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“Issues for a Philosophy of Death and Dying”

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Preface

What happens to a human being’s consciousness and memories at death is a great mystery. However, there is no shortage of beliefs old and new about the final fate of a person’s inner life. Many of the world’s great religions offer hopeful belief in an indestructible self, soul, “Ego,” or mental elements separable from the body at death, continuing to exist until bodily resurrection or reincarnation. Believers may find the teachings, rites, and rituals of these faiths adequate to face the death or dying of other people and sufficient to accept prospect of their own mortality, assured of an immortal life to come.

The advance of modern science and materialism has shaken such beliefs. So closely dependent is consciousness upon bodily life and brain processes, that many moderns find themselves unable to accept the possibility of any personal survival after death of the body. They believe that enjoyment of this bodily life is all there is, and put their faith in secular material progress for future generations. The evident aim of secular materialism is heaven on earth now, not in heaven above later. Even those of us who now question the environmental costs and resource depletion required by an ethos of endless economic growth tend to take for granted the comforts and convenience of the consumer culture around us, despite despair at its wastefulness and spiritual

desolation. Everywhere in modernity we find a struggle between material greed and more humane values.

Intellectually unable to accept doctrines of formal religion, persons of a secular bent nevertheless may find in religious teachings or mysticism some philosophical viewpoints useful in framing moral beliefs consistent with personal life experience. The image of a divine Creator looking with love into the hearts of all created persons may furnish the secular person with a merely heuristic device useful in imagining others to have an inner life as valuable as one's own, universally worthy of careful consideration in personal encounter.

Thereby one may also become more able to mourn the dying and death of others as a personal reminder of one's own fate. But secular persons lack the reassurance afforded by long religious practice and by prayerful release of troubles to deity. So a non-religious person may question whether merely intellectual beliefs will be enough to deal with the emotional disquiet emerging as one ages and starts to feel one's own end approaching.

As the end nears, a religious person might think about "preparing to meet one's Maker," God, for Final Judgment. But one who is secular or non-religious may instead find need to make that final judgment personally. One may put on trial the life one has lived, asking what it all meant. Perhaps even persons of religious persuasion may find useful the idea of preparing their own "brief," or summation of life lived, before appearing before the expected Final Judge. For beyond moral questions relevant to salvation or damnation, a Final Judge might ask also about what one has done with the gift of free will to craft a uniquely human life. So religious and secular persons alike may want to ponder the meaning of their lives right here on Earth, though in terms more mundane than religious. Our materialistic culture tends to put highest value upon earthly "success," in terms of social status, acquisition of goods, or "good experiences," but dedication to service and contribution to the common good do also find respect in obituaries.

For some of us who are not religious, the question of what might count as a secular analogue of "salvation" often goes beyond reputation, possessions, or novel experience. In the final stage of life, the fortunate

few whose lives have been filled with personal fulfillments and satisfactions may find contentment in letting death overtake them, secure in the knowledge of lives well lived. But as Thoreau observed, "The mass of men live lives of quiet desperation." Many of us nearing life's end find ourselves more concerned with personal losses, disappointments, and inner shortcomings met along life's way. Pondering lives felt in some way incomplete or unfinished, we may wonder if there is any way to meet life's end with acceptance and courage rather than resignation, anguish, despair, or disturbance.

For this reason, the problem I take up in this paper is how those without religious belief might best prepare for death and dying. In what follows, I shall try to address some of the issues I personally find arising in this regard. By an issue, I mean simply a question to which there may be more than one answer. For clarity, each question I discuss will have two sharply opposed answers. I will frame each issue in terms of a sharp rhetorical distinction between role expectations common in the surrounding society, as against the individual's more personal evaluation of a unique life history. In doing so, I hope that the personal issues I raise may be of interest to others, as they seek to articulate concerns of their own about facing death and dying.

My discussion will conclude with a secular alternative to religious solutions of existential problems underlying some issues of death and dying. With some of the ancient philosophers and religious mystics, I believe that long practice of disciplined inner work is the best way to approach life's deepest quandaries. So I shall emphasize the importance of encouraging the young to begin early on a deliberate path to self-knowledge. The inner path I later describe is one based upon secular psychotherapy, rather than the religious inwardness of prayerful dialogue with a deity. But it nevertheless shares some central moral concerns of religion, such as seeing others realistically in terms of their needs, as well as one's own.

Cultivating an active inner life of reflective dialogue critical of common opinions is a first step along that path. So it will be useful to begin with a critical look at some prevalent answers given to questions on death and dying.

Part One: Is There a Best Way to Live in Old Age?

A non-religious, empirical, and naturalistic orientation shapes my own approach to issues of death and dying. The relation of mind and consciousness to brain and neural processes being found so intimate by science, I see no possibility of an immaterial self which can survive death of the body. With Pragmatists such as John Dewey, I view the adult "self" or integrated "ego" as a temporary social achievement, not an eternal metaphysical given. A seemingly unitary "personality" can divide in schizophrenia or fragment in Alzheimer's disease. Nor do I find experiential arguments for an afterlife convincing on their own merits. Against claims based upon "near-death experiences," I believe that truly dead men can tell no tales of a life "hereafter."

I also think that "altered states of mind"--visions, drug "trips," hypnotic "regressions to past lives," and the like--record mere hallucinatory disturbance of hard-won evolutionary ability to survive in a prehistoric world of predators and elusive prey or food, not evidence of some numinous "Beyond." Hominid ancestors "stoned" on fermented fruit or grain would be unlikely to have lasted last long stumbling around on an African savannah filled with lions, leopards, and hyenas competing for meals. So treating "altered states" as anything but abnormal disturbance of evolved capability to navigate our everyday world successfully is simply delusional. But life is hard even today: with all its advances, modern civilization does have its discontents, as Freud pointed out. So people often use wishful thinking, intoxicants, or shared religious delusions to lessen the pain of its hardships, especially the inescapable pain of death and dying.

