fully than less enlightened humans. The Chinese book *The Secret of the Golden Flower* explicitly states that in order to survive bodily death, one must go through training. If not, one will not withstand the shock or impact of the transition. In the Catholic canonization proceedings, one of the requirements for sainthood is performing two miracles after death. This tests the authenticity of the saintly powers by examining whether they carry over in a functional, useful way beyond death. Padre Pio, for example, reputedly performed dozens of healings after his death and appeared to many people. The Sufi teacher Gurdjieff claimed that most people do not survive death; the two kinds of people that do are highly evolved souls and monomaniacs so fixated on something in life they do not even realize they are dead. The Theosophical view is that encountering a spirit is equivalent to meeting with an astral sheath or astral corpse rather than the "true" personality. Michael Murphy added that many esoteric systems refer to more than one death: departure from the physical body, then from the astral body, and perhaps even from the causal body. Charles Tart suggested giving comprehensive psychological tests to people before they die and then investigating what postmortem communicative avenues might be open to them. The main point is that survival may take place in many different ways.

Michael Grosso built his own work on the ideas of Julian Huxley, a highly conservative evolutionary theorist. Huxley felt that the single property of all living matter is the property of copying itself. If life is defined by the capacity for self-reproduction, survival after death would just be a new level of this capacity. It does involve a break into a new realm of non-physicality, but such a break is in keeping with life's general trajectory towards increasing freedom and greater control. Huxley noted that dominant organisms demonstrate greater control and greater independence from the environment. A soul or astral body would represent a huge leap forward but it would be a natural extension of the overall evolutionary trend. A related point is that we can see many current technologies as tools in the process of life freeing itself from the physical substrate. Today's communication technology, for example, resembles mechanical ESP, transmitting information at a distance. As such it can be seen as an intermediate solution in the process of liberation.

These discussions of psi and survival within the context of evolution are not without precedent. Indeed, Alfred Russell Wallace, who co-founded the theory of evolution by natural selection with Darwin, did not see an inconsistency between evolution and Spirit. Unsolved evolutionary problems, he felt, may well be addressed by such a framework. Alister Hardy wrote about the role of psi within the context of evolution, generally using it to strengthen a Lamarckian view. More recently, Colm Kelleher (1999) has been studying retrotransposons, located in non-coding and mobile areas of the genome, that may allow for some Lamarckian dimensions in the evolutionary process. His hypothesis is that humans who have enlightenment experiences might activate a transposition burst which allows a more luminous kind of embodiment. Michael Murphy commented that a lot of thinkers have entertained some version of this neo-Lamarckian framework. In fact, when we begin to look at the human realm, a Lamarckian perspective makes more sense since natural selection is less of a shaping force and conscious choice plays a more significant role in the trajectory of evolution. Further evolution is increasingly dependent, then, on our learning and behavior during life.

Michael Murphy's (1992) angle on bringing evolutionary theory and survival research together derives from the so-called perennial philosophy (a core hierarchy of being common to major mystical systems), and has been developed by his observation that at least twelve major areas of functioning -- perception, somatic awareness, communication, vitality, movement, dexterity/environmental control, relationship to pain and pleasure, will, cognition, subjectivity, love, and bodily structure -- evidence normal and metanormal equivalents, often with intermediate steps in between. For example, the implausible claim of levitation appears in virtually every mystical tradition, and in some cases, such as with Joseph of Cupertino and Theresa of Avila, dozens of witnesses testified to such feats. This clearly extraordinary version of movement does have intermediate versions, such as the lung-gom walking in the Tibetan tradition in which people report entering a light trance and being capable of walking vast distances at high speed with no fatigue. Shamans use statements like, "the feet have eyes" or "there is light in my feet" to indicate this extraordinary buoyancy in expanded states of awareness.

The general evolutionary trajectory, in Michael's opinion, is the emergence of higher levels of being into manifest form. In the earth's early history, only the physical and chemical rudiments of matter (the lowest link on the Great Chain) were manifest. As evolutionary history has unfolded, the higher stations and qualities have emerged into the incarnate world. In other words, evolution is the process of making explicate what has been implicate. Thus, the existence of metanormal capabilities may well be pointing to a new, more luminous, creative, dynamic, and multi-faceted human nature which extends our current capacities.

