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# Soul Survivors

## What Really Happens When We Die

*“No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don’t want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because death is very likely the single best invention of life.”*

– Steve Jobs (1955-2011)

Life is a lifetime falling into death. From birth we trace an arc, tossed up into the living for a time, but even as we are loosed into life, our destiny is determined. Life, it seems, has a catch to it. There is an end to it. Eventually we must touch down, and we hope the catch is gentle.

As children, we think nothing of it, too taken with our vital present to imagine a finite future; but as we grow older, we begin to notice mortality, and before long we learn we are not everlasting. Long before we fully comprehend the certainty of our temporary existence, we pray that God will take us into heaven when we die. Wherever that is. Whenever that is. As adults we interpret it to the young, trying to explain the reasons behind the experience of life, but when it comes to something as common as death, we are still like children. We know where Santa Claus gets the toys and where the Easter Bunny gets the baskets, but most of us are still hopefully expecting that if we die before we wake, we pray the Lord our soul to take. Even the most rational among us usually agree that when it comes to that inevitable, ultimate, and final transition, God only knows what happens then.

For many more, avoidance is the best refuge against a disturb-

ing realization. As the world population grows, we notice more and more people dying all the time. It seems to be trending. In response, we keep our minds fixed on the here and now, rather than on the where and when. We all live our lives, and then?

And then ... will the heavenly odds-maker collect the bets and will the first person to the other side please tell us what happened? Am I Brahman, a spirit, or an angel? Did Jesus love me, or did I miss Nirvana and I'm about to be recycled as a turtle for some Buddhist sin? Are these the Elysian Fields, the Happy Hunting Grounds or, wrong turn, doggy heaven for Rover? The more we think about it, the more we realize how undefined this most inevitable of destinations remains. We know more about the moon than about the experience of death, and very few have gone to the moon. Those who went, however, returned, and that is the big difference. The moon is a temporary destination; death is always forever.

Where, or how, we spend that forever remains for too many a bothersome unanswered question. Even the most religious souls are curious; this is an innocence nearly all of us keep throughout life with much guesswork and very few authorities. We cannot speak with authority ourselves, and those with real expertise have nothing to say at all. Dead men tell no tales. And so, preferring something to nothing, many accept the various descriptions of everlasting life, or lives, as handed down by our traditional religious or spiritual beliefs. Those who have found a path they can trust know the peace of the mighty and the comfort of the meek. As we grow older, we begin to understand that we all want that assurance. If truth be told, nearly all the non-believers would love to have a reason to believe.

### Guidebooks To Forever

Comparing the afterlives described by the world's great religions, we begin to notice similarities. At first, singing in angelic choirs doesn't seem quite like getting off Buddha's wheel of life, but there is always ultimate peace. It is always a blessed journey or a return to a higher and better place where the woes of earthly life are left behind as we take up a new existence without suffering or pain in a world without end. Living in the cross-cultural currents of our global society, we sometimes have trouble reminding ourselves that less than a hundred years ago, wherever we went,

we can accomplish this leap to immortality given the only tools at hand: our will, wick, dying mental selves. These days, most of us don't like to believe in magic. If it takes a mystery or a miracle to get us to heaven, that seems a little awkward. If it's really possible, perhaps it's time we came up with an explanation that makes sense. Now that modern medical technology seems able to keep any of us, or for that matter any part of us, alive almost indefinitely with various implants and devices, there is a renewed interest in just what happens afterward. No one in recent history has died and returned to life, and nobody yet has been known to survive brain death. We do, however, have volumes of reports from those who get close enough to stick a toe across and hear it back before it was too late. By reviewing available information from these near-death experiences, often referred to as NDE's, we begin to get a picture that may help guide us toward the explanation we seek.

There are many common themes: a miraculous transformation, departure from the physical body, heavenly beings, often a white light or passage, and the sense of timelessness. Only the details seem to be cultural. Nirvana never arrives for a devout Dominican nun. Holy Hindus drop their bodies and achieve nirvana, but they never meet Mother Mary. It is our own life that we re-experience, our own relatives who greet us along the way. Left unanswered is how we can greet our grandparents if they are off with their own grandparents: the paradise of the select goddess. Holy books seem strangely incomplete; the inevitable crowds of Chinese in paradise are simply not mentioned in any Christian biblical text. Even heavenly angels meet cultural expectations; winged for Christian, non-winged for Hindus. Heaven is always a curious combination of human universals and cultural specifics.

