Death Makes Life Possible

*bridging* consciousness, science, and spirit

Lisa Reagan interviews Marilyn Mandal Schlitz, PhD, and Deepak Chopra, MD on their new documentary film and book
Emboldened by radical Renaissance insights after centuries of violent enforcement of religious control of human thought and beliefs, in 1603, Shakespeare’s Hamlet pondered his mortality, “to be or not to be,” and in open defiance of the clearly defined territory of medieval Christian doctrine, declared death to be an as yet, “ undiscovered country.”

Four centuries later, the deal-brokered split of human consciousness between church hierarchy and scientists into internal and external, disconnected worlds has spawned industrial systems so out of balance and unsustainable, human civilization and planetary ecology built around these systems now face increasing and dramatic degradation.

“Had he lived today, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, would confirm with deeper conviction than ever: To be or not to be is indeed the question,” writes Ervin Laszlo, PhD, in Quantum Shift in the Global Brain. “It is not the skull of an individual human being that Hamlet would ponder, but this living blue-green planet, the home of humanity... The question [now] is: Evolution or extinction?”

It is this ancient splintering of human consciousness, and the modern world it has spawned, that researchers at the Institute of Noetic Sciences, IONS, have explored for the past 40 years. According to Marilyn Mandala Schlitz, PhD, immediate past president and CEO of IONS and now global ambassador and senior scientist, noetic science is “a bridge between the subjective and objective that is grounded in discipline, in that we want to understand with validity—what is the great mystery we’re all participating in?”

In IONS’ new documentary film, Death Makes Life Possible, Schlitz unveils center stage the overwhelming accumulation of science that shatters the Western cultural belief in the unknowable finality of death and, instead, points to the evidence of life as a continuum of consciousness, with birth and death functioning as entry and exit points to a brief human drama.

In bridging outer scientific revelations with inner spiritual wisdom, Deepak Chopra, MD, joins Schlitz as a co-producer of the film. Chopra, a pioneering mind-body physician and founder of the Chopra Center for Wellbeing, has written more than 65 books with 19 New York Times bestsellers. Chopra says that he is “confident this movie will change your perception of death and ultimately, your experience of death.”

The film is particularly timely, not only because of the imperative global sustainability discussion it could inspire, but because of the very real crises faced by the world’s aging population. According to the book, An Aging World, the number of people worldwide 65 and older was estimated at 506 million and is estimated to hit 1.3 billion by the year 2040. Beginning in January 2011, more than 10,000 Baby Boomers reached the age of 65 every single day (US Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration on Aging). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report, released in October 2012, stated US deaths per year surpassed 2.5 million for the first time in 2011.

“Death is not the opposite of life. Death is the opposite of birth. Life is the continuum of birth and death.”

– DEEPAK CHOPRA, MD

Death Makes Life Possible seeks to connect viewers to universal questions and to their own perspectives on the ultimate meaning of life, death, and what lies beyond. The film moves seamlessly between personal stories of near-death and out-of-body experiences and expert interviews with mental health professional on the practical task of living without fear of death. More than two dozen thinkers, researchers, and scientists, including Rupert Sheldrake, Bruce Greyson, Stuart Hameroff, and Rick Hanson, share how they are seeking evidence for the soul.

As IONS’ website states, “This film makes the case that we have much to gain by facing our fear of death and asking what death might have to offer our lives. Death Makes Life Possible is a must-see for anyone who’s going to die.” With such a broad audience to reach (everyone), LILIPOH sat down with Schlitz and Chopra for separate interviews about the film and their integrative collaboration.

In an email exchange, Chopra, who created the film’s title, explained its meaning: “Without death, there can be no present moment, for the last moment has to die to make the next one possible. There can be no present love, for the last emotion has to die to make a new one possible. There can be no present life, for the old cells in my body have to die to make new tissue.
possible. This is the miracle of creation, which in every second is one thing: life and death joined in an eternal dance. Without death, that would guarantee a universe with no chance for renewal. Fortunately, creation wasn’t set up that way. We live in an endlessly re-created universe.

“On the other side of our fears and doubts, our deepest prayer should not be for life, which we have in abundance. It should be a prayer to lead the cosmic dance, for then the angels and gods themselves will have someone to follow.”

In his book, *Life After Death: The Burden of Proof*, Chopra scoffs at the idea of science’s ability to truly explore the dimensions of death. “Science is still burdened by spiritual materialism, the belief that any explanation of god, the soul, or the afterlife is valid only if matter contains the secret. This is like saying we can’t understand jazz until we diagram the atoms in Louis Armstrong’s trumpet.”

However, according to Schlitz, it is the current “Spiritual Renaissance” in the West that is ushering in a desire for understanding death. And, she says, “It is at the meeting place of science and spiritual wisdom traditions that we are discovering a new paradigm of reality and what it means to be fully human. We are discovering that simply contemplating death can make us happier, healthier, and better citizens... as we confront our mortality, we are midwifing the difficult birth of a multidimensional transformation—physical, spiritual, psychological, social, and ecological.”