Most contemplative traditions recognize the emergence of supernormal powers as byproducts of spiritual development but warn against indulging in or encouraging such talents, for they are said to distract the aspirant from more central goals (humility, enlightenment, nondual consciousness, etc.) These metanormal abilities are called siddhis in Hinduism, the adornments of the man of light in Sufism, or charisms in Christianity. Hinduism has produced the most extensive classifications, though there is no comprehensive inventory. Hindu scholars break the supernormal abilities down into dehasiddhis (bodily powers), manasiddhis (mental powers), brahmasiddhis (the great siddhis of higher realization), anandasiddhis (different kinds of ecstasies), each of which correlates with the koshas (the subtle sheaths).

In the West, the best evidence for supernormal abilities comes from the Catholic church (Thurston, 1952), which is the only organization to have put its reputed saints and teachers on trial, with a prosecutor, witnesses, etc. to determine the authenticity of their sanctity. The "promotor fidei" plays the role of the devil's advocate to knock down fraudulent claims of holiness and miraculous abilities. This has resulted in a little known but extensive body of work. Pope Benedict XIV, a great humanist in the Renaissance, drew upon his role as former promotor fidei to create extensive criteria for miracles, charisms, and fraud. About twenty to twenty-five charisms have found universal acceptance in the Church. Some abilities verge on the grotesque: St. Theresa was reputedly able, while in ecstasy, to dislocate all her limbs, and distend her neck. Bodies appear to have a supernormal plasticity in these dilated states, mirroring the plasticity of the expanded mind.

In terms of survival research, Michael would posit that we are evolving towards a more luminous kind of embodiment: the supernormal capacities we witness in exceptional humans today might be prefigurations of normal capacities in the postmortem world or in our terrestrial future. These siddhis are the budding "limbs and organs" of a latent supernature that wants to emerge in the earthly world. Perhaps the walls between the earth-game and the afterlife will, or could, eventually rub thinner allowing greater interplay between the two realities. As our abilities open up, our world actually enlarges. For instance, as our metanormal perceptual abilities open, we can see more and enter a "larger" world. Athletes make statements such as, "In this state, I made more space for myself." The athletic world, for Michael, has been a remarkable place to gather evidence for these capacities since many sportspeople are naive subjects who have never heard of any of these talents. Their extreme discipline and training lead to a remarkable capacity for attention and concentration, which might allow the metanormal to come through.

Adam Crabtree commented that he finds lucid dreaming a fertile arena in which these metanormal abilities find expression, and he suggested taking an inventory of things people attempt in lucid dreams. These desires might reflect or prefigure the qualities of an emergent supernature. Michael Murphy also sees the same anticipation of latent capacities in science fiction literature and children's stories. Charles Tart added that a recent book, entitled *The World Beyond the Hill* by Alexei Panshin, explores the subject of how science fiction is becoming the spiritual literature of our day.

Michael has received, due to his books on golf and mysticism, many reports from golfers of supernormal events on the course and he hypothesizes that reading his books gives them unconscious permission to have such experiences. One man commented that he hit the green of an uphill par-five in two shots for the first time in his life and had the convincing sensation of actually walking downhill rather than up. The possible range of events is thus expanded by permission. Michael's philosophy is, in many ways, an extension of Tantra, in which all impulses, experiences and capabilities can be harnessed for transformation.

He then turned the group to a more in-depth discussion of each category of human capacity, with an eye towards metanormal equivalents that might emerge in the postmortem world. Each category below covers only the more unusual levels of manifestation.

