

## Survival of Bodily Death

An Esalen Invitational Conference  
May 22 to 27, 2005

### The Zeitgeist, Einstein, and Survival

**Frank Poletti and Sean Kelly**

On Wednesday morning Frank Poletti gave a two-part presentation with the assistance of Sean Kelly. In the first half Poletti built upon many of the ideas that Kelly had presented during the 2004 conference. The reader is thus encouraged to see the 2004 summary for more information and background on Kelly's main theoretical proposal, which he calls "Integral Time and the Varieties of Survival." Put briefly, Kelly believes that a fragmented and reductionistic type of thinking still informs most attempts to create a theory for the survival data. Too often in these attempts the rich, multi-faceted, and paradoxical nature of the survival question is approached as if it were a simple riddle to be solved and that the answer could be put on the side of a cereal box. Instead of "dumbing-down" the survival question, Kelly has sought to honor this great mystery by theorizing about it in a way that holds in a broad compass the sometimes contradictory evidence we have in favor of survival. In particular, Kelly thinks that there are some irresolvable paradoxes (e.g., freedom and determinism) that are inextricably bound up with the survival question, and these seemingly contradictory issues must be approached with sophistication instead of a simple-minded desire to put a true mystery in a theoretical straight-jacket.

As Poletti echoed some of the features of Kelly's integrative theoretical proposal from the 2004 meeting, he also encouraged the conference participants to think about the survival hypothesis from yet a different vantage point—the current Zeitgeist, or spirit of our own moment in history. Poletti suggested that if the conference participants could start to relate their own musings on how survival works to some of the pressing issues of our moment in history, then we might start to see how the survival issue bears upon some of the massive cultural changes already taking place in the early 21st century. In particular, Poletti asked the participants to think about survival from a broader, more evolutionary context. He noted that several prominent spiritual teachers, mystics, and transpersonal theorists have said that our moment in history is one of tremendous evolutionary changes. And perhaps sooner than most think, humanity could be confronted with a "survival crisis"—but not for just one individual who is dying, but rather a crisis on a planetary scale, a species-wide survival crisis. Could it be that our growing curiosity with the nature of individual death and survival bears some relationship to a potential planetary-wide case of death and survival? By thinking about this issue in a somewhat metaphorical way, Poletti was echoing the comments of Chris Bache, who presented at this survival conference in 2001. Poletti highlighted some of the key ideas in Bache's book *Dark Night, Early Dawn*, which develops Stan Grof's 40-year research into the "death-rebirth crisis" by putting it in an ecological and planetary context. Both Grof and Bache have written about a fundamental issue that all people must go through on the path toward spiritual maturity: ego-death. Bache in particular has speculated on the possibility of a species-wide ego-death (or death-rebirth crisis), which could be thrust suddenly upon humanity in the near future by such issues as ecological collapse, global warming, fundamentalism, etc. Overall, Poletti asked the conference participants to think about the relationship between our personal curiosity about survival after death (will I survive and what will it be like?) and the issue of humanity's survival after a planetary-wide type of ego-death (could some kind of trans-egoic humanity survive after the death of civilization as we know it?). In some important way, Poletti suggested that these two issues inform one another.

In the second half of the presentation, Poletti described a GUTs theory called Relational Block World, or RBW for short, which builds upon the great legacy of Albert Einstein and has some interesting implications for the survival hypothesis. The physicist-philosopher Michael Silberstein was planning to attend this survival meeting but could not make it at the last minute, so Poletti gave an overview of Silberstein's work on RRW. Readers who are interested in Silberstein's more detailed description of this topic are welcome to Google his article titled "Minkowski meets Hilbert: No Time for Quantum Mysteries in the Relational Blockworld." Below here, there is brief introduction to RBW and how it relates to the survival hypothesis.

In the early twentieth century there were two major revolutions in physics: 1) the quantum revolution and 2) the relativity revolution. A good 75 years later, no brilliant scientist has yet to come along to successfully weave these two breakthroughs together into a coherent "GUTs theory" (grand unified theory). Or so it would seem. Michael Silberstein and his colleagues have been working on a radical GUTs theory that builds upon Einstein's basic intuition about light as described in his special theory of relativity. Interestingly, as Poletti described RBW, he noted that Einstein's famous paper for this theory was published exactly 100 years ago this year in 1905. The strong interpretation of the special theory states that all moments in time are equally real and no single perspective in time can be taken as fundamental. This is generally called the "relativity of simultaneity" by physicists. RBW builds on this radical intuition about time and creatively synthesizes it with some of the basic findings of quantum physics like non-locality. After describing some of the features of RBW, Poletti said that although from an "egoic-perspective" RBW seems counter-intuitive, it should be taken seriously as a GUTs theory. Why? Primarily because the central theoretical orientation of RBW meshes so well with reports from mystics about the paradoxical nature of time and light. Poletti noted that several mystics from different time periods and cultural backgrounds (Meister Eckhart, D.T. Suzuki, Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, Ibn 'Arabi, and many others) have reported that linear time and the movement of light are both illusions that appear real from the egoic-perspective but not from that of a realized spiritual master. Poletti said that what fascinates him about RBW is that it gives an intelligible account of why human egos would experience light and time in the way we habitually do while also elegantly proposing a deeper structure to reality. After explaining some of the further compatibilities between the mystical view of time and light and RBW, Poletti ended by reminding the participants that Einstein never believed in time; he called it a stubborn illusion. And in fact, when Einstein's close friend Besso died, he wrote a letter to Besso's family in an attempt to console them. In this letter Einstein said that although we experience death and loss in the context of linear time, in reality that is only a convincing illusion. Overall, Poletti suggested that if this conference wants to be serious about addressing the full complexity of the survival hypothesis, then it must come to grips with the elusive and paradoxical nature of time, which may be vastly more mysterious than what we commonly think.

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

[A Note to Readers](#) | [Conference Participants](#) | [The Infinite Regress of the Observer and the Stubbornness of Fact](#) | [Metaphysical Assumptions and the Survival Hypothesis](#) | [Sri Aurobindo and the Survival Hypothesis](#) | [Quantum Physics and the Psycho-physical Nature of Reality](#) | [The Zeitgeist, Einstein, and Survival](#) | [On the Nature of Entangled Minds](#) | [William James and the Nature of the Personal "I"](#) | [The Later James and the Influence of Myers](#) |

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[Scholarly Resources](#)

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