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THE FUTURES OF DEATH AND DYING

Sohail Inayatullah

Death, today, is a basic fact of life. It is a certainty. A certainty that humanity has always tried to understand, to give meaning to, a certainty that has always been paradoxical — attracting, yet repulsing us.

Throughout history, humans have developed ways of dealing with death, attitudes towards death, and specific behaviors dealing with death and dying. Society, today, is undergoing rapid changes on individual, societal, and global levels. Our patterns of communication are changing, revolutionary new technologies are being developed and diffused. Structural changes are occurring in both developed and underdeveloped nations and in their interrelationships. The list of revolutions are numerous; biological, political, spiritual, information and so on. Some say that our image of man is changing; our image of the good life and the good society is also changing — and so is our image of death.¹

What will death be like in humankind's futures? What trends in our changing image of death will bring about these alternate futures? How will changing images of death affect different aspects of society?

In this paper I will explore past, present and future strategies of dealing with death. I will then discuss death in America (and the Industrial World) today, specific trends that may alter America's (and the Globe's) image of death, and the effects of these trends on society, and finally I will explore what death may look like in various alternate futures.

But first, understanding death is a cognitive as well as an emotive challenge. Visual presentations may be more holistic than written ones in bringing about an understanding of death. Plays, movies, slide shows, and of course having the experience of someone close die or being near death oneself are important. So bear with me and the inadequate written word and let us begin.

STRATEGIES OF DEALING WITH DEATH

Arnold Toynbee presents eight specific strategies that cultures have used to deal with death.² Some of these are highly durable from culture to culture and from time to time (for example, "putting one's treasures in future generations") while others, such as "physical countermeasures," have evolved significantly from putting food within a tomb to genetic engineering.

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Sohail Inayatullah is a graduate student in political science at the University of Hawaii, Honolulu, HI 96822.

These strategies are significant indicators of the cosmology of the culture; for example, a culture which deals with death through the belief in hell and heaven is different from a culture which believes in reincarnation. It is also important to note that attitudes towards political, economic and individual life are also correlated with images of death.

1. Hedonism

This is the most obvious way of reconciling oneself with death — enjoy life as much as possible before the cruel sceptre of death snatches it away. Here one attempts to rid the mind of the reality of death, yet it forever lurks in the unconscious, making itself present only occasionally, but long enough to gnaw at the conscious mind. From Egyptian times to the present day, humans have attempted this approach, but in the final analysis this strategy fails — it denies the complexity, the struggle and depth of life and death.

2. Pessimism

The most obvious alternative to hedonism is the idea that although death may be painful, compared to life it is the lesser evil. In the fifth century, the Greek poet Sophocles declared that "it is best of all never to have been born, and second-best — second by far — if one has made his appearance in this world, to go back again, as quickly as may be thither whence he has come."³ It has also been said "those who the gods love, die young."⁴ This view especially holds in history when getting old was equated with increasing disease and feebleness; in fact, the average life expectancy was 20 years prior to A.D. 500 and only 40 years by A.D. 1900.⁵ coupled with periodic famines and plagues and wars, death may indeed seem to be a desirable state.

There is another type of pessimism — a philosophical pessimism. This has been developed by numerous groups of people but best illustrated by aspects of Buddhism and 20th century Existentialism.

Buddhist pessimism has been radical, and according to Toynbee, sincere. In Buddhism, life is suffering, suffering is caused by desire, thus by extinguishing desire, suffering is transcended and Nirvana is attained. Buddha saw life and suffering as being synonymous. Life is painful, but by breaking the wheel of karma (actions and their reactions brought about by desires), by breaking the wheel of life, death, and rebirth — life and death are transcended. Buddhism begins in pessimism but concludes in Enlightenment and the death of Death.

For the existentialist, death is an absolute, the unqualified termination of the individual self. Humans, unlike animals, know of their impending death, and their finitude. In Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea*, the main character, Roquentin, like the Buddhist, has the veils of ignorance torn away, but only to see that death is the final absurdity, an absurdity bringing about anguish, dread, and despair.

One indicator of pessimism is suicide. Suicide has been practiced for ages. Greek statesmen committed suicide, Hindu widows have done likewise. There have been cases when Jews, Phoenicians, and Lycians have committed suicide rather than be taken prisoner. Recently Jim Jones and his followers allegedly committed mass suicide rather than face their future.

Greek and Eastern cultures have significantly little stigma attached to suicide, as compared to Christian and Islamic cultures. The Christian does not believe he has

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the right to end his life, only God has that prerogative. This view obviously affects American attitudes towards euthanasia.

3. Attempts to Circumvent Death by Physical Countermeasures

A common assumption amongst primitive cultures concerning death is that the dead person's life can be prolonged by providing the corpse with food, drink, and other paraphernalia. Although this strategy has not helped the Egyptian Pharaohs live any longer, it certainly has helped archaeologists reconstruct ancient civilizations, and moreover it has helped the sale of Pharaoh Tut-ankh-amen t-shirts — but more on death and capitalism later.

Another strategy for the circumvention of death by physical measures has been the search for the elixir of life, the fountain of youth.

A 20th century strategy that is being developed by scientists is the hope of somehow finding the "aging clock" that regulates life span. Futurist Joel Kurtzman writes:

If there exist certain "death genes" which key on the degeneration process in cells, then it may be possible to introduce new genes produced synthetically or from young humans, animals, or bacteria that will turn off the death genes.

Gene transplants might even enable scientists to inject developing fetuses with new genetic information that would cancel out the death genes at birth or prevent breakdown of genes with time.⁶

Furthermore, futurist F.M. Esfandiary believes that immortality can be achieved in two stages. First through anti-aging measures or cloning, and secondly either by the creation of new imperishable bodies to house the conscious mind or by genetic engineering.⁷

Whether all this is simply an extension of our search for the illusive elixir of immortality remains to be seen, but without doubt it is an important strategy.