- Perception:** This leads to the ability to perceive in a non-bodily way, as evidenced by OBEs. Michael Grosso reminded the group of an article by Thouless & Wiesner that argues ordinary perception and volitional capacities are on a continuum with supernormal ones like clairvoyance and psychokinesis. Ordinary perception would be a scaled-down, endosomatic version of clairvoyance. Ordinary movement could be seen as endosomatic psychokinesis. Michael Moncrief developed a thesis that we could not have true communication without telepathy: a mental communication accompanies the sound of the words. Michael Murphy then mentioned the tradition in India of the animan siddhi, the capacity to change the focal length of the mind down to the length of an atom, allowing one to explore cellular and molecular structures. Charles Leadbetter and Annie Besant, both of the Theosophical Society, attempted to study the periodic table of elements experientially with a version of this supernormal perception, and they got some right, such as insisting that neon comes in two forms several years before that fact was discovered. There's also a book written by Steven Phillips, a physicist at Berkeley, on the extrasensory perception of quarks. Many athletes report spontaneous glimpses of their capillaries or muscles. Charles Tart told the story of Nikolai Tesla, whose powers of visualization were so developed that he could design a machine in his head, set it in motion, and come back to it months later to see what parts showed excessive wear.
- Kinesthesia:** Paul Foley has done work with lucid dreaming as a vehicle for peak training in sports; Aaron DeGlanville commented that he personally had used Foley's techniques effectively to train for competitions.
- Communication ability:** This can lead into sustained telepathic exchange in musical groups who are "in the groove," great lovingmaking, teams that are operating "in sync," transmission of spiritual illumination, either to someone nearby or someone at a distance, and communal ecstasies. Arthur Hastings believes that in his work with groups, when they really click, a group field begins to be created at the fifth, sixth, and seventh chakras, resulting in telepathic exchanges.
- Vitality:** Kundalini (Hindu), tumo (Tibetan), incendium amoris (Christian), magical heat (shamanism) and boiling nu'um (African bushmen) are all terms for supernormal vitality. Philip Neri would walk around Florence bare-chested while it was snowing. Spontaneous combustion cases might be an extreme, more pathological form; Larry Arnold (1996) wrote a good book on the subject. A related stunt with physical mediums involves invulnerability to burning from hot coals, either by handling them or walking on them. A way to look at this is a freedom from environmental vicissitudes. In the physical body, heat comes from transformation of energy; this might be different in a non-physical spirit body, more dependent on something like vibrations.
- Movement:** This can lead to extraordinary agility such as lung-gom walking in Tibet. Lama Govinda (1966) writes of running across slick river rocks at night, explaining this in terms of psychophysical transformation. More extreme claims involve levitation or bilocation. Padre Pio was the subject of several claims of bilocation, both while alive and after his death. St. Joseph of Cupertino, the greatest levitator in the history of the Catholic church, was seen rising above the ground dozens of times by hundreds of witnesses. Traveling clairvoyance while out of the body would fall in this category, as would passage into other worlds. Michael Murphy believes that the pressure for victory in athletics combines with intense training to produce phenomena close to paranormal. Some basketball players appear to be suspended in the air. Lore around Nijinsky in ballet was that he hung in the air longer than was humanly possible. Charles commented that he would love to analyze a frame by frame video of this, perhaps engaging a physicist in the task.
- Coordination, dexterity & controlling the environment:** Jule Eisenbud proposes that predators waiting for prey involves an act of telepathic summoning, a variation on psychokinesis, and he cites instances of mice who emerge almost docilely from holes to be eaten by cats.
- Relationship to pain and pleasure:** This can lead to the cultivation of self-existent delight, a return to the primal joy of living. Will this primal delight be carried over? If we die moaning and depressed, will we reenact that state of mind on the other side?
- Will:** A flow-state might be a metanormal equivalent.
- Cognitive ability:** Michael finds it difficult to differentiate higher-level cognition from higher-level perception since inspirations often arrive toute ensemble, but metanormal cognition often involves an ability to see a solution or vision instantly, without noticeable cognitive process.
- Subjectivity:** Michael proposes there is a supernormal sense of personhood or individuality that is rooted in immediate awareness of oneness while retaining a sense of separate uniqueness. He differs with the Buddhists on this.
- Love:** A more universal love or compassion can emerge, less possessive. Tantric practices can be seen as an attempt to awaken higher octaves of love as well.
- Bodily structure:** Poortman (1978) has collected a large body of evidence for an energy or spirit body, a metanormal expression of our current bodies.

