

IS THERE AN AFTERLIFE?

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READING 1

On the subject of spirit beings, this is from a private letter of Carl Jung, although this opinion on spirit beings is not found in his published work.

I once discussed the proof of identity for a long time with a friend of William James, Professor Hyslop, in New York. He admitted that, all things considered, all these metaphysic phenomena could be explained better by the hypothesis of spirits than by the qualities and peculiarities of the unconscious. And here, on the basis of my own experience, I am bound to concede he is right. In each individual case I must of necessity be skeptical, but in the long run I have to admit that the spirit hypothesis yields better results in practice than any other.

Carl Jung, Collected Letters, Vol 1, p. 431

READING 2

On the subject of reincarnation, three excerpts from Chris Bache's book "Lifecycles". Bache is a retired professor of religious studies and a faculty member at the California Institute of Integral Studies.

Human existence itself is about spiritual growth. We have taken birth in the Earth school to learn and to grow, but there are different tracks through this school. The slowest track is to follow passively the course of our karma as it winds through one valley after another. The less aware we are of the rules of the game, the slower will be our progress, but progress will nonetheless be made. As we become more aware of the causal laws governing the process, we are able to make more informed choices and thus can progress more rapidly and smoothly. The world's spiritual traditions have been teaching us these basic rules for more than two thousand years.

If the religions of the world have made possible a more conscious participation in our own evolution, it is clear that they have no monopoly on spiritual growth. We exist on Earth in order to grow, and we will grow whether or not we affiliate with any religion, let alone with any specific religion. Religions are not the only institutions that have supported this evolutionary process, and we must admit that they have at times seemed to work hard against it.

Though we often tend to describe the spiritual journey in terms of its end stages, in fact every stage of human growth is part of one's spiritual evolution. When people talk of taking up a "spiritual path", they are only describing a point at which the spiritual path they have always been on has become a self-conscious choice. This is a significant point on the journey, but certainly not its starting point. In our personal lives as for the planet as a whole, we are waking up to something that has been going on for billions of years.

Christopher Bache, "Lifecycles" (1990) p. 216ff

PRESENTATION

The summer I was 13 our family rented a cottage on a lake in Wisconsin. One of my favorite activities was, well, doing nothing. A favorite place, too – a slight hill nearby where I could lie down, stretch out, and look at the summer sky and let my mind wander. It was best on a clear evening when the stars appeared. What were they about? Did they have anything to do with me? What was the universe all about?

One evening I told my mother about my mind wandering. She was concerned, and she urged me to keep my feet on the ground, to direct my thinking to more practical matters. At that point, practical matters were not too interesting to me. In retrospect, she was partly right. After all, there would be a time when I could no longer stretch out under the stars and dream. Responsibilities and all that stuff.

I did become a practical person and I have no regrets. But now I rather enjoy letting the dreamer return, as there is much to dream about. One of the same questions that I pondered at 13 keeps coming back: what is the universe all about? The big difference, then to now, is that I've had a career in applied science, a head full of facts and opinions, and 60+ years of the obstacle course known as life. I've also picked up a healthy respect for evidence; that's consistent with a lifelong distrust of authority, which I share with many of you. Anyway, back to the universe. What indeed is it all about?

In recent years I've become interested in unexplained phenomena or mysteries about our lives on earth, little ones and big ones. I don't mean the *really* big ones like -- what do women want? I'm talking about observations and processes that have no explanation in current scientific knowledge but are nonetheless real. I'm convinced that a primary path to understanding our world runs through these mysteries. Many of these phenomena are still called "paranormal" or "supernatural". Those words will eventually fall into disuse as these things are understood to be normal and natural, even if unexplained by conventional science.

I've talked about many of these phenomena in previous papers. Although many of you are skeptical of my ideas, I appreciate the fact that you have listened. I'm also glad that some of you have shared your personal experiences of such mysteries with me. I continue to be interested.

I used to group all these mysterious phenomena under the word nonphysical, meaning beyond the boundaries of today's science. Now I am inclined to divide them into those that take place in the physical world we live in – the world of space, time, and matter or energy -- and those beyond, in other dimensions whose nature we can only guess at. I will call the two worlds (1) the earth or physical plane and (2) the spiritual plane. Some phenomena such as interventions may involve both worlds. I've spoken about those in my presentations on angels and miracles.

My main reason for separating the two worlds is my growing belief that phenomena of the first type, within our earth plane, will be explained by extensions of scientific ideas already known,

primarily physics. We will see good reproducible experiments to support the developing theories. I think the time line for this is 10-20 years, maybe less. The line of thinking that appeals most to me is the notion of a universal information field that connects us all. But that's another topic. Let me summarize five groups of these unexplained phenomena of the earth plane before we take our excursion into the spiritual plane in search of an afterlife.

