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Life after death is true

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'Life after death is basically true - we don't actually die'

Interview by Geoff Ward (October, 2003)

In life, we are like explorers in uncharted territory who have "lost radio contact with base" - in death, we return to base, from whence we came.

Colin Wilson, pursuing his analogy, envisages a blissful time back at base camp, but also predicts a condition there which he describes as "freedom without movement", and so some of us might just want to "get back out there again", and return to the world.

These are among conclusions reached by Colin after half a lifetime spent bringing a powerful intellect to bear on exhaustive investigations of the paranormal, among many other subjects.

He says he has been "cheered" by the findings of neuropsychiatrist Dr Peter Fenwick who in September, 2003, revealed that a series of studies of near-death experiences, precognition and the effect of prayer had proved that the human mind existed outside the body, and was capable of surviving death.

Dr Fenwick, of the Institute of Psychiatry in London, speaking

at the British Association Festival of Science at the University of Salford, cited cases of patients who, in heart failure, claimed to have left their bodies and "watched" themselves being resuscitated. Another line of evidence came from the "deathbed coincidence" syndrome when someone emotionally close to a person who had just died claims to have either seen them or been aware of their presence.

"They have the impression the person who has just died has come to say goodbye," said Dr Fenwick. The phenomenon could help to explain mounting scientific evidence from around the world suggesting psychic powers, or the concept of sixth sense, are real.

Dr Fenwick said: "Mind may exist outside the brain and may be better understood as a field rather than just the action of neurones in the brain." His findings were arrived at in partnership with Sam Parnia, a clinical research fellow at Southampton Hospital. Sixty patients at the hospital's coronary care unit were interviewed after heart attacks had left them temporarily brain dead. Seven reported near-death experiences, defined by features such as a feeling of leaving the body, and going through a tunnel and entering an area of "love, bliss and consciousness".

Although Colin welcomed Fenwick's and Parnia's findings, he said they came as no surprise to him. The truth was that such verification had been around for almost a century, and he gave as examples Sir William Barrett, a fellow of the Royal Society, who gathered evidence shortly after World War I, and Dr Raymond Moody who carried out research in the USA in the 1960s.

"But it cheers me up no end because I suspect this kind of thing is ceasing to be regarded as rather nutty and cranky," said Colin.. "I can see exactly why people regard talking about life after death as nutty and cranky because we associated it with the kind of emotional stuff that silly old ladies talk about when they're doing their knitting - but as soon as a scientist comes along with good solid evidence, people feel like saying it must be so. Most scientists have been unconvinced because, unlike me, they have never taken the trouble to study the vast pile of solid testimony.

"When I was a child I was interested in spiritualism because my grandmother was a spiritualist, but then I got interested in science, at about the age of ten, and I felt that all this stuff about life after death and spiritualism was a lot of old nonsense. It wasn't that I literally disbelieved it, but somehow it made me uncomfortable. So for the time being I lost interest completely."

Decades later, Colin's interest was rekindled when a publisher persuaded him to write a book about the occult. At first he thought he would have to write the whole thing with his tongue firmly in his cheek, but as he began to study various aspects of the paranormal, such as telepathy – "which I knew perfectly well existed, because my wife Joy and I have always been telepathic" – he began to look at the subject with a little more sympathy, and gradually became more and more absorbed in it.

The Occult appeared in 1971, and it became Colin's biggest selling book up to that time. "But if you'd asked me, did I believe in life after death, I would have said, well, not really. I'd have said I believe that the so-called paranormal, which undoubtedly exists, is due to powers of the human mind that we know

nothing about – telepathy, precognition, second sight and all that kind of thing. I'd have said that although I keep an open mind about life after death, to be honest, it's not something that arouses my enthusiasm that I feel immediately, yes, this is true."

Colin followed up the theme of *The Occult* in a number of subsequent works, particularly *Mysteries* (1978), and *Poltergeist* (1981), the natural progression being to *Afterlife* in 1985, although as he embarked on this project he still felt that life after death was mostly wishful thinking, and he began the book in a sceptical frame of mind.

"But as with the occult and poltergeists, the more I studied the subject, the more I realised, my God, this is true! There were so many cases that quite obviously were totally genuine and, moreover, there were so many cases where there was no doubt there could not be another explanation.

"I'm not a spiritualist, I never go to spiritualist meetings, I don't read great fat books about the subject – philosophy is the main thing that interests me – but if you ask me now if I believe in life after death I will say, yes, life after death exists.

"And if you ask me, what is the purpose of human existence, I would say it's there in that last chapter of *Afterlife*, where I say something like, I'm pretty sure that human beings are here in this world because they want to be, voluntarily, almost in the way that explorers go to the North Pole, to check it out and to learn something, but that we have a pretty poor radio contact with base. It's a very crackly radio, but things will come through.