Michael M. spoke to the extensive lore in every religious tradition about subtle or spirit bodies. Ochema is the Greek word for this subtle body, while in Sanskrit it is deha, kosha, or sharira. Jewish and Sufi mysticism are also full of this lore around spirit bodies. They all refer to the relationship of bodies in the subtle realms. Near-death experiences also speak to the existence of these "disembodied bodies." The existence of subtle energy bodies can be inferred from studies with EMGs (unpublished, but work done by Todd Mikuraa) in which one resists pressure on an extended arm, first with force and then by visualizing the arm as a beam of light while relaxing. The amount of force needed for resistance diminishes significantly during the "energy arm" condition as opposed to the physical force condition, even when significantly more weight is added. Schmidt random generators, designed to test psychokinesis, also indicate an ability for the mind to affect inorganic realms at a distance, perhaps showing subtle energy bodies at work. An upcoming Esalen conference will address this topic more systematically.

Another major philosophical issue raised several times during the conference was how to "disprove" or address the "superpsi hypothesis," which has been used to challenge much evidence for survival. The superpsi hypothesis posits virtually unlimited access to psi abilities to account for mediumistic, reincarnation, and other forms of survival evidence. Conference participants felt it has many problems, not the least of which is that it generates no empirical controls and is not particularly parsimonious: Occam's razor may apply here. If true, superpsi reveals enormous latent capabilities of the unconscious mind. At its extreme, several conference participants felt the theory is self-canceling because it becomes proof of something that could survive. Most agreed that unconscious psi is used in some cases to fortify illusions, but to make it cover all the available data, the theory becomes unwieldy and amorphous and fails to generate testable hypotheses.

Psychological and Political Issues

Steve Dinan felt that in order for people to relinquish a primary orienting paradigm, around which they organize friendship, work, and habits of thought, there needs to be something reasonably solid ahead which holds the promise of greater utility. Few people will leap into the unknown. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection provided the key element of a compelling new meta-theory to describe the world and our place in it. Steve feels that what is needed to advance the field, more than polished research in any particular discipline, is a cohesive, believable framework in which survival research can make sense. He described this in the context of evolutionary landscapes, the peaks of which represent areas of greater "fitness." In the case of an orienting paradigm, fitness reflects the practical explanatory value of a worldview. Most thought and work proceeds steadily up the local fitness "peak," polishing and refining a core worldview. However, we can (and do) become stuck on a local peak, unable to make the leap to another peak that is more fit, since doing so demands muddling through unknown and less "fit" terrain.

When the fitness landscape is turned upside down, the peaks become attractor basins, each of which is like the watershed of a lake. Moving to a new watershed (in this case a paradigm) demands a rigorous journey across peaks, a journey undertaken only by a bold few. Fortunately, as an increasing number of pioneers unite their efforts, the difficulty of traversing the path to the next attractor basin lessens, eventually resulting in a major paradigm shift. The three dominant paradigms vying for cultural supremacy in recent Western history involve the supernaturalistic religious worldview, predominant through the Middle Ages and until Darwinian thought took root; the worldview of materialistic science, currently at its apex; and a new paradigm that has been variously called evolutionary panentheism, conscious evolution, a broader empiricism, or constructive postmodernism. This last has yet to be articulated fully. The challenge survival research faces is that it fundamentally undermines Attractor Basin #2, which is very threatening to those who hold that worldview. It is a paradigm-shifter, much like Darwin's theory of evolution. There are three main tasks to accelerate a paradigm shift:

- Improve research in fields which challenge Basin #2, an accumulation of inexplicable anomalies.
- Bring related fields into more cohesive and synergistic collaboration, which increases the power of each (i.e. the sum is greater than the parts)
- Develop a compelling and synoptic new worldview (Basin #3) which can accommodate a wider range of data in the same way that general relativity extended but included Newtonian theory.

The debate over patterns and timing of paradigm evolution has analogs in the debate over gradual versus punctuated evolution in biological circles. During the conference, Michael Murphy leaned more towards the Jack-in-the-Box (punctuated equilibrium) model of idea evolution, while other conferees, like Ed Kelly, believed in something akin to gradualism: change will result from the gradual accumulation of a compelling body of scientific data. The gradualists believe that no single study will push us over the edge.

