

Sir George Trevelyan: thoughts and writings

Death, the Great Adventure

from A Vision of the Aquarian Age

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OF ALL SUBJECTS REQUIRING re-appraisal in light of the spiritual world view, death takes a paramount place. Ours is a death-ridden culture. Death, in one form or another, seems always to be the chief news. At the same time, it is a theme we try zealously to avoid. It is something not quite "nice" to talk about. It must be mentioned only in muted whispers, if at all. Every possible medical means must be employed to keep a person alive, even at immense cost in money, suffering and energy. In a great many minds, dread of death looms immensely large, a gigantic brooding spectre. For others, there is a basic unconcern, a wilfully assumed indifference. As we can know so little about what, if anything, happens hereafter, it is best to ignore the whole unpleasant subject - this is the prevalent attitude.

Conditioned by the materialism of our time, we tend to identify ourselves with our bodies. In consequence, we wonder how consciousness can continue without the physical organ of the brain. This is perhaps the strongest argument of those who do not believe in survival after physical death. But even among believers and religious-minded people, the emphasis is constantly on rest in the hereafter: "*Thou in the grave shalt rest*".

"Rest in Peace" is the theme of inscriptions on thousands of tombstones. Some are deliberately witty, such as one in a church porch for a pauper:

*The further in the more you pay
So here lie I as warm as they.*

Or in the ballad "Clark Saunders":

*My bed it is full lowly now,
Amang the hungry worms I sleep.
Cauld mould is my covering now
But and my winding sheet,
The dew it falls nae sooner down
Than my resting place is weet.*

Quite obviously, such inscriptions incorporate the tacit assumption that we are identical with our bodies, or that the soul is tied to the body when the latter dies. But to those who believe in extinction of consciousness after death, and who demand proof of survival, perhaps the best response is a species of counterattack: "*Can you produce for me one shred of real evidence that you are extinguished? I challenge you to demonstrate that your position is anything but sheer supposition. An immense*

body of circumstantial evidence is now available for any mind prepared to consider it openly, without prejudice. This evidence provides increasingly more basis to conclude that the soul continues, very much alive. There is no similar evidence to bear witness to its extinction."

It must be re-emphasised that man in his core is an eternal being of spirit, housed for a time in a body. This truth about his manifold nature has largely been forgotten, and is only now being recovered. Furthermore, as a spiritual being, man belongs to the spiritual realms. In descending to earth life, he takes on drastic limitation and his five senses are really filters. They allow only fragments of the glory of creation's light and harmony to enter his consciousness. To think that this free spiritual being is identified with the discarded and rotting corpse, that it sleeps in the grave or is consumed in the fire of the crematorium, is sheer blindness arising from a circumscribed view. Our thought and imagination must appreciate that the free-ranging spiritual being can indeed venture further into the realms of light.

It is rather remarkable that there is no word in our language to imply or describe that most majestic and solemn of processes, the release of the soul into light. For this is what the passage through the gate of death truly entails. During the past few centuries, death has become almost exclusively associated with the hideous corpse and rotting cadaver. Dürer's "Dance of Death", for example, portrays the sinister form coming to tap us on the shoulder with its fearful summons. Now, however, it is time we broke definitively with this outdated attitude and recognised that the spiritual entity of man is imperishable. We should therefore drop from our vocabulary those words which identify the soul of man with the mechanical process by which the physical sheath decays and is discarded. We must awaken to the great realisation that on all levels there can be no death without rebirth – in other words, without release onto a subtler and more light-filled plane of life. We may thus enjoy the certainty that the liberated soul is free to range in wide realms of existence and that vistas of exploration, joyous adventure and creative activity open up to us in the hereafter.

Everywhere in living nature, the process of death occurs solely in order that old forms may give way to new ones by a process of metamorphosis. Every death is accompanied by a resurrection, a new "becoming". As Goethe writes: "*Nature invented death that there might be new life*". The eternal being is released in order that it may assume a new form. The daffodil "dies" and is thrown onto the compost heap, where it breaks down into humus, the matrix of life. In the meantime, the seed holds the core of new living forms. In the soul of man, similarly, psychological death – the temporary death of the transient individual personality – is often necessary for an inner step to be taken. In a jocular mood, for example, William Blake wrote his own epitaph: "William Blake, who delighted in good company, born and died many times since". And Goethe again reiterates the profound truth:

*For if you have not got this, this DEATH and BECOMING,
You are but a dull guest in the dark world.*

It is worth re-examining the subject of death from the hypothesis that the spiritual individuality of man (or what is loosely called the "soul") is imperishable. Released from the body, it is still itself, but moving now with greater freedom in a subtler world. Certainly this would seem to be confirmed by all communications received from the "beyond".