4. Attempts to Circumvent Death by Winning Fame

This view acknowledges that the dead body cannot be kept alive by physical measures, but states that the memory of the dead can be kept alive. The means of doing this have varied throughout history, from the use of oral poetry to writing on papyrus leaves, clay tablets and temple foundations, and more recently through the use of the printing press. Besides the written word there are other ways of conveying information — sculptures, paintings, and the media. Yet as eons go by, how many books will survive, how many sculptures will retain their form, and who in fact will care, if indeed there is anyone alive to care?

5. Reconciling Death by Putting One's Treasures in Future Generations of One's Fellow Human Beings

Here the individual "lives" on by identifying with his successors, be they physical descendants or political/religious heirs.

Yahweh never promised Abraham immortality; he promised him progeny. Yahweh said, "I will make of thee a great nation" and "thou shalt be a father of many

nations."⁸ And in the Hindu tradition, Krishna virtually promised the same to the Pandava brothers.⁹ Conversely, not having any offspring, or not having anyone worthy of political or religious succession is looked on with horror.

Ancestor worship is another form of this. The individual desires to be commemorated and honored after his death by his family and so on in succession through time.

However, today it seems, according to Toynbee, that one must transfer one's concern from one's puny self to the whole of humanity. And what if humanity does not survive? Can transferring one's treasures to posterity really help in depriving death of its sting. It seems not.

6. *Self-liberation and Merger in Ultimate Reality*

Here death is not seen as the termination of the self, but as simply another change — a continuous phased metamorphosis. One is born, one dies, one is born, one dies — endlessly. But life has a special function. It is through having a physical body that one has the opportunity and possibility to merge with the ultimate reality or in Indian thought — Brahman.

Although there are different mystical schools who follow this strategy, in general their view points are quite similar. The most important aspect here is that the self is seen as being multidimensional. There is the "I" or self of the body, the "I" of the mind, and the "I" of the soul. In death it is the first "I" that dies, but the "I" of the mind and soul continues; until the soul realizes that its actual identity is Brahman, and it, at death, merges into ultimate reality.

There is far less fear of death if one has a positive image of the future. There are specific ways and means of attaining liberation, devotion, meditation, and service being the most important. An interesting example is the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. This book includes inner maps of the dying, post-death, and rebirth process. These serve as preparations for death. Hence through the belief in reincarnation, the acceptance of the multifarious nature of the self, and the use of maps of death, the individual somewhat reconciles himself to death.

7. *The Belief in the Personal Immortality of the Human Soul*

This strategy is similar to "merger in ultimate reality" in that death is seen as only being a stage, but for the mystic, the self either expands to become Brahman, or is extinguished to realize Nirvana. Whereas in the belief of the personal immortality of the soul, the soul eternally retains its separate and individual identity.

Numerous cultures have followed this strategy — the Babylonians, the Greeks, Christians, Muslims, Jews, Egyptians, Scandinavians, and Zoroastrians. Here there exist tales of ghosts, spirits, communication with the dead, and places where the dead reside. The individual dies but at a certain time (Judgement Day) the soul is resurrected with the physical body reborn. Christianity and Islam both share this view, and according to Toynbee it seems to have been derived by these religions through Zoroastrianism.

8. *The Hope of Heaven and the Fear of Hell*

Both the above mentioned views find their sophistication when spatial and moral conditions are met. Where is the soul going to reside and why in that particular

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place? The Greeks had their Hades, the Egyptians had their Kingdom of the West, the pre-Christian Scandinavian hero his Valhalla, and the Christians, Muslims, Jews have their Heaven and Hell.

For the ancient Mesopotamian the afterlife was dark and miserable regardless of his good or bad actions. Different fates awaited those Egyptians who had sinned and those who had lead a moral life.

This is conditional immortality. The future may be horrid or blissful, but the present is definitely full of anxiety, guilt and fear — if not for oneself then for others who may or may not make it to heaven. And even more unfortunately, adds Toynbee, "in so far as the belief in personal immortality after death does captivate a living person's imagination, the believer's mental picture of hell seems generally to be livelier than his mental picture of heaven."¹⁰

In addition to the previously mentioned historical views, most of which are alive today, we can add the viewpoint eloquently expressed by Bertrand Russell in his essay *Do We Survive Death?*

His answer to this question is plain and simple — we do not. Belief in a future life, or some ultimate reality is caused by an emotional and fearful reaction towards death, not by the courageous acceptance of death and our personal mortality. The "survival of the soul" approach is, according to Russell, irrational and has many times served as a tool for religious and ideological expansionism. With personal immortality guaranteed, or the future of the Idea (State or God) at stake, the individual is more ready to die for the cause.

But there are other ways to categorize death strategies than the ones mentioned already, for example one could use a "reincarnation," "heaven and hell," and "termination of individual identity" trichotomy. However a more helpful way is to categorize individuals and cultures through a death-denying/death-accepting continuum.

A death-denying individual is one who attempts to evade the question of death. He does not wish to confront the issue. A death-denying culture attempts to remove death from the senses and mind through its social organizations.

A death-accepting individual, however, attempts to understand death. He recognizes its importance in understanding life, is exposed to it from an early age, and although afraid of death, accepts this fear. A death-accepting culture has social organizations and rituals which are fluid and which aid in the awareness and acceptance of death.

It seems that in general, hedonism, pessimism, attempts to circumvent death by winning fame and by physical countermeasures are not successful in dealing with death. Nor are the primarily Western religions because of their emphasis on heaven and hell. Whereas some of the Eastern cosmologies with their maps of death and reality are more death-accepting. The view that individual awareness ends at death can be a death-accepting one if faced with courage not pessimism.

DEATH AND DYING IN AMERICA: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

What is the situation in the world today? It seems that the Western Industrial World has developed a death-denying culture, and that Third and Fourth World nations will also face this future if they continue to follow the Industrial Developmental model.

I will now specifically deal with the attitudes towards death in the United States. We find the roots of America's present death-denying culture in the Puritan Ethic. This ethic, because of its tenets of predestination and salvation through divine grace

alone, led to a sentiment of uncertainty concerning who would be amongst the chosen few.