"Some forces, so to speak, where we came from, are in touch with us and arrange weird synchronicities which suddenly make

us think there is something more than one assumes to this ordinary, boring, material world, to what Heidegger called the 'triviality of everydayness'. Our purpose in the world is eventually to enable spirit to conquer matter, to get into matter to such an extent that there is no longer any matter. As George Bernard Shaw said, what started off as a whirlpool in pure force ended in a whirlpool of pure mind, intellect. That's the ultimate aim.

"Every one of us contributes towards this in some small way, except criminals who go in the wrong direction, and other ordinary people who have got themselves in a terrible state about something or other and consequently just waste their lives - all of the people Eliot wrote about in *The Wasteland*: 'what shall we do tomorrow, what shall we ever do?', and that kind of thing. A lot of people have totally lost direction, but all the people who have a sense of purpose, which includes you and me, basically feel we are here for a purpose, that there are such things as real values, that we have a strong sense of what's right and what's wrong – for example, we feel quite instinctively that child murder is wrong. So we're here for that purpose, to push things a stage further, and provided we do that, things go OK. And what's more, you get these odd synchronicities which prove to you they're OK."

He gave two examples, which he recounts in his autobiography, *Dreaming to Some Purpose*. About to complete his book *Alien Dawn*, he awoke during the night on various occasions to see his bedside clock reading 1.11, 2:22, 3:33 or 4:44, always the same format. On another occasion, driving home with Joy after visiting a pub, Colin remarked how they took everything for granted, such as how the car would run without

trouble and get them home without incident. Just as he said that, the car broke down! Later, the garage mechanic said he had never seen such a component failure before.

"It was as if something was saying to us 'OK, you're right', just as synchronicity seems to say to you 'You're on the right path, keep going', as if something is trying to tell you there is a meaning there. It didn't do it unpleasantly, it didn't wreck us, or send us home at midnight. It just confirmed to me what I thought. I have this extremely powerful feeling of an underlying meaning in human existence, and this whole life after death thing obviously fitted in with this simply because I believe that after death we go back wherever we came from, which is back to base, so to speak, where there's a feeling of total, absolute freedom, but on the other hand, although you are totally free you aren't in contact with things so you can actually move. It's like being free in empty space, so although you must no doubt feel marvellously free I'm sure that one of the things you want once you get back to base is 'OK, come on, let's go out again!' – the feeling that there's a lot more work to be done, and you really appreciate being in touch with the world.

"I think that one of these days human beings will actually grasp all this that I'm saying, and take it for granted, and say, 'OK, that's why we're alive, that's what we're here for', and will live from the moment they're born until the moment they die with that kind of absolute certainty and without wasting time and without doing stupid things."

Was it now the case, then, that belief in life after death was no longer a matter of faith? "Well no, you see, when I was writing *Afterlife* I felt this quite strongly, that the sense in which it

wouldn't do human beings a lot of good to actually believe in life after death, to be absolutely certain of it, because a lot of us would feel 'We've had enough of this, let's get back home!' It's far better for us, in a sense, to be uncertain, and I've always believed in what I call James's law that for some reason, where psychical research is concerned, there's always just enough proof to convince the believers and never quite enough to overwhelm the sceptics. It seems to me this is absolutely deliberate. But I do feel, nevertheless, that life after death is basically true, that we don't actually die. It doesn't interest me terribly. It seems to me it's just a basic fact. What strikes me as very bad is to get all obsessed with life after death, and to start going to spiritualist meetings. That seems to me to be a waste of good time. So if you said to me, would I really like to convince everybody in the world tomorrow of life after death, the answer is – not really. I'm a bit ambivalent about that."

People still feared death because they were unaware of the evidence for life after it. He said: "I'm not sure that it would be terribly good for them to be aware of it. People who have near-death experiences say that it's so exquisite that they are often resentful about being pulled back. It would be too bad if death became, as it were, the outlet for everybody in the way that drugs or alcohol can be.

"In order for the notion of life after death to be useful to a person you need to be a pretty objective, philosophical kind of person. As soon as you begin to get subjective, emotional people, then it's really not on, they just use it for their own purposes, and turn it into a kind of dream, which is nothing to do with what really goes on. I don't really feel I would like everybody in the world to believe in life after death. I would like

everybody in the world to believe in this kind of vision I have of life on a very high level of purpose, and also on a very high level of optimism and certainty, you know, just that feeling that everything's going to be OK.

"It really came to me with some clarity back in 1993 or 1994 and I'd spent two years writing an enormous novel, called *Metamorphosis of the Vampire*, which I still unpublished, certain this was a masterpiece, would make such an impact, and with a bit of luck would make me some money. But when I finished it, to my horror, the various people I sent it to, even agents, were very ho-hum about it, and publishers looked at it and said it was far too big and turned it down. I really was in quite a state about it.