As one given to skeptical naturalism, I find it futile to worry about my self's dissolution at death, though I am sure that I would go through the usual bodily terrors of gut and mind at immediacy of that prospect, upon diagnosis of a terminal illness. Extraordinary conversations with a similarly rationalistic and stoic friend who died of cancer in home hospice care a couple years back convince me of that. A false cancer scare of my own during that time, due to inappropriate medication by an inexperienced physician, has led me to focus intently upon my own mortality. Since then I accept being in the final stage of life; and I

ponder how long I have left and take measures to avoid what might do me in. But I also worry about how to meet death.

Fortunate to have reached the age of 75 still in relatively good health, I now focus primarily upon time remaining, rather than time elapsed. My central interest these days is preparing to respond in a fitting way to that inevitable end which gradual decline of my bodily and mental powers increasingly forces me to confront on a daily basis. This paper on issues of death and dying reflects that concern.

Pinning down exactly what worries me has not been easy. But reflecting upon my growing unease upon being in life's final stage, I found myself considering the way our own society has structured "old age" within the human life cycle. Most obvious is the ritual of retirement from gainful employment, an unsettling sign of what lies ahead. We may feel young in spirit, but calendar and visibly aging body don't lie. It's time to retire, we may be told, or tell ourselves.

1. What Should I Do in Retirement?

For a great many of us, the question of "what to do in retirement" has framed grudging acceptance of the reality that we are moving towards an eventual conclusion of life. Long submerged in necessity of getting and spending, those of us lucky enough to have retirement as an option ask ourselves how we're going to spend our dwindling days. Two main alternative answers here are "do whatever my spiritual tradition or secular social position tells me," or "do whatever I've been doing, or long wanted to do, during leisure hours."

In some ancient or highly traditional societies, a person who had fulfilled family obligations as parent, provider, and grandparent might be expected to follow an ascetic path, or embark upon a final religious pilgrimage, or undergo ritual cleansing of soul in preparation for spiritual transition. But the social expectations of retirees in today's secular culture may sound more like the disjointed options on a consumer shopping list: give back to the community as a volunteer; serve as a role model for youth; deliver meals on wheels; make a difference; win a lifetime achievement award; contribute to lifelong

learning or other age-appropriate community activities at senior centers; and so on.

Alternatively, one may follow a more individual path. One may turn to familiar or deferred leisure activities: watch more TV or movies; do more email and Facebook; go for walks or bicycle; go fishing; travel, tour, or vacation as befitting one's social class status; continue golf, tennis, poker, chess, or other competitive pastimes; indulge hobbies; take lessons or pursue lifelong learning; make new friends in senior center activities; go through one's "bucket list" of wishes to fulfill before "kicking the bucket;" and generally stay active, be creative, go shopping, and try to stay young. One hides from death by immersion in promise of a new life, or at least another "new beginning," with focus upon a "reinventing" or "making over" of self.

As may be obvious from the latter list of post-retirement options, even the realm of individual leisure pursuits is ever more a matter of social convention, promulgated by TV and the other mass media. Notable here is the emphasis on doing and making, typical of a commercial culture in which people define themselves by what they do or consume, rather than by what they are; by doing rather than being. "Being" might require more difficult inner work on virtues and right relationship, personal centering, integration of disparate tendencies, a search for "authenticity," and reorientation to spiritual concern, or helpful generativity in relation to others (by initiating supportive, creative, or inspiring activity). But any retirement activity can be interrupted by an accident or serious illness, raising an unwanted question requiring answer.

2. How Long Should I Rely on Medical Measures to Delay Death?

As indicated earlier, the question of how to live out the final stage of life may be sharpened by noting how painfully the question may arise for a person suddenly diagnosed with a terminal disease and short time to live. One may then be faced with the unexpected question of how long to prolong one's life by medical means, especially as that begins to require more and more "heroic" procedures by doctors and medical personnel. The issue tends to be framed in terms of the quality of life thus prolonged, as opposed to quantity.

One option is for patient and family, in consultation with doctors, to weigh the costs and benefits of radical and expensive treatments in end-stage disease, as with repeated surgeries, chemotherapy, or radiation. If there are likely to be serious side effects such as more intense pain, persistent nausea, disorientation, compromised immune response, serious secondary infections, or newly induced cancers, then the short time bought by treatment may not be deemed worth the risks and costs of further treatment. The quality of daily life to be expected by merely lingering longer under more intrusive or intensive care may seem unpalatable to all those concerned, especially if the family is under severe emotional stress due to financial strain. The patient may refuse further treatment, save for comfort, and accept arrival of life's end.

On the other hand, a terminal patient may be very strongly motivated by need for more time to finish creative work or to find emotional closure with significant other persons. In that case, all concerned may accept reluctantly the greater degree of physical suffering, interpersonal strain, and financial cost associated with extended treatment. There will likely be additional emphasis upon extended palliative measures to remedy increasing discomfort, as the patient compensates for decline and tries to bring to a fitting conclusion that which is felt incomplete.

Both these options are the familiar stuff of deliberation in medical ethics. The focus in both is primarily upon what the patient may be able to experience in the time remaining, if life can be prolonged. But there is a deeper issue underlying such calculations. Another friend's decision to forgo more treatment and die led me to ponder a question difficult to face.

3. When Should I Let Go the Hope of More Tomorrows?

There is a fine Japanese print of a rotund sage laughing roundly at the sight of a single leaf still clinging to the limb of a tree in winter's first wind, as though reluctant to let go its last hold on the tree of life. Perhaps the sage is amused by recognition that the leaf is like so many of us, unwilling to recognize the evident truth that each individual life comes to a natural end while life itself goes on. The obvious question

for those in the final stage of life is when to let go of living and accept dying.

As we have seen, the prevailing answer in our society is to accept the benefits of modern preventive healthcare and medical treatment until all reasonable expectation of a viable quality of life is exhausted, the futility of heroic attempts at resuscitation becomes evident, and need for hospice or other end-of-life care becomes evident to all concerned.

Perhaps the more sage answer is that as old age sets in, one gradually needs to gradually begin letting go of many things appropriate to preceding stages of life. "To everything there is a season," and the winter of life brings death. But "letting go" may not be easy in our youth obsessed, "hanging on" culture. The thought of no more tomorrows means the end of chances to finally get it right, no further chance to make amends. So apart from our own awareness of declining powers, it may be others' perception of us (as becoming frail, neglectful of duties appropriate to elders, unrealistic, forgetful, or downright foolish), which suggests it's time to begin learning when, and of what, to let go. As the French existentialist Sartre once wryly remarked, "It is the others who are my old age." But letting go of living is ultimately up to oneself, a final task of the inner life.

