

*Death and Beyond. Andrew M. Greeley. Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1976.*

Chapters 1-2 = limit experience

Chapters 3-6 = reassurance

Chapters 7-8 = reflection

**Chapter ONE: Rite of Spring**

Life does not emerge in Spring with neat, orderly restraint; it bursts forth, it breaks into the open, it surges in all directions – IT *ERUPTS*.

But this eruption of life is also linked with death: “We know that what is born with the spring will die in the cold of the following autumn and winter.”

*Death is the price that must be paid for birth.*

Ancient civilizations believed that spring was a ‘sacrament’, i.e., ‘a revelation of the fundamental powers and forces at work in the universe’.

(Note the presence of Easter in the Spring.)

The Resurrection of Jesus is a religious symbol, i.e., a *story which tells us about the way things REALLY are*, about the meanings of human life and human death, about the purpose of the universe, about good and evil, love and hatred.

The ‘event’ is designed to *reveal* to us the nature of God and the meaning of human life.

As we witness the glorious rebirth of nature in springtime, we inevitably ask ourselves, ‘is death the ultimate and final end?’

“in the depths of the human unconscious is the unshakable conviction that life is not without meaning or purpose, that somehow we will be able to conquer death.”

The decisive religious question is whether that hope which is at the center of our personality is cruel deception or whether it is the best single insight we have into what human life is all about.

Easter proclaims a powerful certainty that death is not ultimate.

“The resurrection is the revelation that it is all right to hope.”

“in the life, the death, and new life of Jesus, God reveals to us what human existence is all about.”

“Easter morning conveys a very simple message: ‘Life is almost a complete and tragic disaster but not quite. At the very last second, the tragedy of human life is turned into comedy, and the existence of the human personality and the human race has a happy ending’.”

## Chapter TWO: The Ultimate Question

*Religion is rooted in experience* – “Spectacularly or matter-of-factly, humankind bumps up against the limitations of its own existence, and in that moment of encountering limit, it also encounters giftedness, gratuitousness, grace.”

Many experiences suggest to us that there is “something more.”

“If we perceive the ‘more’ to be benign and gracious, then the world is defined by us as pleasant, and we adjust our lives accordingly. If we perceive the ‘more’ as malign, difficult, contentious, or unpredictable, so, too, the universe will be defined, and we live our lives accordingly.”

There are a number of *primordial experiences* of the sacred which seem to be universal symbols which hint at what lies beyond the horizon – e.g., water, sun, moon, tree, sexuality, spring.

Primitive religions developed *rituals* as ways of continuing the experience.

“The ritual was an overflow of that experience by which they attempted to share it with others.”

Religion is rooted in experience; ritual is an attempt to rekindle that experience.

“Theology comes much later.”

Formal religious thought is essential, but it must begin with the symbol and return to it.

“The Christian spring festival tells us in its raw, elemental resonance that life is too strong for death.”

Chesterton: ‘Life is too important to be anything but life.’

The Christian answer to the question of life after death is simply ‘Easter’.

“Dig out a recording of the Exsultet and permit yourself to be carried away by its rich and powerful symbolism.”

One must choose: he either permits himself the spring-Easter experience and believes that it is revelatory, or he dismisses it as an absurd self-deception – in either case, no argument is really possible.

Yet the critical modern mind must ask questions – and while decisive proof is precluded by the very nature of the question, one may be able to bring evidence from a number of different disciplines and a number of different points of view to suggest that the conviction of life after death is not irrational.

But in the final analysis, the judgment made on that which has been experienced is an *absolutely free decision* of the personality.

Rational argument: ‘...to find some measure of reassurance against the nagging doubts of meaninglessness’ (J. Choron).

“... form in the void” (Lyall Watson).

“... something afoot in the universe, something like gestation and birth” (Teilhard).

### **Chapter THREE: So Little Time**

Whenever a person reflects on growth, development, and fulfillment, a nagging question lurks just around the corner: "Could the universe have produced a creature that *hungers* desperately for permanent existence and *frustrate* that hunger?"

If the answer is 'yes', if all the struggles, joys, hopes, disappointments, frustrations, sacrifices, plans, the expectations that constitute human life are for nothing, then life is a tale told by an idiot, 'full of sound and fury, signifying nothing' (*Macbeth*).

Ernest Nagel: life as "an episode between two oblivions."

But something in us revolts against the absurdist explanation; there is a powerful, 'instinctive' human impulse to deny the absurdity of things and *to assert the purposefulness of life*.

