

Mortality

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For every person there will be a day, sometime in the future, when his or her life comes to an end. Some live in dread of that day. Some, I am sure, harbor a morbid curiosity about it. But a lot of people look for some religious philosophy that can offer concepts of the afterlife. These views and explanations have become part of our belief system, quite independent of the religion we happen to espouse. We speak of Heaven and Hell, eternal bliss, reincarnation, the book of the dead, One with God, bardos, the after-life, and so on.

Where we go and what we do after we die may be the most frequently discussed aspect of dying, but is only one of three parts of the story. Over the years I have become increasingly intrigued by the process that lies between living and dying. That invisible line which, once crossed, defines death. This is the second part of the story.

People have discussed experiments involving dying patients where the person is put on a sensitive set of scales, to establish the moment of death by the departure of the soul from the body. The loss of weight at that precious moment would not only define just when it occurred but would also determine the mass of the soul itself. If these experiments have indeed been done, I don't know the results of them.

I remember a strange concept that entered my mind as I was watching the monitor of the electrocardiograph as I stood at my late wife's side some twenty five years ago, in Herrick hospital in Berkeley. The electrical signals to her heart were slowly dying away. I wished that she would not die, but the life support system had been withdrawn and the process was underway. The complex heart-beat wave pattern gradually became a simple peak which slowly became smaller and smaller. The thought that occurred to me involved the property of time. Within my time scale, I could say how many minutes it took for the heart to stop, although I still had no insight as to just when was the moment of death. But what was her time scale? What if time were slowing down for her? If it were slowing at a logarithmic rate, then the heart rate would approach the zero line asymptotically and, never reaching it she would be immortal.

It was, I believe, Solzhenitsyn who said: "The two seconds before death are very complex. The first of these insists upon a complete review of one's entire life from birth up to that moment. And the second of these is consumed preparing oneself for the most profound alteration of consciousness." (get exact author and quote from the stoned file)

But to me and equally intriguing aspect of dying is the changes that occur in the world of the living after one's death. The usual quartet of emotions associated with the death of a loved one is, first, disbelief, followed by sorrow and then forgiveness and finally peace. Sometime there is some anger spun into the picture. But with time, there is a seldom mentioned additional factor in the mind of the survivor, simple forgetfulness. When you were a small child, you probably had a living grandmother. Now that you are an old adult yourself, how long has it been since you thought of her? Oh sure, you have a photograph of her in that box on the top shelf of the living room. but you alone know who that is in the picture. And with your death there is no one living who would

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recognize her and your heirs will toss it out with the rest of your garbage. There are several examples I know of personally, of this type of amnesia.

There was a pharmacologist at the University of California at Los Angeles with the name Gordon Alles. (check name in thesis) He was a researcher in the area of my own interests, and in fact had independently synthesized and assayed MDMA back in the 60's. I know that he was exploring the tryptamines as well, and we had a date to meet and talk. A month before that was to occur, he underwent an unexpected diabetic crisis, and died. I knew the psychiatrist who was supporting the widow, and I asked him to ask her if I might explore Alles' research notes. In exchange, I offered to publish all of his findings in a book, which I would publish with his name being the sole author. This would be the investment of a few months, but both I and the world would know of his otherwise unpublished discoveries. My psychiatrist friend forgot to ask, although I reminded him every decade or so. He has now just recently died, and the widow most certainly is dead, and for all I know the lab books are probably non-existent, and his discoveries are now lost forever.

There was a famous chemist in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century. This was Emil Fischer, who had made many innovative discoveries during his research career. So the university library allows a person to read what he had published and thus learn from him, but there is nothing tangible that could allow you to discover new things about him. A series of boxes that contained his collection of reference samples of all the things he had synthesized, published or not, had been given by the son, Herman O.L. Fischer (verify the name, my thesis) to the laboratory of Wendell Stanley. All that was asked was to have someone organize it all into some sort of a reference museum. I knew both the son Fischer and the Nobel Laureate Biochemist Stanley and, by good chance, the young student who had been asked to do the organizing. He got a little bit of the way into it, and was given another task felt to be of greater importance. The boxes went onto a shelf somewhere, and some decades later were unrecognized and probably discarded to make room for something else.

Mea Culpa as well! Down in the basement under my bedroom (I call it basement three) there are a number of cardboard boxes stacked against the back wall. In these there is all the correspondence that I had with my mother during the time she was in the Atlantic Theater during World War II. One time, a dear clairvoyant friend insisted that there would be some unexpected thing of great interest inside one of them. That one, right there. So I opened it, explored it a bit, and found nothing of immediate interest. That is the only time in the last 55 years that I have touched them. It gets worse. Right there in that basement there are several small boxes of my mother's correspondence to her sister, my Aunt, from her travels in Egypt before WW-I. And there are also several boxes of glass slides she brought home with her. Some collector might want the stamps from the envelopes, and maybe even the photographs of the pyramids taken almost a century ago if they still have some emulsion on them. But these would be evaluated on their own merit and would not serve in any way as an introduction to her.

And there is the topic of books. Collections in libraries of highly specific but limited interests, are surprisingly rare. If the library is going to be of any value to the public, if it is going to be used, it requires funds from some source. A good example is the Donner library (check name) which has all the archives of the Gold Rush times such as

newspapers, magazines, books, and many photographs. It has a permanent home as a guest of the University of California at Berkeley main library and so the supporting funds for the people caring for it are paid for by the University.

But in the area of the psychedelics, there is no example in existence today. Probably the prime example is the Fitz Hugh Ludlow Library, a fabulous collection of papers, books, artifacts, manuscripts, letters, all associated with the history of the psychoactive drugs and their rise in popularity over the decades. But, except for an early residence on the second floor of a small apartment on Columbus Avenue, and a brief public display in a room at the Presbyterian Hospital library (in San Francisco), the entire collection rests in a hundreds of boxes stored somewhere. I don't think a single paper has been added to it in many years. It is of great value, and it is absolutely useless. (check with Horowitz re details) A similar fate awaits the library at the Hofmann Foundation. The laboratory notebooks involving the extensive research on the ergot alkaloids by Albert Hofmann (including the discovery of LSD) were donated to that library by the administrators of Sandoz Pharmaceuticals, in Switzerland. But all rests at the present time in the apartment of one of the organizers, all again in boxes, and the future plans for some public access seem pretty grim (check with Myron)

So why am I writing on this morbid topic of mortality? Because at some time in the future, I too will die, and I am playing a guessing game as to what will happen to my strange collection of books, filing cabinet drawers of reprints, infrared and mass spectra atlases, lab books, and hundreds and hundreds of vials of reference samples of stuff I have synthesized over the last forty years. A lot of the technical details are safe, having been recorded in the books PIHKAL and TIHKAL. These will be around for a long time, and what is in them is public information. My chemical ideas will be remembered, but I will not be. I am destined to be lost to the forgetfulness factor of the human animal in maybe two generations. It would be exciting to discover a psychedelic library akin to the Gold Rush example, and let this pile of memorabilia have a lasting home.