One might wonder what this final letting go of life might mean. At the very heart of one's inner life is an ongoing and cumulative knowledge of personal history. A lifetime of human relationships constitutes that life history. Society regards ability to remember, reflect upon, judge, and act upon lessons of that life history as the very core of one's personal identity, forming the basis of moral and personal obligations to other people. Knowledge of one's obligations to others is clearly essential to the inner life. But among those obligations is the assumption by others that each of us will take responsibility for choosing a path of life that makes the most of our own particular abilities and inclinations, through enriching human life generally. "We're all in this together," as the saying goes, obliged to "give back" to society. The very words or ideas in which we think are cultural gifts bestowed by the human community, which invite creative social response as appropriate return.

Part of our creativity is highly personal—the wishes, hopes and dreams, sufferings and triumphs, solitudes and relationships, initiatives and adventures which in themselves are thought to lie within in a realm of individual liberty and happiness. As John Stuart Mill pointed out, our lives are experiments in human being, with freedom to explore individual paths to happiness restricted only by moral obligation not to harm others in that pursuit. In short, there is an essential part of the inner life in which we are at liberty to make and keep promises to ourselves about what we are going to do with our lives. It would appear, then, that we have obligations to ourselves as well as to others. And herein arises a problem, when we try to decide about what we should start to let go of in the final stage of life, as we begin to feel death nearing.

4. What is One's Most Important Obligation in the Final Stage of Life?

In each of the final stage alternatives discussed so far, there has been a strong element of family, community, or current sociocultural expectation, as seen in mass media portrayals of dealing with the difficulties of a large population of postwar "baby boomers" (children of the generation in which the troops came home from World War II and started families). Consequently, some in the final stage of life may find a profusion of societal expectations clouding the issue of how best to approach life's ending. A welter of competing outer obligations may distract from strongly felt sense of inner unmet obligations to oneself. But in doing what might such obligations consist? And how might we discover them?

Self-knowledge of this sort may not come easily. It requires looking back through one's life history to decide which obligations and underlying values are most important. Considering the meaning of one's entire life puts emphasis more upon evaluation of one's life as a whole. Focus upon retaining core priorities of one's own life history and philosophy could be seen as the positive side of learning to "let go" of life, shedding whatever seems inessential in life's final stage. The aim is not to lose sight of what seems most worthwhile, before it is too late to bring it to an end found fitting.

Thus, pondering the meaning of one's life history puts emphasis more upon assessment of one's life as a whole than upon patterns of current activity and interactions. Focus is more upon inner history than outer life. But societal obligations may have played a very important part of one's earlier life and might or might not continue to do so as one gets older. The question in one's final life review and assessment now becomes what weight to give obligations to others, in comparison to obligations to oneself.

5. Is the Personal or Social More Important in the Summing Up?

More precisely, as one nears the end of life, how far should a person become more concerned with issues of personal meaning than with any social expectations of what is appropriate for one's age? The issue here is often framed in terms of "integrity" or "authenticity"—thinking it over and deciding for oneself whether final evaluation of one's life should be in social or individual terms.

The great variety and power of social expectations as to behavior appropriate for persons in the final stage of life may give one pause, as one considers the possibility of putting the personal above the social in importance. The risk is taking too much and not "giving back" enough. Lapse into an isolated, stultifying, narcissistic self-absorption is a danger at any age, a social failure to repay the gifts bestowed by human culture in one's upbringing, education, and association with others.

But so is there a danger in failing to actualize whatever may be the potentially unique contribution to humankind of which one might be capable. Discovering that potential at various stages of one's life and living it out is an essential part of the human experiment in living. Identifying that lived or unlived potential in reflection upon one's life as the end approaches requires deliberate autobiographical reflection, honestly done, aimed at a perhaps painfully truthful final version of one's inner life history.

Whether that highly personal reflection could or should be informed by promptings of some "true" or "higher" self is an enormous issue in the philosophy of psychology. In bypassing the issue, I will simply say that a person who has long followed some rigorous "inner path" in search of

self-knowledge may have the best chance at accessing the creative potential available from whatever hidden inner self or sub-selves there might be.

Part Two: What Does it Mean to Sum Up One's Life?

In earlier years I've often wondered how old people could spend so much time just sitting quietly lost in thought. Are they simply reliving the past? Fondly recalling good times with family, friends, lovers, or comrades-in-arms, such as the "glory days" in a currently popular song? My own felt entry into the final stage of life suggests a more complicated project. Increasingly I find myself undergoing an intensive life review aimed at some sort of evaluation or summing up of my life.

But what should be the point of this summing up, to best conclude my life? How might one best go about this task, to prepare for approaching termination of that life history? In what terms does one best sum up a life history? And what form of inner autobiography might give fully intelligible narrative unity to the manifold and seemingly disparate events of one's entire life? What follows is one man's tentative attempt to answer these four questions. It comes from what I find myself grappling with. Again, I hope my thoughts may find some resonance with concerns of others pondering issues arising in the final stage of life.

1. What Should Be My Aim in a Final Summing Up?

What is the best aim in a closing assessment of one's life? While some persons might hope to conclude with relative satisfaction or a sense of fulfillment at "a life well lived," aim at peace of mind in one's final moments may not be a realistic goal for many others. Their lives may have involved so many infantile traumas,, painful or damaging childhood experiences, severe adolescent conflicts, adult disappointments, or unfulfilled wishes, dashed hopes, and other misfortunes of later life, that bitterness or unhappy memories threaten to overwhelm equanimity. And even those who feel fortunate or successful overall may find themselves sometimes unexpectedly undermined near life's end by bad memories, of things long forgotten or pushed out of mind, or by sudden awareness of missed chances.

One may not even have realized an earlier opportunity for growth or fulfillment for what it was, or may have responded inappropriately. There may be irony in finding the path to truth too late in life to live it fully. In such a case, one may at least try to point others toward the truth, by personal advice, lecturing, or writing a paper or book. One then might feel like a drowning man trying to throw life preservers to others, hardly a recipe for peace of mind.