For the newly dead, it is often a surprise to find oneself very much alive and free from illness, aches and pains. It appears that our friends are there to meet us in surroundings at first much like the world to which we are accustomed, though more beautiful. The explanation is simple enough. The next world is composed from thought and imagination. It is a subtler plane of finer vibrations, and therefore substance is immediately responsive to mentation and intention. Thus, there are houses, trees and rivers which are experienced as solid since they are on the same vibratory rate as our new "bodies". We know that solid matter on earth feels hard to us but is in reality composed of widely spaced particles of energy. In a similar way, on higher and subtler planes, worlds created by imagining exist. There is a region of extraordinary beauty known as the "Summerland", which is described by many communicants. This is a soul place where the heart's desires are fulfilled. Having reached it, many feel it to be heaven and are content to sojourn there for substantial periods of time.

Of course it is true that this is a plane of illusion; but that does not make the experience of it any less real, valid or important. It is, after all, no more illusory than our own earth plane. The "Maya" of the material world is real and necessary enough for us while we are here. The crucial point to realise is that the genuine realms of spirit exist on far higher planes, attained only after long soul development and catharsis.

Before reaching the "Summerland", the departing soul passes through the "Borderland". After an initial period of sleep or unconsciousness, it wakes to find itself in surroundings formed really by its own preoccupations and preconceptions. The soul before death sends out "the call", and those it loves gather to receive it into the next world. Clearly this can be a supremely joyful moment, and those who have prepared their understanding may find they move quickly through to the plane of light.

What, however, of the many souls in our materialistic age who lack all certainty of the true reality of life after death? Many now are agnostic and even atheistic, and are thoroughly sceptical of survival. They, too, naturally, will awaken to find themselves alive. Many, in fact, will at first refuse to believe they have died. But if they are totally unprepared, they may find themselves in a fog or maze, or lost in some gloomy setting which is really the symbolic counterpart, the objectification, of their belief, or lack of it.

The important fact, confirmed by so many reports, is that friends and loved ones from the realm of light have difficulty establishing contact with a soul held in the thralls of blindness to the spirit. Until the soul is ready to respond, it cannot be reached from above. In the present age of disbelief, therefore, the "Borderland" is apparently a very dark place. Thousands of souls pass over without the comprehension that would enable them to make contact and break through. In consequence, there is a need for "rescue centres", where wanderers between death and new life can be awakened and redeemed.

We here on earth have an urgent role to play in the process. The soul after death will invariably turn back for contact with those it has loved. It can absorb knowledge from those still alive on earth. Indeed, the initial nourishment for the soul is drawn from the spiritual thoughts of those with whom it has affinities on earth, particularly when they are asleep. Today, however, when so many enter sleep at night without having developed any spiritual awareness, the crying need of the lost souls hungry for sustenance remains unanswered. Furthermore, when a person bereft on earth is filled with unreasoning grief, a species of smoke screen is created which prevents the soul in the beyond even finding its friend, much less establishing contact. Herein lies the immeasurable importance of re-evaluating our conceptions of death. For souls moving on, it is essentially a release which can be filled with joy. The substance of so many communications is that *"I am all right and very much alive and it is wonderful over here"*.

As for the sorrow of those of us left behind, we must be honest and acknowledge that it is sorrow largely for ourselves - a form of self-pity. Obviously we cannot belittle the pain of parting and the accompanying sense of loss. But we must accept the basic fact of telepathic contact. The higher world is a thought world. Those residing in it are free to move with immense rapidity, and souls can blend with each other, sharing consciousness. As a result, our thoughts, prayers and love for a departed friend are instantly received. Even though most of us cannot register this, we can nevertheless act on it. We should talk to our friends or relatives, bring them actively into our lives and plans, mentally discuss things with them. And we should support them with love and joy and courage as they explore ahead. Such an attitude preserves and validates our bond with the dead, but does not shackle them to earth in the wrong way. On the contrary, it is rather our unreasoning and persisting grief that binds and hurts, and - as many communications strive to convey - in fact hinders the soul's forward progress. To overcome our anguish of bereavement, we need only remind ourselves that the dead really are with us - and quite frequently. They can speak within our thinking and in the impulse of joy within the heart. They will not appear to us as sad ghosts outside us, but will respond to our yearning for them in a delicate and subtle way - as if we have answered the questions perplexing us within our own minds. It is through such conscious communion, such blending of thought in full awareness, that modern sensitives are able to impart to us so comprehensive a picture of the life beyond. This capacity to "tune in" to discarnate souls involves a developing of faculties which lifts us beyond communication through trance mediumship. It

opens the possibility of infinitely rich and joyful relationships, in truth closer than before. Our beloved friends can indeed be "closer than breathing, nearer than hands and feet".

