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# Can you live to be 300?

9-12 minutes

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"There will probably be more Wilsons, so to speak, in future generations than any other major thinker."

Iris Murdoch once asked Colin Wilson what he really wanted out of life. Colin replied that what he would really like to do, as George Bernard Shaw had suggested, was live to be 300 years old.

"That's remained the kind of basic feeling I have," said Colin, "although at 75 I can see that, for the time being, that's an impractical aim, I'm afraid. But we are getting to live longer and longer, and the interesting thing is, people die, as Shaw said in Back to Methuselah, because they want to die, because they don't have any more purpose in living."

Even Shaw himself, when he was in his 90s, after falling out of a tree and having been admitted to hospital - Colin chuckled at the anecdote - said: "I want to die, but I can't, I can't! This damned vitality keeps me alive."

Colin said he was fascinated by the "mental mechanics" that lay behind the visionary and peak experiences - those fleeting moments of profound insight and bubbling enthusiasm - and how we could induce them at will. "If we could do that, we'd have the secret of living forever, or as long as we wanted, and this is where the promise of the future lies. This is the direction the human race is going to go in."

The psychologist Abraham Maslow had admitted that he

could not "turn on" the peak experience. "But there must be a way of doing it," said Colin. "That has always been my quest, back to about 1961. That was when I began to look into if there is a method of inducing the peak experience, the moment *bienheureux* as Proust called it, by, as it were, sheer willpower or concentration. When we are feeling miserable and low we look at the world and it seems inevitable; we say we are feeling miserable and low because there's a rotten old grey sky outside, and this kind of thing, and we respond so completely to it that we don't seek any alternative."

Colin likes to illustrate his point with the story of the novelist Graham Greene playing Russian roulette with a loaded pistol which had only one bullet in the chamber. When he put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger, and the gun did not fire, he felt a sensation of overwhelming happiness, and he suddenly saw that life was infinitely exciting and interesting. But the feeling didn't last. Greene couldn't find the method of inducing the peak experience. He had seen the answer but had failed to follow it up properly, and "a series of dreary, rotten, pessimistic, boring novels" was the result.

"For me," said Colin, "the question was, is there a way of following up that answer? And that is what I've spent all my life trying to do. Now, it seems to me that the answer to that question would be the answer to the question that Iris Murdoch asked me: 'How can you live to be 300?' How can you even hope that such a thing is possible? The reason is quite simple. Once you really look at what you might call the phenomenology of that experience that Proust had, that is to say the exact mental mechanics of it, you can suddenly see that we are inclined to paint the world black, and from our own interior, so to speak. It isn't genuinely the external world at all.

"What happens when Graham Greene points the gun at his head and pulls the trigger is that suddenly this black dog that was sitting on his shoulder gives a yelp of alarm and leaps off his shoulder, and suddenly everything is fine.

"There must be a way of doing it that doesn't involve anything as dangerous as playing Russian roulette. That has been, in a way, the quest of my life - how, in fact, could we live much longer? How could we go on? The answer, partly, is being sufficiently fascinated by things. Provided we are fascinated enough then suddenly we feel much more alive. Everybody's noticed, for example, this business of feeling a bit sick, and then by suddenly thinking in some odd way, or being interested in something that's happening outside you, the sickness just vanishes like that, and you cease to feel sick instantly. You know that in some funny sort of way you have succeeded in doing that.

"Now if we could do the same kind of thing with the sickness of the 20th century, we'd really be on to something big. That's what interests me so much, this possibility of learning techniques that would enable you to do this.

"Although I was tremendously disappointed by the fact that my autobiography wasn't understood more, I can suddenly see that it was actually a jolly good thing, because what it forced me to do, in a way, was to punch up my will, and go back to the drawing board, and that has actually produced an interesting effect, realising that it wasn't bothering me in the least. You suddenly realise that you've created something inside you which Gurdjieff called 'essence'."

Gurdjieff, the Greek spiritual philosopher and charismatic, said a person could have a great personality, but no essence,

nothing really solid inside them at all. Essence was created by what Gurdjieff called "intentional suffering", a form of intense discipline, akin to that witnessed in saintly behaviour.

"Now what we are talking about is the development of essence. If we could find a method of developing essence then we would live much longer. That's the really interesting question."

After Romanticism had come "Romanticism Mk 2": existentialism, beginning with the Danish writer and social critic Soren Kierkegaard, and which asked what we were supposed to do in the world. In the 20th century, existentialism moved a step beyond to embrace a kind of stoicism as reflected in the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus: "a man can be destroyed but not defeated", as Ernest Hemingway wrote in *The Old Man and the Sea*.

"But we've got to have a third possibility, a 'Romanticism Mk 3', that ends positively instead of in mere stoicism. I'm saying I have been trying to create this, and that's what I stand for, and that's what posterity will see I do stand for. But what chance do I stand of getting anybody to think seriously about 'Romanticism Mk 3'? All that you can do is continue in your own way.

"The interesting thing is that most people, by my age, more or less feel that they are giving up. And like H G Wells, who was only 80 when he died, feeling that there's really no further that they can go. So to me, the extremely interesting question would be, could I be the first to go straight on, straight through that particular 'sound barrier', on to the next peak, the next hill-top?"

Colin's optimism here lies in his idea that if we can push ourselves up the "ladder of consciousness", through the "seven levels of consciousness", as he first described them in his *Beyond the Occult* (1988), then we will be able to live much

longer.

Briefly, level one is deep sleep; two, mere awareness; three, what Sartre called "nausea"; four, normal, everyday consciousness; five, happy "spring morning" consciousness; six, a "magical" or ecstatic state; and seven, "Faculty X", a godlike sensation, with the disappearance of time.

"When you realise our normal, ordinary level of consciousness tends to be 4.5, I've managed to push myself up to something like 4.7. You can actually get very, very, very slowly up this consciousness ladder. I realised that if I can do it, then other people can do it. Once we know something can be done, it suddenly can be done quite easily. So this is my main hope. And what this will actually do, if we can achieve this, is enable us to live much, much longer."

A feeling of inner certainty and strength would replace that feeling which human beings have for so much of the time, of vulnerability, the feeling that Sartre called 'contingent', as when you might witness a bad road accident and think; 'Oh my God, that could have been me', and you have a terrible sinking feeling inside you.

"And that's what happens on the second half of level four - you suddenly get that odd feeling of yes, you can win. That's the feeling that interests me so much."

But attempting to raise one's consciousness in this way was a solitary undertaking. "I don't feel terribly gloomy about the fact that I've been forced to do it on my own. If I'd had a great band of disciples around me, like some of these people I wrote about, the 'charlatan messiahs' and so on (The Devil's Party, 2000), it wouldn't work. No-one is going to achieve that kind of power over other people - it probably corrupts you - and all of those 'messiahs' were corrupted by it."

Colin revealed that for many years he had been keeping a diary on tape every morning, which now ran to hundreds of tapes containing a vast amount of material about his life and work. This meant that there would probably be "more Wilsons, so to speak, in future generations than any other major thinker".

He added: "Imagine what would have happened if Shakespeare had done this with his life, written down everything that had happened to him in the morning, from the time he got up on an average day to the time he went to bed at night. It would be invaluable! So they've got it with me!" More laughter all round.

"And I agree, it sounds enormously conceited. Roald Dahl said to me, when we were having dinner once: 'You and I, we're not really important people, we don't really have anything to say, do we?' I said: 'You speak for yourself! I think I'm the most important writer of the 20th century'. Roald seemed quite put out; I quite shocked him."

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**Interview by Geoff Ward (May, 2006)**



\* Photo by Geoff Ward

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