In the 'modern mind' there is a dialectic between purposelessness and purposefulness.

Cf. Jacques Choron, *Death and Modern Man*.

Choron concludes his work with some measure of reassurance: 'For myself, I find some measure of reassurance against the nagging doubt of meaninglessness in the implications of what has been considered by some thinkers as the profoundest, even though unanswerable, question: *Why is there something rather than nothing?*'"

We must deal with Schubert Ogden terms the 'unshakable and unforfeitable conviction that there is meaning in human life.'

Rabelais: 'I go to look for a great perhaps.'

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's research indicates that terminally ill patients maintain a sense of hope throughout the dying process, and further that among persons who have experienced 'death and return', the fear of death diminishes.

"We are born with two incurable diseases: Life – always fatal – and hope – never curable."

*The critical question is whether hope is revelation or deception?*

There are hints, but no proof: ultimately, one pays his money and takes his choice.

Virtually all religions that we know take it for granted that the human personality survives.

"That most humans in most times and in most places have believed in life after death does not prove that there is life after death. Still, only the most narrow and rigid ethnocentric describes their testimony as irrelevant. They were not more certain than we are, but at least they were not ashamed to hope."

### **Chapter FOUR: Sociology Has Its Say**

In the U.S., there has been little change in the last forty years in the belief in human survival.

The data contradicts the 'secularization theory', which contends that in advanced industrial societies, sophisticated human beings cannot take religious myths seriously.

United States (% believing):

- 1936 = 64%
- 1944 = 76%
- 1947 = 68%
- 1960 = 70%
- 1968 = 73%
- 1970 = 70%

1968 European figures:

- England = 38%
- Norway = 54%
- Finland = 59%
- Holland = 50%
- Sweden = 38%
- Greece = 58%
- West Germany = 42%

Women are slightly more likely to believe in life after death than men, though not significantly (ca. 6% in the U.S. in 1973).

By denomination in the U.S., 1973:

- Protestant = 71%
- Catholic = 70%
- Jewish = 31%
- None = 33%
- Other = 73%

By educational attainment (U.S., 1973):

- Primary = 68%
- Secondary = 72%
- Higher = 68%

There is no linear relationship between age and belief in life after death.

15% of 1973 Americans reported actual 'contact with the dead'.

## **Chapter FIVE: The Wonder Sciences**

Such research proves to us quite powerfully that we live in an open universe that still has the capacity to surprise us.

Revealed to us is a far more complex and wonderful universe than that of mere physical and chemical processes.

They enable us to conclude with a high degree of confidence that there is a dimension of the human composite which is able to operate, at least for brief periods of time, independently of the human body.

ESP and psychokinesis have been proved beyond any reasonable doubt.

Cf. the research of J.B. Rhine.

Many scientists (e.g., Semyon Kilian) conclude that there is some kind of 'energy matrix' in all living things that has a shape like the organism but is relatively independent from it.

There are many reports of communication with the dead (e.g., Carl Jung).

"One can minimally conclude that there are forms of communication with are extra-sensory, that is to say they operate independently of the ordinary process of the impingement of energy waves on sensory nerves – at least insofar as we understand this process. It may also be possible to conclude that there is some kind of 'entelechy' or 'force directrice' which is united with the body, organizes its experiences and memories, but can to some extent operate independently of it."

'Out-of-body' experiences raise some very interesting possibilities.

"The existence of a human soul which might survive death at least for a time and perhaps indefinitely does not prove resurrection, but it would put on the defensive those who argue in terms of the scientific worldview that life after death is impossible."

### **Chapter SIX: Are We a Nation of Mystics?**

Extraordinarily intense experiences are recorded at every time and place in history; certain themes run through such interludes – joy, light, peace, fire, warmth, unity, certainty, confidence, rebirth.

"Intense, overpowering joy which seemed literally to lift them out of themselves."

Freud: 'oceanic feelings'.

Characterized by William James:

- Ineffable;
- Noetic;
- Transient;
- Passive.

Many psychologists presume that such ecstatic experiences are signs of schizophrenic personalities.

In a national survey, a large segment (40%) of the American population reported having had an experience of a powerful spiritual force which seemed to lift them out of themselves.

There is a high (.30) correlation between having such an experience and good mental health as measured on the Bradburn Psychological Well-Being Scale.