Clergy exhorted their congregations to contemplate the horrors of hell. Youngsters were told, "Children; you will there see graves as short as your selves. Yea, you may be at *Play one Hour Dead, Dead the next.*"¹¹ And according to David Stannard:

The child of the Puritan was told to think how it will be on a death bed; to consider the terror of certain separation from, and even betrayal by, parents and loved ones; and to imagine what his well deserved torments in Hell would be like.¹²

However, death took on a romantic meaning in the 19th century. The child was told to imagine the act of dying as a peaceful and transformative experience. The emphasis was on the sweetness of salvation.

The dead were buried in beautiful graveyards with park-like atmospheres. This was done so as to keep the community-like feeling of rural America, but as the forces of industrialization and commercialization emerged; instead of romantic beauty, the reality of death was banished in these very "parks."

Thus began the intertwinings of capitalism and death. "Undertakers" became "funeral directors," and embalming the dead became a common practice. In fact, there was even a contest offered by one of the many funeral magazines called *Sun-nyside* which offered a \$1000 prize to the funeral director who showed the best appearing corpse after a time of 60 days between embalming and contest judging.¹³

Instead of "coffins" there were now "caskets" — a word originally meaning "jewel box." As prices continue to rise it is quite clear who is getting the jewels and who the casket. For example, America spends an estimated \$4 billion a year on funeral and burial expenses — an average of \$1037 per funeral.¹⁴

In addition, funeral directors who describe themselves as "grief counselors" do not alleviate grief with their lack of proper training; rather they are more quick to ask for additional sums of money for the latest velvetized casket with bucket seats. Furthermore the practice of cosmeticizing the corpse does little for the survivors but hide death, or bring out death in a repulsive form.

With industrialization, population centralization occurs. As individuals move to the city, the rural family is lost, community feeling decreases, long-time friends are lost, and the pace of life including orientations towards time change. And along with the specialization of work in industrial life, the dead are removed from the family and community and assigned to the hands of the undertaker.

Moreover, not only are the dead sent to the funeral home but the dying are sent to the hospital and the aging to the nursing home, all under supervision of specialists who are strangers.

With the institutional control of the dying, a certain warmth, a certain caring is lost. As one patient said, "death may be routine to you, but it is new to me," and, "all I want to know is that there is someone to hold my hand when I need it."¹⁵ Death is not adequately discussed within the confines of most hospitals. A game of mutual pretense is played between nurse and patient. Death and the accompanying fear is on everyone's mind but this concern is not verbalized — the patient is not told of his future, of his dying. This leads to a host of suppressed feelings and dark moments that remain untold and unshared.

Death in industrial society is pornographic. It is a social disease — one not mentioned in polite company, not before the children. Death, dying and aging are horri-

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ble subjects and are not to be talked about. And when a death does occur, the response of others to the dead person's survivors is an automated "Oh, I'm sorry." There is little discussion of the decaying body. The dead are hidden away in caskets and then laid to rest between the roses and the plumerias.

Little attention is paid to the survivor. Survivors are expected to bear the grief bravely. This effort however leads to the repression of anger, fear, guilt, sorrow and loneliness. In today's fast-moving society, traditional rituals are losing their meaning and new ones have yet to be developed.

At a recent suicide at a university dormitory area, no one knew quite what to do, how to act. The stereos stopped for awhile, all gathered to watch, feeling uncertain, puzzled and afraid. The body was removed, the stereos blared again, but for days the spot where the body had fallen was avoided. Few emotions were expressed and the chance of death being a transformative experience for the community was lost.

There is some death education, of course in the form of *Hawaii 5-0*, *Starsky and Hutch*, *Kojak* and other such television programs. Yet these do little more than desensitize the reality and pain of death and dying. Death is not shown as a natural process but as a violent and sudden event. The bystander in *Kojak* may be hit by a stray bullet, but the pain and misery accompanying death by cancer or famine is not explored.

Technology has led to the prolongation of life. Diseases have been conquered, and Americans live longer. But when the prolongation of life and the relief of suffering are in conflict, the former is more important. There is, then, an imbalance between the quantity of life prolonged and the quality of life prolonged.

And what of the cost of unnecessary prolongation of life? Who will pay the bill? There is guilt and anger felt by the spouse as his or her partner lies on the deathbed, s/he having to pay the bill, and yet watching the unnecessary agony of the dying one. Hospitals are cold and expensive.

And along with industrialization there not only come new ways of saving lives but new ways of inflicting death — napalm bombs, biological warfare, and the nuclear bomb, a bomb that in a flash can destroy. . . .

The above is not the whole truth. Industrialization, centralization, institutionalization, materialism have helped form the present death-denying culture, but within this culture there are trends and emerging issues that may significantly alter present images of death. America and the Industrial World need not be a death-denying culture. But before I venture into the future, it is important to gain an emotive grasp of the paradoxical nature of death, of the denial and of the acceptance, and of the fear and fascination. The following is a sampling of responses (by University of Hawaii students, of all ages, enrolled in Death and Dying and in Futures Studies classes) to the assignment of describing one's own death. It is best if these can be read slowly and aloud.

. . . I don't want pain.

My death. Never heard of it.

Come on, everybody dies, someday.

Not me, not me.

There is no fear of death as it shall come when its time has come. It shall be welcomed, for I have lived a full life that is and has been good. I am prepared to go whenever called upon.

There are times when I conceive death as a black, mindless, void, one where there is no hurt, no nothing. . . . In truth it is hard for me to conceive of my own death.

I can't imagine what death is like — although I've imagined what dying would be like. I'm not afraid of dying — I think it must be like falling through nothing. What scares me most is losing what is here right now. I like being alive — like living. I think the finalness scares me most. I feel really sad — I can't understand (but I have to) why some things are gone forever. I am also afraid of being alone. I don't want to say goodbye to my family. Maybe these things won't matter to me when I'm dead. Being nothing scares me too. And the final moment must be hardest to face. I'm afraid of having any regrets (about the things I did or didn't do).

