

Survival of Bodily Death

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State of the Survival Field

Michael Murphy thinks the field of survival research is in a curious state of affairs. William James, Frederic Myers, and other founders of the (British) Society of Psychical Research initiated significant research and inquiry during the 1880's that has not been significantly surpassed in the intervening decades despite the accumulation of several new strands of important data. The fundamental questions are accessible, yet only a handful of researchers are paid to investigate the topic. His goal for the Esalen conferences is to bring a synthetic and catalytic intelligence to the field.

Charles Tart feels there are three main areas of research that bear upon the question of survival:

1. **Indirect evidence** that indicates autonomy of the mind from the body, especially that gathered in parapsychological research. Telepathy, clairvoyance, and psychokinesis cannot be explained by normal psychophysical causes and thus indicate latent capacities of the mind to act in autonomous ways.
2. **Direct evidence** for survival, as reported in accounts of near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, and reincarnation research. These experiences tend to convince those who have them without having too much effect on those outside.
3. The most direct evidence comes from **mediumistic sources**, although the quality varies significantly. Telepathy can account for many successful mediums, and indeed, there are many cases in which convincing communications have been produced by a medium when the sitter incorrectly thought the supposed spirit was dead. However, telepathy does not account for all cases unless one adopts the superpsi hypothesis which posits that an unlimited amount of psi can produce virtually all the effects we see in survival research. The superpsi hypothesis undermines evidence for survival but requires a remarkable picture of human capacity.

Michael Grosso remarked that the field of survival research might represent an area where popular opinion and belief are closer to the truth than the mainstream scientific view, a reversal of the typical situation. He feels that the core experience is the out-of-body experience (OBE) inasmuch as it may demonstrate an independence of mind from a material substrate and gives a foretaste of the actual experience at death. His taxonomy divides the evidence into apparitions, mediumship, and reincarnation evidence. Other areas Grosso feels are of particular importance to the question:

1. Collectively-seen apparitions
2. Death-bed visions
3. Near-death experiences/visions
4. Physical effects at the edge of death (e.g. clocks stopping, pictures falling off the wall).
5. Mediumship with proxy sitters who know nothing about the target "spirit."
6. Drop-in communicators: an apparent spirit unknown to a gathered circle sometimes begins communicating verifiable information.
7. Book tests: a medium will describe an unusual passage in a book that is highly relevant to the sitter.
8. Cross-correspondences: several different mediums receive information that individually makes no sense and the meaning only becomes clear when all the pieces are assembled. The deceased F.W.H. Myers was allegedly responsible for some of these, which would make sense since he was acutely aware of the legitimization issues as a researcher.
9. Machine-mediated mediumship: reflects our increasing reliance on technology
10. Near-death experiences of people who are blind from birth and report sight in their experience.
11. Organ recipients and apparent memories from the donor.
12. Night terrors or haggling (Hufford, 1982): Waking up in the middle of the night with a feeling of paralysis and a sense of a frightening presence in the room.

Reincarnation evidence brings up the question of what actually survives. Do we have a disembodied existence where the whole personality is intact? In Taoist accounts, not everyone survives; survival of bodily death reflects sufficient spiritual development so as to overcome the shock of death.

Michael Grosso suggests several fruitful avenues by which we can expand the paradigm:

1. Put the issue of post-mortem survival in the context of evolution, which would lead it to carry more weight.
2. Address the question of which aspects of personality bridge into another world and which don't. For example, the Columbia professor Hyslop argued we are most likely to carry our creative imagination with us.
3. Expand the database, looking for more related phenomena. Transpersonal psychology, mysticism, and shamanism are all part of the overall world picture and should be woven in. Physical phenomena tend to be overlooked.
4. Expand modes of research, which ties in with therapeutic concerns, since it is important for people to come to grips with their mortality. This leads into working out a state-specific epistemology and new modes of research. Direct experiences may give us a foretaste of what it is like to die. Three main ways to produce direct experiences:
 - o induction of apparitions such as with the psychomanteum
 - o induction of OBEs
 - o development of a method to experience "the light," since it is almost universally reported as the most transformative component of NDEs. Michael Grosso has done preliminary but promising work in this direction using visualization with his students.

Michael Murphy spoke to his sociological aspiration behind this conference, which might be called a hope for a Jack-in-the-Box effect for survival research, sparking a quick change of worldview. As a parallel, the theory of evolution had many adherents before the Darwinian revolution. Diderot, in the 1750's and 1760's, called himself a transformationalist in a prefiguration of Darwin's theory. Lamarck, in 1809, had a theory of evolution, though his mechanism failed to withstand scrutiny. Huge amounts of geological and biological research piled up for something like evolution. But each time there was an approach to a cohesive theory, scientists backed away. When Darwin advanced his theory, though, a dramatic shift occurred among opinion elites in just a few years. Michael likened this to a Jack-in-the-Box; once sufficient conditions are met there is a rapid change in the dominant organizing paradigm. In Darwin's day, the fashion was to have chests full of butterflies and rocks; natural history was a popular hobby. Today, the trend is to collect novel and interesting experiences; the paranormal is in vogue in our culture, perhaps indicating a ripeness for a similar cultural shift today. The question then becomes, what triggers or sufficient conditions will produce the shift? Michael speculates that a synoptic new theory might lead to a tremendous efflorescence of research, new academic departments, and practical benefits.

In commenting on the current public fascination with the paranormal, Emily Kelly reminded the group of Batchelder's experiments in which he deliberately did something deceptive, such as bumping the table, that then seemed to lead to actual paranormal phenomena. The atmosphere of spiritualism in the 19th century, for example, was filled with fraud and deception and it took discerning psychical researchers to cull the good phenomena from the dubious. However, the deceptive junk may have been necessary to create a field of possibility for the real events to happen on top of the fakes, perhaps by disengaging the skeptical mind.

A more recent version of this work was done by George Owen (Owen, 1976) in Toronto, where his group set up a circle that would meet regularly to produce some of the phenomena of the 19th century such as table-tipping. They deliberately fabricated a personality named Philip -- totally fictitious with a fictional history -- and organized sittings to contact Philip. Their efforts resulted in the creation of physical phenomena like sounds and raps, as well as table tilting. Owen aimed to disprove spiritualism, to show that what was actually being contacted related to unconscious material from participants. Interestingly enough, though, analysis of the raps within the table by physicists at Kent State indicated that there was no way to produce the type of sound dispersal through any external hitting -- there was a different shape to the sound envelope. The sound was coming from inside the table. Something paranormal was clearly happening even if it derived from the group unconscious.

Conferees then explored the connection between 19th century spiritualism and social activism. Many spiritualists were feminists and abolitionists at the avant-garde of social thinking (Braude, 1989). Victoria Woodhull, for example, was a medium in Boston who was a suffragette and the first woman candidate for vice-president. Robert Dale Owen, a British socialist, developed his whole socialist program for the country based upon transmission from the spirits. Messages today are more focused on inner guidance, while back then many of the messages were focused on social activism. Hundreds of liberal movements around the U.S. drew inspiration from mediumistic work.

References

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