On a related note, Steve explained a stage model he has been developing on the evolution of memes, and especially a subclass of memes called transformational memes -- ideas or practices that demand individual or collective growth before they can be implemented. In his research on Esalen's history, he sees five main stages of meme evolution. First is a period of pioneering in which iconoclastic, curious, or exploratory individuals develop new ideas. Second is a phase of coalescence, which is usually localized to a single geographic spot, and which results in the unification of pioneering efforts into something larger, more akin to a movement. Third is a phase of maturation in which theory, research, and practice all flesh out the contours of the meme and build a believable framework. Fourth is a stage of confrontation in which the meme becomes threatening to various power structures in the society, resulting in backlash. Fifth is integration, the gradual melding of the old and the new -- the incorporation of the meme into the dominant worldview of the culture. The expertise of Esalen conferences lies in the coalescence phase, bringing a movement together out of individual pioneering efforts. Survival research, perhaps because it demands a paradigm-shift, has spent a century just trying to get off the ground. Michael Grosso joked that it is arrested in coalescence, which seems accurate.

Time and again, conference participants lamented the extreme reluctance of many in mainstream scientific circles to address this topic with objectivity and impartiality. At times, the culprit appears to be a reluctance amongst materialists to face their own mortality. At others, the strength of the emotional response and the loose-cannon nature of their retorts speak to an even more powerful force at work, the power of a dominant paradigm and the fear of losing it. In scientific work that does not challenge the core paradigm, psychophysical and cultural resistance play a less prominent role. However, in the field of survival research, friction is more pronounced. This bias is even common amongst transpersonal or perennialist scholars, who should be allies. They have a tendency to want to keep parapsychology out of it, to focus on contemplative truths and practices for transformation without dwelling on metanormal abilities. There is a snobbery involved: moksha before siddhi. Psychical abilities are considered part of makyo in Zen.

Charles commented on the success of the NDE field in riding the coattails of medicine. Its isolation from the bulk of parapsychological work actually has allowed it to receive more attention. Sukie commented that the hospice movement has also significantly impacted on the survival issue by addressing the dying process more directly. Perhaps both point to possible strategies to gaining credibility in the future.

References

- Govinda, Lama.** 1996. *Blaze!* The Mysterious Fires of Human Combustion. M. Evans and Co. ([buy at amazon.com](#))
- Arnold, Larry.** 1966. *Way of the White Clouds*. Hutchinson.
- Grosso, Michael.** 1992. *Frontiers of the Soul: Exploring Psychic Evolution*. Wheaton, IL: Quest Books. ([buy at amazon.com](#))
- Kelleher, Colm.** 1999. *Retrotransposons as engines of human bodily transformation*. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 13, 9-24.
- Murphy, Michael.** 1992. *The Future of the Body: Explorations Into the Further Evolution of Human Nature*. Los Angeles: Tarcher. ([buy at amazon.com](#))
- Murphy, Michael.** 1998. *On evolution and transformative practice*. In Rothberg, D. and Kelley, S. (eds.) *Ken Wilber in Dialogue*. Wheaton, IL: Quest. ([buy at amazon.com](#))
- Myers, Frederic W.H.** 1903. *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*. 2 vols. London: Longmans, Green, and Co.
- Poortman, J. J.** 1978. *Vehicles of Consciousness: The Concept of Hylic Pluralism*. Vols. 1-4. Theosophical Publishing House.
- Thurston, Herbert.** 1952. *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company.

[Conferences Menu](#) | [Summary Home](#)

[State of the Survival Field](#) | [Episodic and Periodic Nature of Psi Phenomena](#) | [Reincarnation](#) | [Near-Death Experiences](#) | [Out-of-Body Experiences](#) | [Multiple Personality Disorder](#) | [Channeling and mediumship](#) | [Cross-Cultural Dimensions](#) | [Philosophy and Meta-Issues](#) | [Future Directions for Research](#) | [Bibliography](#) | [Recommended Reading](#) | [Participants](#) |

About Esalen CTR
General Calendar
Web Links
Home

Leading Scholars
Articles & Book Reviews
Meditation Archives
Extraordinary Functioning Archives

Evolutionary Theory
Survival Research
Integral Capitalism
Past CTR Conferences

For inquiries about Esalen's public workshops and classes, please visit www.esalen.org.
Help

Questions or comments about our website?
Send email to WebMedia@esalenctr.org.

All text, graphics and content of the Esalen CTR website.
Are Copyright 1999-2001 by Esalen Center for Theory & Research.
All rights reserved.