Almost all of us will lapse into brain coma before we die, but each year a few make it back to describe the experiences they had. It seems a new "visit to heaven" book climbs the best-seller lists nearly every year, the ones written by physicians or young people leading in popularity. Although many are beautiful and poetic, one stands out.

On the morning of December 10, 1996, Jill Bolte Taylor, a thirty-seven-year-old Harvard-trained neuroscientist, suffered a massive stroke. A neuroanatomist by profession, she observed her own mind deteriorate completely to the point that she could not walk, talk, read, write, or recall any of her life, all within the space of four hours. As the massive neurological disaster unraveled her higher cognitive centers, all her rational and time-oriented func-

tions became unavailable. In her 2008 book, *My Stroke of Insight*, followed by an easily available TED talk viewed by millions on YouTube.com, she describes in vivid detail the complete disruption of her universe as her virtual reality crashed around her.

Taylor found herself alternating between two distinct and opposite realities: a euphoric retreat into the intuitive brain, a realm of complete well-being and peace, and the intrusive attempts of the logical, cognitive centers which quickly recognized she was having a stroke and doggedly enabled her to seek help before she was lost completely. Her recovery took six years, but today Taylor is convinced that the stroke was the best thing that could have happened to her. It taught her, she says, that Nirvana is never more than a thought away. Her widely acclaimed work has become a source of comfort and inspiration to countless stroke victims and their caregivers.

In a classic 1980 study, a number of survivors of near-death experiences were cataloged for similarities by Dr. Kenneth Ring, one of the first physicians to conduct serious research into these phenomena. Placed in the order they were perceived, these reports suggest a series of common experiences. Subjects reported “peace and contentment” (60%), “detachment from the physical body” (37%), “entering the darkness” (23%), “seeing the light” (16%), and “entering the light” (11%). Since most patients who suffer the sort of trauma experienced by these individuals do not recover, survival rates would naturally favor those who experienced only the first stages of brain coma. Those that report “entering the light” account for a small percentage, probably because most of those who get that far don’t come back.

Along with near-death revival stories, there are the last words of those who died describing their final visions, often leaving poignant images of a place beyond. Interestingly, these visions are almost uniformly pleasant and often include visions of parents or other relatives and friends who had died before. Krista Gorman, who survived eight minutes of clinical death while giving birth, describes a beautiful Eden—like world filled with love to Morgan Freeman in a *National Geographic* segment also available at YouTube.com. The poet and religious mystic William Blake, present at the death of his beloved brother, recounted seeing his brother’s released spirit ascend heavenward “clapping its hands for joy.” Steve Jobs’ last hours, steeped in his yoga practice and expected for years, were determined and mindful as he said his last goodbyes. As his sister Mona Simpson recounted in the *New*

*York Times*, “Death didn’t happen to Steve, he achieved it.” After making it through one final night, wrote Simpson, her brother began to slip away. “His breath indicated an arduous journey, some steep path, altitude. He seemed to be climbing. But with that will, that work ethic, that strength, there was also sweet Steve’s capacity for wonderment, the artist’s belief in the ideal, the still more beautiful later.” His final words were monosyllables, repeated three times. At last, surrounded by his family, he gazed at each in turn and, looking up and beyond them he peacefully surrendered. His last words were those of nearly speechless awe. “Oh wow! Oh wow! Oh wow!”

All human cultures have religions, so the possibility arises that the heavenly images and experiences common to all religions might be common to human consciousness itself. Since similar images appear in the words of several prophets and sacred texts as well as first-hand reports of near-death, or clinical death and revival, it suggests there might be a neurological explanation, something common to all of us, that we could all experience in one form or another. If the developing brain left us with a taste of eternity as we matured into our human consciousness, it should be able to bring us back to that starting place before we leave. Nurses and prophets have always been able to tell us where we went after death, it seems science may finally be ready to provide a reasonable explanation of how we get there.