More realistic than seeking peace of mind at life's close might be to aim at an understanding of self that is sufficient for the most graceful death permitted by bodily and mental decline, rather than being overtaken by an ugly death. There are cases in which a dying person's adult self seems to begin disintegrating in an ugly way. An earlier or more primitive self begins to emerge, full of past terrors, sharp suspicion, endless accusation, blame, rudeness, or other irrational anger at family or caregivers. Having witnessed such ugly declines, we may ourselves hope to avoid foisting such undeserved venom upon others when our own time comes. We may hope for a final exit more fully in self-possession. What that might mean and how to achieve such composure brings us to the central question of summing up one's life.

2A. How Might a Life Review Best Prepare One for Death and Dying?

In a way, we are asking now what might be the secular analogue of an inner life shaped by prayerful religious dialogue addressed to a deity. A religious life may well have brought some measure of inner composure helpful in bearing life's burdens. But if long faith in divine help has not met with a reassuring answer, one may feel an appalling emptiness (as in the personal writings of even a saintly Mother Teresa), which could undermine efficacy of prayer in facing life's final mystery.

Instead of prayer, secular persons instead have often relied on long practice of manly stoic virtue, of the gentlemanly sort made famous in Rudyard Kipling's famous poem "If." However, it is doubtful that trying to firm up "will power" or tighten up self-control is adequate to deal with the personal agonies evident in the throes of an "ugly death," as long-suppressed inner forces threaten to overwhelm the "stiff upper lip" of virtuous self-denial.

Instead, I believe, one needs to have been working for a long time on recognizing one's own "inner demons" and "working through" the earlier experiences which gave rise to the emerging destructive emotions which may now surface inappropriately in a much later, and now final, situation. One needs to have practiced a disciplined self-analysis sufficient to identify and properly "place" long-buried feelings in their situation of origin, with an understanding of why one was unable then to express the underlying emotions openly to significant others at the time. Such "inner work" can be devilishly difficult and is unlikely to succeed without wise guidance over time from someone who has already achieved some mastery of inner work on motivations, such as a psychoanalyst, psychotherapist, spiritual guide, wise relative, perceptive friend, or other insightful person.

In my opinion, the "inner path" most useful in this task is found in the twentieth-century tradition of Freudian psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, as developed in a newer practice I would describe as "insight-oriented bodywork." This newer discipline has origins in Gestalt psychotherapy and the "Bioenergetics" of psychiatrist Alexander Lowen. It was Lowen who recognized the importance of earlier work by Freud's follower Wilhelm Reich on the role of bodily "defensive armoring," in maintaining the "repression" of powerful instinctual wishes found too threatening to bear in family situations of infancy and early childhood. Covert continuation of these "unconscious wishes" they found, found expression in behavior of symptomatic of "neurosis" or "psychosis," skewing all subsequent development of the personality.

Where Freud sometimes speaks as though "repression" is a mental process in the head and curable by a "talking cure" in dialogue with an observant psychoanalyst over several years, Lowen realized that habitual muscular tensions in the face, throat, chest, abdomen, and pelvic region were in fact localized bodily symptoms expressive of the longstanding repressions also evident in neurotic social behavior. These inhibitions were of impulses or emotions associated with severe conflicts once felt too dangerous to express openly. Repression of the associated fears, rages, tears, and desires could only be undone by combining insightful recollection with apt bodily exercises to release the tensions. So Lowen developed a practice of "bioenergetic" bodywork therapy, carefully designed to unlock the muscular rigidities

enforcing bodily inhibition of the emotions aroused by underlying conflicts.

Now the underlying conflicts could be brought fully to consciousness and reassigned to places in the past where they really belonged, liberating current experience from distortion by ancient grievances. By thus "working through the repressed material," one would be freed to be fully alive "in the moment." Now one could respond to the present as a realistic adult and not as a prisoner of the long-ago past. In this way, insightful bodywork therapy would make of the life review a process of self-transformation. The individual would take possession earlier of what might otherwise emerge later in an ugly way, barring a graceful exit from the final stage of life. Reference here to different times of life brings up another important question, relating to the starting point of a final life review.

2B. With What Does a Final Life Review Best Begin?

One might think that a closing explication of a kind of cumulative feeling about one's entire life is the best way to go. But there may arise here an unfortunate tension between feeling and reason. There is always danger that the urgent feelings motivating a final life assessment might give too much weight to an unpleasant or depressing current situation. Moreover, some persons are too pessimistic, while others are too optimistic. The best corrective to such biases is deliberate continuation, at life's end, of a long-term habit of reflection upon one's unfolding life-history, which has continually tried to give proper weight both to feeling or emotion and to reasoned evaluation of one's own behavior and emotions.

Such reflection is rooted in something we all do: correct the mistakes or ineffective habits leading to bad experiences rather than good ones. The more one's analysis traces both the earlier origins and the subsequent consequences of behavior found dysfunctional, the more likely one is to discover the best ways to change it. As suggested earlier, such work entails coming to grips with irrational feelings or emotions distorting one's perception of oneself and others, preventing effective or moral response. It is better to meet the present on realistic terms, rather than see it through the warped lens of long-ago conflicts, especially at life's

end. Hence the importance of encouraging the young early to follow the long and difficult path of inner analysis, integrating psychodynamic insight into one's repressed motivations with bodywork designed to bring these muscular inhibitions into awareness. Discovering the underlying early conflicts, a person is now free to circumvent them, by inventing a more realistic and mature response.

3. In What Terms is an Effective Life Review Best Realized?

We cannot escape being shaped by our times, so reference to the social and cultural context of one's life is unavoidable and necessary in any complete inner autobiography. But commonplace categories such as virtues/vices, success/failure, victory/defeat, etc. drawn from current parlance, biography, or history are by themselves inadequate to capture the intertwining threads of both one's outer and one's inner life as well. By the same token, categories drawn solely from an account of one's familial conflicts and their hidden distortion of later personal relationships are by themselves inadequate to capture both response to, and participation in, the life of one's times. A narrow psychotherapeutic account by itself fails to capture fully the wider sociocultural forces both conditioning and interacting with the maturing person's individual path of development.