. . . I would like to die quickly and not be a burden to my family.

. . . I would like to be under the influence of a euphoric opium drug and die from an overdose of it.

. . . I think of it as a tremendous source of energy being released without the limitations of the physical body.

To think about my own death seems somewhat vague, so far away. I feel as though I'm just starting out in life.

. . . I'm going to have to say that I just can't imagine what it would be like to be dead!

My death will be rather dull I imagine.

Death is a reality, a hundred percent certainty. As long as I am able to acknowledge and affirm that, then life becomes real.

Everyone dies, everything dies, and you can see this even in a delicate rose that is beautiful one day, and a week later it has become wilted and dried. Life now is great, living it is truly living a full life of beauty, then death will also be a beautiful thing.

. . . I don't want to die like my husband and son.

It is important to note that these are conscious and intended reflections on death, the unconscious might reveal something altogether different.

THE FUTURE: HUMANISTIC, SPIRITUAL, AND TECHNOLOGICAL TRENDS AND ISSUES

What about the future? There are three basic trends and emerging issues that are shaping the future. The first is a death-acceptance trend. This is a humanistic endeavor concerning the reduction of suffering, dying with dignity and grace, and a general holistic approach to death and dying. The second trend is a spiritual one, which is concerned with life after death possibilities and the acceptance of death as a gateway to new mystical horizons. The third is a technological trend concerned with the prolongation of life, the reduction of physical suffering through medical advances, and the possibility of immortality.

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Death Acceptance

There are numerous indicators that the first trend — death-acceptance — is becoming part of American life.

Death is more openly discussed. There are presently over 1,100 courses on death and dying being taught at American universities. There are an increasing number of movies and television programs which are attempting to handle death in alternate ways, the movie *All That Jazz* being the latest intriguing effort.

There is a lower chance that children will interpret death as only being terrible, awful, and fearsome. And with greater death-acceptance it is easier to create an environment in the home for children to express their thoughts and feelings concerning death and dying.

There is a greater understanding of the dying process as research continues at hospitals. Many studies have attempted to understand the relationship between the staff and the patient, the nature of the communication surrounding the patient, and the benefits of a patient knowing that he is dying. More open attitudes towards euthanasia are also developing. An example of a document dealing with this subject is reproduced below.

If the time comes when I can no longer take part in decisions for my own future, let this statement stand as the testament of my wishes:

If there is no reasonable expectation of my recovery from physical or mental disability, I, _____, request that I be allowed to die and not be kept alive by artificial means or heroic measures. Death is as much a reality as birth, growth, maturity and old age — it is the one certainty. I do not fear death as much as I fear the indignity of deterioration, dependence and hopeless pain. I ask that drugs be mercifully administered to me for terminal suffering even if they hasten the moment of death.

This request is made after careful consideration. Although this document is not legally binding, you who care for me will, I hope, feel morally bound to follow its mandate. I recognize that it places a heavy burden of responsibility upon you, and it is with the intention of sharing that responsibility and of mitigating any feelings of guilt that this statement is made.

Signed: _____

There is a growing desire to discuss death, so much so that when the magazine *Psychology Today* asked for responses to a death and dying survey, it received 30,000 replies — 10,000 more than a survey on sex.¹⁶

In addition to this, the growing popularity of the human potential movement with its emphasis on self-actualization and holistic health has led to numerous workshops and seminars being offered on death and dying.

This openness is further complimented by a greater sensitivity to the grief process. Widow groups and other organizations specifically dealing with helping people face life-threatening illnesses are on the rise. One national organization with over 100 chapters in the United States and Canada called Make Today Count has the following goals:

To draw together people with serious illness, their families and other community members for free discussion of mutual concerns.

To bring the subject of cancer, death, dying and other aspects of life threatening illness into the open.

To share our experience, joint strength, and our hope.

- To help the patient and his or her family to better cope with life threatening illness.
- To improve the quality of life for all persons with serious illness.
- To promote the simple goal of living each day as fully and as completely as possible.¹⁷

We can expect an increase in organizations such as these as the number of elderly people in America continues to increase. In fact much of this trend has been brought about by the aged and their programs and organizations that deal with self-sufficiency, self-reliance, life-long and continued education, the transformation of institutional care, allocation of increased federal monies for elderly programs, and political and social action (for example, the Gray Panthers and the Association for Humanistic Gerontology). These organizations emphasize the need to generate positive images of aging and full life development and the need to break past myths about aging and dying.

Another aspect of death acceptance is a practical financial one. Openness to death leads to openness and foresight in planning for death by being aware of the costs of death, survivor's benefits, wills, and legal duties.

In addition there are non-profit funeral organizations that are dedicated to the dignity, simplicity and economy of funeral and memorial service — how to have a cheap funeral without feeling guilty about it.¹⁸

The hospice movement, or the decentralizing of death, is also playing a major role in the death acceptance trend.¹⁹ A hospice is a medieval word meaning a stopping place for travellers. St. Christopher's hospice in England, for example, provides a bright and airy atmosphere for terminally ill patients where they can die in a conscious and loving environment. The staff at the hospice are especially trained, heroin mixtures are provided to relieve pain, and bereavement services are provided to families for up to 18 months.

Shanti Nilaya — a hospice founded by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, author of *On Death and Dying* — is a Sanskrit word meaning "home of absolute peace." Besides training and counseling for the individual and family it provides educational services for the community.

And of course there is a growing body of literature dealing with concepts of death, death as a social disease, the demography of death (when, why and where people die), the social inequalities of death (the politics and economics of health care), the determination of death (medical definitions), the participants and survivors of death, the psychological and philosophical aspects of death, life after death, suicide and suicide prevention, and the prolongation of life.²⁰

Further developments and hence effects of the death-acceptance trend would include (1) neighborhood life/death centers, (2) more movies and natural and live deaths on cable television, (3) death education programs from early childhood, (4) new rituals for dying, (5) legal and attitudinal changes towards suicide and euthanasia, (6) commercialization of death education, (7) more research in this area in industrial nations, (8) more "how to die" and "art of dying" manuals,²¹ (9) more hospices, (10) better death conditions in hospitals, and (11) an increase of thanatologists.