## Welcome Home: Return To Eternity

So what happens at death? The nature of the experience of death may already be apparent to some. If we once spent forever winding up the mental clock that ticks us through time and space during those endless eons between conception and age three, it will take just as long to wind it down. The human brain at the point of death has over eighty billion fully functional neurons. Each one is different, each is alive. As death arrives, they cannot all suddenly leap up and die at the same moment, that would be impossible. They must die off over some period of time, and their more valuable functions would fall first. From the most sensitive dendrites on the most exposed cortical cells to the most embedded neurons in the brainstem, the brain dies by degrees.

Since it is the activity of the human brain that creates, permits and limits our awareness of anything else, how will our awareness

we lose visual definition, and the sky slowly fades to red, the lowest frequency color in our visual spectrum and the softest color we know. According to the Tibetans, we then see "points of light, like sparks." Finally, there comes darkness and the "setting face to face with the clear light of death." There is still a lot of brain remaining, but we are now as timeless and as rightless as we were in our seventh month in the womb. We are the one and only agent, only this time forever.

Scientists prefer independent verification for theories that the mind may be experiencing these sequential distortions even as the brain is simplifying during death. In 2011, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio gave a TED talk on the nature of consciousness that has been viewed nearly a million and a half times. The sense of self, it seems, is very hard to lose, and persists all the way to the brain stem. Without a single scanner and with the most rudimentary knowledge of brain science, the lamas had been describing in detail the gradual death of the brain while the event was actually in progress. They never went beyond the "clear light of death" in their lucid descriptions; by that time they had stopped talking and "gone beyond" to the most profound and universal state of mind we will ever encounter in our lives. It is a return to our beginning. The circle is now complete, eternity to eternity, and all in one lifetime.

This does seem to be our path; but what would the personal experience be like? It would probably feel like a blessed event, as gently reassuring as our birth was once so bewildering - when was it, a few moments ago? With timelessness fast approaching, our lifetime will seem to have been but a short sojourn, almost a dream, in some recent world. As discrimination falters, we will begin again to remember forever, to see again the sights we saw when we had just arrived from where we are now returning. Tall beings, past lives, the rounds of judgment and rounds of forgiveness: the long forgotten past returns as time itself begins to stretch out, moment by moment.

Years appear now between the minutes of earthly time, centuries between seconds, eons between the tenths of seconds. Finally, as was promised by our God or our faith, we are returned to oneness forever, for had there ever been anything else? By this time we are timeless, as the heart, the mind, the soul, and the universe all merge in the journey back to one, the journey that will never end. Eternity arrives early. It comes with our final consciousness, and it comes for us just a few minutes before physical brain death.

We will never be able to perceive death itself; we will run out of time and self long before it gets to us. The final landing is gentle indeed; we have nothing at all to worry about. We all go home in the end to the timelessness of another universe that remembers nothing and is forever.

Although this description of the simplification of consciousness agrees with information we have from the scientific community, it must remain speculative. Final confirmation remains impossible because of the nature of life: there is a threshold below which a dying cell is dead and cannot be revived. The sense of self may persist all the way to the brain's most basic structures, but anything that would reduce consciousness to a universal state would probably kill off so many brain cells in the process that we might as well stay there. Further studies of people who have been revived from drowning or experimental near-death experiences have revealed that they actually suffered more damage from the sudden return of blood to the brain than from the initial anoxia. Dr. Taylor was actually very lucky; she worked hard to recover and there have been lasting effects. Most people, if revived, would likely suffer from extensive brain damage, remaining trapped in a body completely inappropriate to their mental state. When faced with the question of whether life support should be removed from the brain dead, Pope Pius XII suggested that, in irreversible coma, the soul might have already left the body. He was right, and in even suggesting it, he was demonstrating how easily religion can incorporate neurological perspective as a backup for wisdom that was always available. Still, the final proof will always be missing. Our best witnesses leave us before it's over.

Among the living, then, we can have no trustworthy reports. Brains and minds in the process of development toward adult complexity are in the heads of people too young to speak and as yet unable to reason. Likewise, dying people and with their dying words unspoken, we never hear about their final destination. The Book of the Dead must still be read on faith, but hoping to attain eternity does not seem unreasonable. In fact, there seems no way to avoid it. As the result of time distortion, which must occur as we lose chronological controls, there is no way to know how long it takes to regress consciousness back to stardust. Brain cells are capable of firing hundreds of times per second; we could slow down to a graceful end in the blink of an eye. By the time we reach our own ancient universe, time effectively will have stopped for each of us.