1. Communication other than by sight or sound or electromagnetic waves. Intuition, mental telepathy, premonitions, remote viewing, and many others. These have been demonstrated in thousands of experiments. Some are quite commonplace. How they happen is still a mystery.

2. Psychokinesis, also known as mind over matter. This got a lot of hype some years ago from such feats as the spoon bending demonstrated by Uri Geller or Eastern mystics walking barefoot on hot coals. More recently, there are several cases where the output of computerized random number generators has become non-random for a period of time through intentional focus by people. There is also a fascinating series of experiments by William Tiller, retired Stanford Professor of Material Science, that appears to show that people can program electronic devices by meditation.

3. Consciousness shown by animals. We all have heard or read stories of dogs, cats, and horses that know when death or injury or serious illness occurs to their favorite human, even if not in proximity. I've spoken before of my favorite demonstration – pet dogs that react to their master's decision to head for home, even hundreds of miles away.

4. Consciousness shown by plants. Cleve Backster developed and operated lie detectors. In the 1960's he tried such a device on plants in his laboratory and found responses to events such as his decision to burn a leaf. This Backster effect has been duplicated thousands of times.

5. Medical intuition and long-distance healing. A few people can sense or read medical information about a patient's internal organs. We have one such person in this area who has an excellent reputation that I can attest to. With respect to healing, many trials have been conducted to show that concentrated meditation or prayer at a distance can produce beneficial medical outcomes. Not always, but in a significant number of cases.

That brief list covers some of the mysterious phenomena of life on earth, things you can explore if you're interested. Intuitive communication, psychokinesis, consciousness of animals and plants, medical intuition and distant healing. There is plenty of good evidence about these phenomena in books and journals, and in front of our noses. I believe we will be well along a path to understand them in scientific terms within a few years.

The rest of my presentation, however, is about the possibility of a spiritual world beyond life on earth. We can look at evidence and speculate about it. But I don't think it will be well described by extensions of our science for a long time, because our science is constructed around an earth-plane environment of space, time, and matter. I've tried to collect my thoughts about the spiritual world into four questions, roughly in order of increasing complexity.

Are there conscious presences beyond our physical boundaries?

In metaphysical terms these are usually called spirit beings, and they seem to exist at different levels and have different purposes. Some are called spirit guides, similar to the more popular term guardian angels. The strongest evidence is from two sources. First are psychic mediums who contact spirit beings on behalf of living people. The evidence is tainted because of fraud on the part of some mediums. Yet, an accurate reading can be very convincing, especially when facts are communicated that could not be known to the medium. The ability to be a medium is rare in our population, but there are thousands of such persons. Think of them as naturally having a personal but limited password into the spirit realm.

The other main evidence is near-death experiences or NDE's. These are people whose heart has stopped for up to a few minutes from accident or surgery, but who revive. A very high fraction of them report very similar experiences: passage through a tunnel, a white light, beings available to assist them, and an overwhelming feeling of peace. These accounts have been collected by researchers in several books and journals. The work began in earnest after Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's reports in the 1960's, and Raymond Moody's bestseller, "Life After Life" in 1977. I have not seen criticisms of NDE's based on fraud, but skeptics don't accept this evidence any more than they accept mediums.

Add to mediums and NDE's the large number of reports through the ages of people who say they have received communication from spirit beings, mostly intuitively but sometimes by more direct means. I find the sheer volume of data impressive, and I vote yes – spirit beings exist. In the reading I gave from a private letter of Carl Jung, he also voted yes, but the fact that he did not include this opinion in any published work shows his difficulty in deciding.

Are the spirit beings of human origin?

This question is harder to answer than the first. It might be better to ask whether we are of spirit origin. Most mediums give readings to people who want to contact a deceased relative such as parents, grandparents, siblings, or children. A clairvoyant medium usually communicates her response to images or symbols that arise, and the images are then connected to specific persons. For instance, a vase of yellow flowers may strongly indicate one's grandmother, but it is not the same as seeing an image of grandmother. People who have been through NDE's speak of human-like beings that help them. But it is possible the human aspect is imagined even though the sense of being helped and cared for is real.

Although medium communications and near-death experiences are real and positive for thousands of people, they constitute weak evidence for whole human personalities in the spirit world. The common metaphysical explanation is that we, that is, our personalities, are part of larger spiritual entities. Some call them soul families. Others talk of personality fragments. My sense of the evidence is that living humans can only recognize human-like emotions and images and language. In other words, if there is any communication at all from the spirit world, it is

necessarily in human terms. I go along with the thousands of people who have experienced, one way or another, contact with human personalities in the spirit world. So I vote yes.

If our earthly identities, either in whole or in part, do survive after death in a spirit world, do they ever return to earth?