In general there would be an increased emphasis on the quality of life, death, dying and aging on individual, family, community, and national levels. And an increased emphasis on death education and openness and awareness towards death and its many facets.

It is important that this humanistic trend not become a fad, and that death acceptance not become another blindly followed "should." Also humanistic organizations

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need not only be aware of the necessity of building positive images, but the importance of seeing the negativities involved in death, of the harshness and of the pain. A truly holistic image needs to emerge so that the transformative and healing powers of accepting death can be realized by individual family, community, and nation alike.

Spiritual Trends and Life After Death

The second major trend deals with the increased interest in life-after-death belief systems. There are a growing number of individuals who accept the view that the mind-soul does in fact survive the termination of the physical body. These individuals not only include the traditional mystics and spiritualists but also a growing number of scientists and other professionals.

Much of this has been the direct and indirect result of the influx of Indian yogis, Tibetan monks, and Buddhists. In addition to this influx there are numerous mystical, religious, transpersonal and humanistic groups that accept this view of death.

The best "scientific" work has been done by Dr. Raymond Moody and Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. Moody's studies and his landmark book *Life after Life* basically explore three types of experiences:

- (1) The experiences of persons who were resuscitated after having been thought, adjudged, or pronounced clinically dead by their doctors.
- (2) The experiences of persons who, in the course of accidents or severe injury or illness, came very close to physical death.
- (3) The experiences of persons who, as they died, told them to other people who were present.²²

Moody adds that despite the wide variation in the conditions that surround these near-death experiences, there is an amazing similarity in the content of the experiences, themselves. It is in fact easy to pick out 15 or so elements which recur in the mass of data that he has collected. A brief and ideal experience which has all the common elements of these experiences is reproduced below:

A man is dying and, as he reaches the point of greatest physical distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to hear an uncomfortable noise, a loud ringing or buzzing, and at the same time feels himself moving very rapidly through a long tunnel. After this, he suddenly finds himself outside his own physical body, but still in the immediate physical environment, and he sees his own body from a distance, as though he is a spectator. He watches the resuscitation attempt from this unusual vantage point and is in a state of emotional upheaval.

After awhile, he collects himself and becomes more accustomed to his odd condition. He notices that he still has a "body," but one of a different nature and with very different powers from the physical body he has left behind. Soon other things begin to happen. Others come to meet and to help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving, warm spirit of a kind he has never encountered before — a being of light — appears before him. This being asks him a question, nonverbally, to make him evaluate his life and helps him along by showing him a panoramic instantaneous playback of the major events of his life. At some point he finds himself approaching some sort of barrier or border, apparently representing the limit between earthly life and the next life. Yet, he finds that he must go back to the earth, that the time for death has not yet come. At this point he resists, and does not want to return. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings

of joy, love, and peace. Despite his attitude, though, he somehow reunites with his physical body and lives.

Later he tries to tell others, but he has trouble doing so. In the first place, he can find no human words adequate to describe these unearthly episodes. He also finds that others scoff, so he stops telling other people. Still the experience affects his life profoundly, especially his views about death and its relationship to life.²³

Furthermore, Moody relates how individuals have in their encounter with death experienced a state of timelessness where all knowledge through all time is theirs; as is a deep feeling of inner contentment and the realization of the inherent meaningfulness of life and death.

There are other related studies. One, for example, deals with past life regression. Here a subject is hypnotized and told to mentally return to childhood, and then pre-birth. Many subjects have recounted stories of past lives, in immediate and distant pasts. And in some cases their stories have checked out with accuracy even when it was established that the subject could not have known in any "normal" way about certain people, places, and events.²⁴

In Moody's and Kubler-Ross' studies these individuals who have had the near-death experience found themselves to be more death-accepting and life-loving! This attitude, and related attitudes such as meaningfulness were important regardless of previously held religious views. Also the concept of hell and its horrors, as well as the act of suicide were seen as false approaches of dealing with death.

There are numerous theories that attempt to explain these findings. These include supernatural, scientific (pharmacological, physiological, and neurological) and psychological theories; however, none of these are satisfactory. It seems that perhaps a new paradigm is needed to understand life after death and other such areas.

Critics point out that it is crucial to note that "near death" is not death per se, in that the individual does return. Also some add that opening the door to the realm of the supernatural, although appealing and pleasant at present, may soon lead to the acceptance of demons and versions of hell as strategies of dealing with death.

Moody, however, does not claim that his studies prove the existence of life after death; in fact, he believes that his studies offer "feelings, questions, analogies, and puzzling facts" yet to be understood.²⁵ It seems obvious that his and other related books are offering new maps of dying that are similar to those offered by Eastern religions.

Put together with views that accept the multi-dimensionality of the self (the body seen as energy or awareness, death then being a refocusing of awareness, a forced de-identification of the body), that explore out-of-body experiences, psychic research, ESP, clairvoyance, positive imagery, and meditation, there emerges quite an impressive image-changing trend. Moreover it seems that journals, books, classes, workshops, organizations, and individuals dealing with this trend are becoming an accepted part of American life.

Some possible future developments and effects would include: (1) decreased fear of death, (2) increased acceptance of death, (3) increased interest in psychic phenomena — academic and popular — this having possible far reaching effects on man's concept of what is real, and what is possible, (4) increased demand, increased supply of methods to simulate death experiences, including meditation, drugs, and physical and biological technologies yet to be developed, (5) a new paradigm of man dealing with man being primarily a spiritual being. This new image of man would

posit that humans are comprised of physical, mental, and spiritual bodies, and have physical, mental and spiritual needs. Life and death would be seen as having a purpose in a larger cosmic scheme, (6) a change in the values of institutions dealing with death, (7) the development of new words and phrases replacing "she died" with "she transcended," (8) new theories attempting to explain life after death, (9) increased academic interest in life after death and past life regression with a great deal of controversy and intellectual debate on this subject, (10) a decreased emphasis on technological life-saving methods, (11) increased disapproval towards suicide, (12) increased criticism of this trend by established and fundamentalist religions, and (13) even commercialization with the sale of t-shirts reading "I've been beyond. Have you?"