Conclusions from random interviews:

1. The experiences are fundamentally cognitive. "They say the 'way things really are'."
2. Virtually all have never spoken about their experience(s) with anyone.
3. Some of the episodes are spontaneous; others are occasioned by clearly defined 'triggers'.
4. Some experiences are overwhelming in intensity; others are more gentle.
5. For some, sexual intercourse was the 'trigger'.
6. The people are 'religious' in the broad sense, though not all are churchy'.
7. There is a curious loss of time perspective associated with the ecstatic interlude.
8. The experience is generally benign.
9. All of the respondents were creative, happy, dynamic individuals.
10. There is some relationship between 'mystical' experience and 'consciousness' of death.
11. A 'sudden death' experience has triggered 'mystical' interludes for some.

"We think 'mystical' interludes are episodes of intense and immediate cognition in which the total personality of a person is absorbed in an intimate though transient relationship with the basic forces, cycles, and mechanisms at work in the universe and in his own psychosomatic composite – gravity, cosmic rays, light, heat, electromagnetism, cycles of breathing, circulation, digestion, day year, life, death."

## **Chapter SEVEN: Life Before Death**

The pertinent question is *how do I live in such a way that I celebrate the gospel I believe in?*

The issue is the extent to which our personality is permeated by the vision of faith that we experience in our grasp of and our being grasped by the resurrection of Jesus.

We live the Christian life to the extent that our hopefulness is unchained and freed from the constraints and restrictions that our cynicism, anxieties, and fears impose upon us.

Christians are deeply and fundamentally concerned about the problems of this world and the problems of human beings within it.

"Christianity is neither a this-worldly nor an other-worldly religion; it is a combination of both."

"The Transcendent is working out His purposes in this world, and so both this world and the otherworld are of critical importance, each revealing and reflecting the importance of the other."

The Christian does not believe in life after death; *he believes in life.*"

Death is a *transition* which may modify but does not change the fundamental flow of life.

Christians who believe in the resurrection are necessarily men and women of HOPE!

The core or the Christian resurrection experience is the conviction, unshaken and irrefutable, that nothing can cut us off from God's love."

Hopefulness does not preclude discouragement, disillusion and frustration, but it does preclude bitterness and cynicism.

Baum: "Tomorrow will be different, even if tomorrow is the day after the last day of our lives."

The best way a Christian can prepare for death is to develop a healthy capacity for surprise (John Shea).

"So the Christian goes to bed at night not afraid that he will wake up tomorrow to find himself dead, but curious as to what crazy fool surprise lays in store for him when he wakes up in this sometimes frightening, sometimes absurd, sometimes even vicious but always fascinating haunted house of a world."

"Or, to sum up the whole Christian argument, how do we know that tomorrow will be different? Every other tomorrow we have known has been different. Why shouldn't the next one?"

### **Chapter EIGHT: Life After Death**

"If you believe that God is a comedian and the Holy Spirit is a leprechaun, you can't think of heaven as a very solemn, sober, and dull place."

The Christian heaven is active, dynamic, vigorous.

The transformation will destroy nothing that is good or true or beautiful about human life – "continuity of life, but extraordinary transformation of the quality, the intensity, the richness, the splendor of life."

Marked by surprises and wonder.

Perhaps Purgatory is "a place where we are given a chance to make up for the sense of wonder we did not develop and the capacity for surprise that we permitted to atrophy here on earth."

*Hope* will continue, if by hope one means "a confidence of further growth, development, expansion, a challenge to more activity, a readiness for new adventures, an openness to new wonders."

The experience of continued life will be FLOW (cf. M. Csikszentmihalyi).

"Flow" = that experience we enjoy when our capacities and talents are *pushed to the limits but not beyond them*.

One does what one must do with a rich, full enjoyment, reveling in the challenge and one's capacity to meet it.

E.g., chess, sports, mountain-climbing, surgery.

"My guess is that 'flow' experiences, which abound in our daily lives, are the best concrete, practical anticipations we get of what the delights of the heavenly life might be."

"It sounds like a pretty good deal!"

Images:

- Marc Connolly: 'an endless fish fry'.
- St. Brigid: 'God presiding at a grand Irish drinking party'.
- Wedding Banquet: "What the hell (one should excuse the expression) is a great banquet or a marriage feast unless it's a crashing good party?"

"We prepare for the life that is to come not by fantasizing about it but by living hopefully, joyously, 'flowingly', wonderfully in the present life."

*Celebration* ought to be a characteristic of our lives.

"Blessed are you who celebrate despite your tears, for yours is the kingdom of heaven."