



## LOVE

# IS THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSON WE ARE HERE TO LEARN

# What Death Tells Us About Life

**A**FTER FORTY YEARS OF STUDYING THE evidence for the survival of consciousness, what I've come to conclude can be summed up in two sentences: (1) After a period of confusion, fear, and unconsciousness that I will probably experience in the process of dying, I won't really be too surprised if I regain consciousness in a postmortem state. (2) On the other hand, I will be very surprised if I regain consciousness.

I say this because so much of what my ordinary self consists of is dependent on

having a familiar physical body and constantly getting sensory and informational input from a familiar physical environment. Without that sort of a mold to shape the particulars of my consciousness, I suspect things are going to become very different—and very interesting.

Although I strive to be objective and scientific, I am still an ordinary human being with my biases. For one thing, I am afraid of death—at least sometimes. It is not very impressive to admit to being afraid of something, but when we don't admit to our fears—especially to ourselves—they control us even more, implicitly and unconsciously distorting the way we perceive, the way we live our life, and probably the way we live our death. So I may not be able to write in a completely objective way about death, as much as I [will] try, because there are times when I am afraid of it.

I also have to qualify that while I can say I am afraid of death, I am speaking about my ordinary conscious self. There is also a part of me that is looking forward to death and thinks it is going to be a great adventure. At some deeper level, I am not at all afraid, and that lack of fear in some other part of me is *data*. I can't explain it well, but it is *data*—and *data* are more important than theories and beliefs when we practice science.

To preface my discussion a little more, I think that there is a *something else* that incarnates in a body. When we get a body, it is like getting a personal computer that has some programs already installed in it, already on the hard disk or permanent read-only memory. One of those brain/computer programs is a fear of death and pain in the physical body. Threatening and stressful circumstances activate this program.

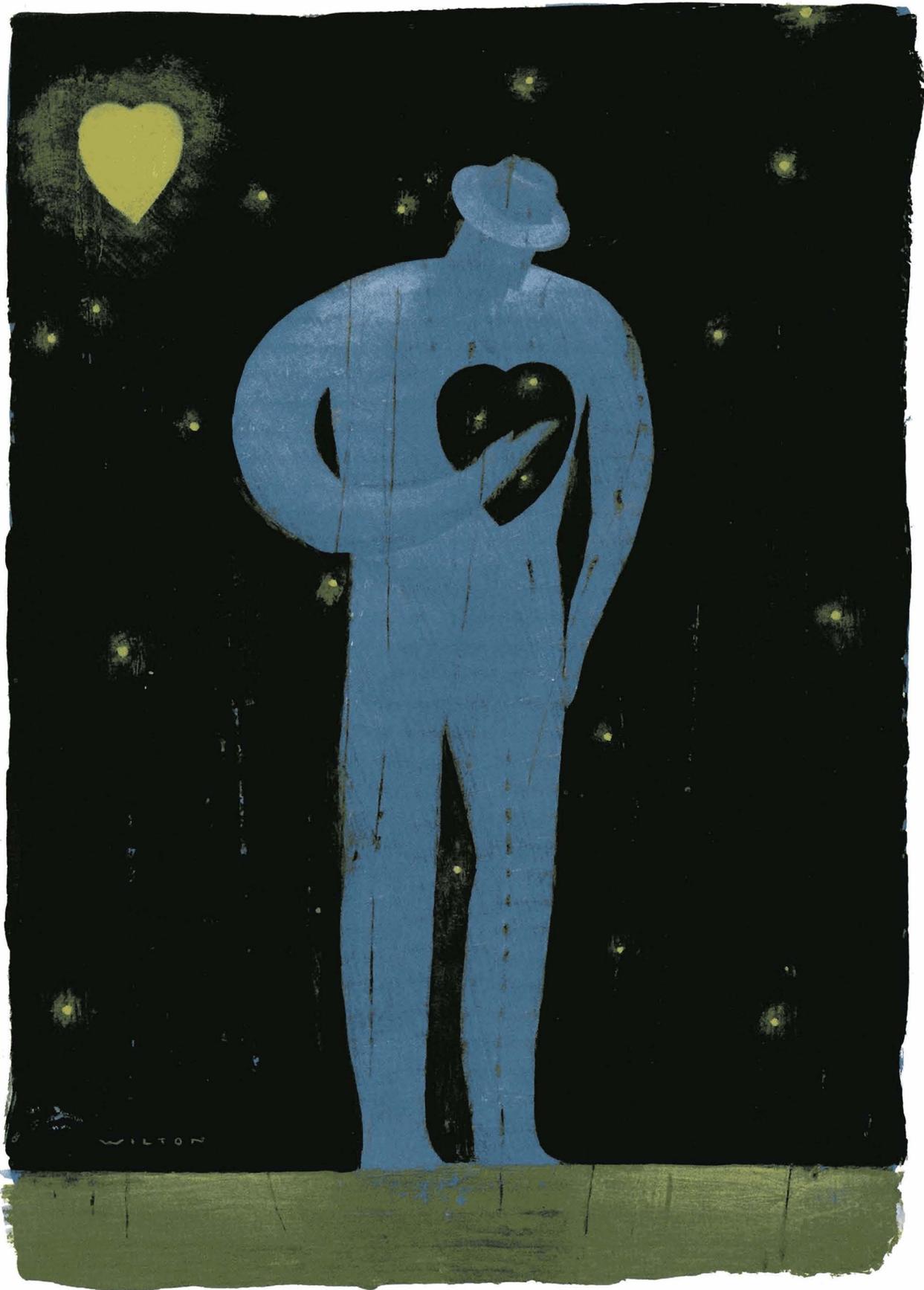
Ordinarily we are very identified with the physical body—it is *me*—so it is perfectly normal and natural to be afraid of death sometimes. Just be careful about taking this as some ultimate truth, even though it is a useful program.