Technology: The Prolongation of Life

The humanistic death-accepting trend and the spiritual life-after-life trend will certainly have a profound affect on the future, but perhaps not as deep an affect as the third trend — the prologation of life.

This trend is perhaps the least well-known. It has various aspects that deal with the prolongation of life through the use of alternative health methods, through the use of numerous advanced medical technologies, through the study of the biology of aging, and through the use of genetic engineering.

In the past, life expectancy was estimated at 20 (A.D. 500), 30 (A.D. 1200), 35 (A.D. 1500), 40 (A.D. 1900) and 70 years (A.D. 1975).²⁶ Although these are only estimates, the upward direction of life expectancy is clear. Scientists in this field forecast that within 50 years, the average life span may range from 160 to 300 years, and eventually perhaps indefinitely.

Whereas the previous trends focused on the acceptance of death, life after death, and the obligatory nature of death, this view has quite a different image of death. This is illustrated by the following quotes from Augustas Kinzal (former president of the Salk Institute of Biological Studies), Simone De Beauvoir (author of *A Very Easy Death*), and Robert Veatch (author of *Death, Dying and the Biological Revolution*) respectively:

We will lick the problem of aging completely, so that accidents will be essentially the only cause of death.

There is no such thing as a natural death: nothing that happens to man is ever natural, since his presence calls the world into question. All men must die, but for every man his death is an accident and, even if he knows it and consents to it, an *unjustifiable violation*.

Death as never before, is looked upon as an evil, and we are mobilizing technology in an all-out war against it. If not death itself, at least certain types of death are beginning to be seen as conquerable. We are being forced to ask the question, "is death moral in a technological age?" (emphasis in each quote mine)²⁷

The question then is how far can death be beaten back? Parts of this trend have emerged while other aspects of it are still in the confines of research laboratories. Generally the information has not yet hit the public.

What has already emerged is an immense interest in alternative health therapies. These include (1) low calorie diets of fresh, pure, unrefined foods (very low or no meat intake), with vitamin, mineral, and enzyme supplements, (2) regular exercise

(for example, jogging and yoga), and (3) stress reduction techniques such as relaxation exercises, positive attitude techniques and meditation.

In agreement with the above, research has been done in areas where individuals have a significantly higher life span — such as the Caucasus Mountains of Russia, the valleys of Ecuador and the Hunza area of Pakistan. This research indicates that other important variables include “a love for life,” and a society that is conflict-free, noncompetitive, and has strong family ties. Inasmuch as these variables are missing in industrial society, it is possible to anticipate an increase in alternative health and other human potential type movements.

The next aspect of life prolongation involves the use of organ transplants. Although kidney, heart, liver, pancreas, cornea, bone, umbilical cord, and lung transplanting has occurred, the success rate has been low. However organ transplanting is an especially important method of life extension as 867,000 people die each year due to the result of the breakdown of a single organ.²⁸

The basic problem with organ transplanting is the rejection of the donor transplant by the body's immune system. In addition to this, organ availability is also a problem. In this regard one controversial suggestion involves the keeping of a bank of “neomorts” — persons whose brains are dead but whose organs continue to function by being hooked up to machines. This would make it possible for surgeons to keep all types of bodies of various tissue-types for use as organ donors. The neomorts could also be used for scientific experiments and for the education of medical students (and for death and dying classes?). This suggestion would of course involve changes in the accepted definition(s) of death, and of social values concerning the moral and aesthetic acceptance of such a practice.

Another area of research deals with the regeneration of whole body parts. Just as salamanders can regrow missing limbs, and lizards can regrow tails, it may soon be possible for humans to regrow missing limbs. This could be done through electrical stimulation or possibly through the use of chemicals. Dr. Neufeld of George Washington University who has been working in this area says, “Can man regenerate? I feel quite sure he can.” And he adds, “I'd give up on this project if I didn't believe this.”²⁹

Another area which gained some public exposure through the “Bionic Man” television series involves the use of artificial parts to replace non-functioning human parts. In fact, bionic technology has already developed artificial corneas and lenses, artificial intestines capable of nutrient infusion, bionic arms, synthetic hip and ankle replacements, artificial heart valves and synthetic blood.³⁰

Also, artificial organs are being developed that will take the place of entire organs. Work is being done on artificial pancreas, bionic heart machines, artificial kidneys, lungs and so on.

Futurist F.M. Esfandiary looks forward to “deanimalization,” a state when humans will replace their parts with durable, painfree, non-flesh parts. Only those parts that enhance evolution would be worth keeping, the rest could be dispensed with.

There is also the young area of brain transplanting — physically and to artificial intelligence, or possibly to a clone. The next area which holds promise is cryobiology and low temperature strategies.

It is believed that a minor degree in temperature reduction of the body temperature could result in as much as a 30-year increase in life span. There already exist drugs that can lower the body temperature, as well as mind-body altering technologies as biofeedback and meditation which can do the same.

Also it is known that low temperature hibernation extends the life span of certain animals. It is possible that with drugs or mind-body technologies humans could

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reduce their metabolic level, and instead of sleeping at night, they could hibernate. This would also result in an increased life span.

Cryonics — or the method of deep freezing — offers other possibilities of life extension. Individuals at the moment of being pronounced dead have had their body frozen at extremely low temperatures, and specially treated with chemicals in the hope of being revived at a future date. There already exist numerous cryonics associations. One problem is the cost of maintaining the frozen body, but when the belief of life after death is not accepted, then cryonics offers significant hope for the survivor and for the frozen one.

Other problems with freezing include the thawing process. Kurtzman and Gordon, authors of *No More Dying*, believe that freezing prior to death may solve many of the other problems inherent in deep freezing.