An interplay of terms from both these vocabularies, both outer and inner is both necessary and enlightening, as in Erik Erikson's psychoanalytic accounts of young Martin Luther or of Adolph Hitler. But in a final life review, something more is needed. One's own dawning sense of unlived lives or roads not taken, of relationships too shallow or incomplete, of personal development too scattered or too focused, and of opportunities not seen or untaken, suggest need to frame one's closing inner life story also in terms of hopes, dreams, and desires fulfilled or not, of inner potential understood and realized or not. For with greater self-understanding in the final stage of life comes the crucial question of whether one could have done otherwise for a better life, having been the person one was.

In some cases the question may well be whether one should have acted differently, in order to be happier. A particularly difficult problem here is weighing the satisfactions of behaving virtuously against the loss of

fulfillments foregone. To the ancient question of why virtue is deemed so good when its self-denials feel so bad, the timeless answer is to think about how much worse it could have been to do the wrong thing (cheat on one's spouse, for example, and perhaps destroy a marriage worth saving, disturbing the secure upbringing of children in a family setting). That rational assessment of "doing the right thing" may well temper pangs of regretful feeling at a tempting opportunity foregone. But of what cumulative use are such earlier exercises in self-knowledge, in attempting to sum up one's entire life in a way helpful in facing death and dying? The problem now is to find a form of inner narrative adequate to the task of enabling whatever degree of self-composure is realistic in time remaining at the close of life.

4. What Is the Best Form of Inner Life Story for a Graceful Death?

Everyone has a story to tell. But concerns about audience response often lead us to make up "official stories" to put ourselves in the best light, to get what we want. However, one's final story may never be told to others, nor need to. To be effective, the life story we tell ourselves in life's final stage needs simply to be the truth as best we see it, taking full account of all the things we tend to conceal from others, however shameful or discomforting. Only by acknowledging the darker side of one's own history, bringing it out of the shadows for conscious analysis and evaluation, can one have any chance of meeting one's end undivided. For it is the hidden parts of oneself, facing the very last chance for self-expression, which threaten outbursts that could make one's dying ugly, rather than graceful.

An honest and accurate "final" version of one's life history is more likely to enable an inner integrity of mind which is less likely to be thwarted by intrusion of long suppressed or repressed feelings or emotions, as one is overtaken by failure of the body. For those inhibitions are themselves bodily, habits of locking out of mind, and hence into one's musculature, very early feelings of anger, grief, or thwarted desire found too overwhelming to be faced consciously at that time. The best final narrative we could tell ourselves would thus have the form of a persistent struggle for inner freedom, against bad emotional habits stemming from infancy and childhood onwards. Those bad habits stem from buried conflicts which have warped later perception of others,

making us mistake the present for a past with which we have not come to grips. Bringing those conflicts to light is a lifelong project of trying to make the unconscious conscious, to free our choices from past influences tending to block realistic choice in the present.

An essential part of that psychotherapeutic realism is learning to see others as who they are, not in terms of our own hidden stereotypes from long ago conflicts of infancy and childhood. For this reason, I believe that psychoanalysis is essentially a process of moral discovery. By learning response to others with sensitivity to their own wishes, hopes and dreams, we find ourselves cultivating the mature moral imagination upon which genuine compassion may be founded. In beginning that practice, we find ourselves in accord with a central aim of all the world's great spiritual traditions: treating others as we ourselves would like to be treated. In learning to love others as we love ourselves, we may in return find greater fulfillment than in having to overcome the mistrust and anger aroused by trying to make them satisfy our own unacknowledged fantasies from long ago.

At the end of life, then, one might hope for an inner summing up neither swayed too much by final doubts and regrets, nor distorted by wishful thinking blind to truths inadequately faced. Only full acceptance of the inner truth about ourselves can allow one to meet death whole. With a realistic final life assessment, one might hope to die with self-possession and composure sufficient to avoid both unjust treatment of others and injustice to oneself. Discovering how my own unconscious habits of misperceiving have contributed to failed relationships and rebuffs by others, "I can see my soul ain't free, nobody's fault but my own," as the old spiritual has it. But by taking responsibility for the rebuffs, I am freed from need to blame others for my own shortcomings: I gain the freedom to "forgive and forget." Now I can avoid the unjust accusations that would make my dying ugly, rather than graceful. However, as we have seen, arriving at reflective self-knowledge of this sort is a very long and difficult task.

As Freud saw, freeing ourselves of unconscious forces distorting our behavior is a lifelong struggle, an "interminable analysis" which can become a way of life for those who value the inner freedom to see oneself and others realistically, and act accordingly. But such analysis

can always terminate sooner than one might expect. For we live in a world full of untimely death, whether from disease, accidents, killing, or war. Hence the life story one tells oneself today could always turn out to be the final edition. And thus, the sooner one begins down the practice of disciplined self-analysis, the longer the time to prepare for a good death.

Those of us fortunate to have discovered the importance of disciplined inner life review may wish to help others find that inner path, particularly those who are young enough to prepare well for what lies ahead. One way to help is by encouraging a wider and more open discussion about issues of death and dying, to overcome our culture's prevalent denial of death. Looking back on lessons learned too late, older persons might feel that "youth is wasted on the young." But it need not be so. Perhaps more candid dialogue about what lies ahead at the close of life can help bridge the perennial gap between young and old, helping them to see in us their own future selves.

The foregoing discussion is meant to stand on its own. But it springs from a view of both religion and psychotherapy so at odds with received views that I found it better to present it last, as a more speculative supplemental inquiry. My aim is simply to present the truth as I see it, hoping not to offend beliefs of others.

Part Three: Resurrection of the Body in This Life as a Moral Project

So powerful is the influence of Judeo-Christian tradition in shaping the modern West, that for secular moderns thought about death and dying usually begins in reflection upon and rejection of religious beliefs. I shall not recap here the long rear-guard struggle of religion against the inroads of Darwinism and of modern evolutionary biology, founded upon genetics. Rather, I focus upon what secular persons can learn from the success of religion in dealing with the strong feelings and deep emotions aroused by death and dying

Essential to Christian religious practice is the poetry and music of prayer. Repeated regularly in ritual and rite, prayer is embedded in the language of scriptural tradition. Concerned with the great mysteries of life, scripture evokes the joys and sorrows associated with human birth,

love, and death. Rehearsing these powerful emotions, prayer also repeats a familiar religious narrative of hope, framing these feelings in a reassuring way. Prayer thus provides a warm faith at odds with the cool skeptical reason of secular moderns.