Death really reminds us how little we know and at the same time how important it is to try to understand. It seems to me that in our investigations of who or what might survive death, we are also investigating who we really are.

**CHARLES T. TART**

## WHO AM I? THE ORDINARY PERSPECTIVE

One perspective on the question “Who am I” is what we might call the ordinary experience. When I think about who I am from this perspective, I am a man, a father, a scientist, a writer, an amateur carpenter. I have these identities. We all have many identities. We might call them personas, to use Carl Jung's psychological term. They are roles we manifest—except that they usually go deeper as we become identified with them. Our personas have plenty of reality. Any one persona can occupy center stage and totally control who we are for anywhere from a few moments to a lifetime, so we must not underestimate their power. Although I have spent many years working with various psychological growth processes



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and have learned enough about *disidentification* so that sometimes I can get behind my personas, most of the time I do not consciously use them—my personas use *me*. They pop up automatically.

Many of our personas, if not all of them, are based in the body. Being a man or a woman, for instance, is based on a particular bodily structure. Being an athlete is based strongly on bodily structure, as is being beautiful or ugly. Further, these bodily structures do not exist in isolation: Environmental and social contexts reinforce some of their aspects and inhibit others. These bodily, environmental, and social familiarities and expectations support our identities, just as the skeleton supports the body.

If we think about this from a survival point of view, it is probably going to be difficult for any of these personas to survive. We won't have a body with which to make our internal sensations have a certain familiar kind of pattern or flavor. We won't have our usual friends and acquaintances around to call us by the same name and give us familiar responses to familiar actions. Habits *per se* may last for a while after death, but the molds, the bodily and physical world, and the social world constancies that create and reinforce our habits will be gone. Without reinforcement, there's a good chance our personas won't last very long. The materialists' position—that our brain and body generate our identities—is clear on this: There is no survival. Remove the skeleton, as it were, and the body cannot live, much less maintain its familiar stance.

## WHO AM I? THE CULTIVATED EXPERIENCE

Now let's take another perspective. Instead of our ordinary experience, let's look at what we might call *cultivated experience* or *disciplined experience*, the kind of perspective people who

systematically practice a meditative discipline designed to get deeper insights into themselves discover. I don't mean merely thinking about ourselves—one of the too common but highly inaccurate ways people can use the word "meditation." I mean the kind of meditative discipline where you learn to still the agitation in your ordinary mind in order to perceive internal and external reality more directly.

If we ask people who practice these kinds of disciplines who they are, they get *behind* their ordinary identities of

father, mother, or citizen because they have realized that their more fundamental identity is something like a *capacity to experience*, rather than any particular manifestation of that capacity. We might say, in a sense, that *I* am nothing, no *thing*—that I am not frozen into any one, concretized pattern, but that there is fluidity underneath these patterns. Spaciousness is found—a capacity to experience particulars, to experience change, and to flow with change,

although the ordinary identities are still there. And when this is experienced, there is a little more choice about "putting on" personas, *deliberately* using them and then setting them aside. It's like having a variety of uniforms, recognizing that they are just uniforms, not really you, and putting them on and taking them off whenever appropriate.

Some people call this spaciousness "detachment"—although that word has pathological associations that I am not talking about here. The pathological form says, "I do not care about anything, and so nothing can hurt me." There is another kind of detachment: a healthy spaciousness that comes from teaching ourselves to be more objectively aware, not to be as caught up in our experience but to pay clearer attention to all events, which makes life more vivid and clear. We then have a clearer understanding of the particulars of the moment along with this spaciousness, this basic capacity to experience that is a more fundamental identity. Words can be clumsy in their description of this. ☺



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This “spaciousness” is something beyond strict verbal definition, although it can be experientially, observationally clear.

I think this kind of answer to the question of who we are is much more about the kind of *something* that has the capacity to survive death. It is not as dependent on bodily, environmental, and social conditions as the ordinary aspects of personality are. This position of the cultivated experience is not an easy one to get to for most of us; unfortunately, we have to work to develop it.