The main question in this trend remains: why do humans age? There are several theories that attempt to explain the aging process. They are very briefly (1) crosslinking — aging occurs when two molecules in a gene become hooked together by a process called crosslinking, (2) aging clock — aging occurs because individuals contain a clock or clocks regulating life span, which genetically determine at what age a person will die and at what rate; the clock is believed to be identifiable and controllable, (3) free radicals — aging occurs as a result of radiation and certain chemicals which interact with chromosomes to produce mutations that destroy the body's defense and repair capabilities, (4) neurotransmitter — imbalances of thought-transmitting chemicals in the brain interfere with cell division throughout the body, (5) immunologic — the gradual deterioration of the body's immune system which leads to the inability to deactivate chemical processes; this then leads to the destruction of vital organs and systems, (6) stress — replaceable cells constantly abused by improper nutrition, excessive toxins, and overwork are forced to use up their reproductive potential decades before nature has intended.

More importantly these different theories are complimentary and by employing these theories researchers have achieved success in retarding aging of mice — a 100 to 150% life extension.³¹ Also, there exist large institutions which are focusing in this area. For example, there is the Duke University Center of Aging, the National Institute of Aging, the Berkeley Health Testing Center, and other such organizations. In addition to this the U.S. Congress has held a hearing on life-extension technologies.³²

The biology of aging coupled with the field of genetics will most certainly lead to life extension. As mentioned earlier under the section dealing with physical strategies to circumvent death, the discovery of a death gene would make it possible through genetic engineering to live indefinitely.

In fact optimist Albert Rosenfeld, author of *Prolongevity* believes:

I will venture to predict that by the year 2025 — if research proceeds at reasonable speed — most of the major mysteries of the aging process will have been solved, and adopted as part of conventional biomedical knowledge.

... for the first time in history, the dream that we might do something about old age — even get rid of it, perhaps — and extend the human life span, has become a scientific possibility.³³

And gerontologist, Alex Comfort adds:

Control of human aging is something that's going to happen. Unless we are slothful or overcome by disaster, it's probably going to happen within our very lifetimes.³⁴

Kurtzman and Gordon go so far as to say that a drug company could come out with an anti-aging pill without any advance notice. The pessimistic view, however holds that any significant breakthrough would not occur in the near future because of the lack of consensus on current theories of aging or any scientific agreement on the basic mechanism for aging, and because of the anti-technology climate amongst certain sectors of the nation. Some warn that these technologies might drive the world towards some unseen horrendous dangers — the element of uncertainty in a future shaped by life extension technologies is considered to be far too great.

Also the individual who uses pessimism as a strategy of dealing with death would be of the opinion that life is already too long. The life-after-death strategies would see life extension as an absurdity, and there would be a great number of people who would want to live to their "natural" life span (possibly preferring the use of the alternative health therapies with some hard technology), but would be against the use of genetic engineering.

Without doubt present and future discoveries in the life prolongation field are of immense importance — however, there are some issues that need to be addressed. These include (1) questions concerning the beneficiaries of these technologies. It seems that only the elite in developed nations (and to some extent the elite in underdeveloped nations) will be able to afford them; and just as there are inequalities concerning who dies in the world, there will emerge greater inequalities concerning who will longer. The question of information and technology transfer to less developed nations, and minorities within nations is a vital one. (2) Issues concerning the misuse of genetic engineering have not been properly discussed: war, "master race" fears, accidents, and the present inability to forecast long-range biological impact being some of the more crucial issues. The public needs to be made aware of the various possible negative and positive implications in the research and development of these technologies. (3) Death in this image is seen as the enemy. This view, however, is death-denying. If the prolongation of life is to bring about truly positive benefits, then the quality of life prolonged and choices concerning the right to not live must be dealt with.

Some possible future effects of this trend would include the following: (1) The greater the increase in life span the greater the possibility of serious societal disruption. This statement can serve as a guiding hypothesis for future effects of life-extending technologies. (2) There will be a marked increase in older people. Between 1970 and 1978 the total U.S. population grew by 7%, while the elderly population (over 65 years) grew by 20%. Over 11% of the U.S. population is presently elderly, and in Florida nearly 18% is elderly.³⁵ Estimates range from 20 to 25% elderly by 2025.³⁶ One estimate puts the elderly population at 33% by the year 2000.³⁷ (3) Increase concerned for the aged; especially the quality of their life. (4) If the life span is 120+ then certain future problems have a high probability of arising: (a) the quantity of available jobs, and the quality of work, (b) social security issues, (c) competition between young and old in the job market, (d) competition for allocation of grants and federal monies especially concerning social services. In general increased hostility between generations due to lifestyles, values, and money — witness the present situation in certain counties of Florida, (e) retirement age changes, (f) institutional and government stagnation because of the lack of youth participation. (5) Increased emphasis on holistic health — health dealing with issues relating to the purpose of living and dying and with the spiritual and mental aspects of being. (6) Associated with the above would be two possible scenarios: (a) an increase in suicides — probably highly ritualized and depending on the type of society, highly

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acceptable, (b) life as a learning-educational process — the increased importance of loving life, the desire to know, and transpersonal aspects such as, transcendence, playfulness, inner peace, and challenge. (7) Changes in what is aesthetic. (8) Cyclical movements between veneration of the young and veneration of the old. (9) A decreased fear of death and a decreased fear of aging — of losing one's independence and self-worth. (10) Changes in life insurance and medical policies. (11) Changes in marketing strategies for businesses trying to reach different age groups. (12) A decrease in traditional marriages and an increase of alternative types of relationships that more adequately deal with an extended life span. (13) Increase in long-range and long-term projects with the increased possibility that one could be a direct beneficiary of them. (14) An increase in national and global population problems. (15) Increase in academic and public interest in the field. (16) New strategies for dealing with death, and new meanings of what it is to die.