That is, is life on earth a one-time through exercise, one and done, or part of an ongoing sequence of existences in both the physical, earth plane and a nonphysical spiritual plane? Yes, I'm talking about reincarnation, but not from a religious viewpoint. There are two types of evidence, spontaneous and evoked. Spontaneous memories are shown by thousands of accounts of young children from around the world who exhibit unmistakable habits, knowledge, language skills, and physical characteristics of someone who died not long before they were born, someone completely unknown to them and unrelated. These memories tend to be lost after the child turns 5 or 6, as the child is absorbed by his new culture and usually unbelieving family. The best accounts, including numerous interviews, were collected and published by the late Dr. Ian Stevenson, psychiatrist at the University of Virginia Medical School.

The second body of evidence is evoked memories of former lives. These are obtained through specific techniques of deep psychological probing. The most prominent technique is hypnotherapy. A problem with these data is the inability to verify most evoked lives, which often took place in the distant past. There is also a tendency to imagine oneself connected to famous people from the past. Skeptics like to joke about the large number of reincarnations of Cleopatra.

The stories of reincarnated children are extremely compelling. The supporting evidence of evoked memories is not as strong for an outsider to the field such as myself, unfamiliar with the probing techniques. A reasonable conclusion is that reincarnation certainly occurs for some people, in some places, at some times. We don't know if it applies to everyone, but why not?

Does reincarnation mean our lives are planned in advance?

Reincarnationists say yes, up to a point. In our spirit phase we, that is our spirit entities, take part in choosing the circumstances of our stay on earth in conjunction with other spirit beings or souls. But we have free will as to how to deal with the obstacles in our way. The overriding theme is learning. We are here on earth not to be this life but to use it for learning. This line of thought necessarily involves the concept of karma, which I'm not going to explore today.

The evidence for planned reincarnation is thin. It's not nearly as strong as the recurring birth marks on Ian Stevenson's reincarnated children. The evidence comes from the same sources cited earlier such as mediums and channels, NDE's, out-of-body experiences (OBE's), and deep psychological probing. A recent and remarkable book by Rob Schwartz examines the process of pre-birth planning through ten interviews of people with major life problems. Much of the book is actual dialog with their spirit guides, as channeled by accomplished mediums. The

concept of pre-birth planning is logical and consistent if you accept the reality of reincarnation. But it certainly is difficult to grasp. I recommend reading the book.

Incidentally, we may wonder why any spirit being would choose to incarnate on the earth plane when there likely are many other options available. Some must be easier or more pleasant than this difficult course we have chosen. Rob Schwartz remarks that earth duty is considered a mark of honor among spirit beings, similar to a campaign ribbon on a military uniform. So, I offer sincere congratulations to all of us.

Well, I've somehow wandered from simple intuition all the way to planned reincarnation in 15 minutes. It's certainly an amazing world that we inhabit. My own opinion is that the earthly mysteries I listed briefly are all real, well-supported by experiment and observation, and they will be explained by extensions of science within a few years. The mysteries of the spirit world I've described in metaphysical terms are intriguing, although the details will remain unclear for some time to come. That includes reincarnation. But again, it's just one person's view.

This is not a religious story although parts of it have been incorporated by traditional religions. In fact, Christianity has not endorsed reincarnation except for some of the early mystical Christians whose doctrines were mostly dismissed by those in power later. Rather, the modern approach, the only one I'm comfortable with, is to look at the evidence and draw conclusions. Such an exercise does not require animal sacrifices, a catechism, or even an annual pledge.

So what? What does all this have to do with our lives? I find it exciting to consider the possibility that life is eternal, there is meaning in the cosmos, and life on earth is all about learning. (Repeat) That's not easy for someone like me who came of age in the heyday of 20th century existentialism – which pretty much says the opposite. Like many of you, I was not comfortable with existentialism. There had to be more to life. So, also like many of you, I found a strong message in humanism. I still do, but why dismiss the evidence, growing in our lifetimes, that there is much more to our world. As usual, Shakespeare said it long ago: *There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*

If you find the reincarnation story consistent, there are some major consequences. Perhaps most important, you may reconsider all the challenging things that have happened to you in life. Bad parents, for example. Betrayals, life threatening illnesses. Terrible losses and tragedies. Parents are often at fault, as will be the drunk driver who runs a red light with tragic consequences a few years from now. The reincarnationist view is that they are at fault but not to blame. (Repeat) We, in our spiritual phase, somehow chose these potential obstacles for ourselves in order to learn to love and forgive. That's very hard to do, of course, particularly if you believe life is a one-time-through proposition.

One other consequence is worth mentioning. We don't have to cram as much as possible into this life. Indeed, we have a spiritual license to stop and smell the flowers now and then. Maybe do a little dreaming on a warm summer evening. On a slight hill. After all, eternity is a long time.

Is there an afterlife? Yes, I think so, and I've sketched my ideas in 20 minutes with a very broad brush. But don't take my word for it. I'll close with a practical view from the 20th century philosopher, Woody Allen. *I don't believe in the afterlife, although I'm bringing a change of underwear.*