Prayer works by offering entry into an active inner life of moral dialogue, bridging the gap between biblical divine examples or ethical lessons and the individual's personal experience of troubling moral dilemmas. From a secular viewpoint, however, any effectiveness of prayer does not come from favorable divine response. Rather, it comes from the personal composure afforded by inner exploration of emotional issues within a familiar framework of hopeful expectation. A positive approach is more likely to elicit help from others in solving one's problems.

The importance of inner dialogue was essential also to ancient Hellenic philosophic inquiries into the good life and the truly just society. That emphasis is evident as well in New Testament books written in Greek about Hebrew struggles against Roman iniquity. Suffice it to say here that a reflective inner life is an important inheritance of modern Western civilization from both biblical and philosophic traditions. But the twentieth century added a renewed secular focus upon inner dialogue, in the psychoanalytic writings of Sigmund Freud and the successive psychotherapeutic tradition.

Freud framed the inner moral struggle in biological terms, of a human organism struggling to maximize pleasure and minimize pain in a difficult world of environmental hardship and social restriction. He viewed organized religion as a collective delusion, serving as a mere palliative for the world's pains. Trained as a physician, Freud extolled instead the virtues of science and other work to improve the human condition. For that reason, religionists commonly revile Freud. They tend to see him only as substituting beastly concerns for divine injunctions.

But I believe that Freudian psychology and its successor bodywork psychotherapies actually open up an inner pathway of secular salvation surprisingly consistent with moral teachings of the New Testament, as suggested previously. Freudian inwardness can point a morally

corrective way to right relations with others, seeing them as free beings not subject to one's infantile fantasies. One becomes aware in present interactions of distorting influences from the past, thus freed for more adult response respectful of others' concerns. At the same time, the Freudian inner path offers hope of a wholeness of self that can enable one to face death's oblivion free of anguished disturbance by unacknowledged parts of oneself desperate for one final chance of expression before the close of life. One's dying could then be graceful, not ugly.

That inner path, of persistent disciplined inner analysis, is one many secular moderns have followed. I have long tried to follow the path of Freudian inner analysis myself, though with only partial success. I discovered too late in life my need for insight-oriented psychoanalytic bodywork. Nevertheless, I see that kind of therapy as the only real path to follow in preparation for a courageous acceptance of death and dying which might offer possibility of a graceful exit from this world. But to render these views more fully plausible, I will have to offer a somewhat radical view of traditional religious orthodoxy on resurrection and reincarnation. At the same time, I will try to explain more fully an unorthodox reinterpretation of psychotherapeutic practice as in essence a moral enterprise.

1. Not a Real Afterlife, but Spiritual Rebirth in This Life

As noted earlier, notions of bodily reincarnation or resurrection are important in great religions of the East and West, such as Hinduism and Christianity. I find such beliefs mistaken for four main reasons.

First, it is arguable that persons who claim to have survived death and returned from some afterlife were never dead to begin with, any more than those who awaken from coma, catalepsy, or sound dreamless sleep. Persons reporting "near-death experiences" were simply that—near death, but not truly dead. Visions of moving into light during such experiences may be mistaken as evidence of entry of a separable "Ego" leaving the body for entry into some numinous spiritual realm apart from material existence. From a naturalistic Freudian perspective, such experiences might better be explained as powerfully wishful recovery of a primal memory of entry into light at one's actual birth, not by rebirth

after death as a disembodied Ego. There is, instead, a desperate primordial recall saying in effect, "I'm not ready to die yet, let me go back to the womb and be born again to live life over." What the recovering person later remembers as recent is actually that very earliest experience of life, being born—or possibly awakening to light for the first time after birth. (My Freudian view here is in principle testable, though with great difficulty: how sure can we be from newborn sensitivity tests or "hypnotic regression techniques" about what the newborn really experienced visually and with proprioception, at that earliest time of experiencing worldly light? That aside, the main point remains: every seeing person has undergone being moved into earthly light at birth; but no truly dead person could return to report light from some afterlife unavailable to ordinary perception.)

Secondly, as argued earlier, "altered states of mind" (from drugs, frenzy, exhaustion, epileptic seizure, etc.) are just that—abnormal states. Even ordinary dreams can be explained in terms of earlier experience. As adults, we may be surprised by how small the nursery room of our infancy now looks. So the dream of being alone "in an enormous room" may simply be a form of nighttime recollection, perhaps of a terrifying infantile memory now resonating with some present waking fear of isolation, from which one wishes escape. Continuation of the dream might suggest some way to fulfill that wish. (The dream image is from a work by psychiatrist Robert Lindner.)

Thirdly, it is clear that the original function of formal religions' doctrines of an afterlife is simply giving sanction to, or "putting teeth in," the public moralities promulgated by these faiths to the masses, for needed social stability in this life. The believer's fear of a bad afterlife as a consequence of wrongdoing in this life can be a stern motive to good behavior while alive.

Fourth, and finally, I think that religious rituals founded upon beliefs in some literal rebirth after death conceal, perhaps deliberately, earlier private initiatory disciplines of spiritual rebirth in this life, which secretly underlie these later public faiths. One example, described by contemporary philosopher-mystic Peter Kingsley, is the ancient priestly technique of inducing transformational dreams of known divinities in an initiatory candidate by lengthy immersion in trance or "incubation,"

in the tomb-like stillness of an underground temple room or cave. Convinced of "dying before dying," the initiate would emerge from trance believing in rebirth as one gifted with occult powers, from induction into a spiritual "underworld." The priestly few might well view such an esoteric initiatory path as too difficult or time-consuming for the many to pursue. A simpler public initiation of organized rites, rituals, and prescribed prayer might better meet priestly need for mass inculcation of everyday moral norms, by which to maintain public order.