Unfortunately, only a limited number of people can yet really experience the subtler telepathic blending of consciousness. But we may learn from them a new outlook which can lift us courageously beyond the despair often felt, and nullify the apparent finality of loss. What we must do is open our hearts in love, transmuting the sense of tragic loss into the comfort and joy and certainty that in good time we shall be united again.

At this point, it is worth considering in more detail the phenomenon of physical death. Man consists of a physical body, the substance of which is held together by a vital body of formative forces known as the etheric. Governing these is the astral body or soul sheath, and the spirit, the eternal spiritual entity which must clothe itself in those sheaths that it may live in the density of earth. In sleep, the astral body and spirit withdraw to spiritual worlds, though few of us have sufficiently developed organs of perception to remember what transpires. In such a state, we are with our friends who have passed on, and those who have kindled their deeper faculties of perception can in fact report their experiences during sleep. This is one of the most important sources of spiritual research. The physical and etheric bodies lie on the bed unconscious, but are linked by the so-called "silver cord", by means of which the wandering soul may be instantly recalled. At that point, one awakens. In death, however, the "silver cord" is broken and no return is possible. During sleep, the etheric forces restore and energise the body. After death, the etheric body flows out and returns to the vast pool of etheric forces from which it was drawn. As it departs, the physical body begins to disintegrate. This is manifest in the changes that occur in the two days immediately after death.

Death has been called the "Great Anaesthetist", for the one who is passing feels no pain. To those who watch, it may seem that the body is convulsed in a last spasm or death struggle, but the soul at this moment is rarely conscious. Certainly it is not conscious of pain. At the moment of passing, it may have a glimpse as of a passageway opening up into a dazzling light. Goethe's last words, for example, were: "Light! More light!" And William Etty, that exuberant life-loving Victorian artist, called out loudly at his last moment: "*Glorious, glorious, this death!*"

The ritual of lying in state for two or three days has profound meaning, for the soul during this time often hovers round its former habitation, getting accustomed to having left it. There are many descriptions of how the "dead" person finds himself floating, discarnate, above his own body. Such descriptions establish the importance of flowers around the coffin, candles and, on occasion, the vigil – as well as the necessity of avoiding fuss or frantic activity in the chamber. The astral and etheric bodies are drawn by the flowers and lights, and the process of transition is made gentler. The very stillness and dignity of the milieu aids the soul to free itself. After a time, it will probably fall into a period of

unconsciousness, from which it will awaken to find itself perhaps in a beautiful "hospital" room with family or friends to greet it. As soon as it accepts the fact that it has discarded the body, that it is still very much alive, that all illness and pain has ceased, it is free to move on into a new and beautiful world. And it is at this stage that we who are left on earth can most support our departed friends by loving thoughts, sending them forth courageously on their new ad venture.

"*In My Father's house are many mansions*", said Jesus. Many mistakenly assume that the "Summerland" is heaven. It is not. It is called, rather, the Plane of Fulfilled Desires – and also the Plane of Illusion. It is in fact but the lowest heavenly realm, infinitely rich and enjoyable though the experience found there may be. It, too, must ultimately be transcended. The soul must in time "die" again to be reborn on higher planes, until eventually it is free for soul-travel in the divine realm of pure spirit.

But it cannot do so until it is fit, and this fitness is attained through cleansing and catharsis. Each step on the journey is a more profound initiation. In her post-mortem communication through Helen Greaves – transcribed in the latter's book, *Testimony of Light* – Frances Banks describes how she decided she would enter the Halls of Learning. Confidently, she strode up the steps of this temple university of the spirit, only to be thrown back by blinding light. We cannot move on to the more refined vibrations until we are sufficiently prepared for them, and in the long soul journey towards the source there are clearly many difficulties to be surmounted. All planes interpenetrate. To echo the analogy cited earlier, finer frequencies can pass through coarser ones as electromagnetic waves pass through "solid" matter. It is a question of learning how to adapt and adjust to the proper frequency, the proper vibratory rate. But the prospect of free soul travel is accessible to all of us. As we have seen, we do it in sleep, but without conscious awareness. Richelieu's remarkable book, *A Soul's Journey*, offers a description of the lifting to consciousness of this experience.

Clearly, the imperishable soul has infinite aeons for its development and exploration. The fact that earth exists as a field for experience of self-consciousness and alienation within the limitations of a gravity-bound body means that the evolving being will use this training ground a great number of times. As the whole consciousness of the earth and of mankind evolves, so the individual monad will necessarily return for further experience. It is a long education, granted. But – "Is not the whole of eternity mine?"