## WHO AM I? THE BELIEFS EXPERIENCE

The many theories or belief systems we have about who we are, such as “I am a Christian,” or “I am a Buddhist,” or “I am a sinner,” provide yet another perspective. If we hold these theories purely as *theories*—if we say, “I have a certain set of beliefs, and I don’t know if they’re really true, but I act on them sometimes”—life wouldn’t be so bad. The problem is that these theories are thoroughly conditioned into us when we are children, literally automatizing the way we perceive ourselves and the world. We don’t act on them “sometimes” or choose to act on them. And the process of enculturation transmits not only the culture’s knowledge but also its restrictions.

Although I don’t think our theories of who we are will survive death very well, more important, our unexamined belief systems control how we live. Jumping ahead to the question of what we can do to live a better life and so prepare better for death, one thing is to find out what theories have been conditioned into us, acquire some perspective on them, and make some adult decisions about whether to continue to automatically believe them. “Do I want to believe that *that* is who I am?” Let’s not confuse the theories we have about ourselves, even though they may run a lot of our life, with who we actually are and what we can find out by direct observation. As I said, from the perspective of cultivated experience, I am *nothing*: I am not a thing but a process that is open to change.

## WHO AM I? THE ALTERED-STATES EXPERIENCE

Altered states of consciousness (ASCs) have much to teach us about who or what might survive death. Most of what

I’ve said so far makes good sense in our ordinary state of consciousness and is based on that kind of “rational” thinking. And yet, as William James put it,

*Our normal waking consciousness . . . is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence, but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are all there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final, which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question—for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet they may determine attitude though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality.*

—William James in  
*Varieties of Religious Experience*

We all know this to some extent from a very common altered state of experience, dreaming. We spend about 20 percent of our sleep time dreaming, in which we are generally not quite the same person we are now. Frequently we think differently, act differently, are afraid of and attracted to different things, and so forth. Unfortunately, our culture has brainwashed most of us into thinking that dreams are not important: Get up and get to work to increase the gross national product; don’t be a dreamer! So we throw away a part of our mental life that is interesting both in and of itself and in terms of the possibility of survival. In the dream we are much less psychologically connected to our body than we are in our waking state, which gives us a preview of a state of consciousness that is less embodied. It behooves us then not just to interpret our dreams but also to study our dream life as a kind of life.

While dreams could be called a rather “ordinary” altered state of consciousness, experienced to various degrees by most people, there are also the extraordinary ASCs, induced sometimes by meditation, psychedelic agents, extreme stress, and more. These altered states can be much more difficult to talk about; again, words begin to fail us. But in

terms of the question of who we really are, the spectrum of altered states is a dramatic reminder that we may be much more than and much different from just our ordinary state, our ordinary self. A near-death experience is one of the more unusual ASCs. It may start with a “straight-forward” out-of-body experience, but generally it changes into a profound altered state of consciousness, not just ordinary consciousness where you happen to be up near the ceiling of the room. In the typical NDE people think differently, experience emotions differently, and know things they don’t ordinarily know.

Altered states of consciousness remind us that there are frontiers of the human mind that we can’t begin to grasp in our ordinary state of consciousness. So when we think about our question, “Who am I?”—Who or what might survive physical death?—we have to take into account that while we do almost all our living in a one-note style, in this ordinary state of consciousness, human beings can have extraordinary experiences. Unless we really understand the full spectrum of these, we will not fully understand what might survive the death of our body.

#### WHO AM I? HOW SHOULD I LIVE?

It is clear to me that whatever that *something else* is, which I mentioned earlier—call it “mind,” “soul,” “essence,” whatever—it is not totally equivalent to the brain or the body. This doesn’t mean we should neglect the body. One of the great and all-too-common distortions of the spiritual life is to neglect or mistreat the body because of a yearning to develop the soul. Quite the contrary, we should treat our body with great respect, for it is the temple of our soul.

At the same time, do not assume that consciousness after death is just like being in a body, just like now.

I think we are living this embodied life for a purpose, a purpose that has something to do with learning—learning knowledge and, more importantly, learning how to love. Disembodied states of consciousness are wonderful in some ways but awfully vague in other ways, making it harder to learn some things. A physical body provides focus, a stable platform for learning, so that the mind—the essence, the soul, whatever we call it—is modified by the learning and growth this body facilitates.



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In my more optimistic moments, when I am trying to reconcile some of the horrors that occur on this planet with a spiritual perspective, I hope that we are, in a sense, enrolled in what my friend Robert Monroe (who had many out-of-body experiences) called an “accelerated learning school.” This is a tough school, but if we can graduate from this Earth school, we’ve got it together! Those who have been personally closest to death and returned, those

blessed with NDEs, frequently mention why they came back instead of going on into the bliss they were experiencing. Along with some particularly personal reasons, the most frequent reason given is that they had not yet learned how to love—and learning how to love is the most important lesson we are here to learn. ☺

—Excerpted and abridged from  
*Body Mind Spirit: Exploring the  
Parapsychology of Spirituality,*  
edited by Charles T. Tart (Hampton Roads, 1997)

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