In better understanding the effects of this and the other previously mentioned trends it is extremely important to develop creative scenarios about these futures. In concluding this section I quote from Albert Rosenfeld:

I know in a way that I can't document — that we can live longer and still have a good world. In fact, as I say in the book, it may be that the opportunity provided by prolongevity would produce a new type of human being, with time enough to grow really wise in the understanding of human nature, time enough to work out creative solutions to dilemmas that now seem virtually unsolvable. It's a challenge that should fill us not with despair, but with exhilaration.³⁸

ALTERNATIVE FUTURES AND DEATH AND DYING

Although it is helpful to understand the futures of death by looking at strategies of dealing with death, and by identifying important trends and emerging issues, it must be remembered that death and dying exist within a larger system — within a larger political-economic and social framework — within a societal image of reality.

Looking at alternative futures for society is a valuable method in clarifying alternative futures for death and dying. Keeping this larger framework in mind it is possible to identify four major dominant images of the future held by different sectors of the U.S. and of the world. They are: Continued Growth, Conserver Society, Transformational Society, and Societal Collapse.³⁹ Here it is important to note that these images are "ideal" types, and that there are some differences held by proponents of each image. Furthermore there are many other alternative futures, but these seem to be the most dominant. They are presented in sketch form and only inasmuch as they clarify death and dying futures.

Death and dying would — insofar as the trends mentioned are dependent on other variables for their successful development — look different in each of the alternative futures to be discussed. For example, industrialization and secularization in developing nations would tend to reduce the importance of life after death and merger into ultimate reality type strategies; and lack of funds or a strong anti-technology climate would certainly tend to reduce the speed and the possibility of the development of life extension technologies.

Continued Growth

The Continued Growth scenario is the most widespread view, and in terms of the

U.S., proponents believe that characteristics such as growth oriented economic development, reliance on science and technology, international dominance, leisure filled, and liberal capitalist attitudes that have dominated the past would continue to dominate in the future. Problems in this type of society would be solved by present institutional structures (or future similar ones), and individual talent.

The death rate in this future would decline, the life span would be longer, but not as long as that projected by the prolongation trend. Nor would the spiritual trend amount to much in this future. Aspects of the humanist trend would be accepted, but there would be no radical changes in the culture — it mainly being death-denying. America would, however, in time, because of social and human maldevelopment, move out of a death-denying culture. Major strategies in this future would include pessimism, hedonism, attempts to circumvent death by winning fame and "the hope of heaven and the fear of hell."

Conservator Society

The Conservator Society proponents are of the view that continued growth would lead to societal collapse, unless a new society based on alternate values such as conservation, voluntary simplicity, stability, and predictability is designed.

Much of the "back to nature" movements, the counter-culture groups, the appropriate technology groups, the environmental movement, and those who favor the decentralization of power and of major institutions share this image.

Death and dying in this future would be concerned with the quality of life. Hospices, holistic healing, and in general the humanistic trend would flourish in a Conservator Society. Low energy and other soft technologies whose impact on society could be easily predicted would be used. Hence life span increases would come as a result of emphasis on nutrition, exercise, and positive attitudes towards living. Spiritual trends would also gain momentum, especially as the power of science would be less. There would be less suicide as the nature of the society would tend to be cooperative, low on conflict, and high on small decentralized communities.

Transformational Society

The Transformational Society scenario is markedly different from the above two. It is based on the assumption that there will be profound national and global changes in the next 50 years. This view is optimistic towards the future, and proponents believe that the crisis of industrial society cannot be solved by minor adjustments, nor by disbanding technology, but through the transformation of individual attitudes and behaviors and of societal institutions and world structures.

Within the Transformational Society future it is possible to identify two main camps. The first is more inclined to believe that due to major changes in world political-economic structures, advancements of electronic communication technologies, the biological revolution, advancements in parapsychological research, the fulfillment of basic needs and other similar developments, will lead to a spiritual-humanistic type society with strong emphasis on individual self-reliance and consciousness raising and on global structures and universalism, rather than localism or nationalism.

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The second believes that there will be changes in consciousness but more as a result of the individualizing effects of communications and other high electronic technology, the breakdown of traditional structures such as the nuclear family, and the development of artificial intelligence. This view also sees changes relating to dominant world political-economic centers, for example, the rise of the Third World and the decline of the West, rather than any one major center or a world government type structure.

The anticipated success of the science and technology revolution would radically increase the life span and reduce the death rate. New meanings of death and dying would result due to a spiritual image of man, and because of the enormous amount of time available to ponder and design new systems — as well as to face boredom. There would also be a certain amount of conflict between the spiritual image of death and dying and the technological image of living well past 120 years.

Societal Collapse

In the Societal collapse model it is believed that industrial society is heading for a total collapse. This is due to a range of reasons, some of which are resource shortages — economic, geological, and political — food shortages, climate modification, environmental disaster, widespread natural or human-made diseases, earthquakes, political or administrative ineptness, and some level of nuclear war.

According to this image it is too late to stop the fall of society. Humankind after the collapse may return to pre-industrial modes of living, or in the case of nuclear war, pre-civilization modes of living.

The death rate would be high, and the life span extremely low. And in the case of a nuclear war, the effects would be far more serious. The reality of death would be ever present, so real that a type of psychic numbing could occur. Besides the pain of physical suffering, mental anguish and meaninglessness would also be a major problem, as would guilt — “Why am I alive while others are dead?”

Suicide, pessimism, and heaven and hell strategies would be most common. Concepts and strategies that dealt with spirits and ghosts would become popular again. In addition the failure of man (whether because of karma, sin, or stepping beyond the boundaries set by God Type beliefs) would induce an increase in religious strategies in dealing with death and dying.

CONCLUSION

What is the future of death and dying? This paper has attempted to shed some light on this question. I believe that the three trends mentioned are and will continue to have a considerable influence on images of death and dying. However these trends are dependent on other variables that involve a larger framework — a framework that may become somewhat clearer through an alternative futures approach.

Death will continue to be a source of fascination, an event incomprehensibly unique for future humans. The humanistic acceptance approach to death, along with the spiritual view of death, and the prolongation of life and the possible reversibility of death will no doubt profoundly affect individual, institutional, and societal images of death and dying, and indeed images of life and reality.

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