We have spoken of the "Summerland" and of release into light. Because the whole immense process is one of soul development and education, however, we must not assume that the higher worlds are devoid of suffering. Released from the body and the prison of the five senses, the soul is compelled to face its own limitations, inadequacies and ill-doing in the form of remorse and, not infrequently, pain. Immediately prior to the moment of death, we experience in one great flash an instantaneous panorama of our past life – a phenomenon to which those rescued

from drowning, for example, bear witness. What accounts for this total recall is the release of the etheric body, which is the storehouse of memory. Subsequently, the soul passes through a long retrospective of its life, which apparently takes something like a third of the time of the actual former life span. During this retrospective, it re-experiences not only its deeds, but their consequences as well – experiences in itself, that is, the pain or pleasure it caused. What it previously visited upon others is now visited upon itself. Thus, if we were cruel to another, we would be faced with the stark realisation of what our action meant by experiencing, in ourselves, its original impact on its victim. As a result, we are filled with a pain that brings understanding and remorse. Until we make such compensation, our own soul development is arrested. But compensation can be made by repentance and forgiveness on the higher plane. If the wrong in question was too grave, however, we may be obliged to incarnate again, to find the soul we once harmed and offer expiation – render some deed of sacrifice perhaps, which will redress the karmic damage and free us for further progress. This purgatorial experience is a very real one through which the soul must pass. But it is not a question of a harsh God issuing judgement. Clearly, the soul is its own and only judge, by creating situations where, within itself, it confronts the real consequences of its actions. This informs it with the urge to make amends and restitution to others, so that forgiveness may release it to advance upon its journey. We are, in short, responsible for creating our own Hell. If the soul is tethered to corporeal desires and appetites, moreover, it will suffer because in death it loses the physical organs for their satisfaction. This is the significance latent in the myth of Tantalus, forever striving to reach the grapes which are always just beyond his reach. Some souls, then, will readily put themselves through the refining fires of "Purgatory" to purify themselves of their faults and obtain access to the next stage. To achieve this realisation, we must overcome much conditioning. Our subconscious, as stated before, still bedevils us with lurid medieval pictures of Hell and Judgment. But the notion of eternal damnation is at variance with the vision which now emerges – that of the soul's self-judgment, by compassionate experience of the suffering it caused to others. It is a very primitive and simplistic view that the good or ill done in one life settles one's fate irrevocably for all eternity. Indeed, the very word "eternity" in this context is misplaced. We only move on to an "eternal" plane in the sense that it is beyond our time-space continuum of earth life. When it is fitting, we can choose to return from the higher planes into the temporal sphere for further experience and service.

Even a partial understanding of the spiritual world view serves to mitigate the fear of death which arises either from ignorance or from uncertainty about conscious survival afterwards. Modern communications are bringing to light a wonderful picture of the fields of experience after death. These offer an assurance that we do really find again those we loved and lost. If the "force field" here is gravity, that in the beyond is composed of sympathy and antipathy. We are naturally and inevitably drawn again to those with whom we have one or another kind of affinity. In this body-free realm, souls can blend and merge so that

consciousness becomes one while identity is retained. Thus the experience of the ecstasy of love will be intensified, though in a subtler form than in the body. As Goethe says, everything on the temporal plane is but a parable, an image. Every earthly thing is a reflection of creative ideas and archetypes in the spiritual spheres. Thus, physical loving must be but a reflection of the glory of experience when light and love-filled souls merge on the higher planes. There need be no fear that by dying we have passed beyond the possibility of ecstasy.

Such blending of souls also provides a clue to the important principle of group souls. It is the basis on which we are drawn into a concourse of kindred spirits, amongst whom we karmically belong. It is with friends in such a group that we will incarnate again.

Though this broad vista of endless life alleviates the crude and ignorant fear of death, it does not, as stated before, mean that all life in the beyond is a rosy heavenly experience. Over the aeons, life, on whatever plane, is a continuous educational experience. Many of us, to a greater or lesser degree, will have failed to fulfil the life task and purpose for which we incarnated. We may even fail to learn what that purpose is. When in the "beyond" we recognise our failures, there may well be agonies of remorse. Though "destiny" may be "always kind", the law of cause and effect holds good, and compensation for failure and wrong-doing is inevitable. Among advanced souls who have seen these tremendous truths, there may therefore be a certain dread of death – of confronting their failure to take the steps in inner development and outer service for which they came to earth.

But knowledge of the reality of the glory of light and the imperishable nature of the soul, realisation of the power of love and forgiveness, can still fill us with joy – a joy which subsumes and transforms all doubt. We can yet realise that we are individually part of a great process of evolution towards the great Oneness, while at the same time undergoing a long training – so that, as a spiritual individuality possessing free will, we can learn to become a companion of God. For man is indeed a creature

God begotten, God companioned

Forever God-ward striving.

Dryden called him "*the Glory, jest and riddle of the world*".