2. Resurrection of the Body in This Life

In Hinduism, "good karma" may lead to reincarnations at successively higher stages of being, and eventual freedom from the cycle of deaths and rebirths. Christianity envisions heavenly reward or hellish punishment after death, with eventual resurrection of the body for those God judges worthy of heaven. While giving hope to the masses of reward for a life of good behavior, such beliefs fundamentally misrepresent bodily rebirth as something occurring after death, after being "born again" spiritually here on Earth. As I see it, the two ideas should not be distinguished: true spiritual rebirth entails a resurrection of one's bodily life right here on Earth, not a "life after death" in some divinely mysterious "hereafter."

I think we need to distinguish carefully between two very different ideas of "being born again," well known to those whose Sunday religious services bemoan mere "Sunday Christianity." Truly "being born again" would go far beyond the momentary enthusiasm of accepting need for salvation and vowing to change one's sinful ways by attending a church regularly. It might indeed also require sincere, unending, and prayerful long effort to bring one's everyday behavior into continuing conformity with biblical morality. But outward conformity alone is always subject to backsliding, in a struggle against "temptation to sin." Preparers of sermons often recognize the need for some deeper "change of heart," putting truly religious inwardness at the very center of one's being. Unfortunately, sermons and communal support of prayerful practice are most likely not up to the task, due to a nearly insurmountable obstacle within Christian doctrine itself: an underlying soul-body dualism, rooted in, and unfortunately reinforcing, distrust and disparagement of the bodily life.

Talk alone, however sincere or prayerful, will not suffice for true spiritual rebirth. Only an insightful procedure respectful of the body's centrality in the child's acquiring of morality and the adult's changing of immoral behavior will suffice. I refer here to the practice of insight-oriented bodywork therapy described earlier. Sadly, few religious leaders seem to recognize the problem, or have the disposition to overcome doctrinal deficiencies by introducing church members to insight-oriented bodywork. Nor do they have the time, for the practice is best suited to small groups at most, and the therapist/ learner dyad at best.

As with ancient religions, modern faiths also end up maintaining a split between group ritual for the many and esoteric practice of therapeutic initiation for the few. The leader of public religious services may have to double as personal counselor, offering short-term psychotherapy for only the most troubled church members. It remains to be seen whether institutional religious reform or mass media presentations on spiritual psychotherapy could narrow this gap between sermons for the many and personal insight for the few.

Though the problem of spiritual rebirth derives from religious tradition, I believe it is a problem that runs all through our culture. Doing, not being, is at the heart of modern western culture: exploration, discovery, colonization, commerce, invention, manufacturing, and conquering take precedence in our history, and continue to do so. Like religion, however, the tradition of modern psychotherapy begins with activity and moves toward questions of being. For inquiry into motivation raises questions of what kind of people we are, and may become—as does religion. (One finds the conflict between being and doing playing out most noticeably in higher education. It is reflected in a recurrent struggle between liberal and professional education, general and vocational and "career" education, between preparation for an inner life and citizenship, and preparation for employment.)

3. The Nature of True Spiritual Rebirth

Building upon earlier discussion, I will try to show more clearly how true spiritual rebirth may occur in psychotherapy without religious aim,

but also that the very practice of psychotherapy yet accords with central spiritual aims of traditional western religion. To see how this could be so, we must consider the psychological basis of morality in habits of bodily behavior first acquired in infancy and childhood.

In doing so, is essential to understand that by "bodily habits" or "bodily behavior," I do not mean merely simple visible activities of the limbs, like tying shoes, brushing teeth, or throwing a ball. Not all habits are simple. Some are very complex. The infant or child's activity of perceiving an adult in emotional terms, as friendly or threatening, and responding with a welcoming reach or a shrinking away in fear, is also bodily behavior; and, as a repeated response to the same emotionally constituted perceptual stimulus, can become habitual, a very complex "habit." And first habits become the foundation for all later ones.

When Mother is the First Woman and Father the First Man for an infant, obviously the way they typically approach and handle or mishandle their baby can form infantile habits of expectation crucial in shaping subsequent experience and development. This is especially true as the infant begins to perceive relations between the parents, and between its developing self and each parent. One need only think here about Freud's famous analysis of the boy's "Oedipus Complex" ("Electra Complex" for girls) to realize how crucial the child's unremembered success or failure in dealing with first jealousies and rebuffs can be, as a habitual influence on all subsequent relationships even into adult life.

One sees in the Oedipal situation some of the child's very earliest learning about moral response to the marital relationship. Normally from fear of his bigger competitor, the boy gives up desires to have Mama all to himself, identifies with Daddy, and decides to wait until adulthood and get his own wife. But failure to resolve "the Family Romance" this way may lead a boy grown to manhood to perceive an older couple in oedipal terms unconsciously. He may then repeat in an inappropriate way the competitive jealousy repressed in that earliest "love triangle," when he lost Mama to Daddy but was afraid to express openly his frustrated wishes for her and anger at him. Barging in on the marriage of two others, he may now discover, leads to all the morally ugly consequences of adultery so often explored in popular literature, film, and TV.

Let us now apply this understanding of early moral habit formation to the problem of spiritual rebirth. As I see it, "being born again" spiritually requires replacing old habits of wrong living with new habits of living rightly in this life, not resurrection in some mythical "afterlife." And bad moral habits are not merely wrong ideas "in the head." As we have seen, they are built into complex bodily habits of perceiving and responding emotionally to other people. Changing these habits means literally resurrecting the body in this life, through a lifetime of painstaking daily effort to restructure even one's very earliest patterns of perception, thought, and emotional interaction with others. It is like trying to get back to the "innocence" we had as infants, before we had acquired bad habits, in order to start over, now that we know better as adults. Perhaps the Christian injunction to "become ye as little children" might be understood this way, esoterically. Except on my view, entering the kingdom of heaven (or of hell) could not occur in another life after death. So obviously my existentialist view of spiritual rebirth, as occurring in this life or not at all, will need to consider appropriate reinterpretations of heaven and hell in similarly mundane terms.