"I remember waking up in the middle of the night once and thinking 'What are we going to do if it isn't accepted?', and really feeling we could easily end in bankruptcy, and have to sell the house, and so on. Then suddenly I thought 'Now, come on, do you honestly really think that you're going bankrupt?' And something in me said 'No, of course I don't – what total nonsense', an element of sanity, normality and objectivity.

"I suddenly realised that I do believe, in a certain sense, that I'm here for a particular purpose, and things work out, provided I accept the purpose that I'm here for. I think that would apply to everybody. Many people ask 'How can you believe in God when he allows such terrible things to happen?' They're just talking absolute nonsense. They've got themselves into this negative, miserable state, and you feel like shrugging your shoulders and saying 'Your whole approach to human existence is totally wrong'.

"What I'm saying, admittedly, only applies to the people who know what their purpose is, and if you ask me about the 99 per cent of other people, criminals, drug addicts, I would scratch my head and say that I don't know that it does apply to them. That's rather like saying to Einstein 'How does your theory of relativity apply to people who can't think?' and who in general find it totally confusing. To which Einstein would reply that it isn't intended for them. Unless they can make the effort to understand it they may as well skip it. I don't really see this as a general cure of all ills that applies to every human being, although I do think that if we were all enough in this direction that it would be.

"I think that, basically, what we need is a breed of statesmen and intellectuals and writers who accept this and see it very clearly and who live according to it, who just feel it inside them, that everything is more or less OK, that this is the purpose we're here for, and get on with it.

"I'm sure that one of the reasons I came into the world was to write a book like *The Outsider* so that literally hundreds of people over time have said to me 'That book changed my life' - it gave me enormous help when I badly needed it - or even 'That book saved me from suicide', half a dozen people have said that. Once you feel that you've given people that kind of personal direction you really feel you've done part of what you're here for, and that's what really hope, to leave behind a body of work that will produce a sense of purpose and direction"

In his essay, *After the Ball is Over*, Colin accepts there is "something in human beings that can survive the death of the body". But what is that "something"? More than a decade before

Fenwick's and Parnia's research, the microbiologist Dr Darryl Reanne brought his scientific acumen to bear on the life after death question in his 1991 book *The Death of Forever*, in which he suggested that it was consciousness that survived. Reanne said that "consciousness cannot be extinguished by death, for consciousness transcends time", and asserted: "Time and self are outgrown husks which consciousness will one day discard ..."

Colin commented: "I believe that consciousness can exist without the human body, but it's not consciousness we're talking about in itself. We're talking about what Husserl would have called the transcendental ego, the real you. There is something in us which is real, which is indestructible, you can call it the soul, you can call it all kinds of things, but none of these really help the situation because they just introduce another undefined word."

Reanne said: "To be free of time is to be free of death". From the standpoint of physics, "time has no verifiable status: it is a fictional map we draw on the seamless spacetime fabric so that we can find our way around ... the mind needed an ordering principle and a nexus of reference ..." The essence of the human quest was to break free of time.

"Oh yes, in a certain sense, but I can't help feeling he's using the wrong word," Colin responded. "We know consciousness can go out like a light every time you close your eyes and fall asleep, out goes consciousness. So consciousness doesn't have some special status, any more than a light bulb does, it can flicker out, be thrown away, and a new one is needed. Consciousness is not something, in itself, which is

inextinguishable, but you, on the other hand, involves a level of self-consciousness, self-awareness, the essential you, does continue to exist. I'm pretty certain of that. Whatever continues to exist is the real you, probably your personality to large extent because so often people are aware of the actual person they knew. How far that personality persists, I don't know."

Assuming that some force or entity exists after death, where is it, in this world or perhaps another dimension? "Clearly, life itself is in another dimension from this physical world we're living in. It appears to run in some weird way parallel to the present physical world, but it's not in the physical world, and can't be accounted for in physical terms, which is the great mistake that all materialist scientists make. We're talking about another level of existence."

John Lennon told his family that after he died he would attempt to establish contact by sending them a red rose. Would Colin, who has four children and five grandchildren, contemplate telling his family he would try and contact them after his death?

"Possibly, yes, there's no good reason why not," he replied. "I suppose it's a possibility. It's never really struck me as anything to think about, but there's no reason why not."

However, he thought the idea trivialised the issue. "What so many people have said, when they've lost somebody close to them, is that they've had a powerful certainty that that person is present. This seems to me to be what it's really about, the passing on of messages and all the rest of it doesn't seem to me to be terribly important. If you're not very careful you get into the realm of spiritualism."