But first we must ask from whence may come the fundamental distinction between "good" and "bad" habits, if not from traditional religious authority. I think that what makes some moral habits bad is their destructive effect upon others and upon one's own life. What these bad habits (and the repeated acts which constitute them) have in common is failing to see and treat the other person as having values, wishes, hopes, and dreams as important to them as ours are to ourselves. In more familiar Christian terms, we fail to love others as we would love ourselves, or fail to do unto them as we would have done to us.

The resultant misunderstandings and hurts generate anger and resentment, undermining the possibility of harmonious relationships upon which the very fabric of society depends—mutual benefit, cooperation, and unselfish love. It is participation in civilized society alone that can ensure each person's best opportunity to survive, fully develop human potential, and flourish. To live the good life, or be happy, we need "a little help from our friends," who themselves want the same thing. By failing to love others rightly, not recognizing the

importance to them of their own inner life and choices, we thereby generate our own suffering: their anger and resultant lack of mutuality toward us. Our lives may then become hellish, rather than heavenly. With the Existentialists (as in Sartre's play "No Exit"), I believe that the true heavens and hells, the only ones worth worrying about, are the ones we make right here on Earth, through our choices in daily life.

These everyday choices are not solitary spontaneous acts unanchored from past history. They emerge from shared sociocultural habits, ranging from family child-raising habits to schooling, and other "acculturation," even the widespread routines of economic and political behavior we call "institutional." An institution is simply an ingrained and widely shared set of social habits. Hence seemingly individual bad habits may in fact result from cultural practices acquired unawares from infancy onward, through parental upbringing and adult example as one grows up. The wider culture and its subcultures (ethnic, familial, religious, educational, generational, etc.) thus play a crucial role in shaping each individual's behavior toward acquisition of moral habits both good and bad, both virtues and vices.

One example may suffice. The "cult of efficiency" in early twentieth century industrial America found intellectual expression in the behavioristic philosophy of John Watson. Stressing control of behavior through "schedules of reinforcement," Watson's baby books told mothers who wished to be "scientific" not to give affection or feeding on demand, but to follow rigid scheduling which deferred gratification. The ultimate aim was to produce adults ready to live by industrial or military schedules and agendas set by those in power. Such upbringing may have produced obedient labor ready to work or serve long hours for acquisition of distant rewards, but grim and rigid lives run on duty were not necessarily compassionate, tolerant, and happy. Later baby books by Dr. Benjamin Spock and others advocated a more permissive approach aimed at preparation of emotionally secure adults more able to love, share, and enjoy the whole of life, as well as do society's work.

From this example we see how growing up in communities of others similarly influenced, the general trend of our own basic moral habits may be widespread, despite the idiosyncrasies of individual life and upbringing. Growing up amidst a society of others, generations may

share a tendency toward various bad moral habits, such as overemphasis upon aggressive competition at the expense of mutuality and cooperation. In the worst case we then get pervasive injustice at home and wars abroad. Institutionalized, readiness for war becomes the "garrison state," with an economy dominated by a military-industrial complex eager to profit from war. And as General Sherman said, "War is hell."

It follows that, ultimately, the hellish or heavenly meaning of one's own life cannot be assessed apart from awareness of the historical trends present in the society, culture and civilization within which one lives. Recognition of this fact is, of course, essential to the literary genre of biography, about "the life and times" of its subjects. Because our times are increasingly war times, costly in unnecessarily squandered lives and economic potential, our own lives cannot escape the hellish cast of the militaristic history that defines our era.

To sum up, the spiritual problem is always a failure of moral imagination, whether individual or social. Rather than learning to see other persons or cultures as centers of free individuality worthy of respect and mutuality, we may have acquired bad habits of treating them only as means or blockages to our own self-centered ends. All too often we try to overpower others, outsmart, or manipulate them, rather than cooperate with them. To that extent, persons or nations tend to become power seekers, not respecters of freedom: self-centered rather than compassionate, greedy rather than sharing, seeking dominance rather than mutual benefit. The personal moral cost is a hellish life of botched loves, foregone friendships, or other relationships needlessly destroyed, by ingrained habits of selfish misperception and response that may date back to childhood or infancy. One might easily find ready parallels for disturbed global relations between nations with different histories.

On a personal level, the only way out of our own private hells is to find some inner path offering guidance to help remake the moral habits that we literally embody in daily interactions and transactions with other people. In short, what we need to work at is spiritual resurrection of the body in this life, through dedication to an insight-oriented bodywork therapy of the kind described earlier. Unfortunately, what religious

sermon or moral exhortation often misses is how deeply buried, in earliest infancy and childhood, are the formative experiences that make our moral habits so deeply resistant to change. The continuing strong influence of that largely unremembered upbringing helps to explain why we keep making the same mistakes over and over so long, hurting others and hence ourselves, by their resentful rebuffs of our misunderstandings of them. And of course they make the same mistakes with us, providing rich possibilities for mutual misunderstanding.

Properly understood, I believe, the esoteric side of all the world's great religions, from Christian mysticism to Islamic Sufism to Zen Buddhism, is essentially engaged in some kind of inner work that we moderns would regard as some form of psychotherapeutic insight. As I have argued, psychotherapy is inescapably a moral enterprise, insofar as it requires us to examine critically and abandon some of our earliest and most deeply embedded beliefs about right relationship to others, unconscious habits arising in infancy and childhood. As adults far from childhood, we do not easily recall, and hence may not stop to reflect upon, how powerfully our very earliest interactions with those who raised us may have set up a faulty moral pattern for all our later social expectations, perceptions, and responses.

As Freud noted, every adult feeling has a history—a long history extending back through childhood, infancy and perhaps sometimes into the womb itself. How better can we explain the universal appeal of cultural myths about the passing of a "Golden Age," or of expulsion from a nurturing garden, wherein we were at one with all around us; to seek ever after, in the arms of another person, the loving gaze and smile of our earliest protective caregiver, with again the bliss of two hearts beating as one; and later on the assurance that a godlike being is still watching over and caring for us, as happened so long ago in the seemingly endless period of our own infantile helplessness? Freud found it difficult to believe that such experience, typical in the long infantile dependency of newborns in the human species, would not later find mass echoes in mass cravings, by adults weary of lost loves and life's hardships, for solace by religions promising the eternal gift of undying divine love.