**Lisa Regan:** What inspired the making of, and then the title of the movie?

**Marilyn Schlitz:** As you point out with the *Hamlet* quote, this is not a new conversation that we are having around death and what comes later. What is the possible model that each of us holds that gives us some sense of the possible, the mystery, the undiscovered country—a beautiful metaphor. The movie explores the mystery of death. How do different cultures hold it? How do different religions and spiritual world views hold this idea of death? Why do we die? And what comes next, if anything?

We spend some time in the film examining the shared, perennial qualities of diverse, and often conflicting, faith traditions and world views before moving into the science. What does science have to say about the evolutionary nature of death? Death does make life possible. We need death in order to maintain that great cycle of life.

**Lisa Regan:** What has science shown about life, or the continuum of consciousness, beyond death?

**Marilyn Schlitz:** We talked to scientists about the possibility that *something* survives bodily death: a soul, an identity, some kind of journey. Yesterday [in October 2012] at the Earthrise Retreat Center at the Institute of Noetic Sciences, I had the privilege of meeting with Incan Indians from Peru who live up in the Highlands. They believe themselves to be the direct inheritors of a lineage that was largely eradicated when the Conquistadors came—so again, going back to our historical references, different continent, but equally interesting. So, for about 500 years, they went and hid in the mountains and it is only within the last few years that they have started to come out and to engage modernity with messages from their cultural understanding.

I talked with them about death and then, that evening, went to an art exhibit where my town in California is celebrating the tradition of the Day of the Dead, which is a practice that takes over for a month. The Day of the Dead honors the dead as a parallel life. It was interesting to me that these Indians, who are carrying a heritage 500 years away from direct communication with their descendants, have the seeds of the same model, the same cosmology or worldview as the Day of the Dead ceremonies.

So, there is this very rich continuity between the living and the people who pass over, and there is the belief that there is communication. There is no separation. We find this in a lot of different traditions, that there is an active relationship between our departed loved ones and the way in which we carry on our lives.

**Lisa Regan:** How does one study consciousness beyond death?

**Marilyn Schlitz:** We talk to our scientists at the Institute of Noetic Sciences, like Dean Radin, who have conducted studies on the psycho-physiology of mediums who claim to communicate with the departed and what is happening

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“*We need death in order to maintain that great cycle of life.*”

—**Marilyn Mandala Schlitz, PhD**
in their brains and bodies when they are having these experiences. We present this information in the film, as well as case reports on reincarnation that show threads of evidence that some kind of identity can survive bodily death.

So, these are very interesting mysteries, and remain mysteries, but science is now attempting to explore them.

Lisa Regan: How does the idea that death makes life possible trumpet a radical departure from our current, dominant worldview of death?

Marilyn Schlitz: Being with these Incas yesterday, and hearing you talk about Renaissance thinking, we have, in civilization, lived through many changes in our paradigm, in our worldview, moving from a strictly mechanist model, the Newtonian cause and effect model, to now something that is very much informed by quantum physics, by interconnectedness and acausal relationships. That is the result of a transformation and a paradigm shift. What we have today is the opportunity to be more mindful of that revolution than ever before. Because we have the mass communications; we have conversations like we are having right now.

We are bringing awareness to the fact that we are living in a time of revolution. It is a revolution in thought and in the understanding of who we are and what we are capable of becoming. We’re seeing the strict dependence on religious dogma being questioned. There is a sense that something new is being born. And one of the topics that comes up is consciousness and what do we mean by consciousness.

Consciousness is a huge mystery, and we are only just now taking it seriously as a science, and that science still needs to mature a little bit because it wants to reduce everything to the brain. Science is very influenced by the dominant paradigm of materialism, but it is now being informed by spiritual insights. One of the extraordinary things of our times is that never before have so many ways of approaching reality come into contact.

There is a changing perspective about our consciousness and our interconnectedness, and we are caught in the middle of that paradigm shift. It’s not entirely clear where it is going. But where we go in the movie and the book is the notion of a new story.

We have all the beauty that comes from these wisdom traditions, and the insights and the practices and the cultivation of a lifestyle that comes from those traditions. We have the opportunity to look at what is true for us individually through the Western, scientific, critical thinking approach, and that is beautiful too.

Watching these worldviews come together, and then listening to Stuart Hameroff (author of the Quantum Soul) speak in the film about how our souls mirror principles of the quantum universe, we can see how what people practiced and believed thousands of years ago is finding legitimacy in theoretical physics experiments.

It is very exciting to grapple with these ideas, but as you say, it is also very timely as it is not only the US population that is aging, but it is a global phenomenon. There is a call and hunger for meaning amongst people who want to understand, to have coping skills, and to be able to have conversations across worldviews in families that invite in healing.

Lisa Regan: What do we need to understand about coming to terms with our own mortality?

Marilyn Schlitz: The denial impulse doesn’t work. It really leaves a lot of crap behind for other people. It is true, literally,
that if we don’t clean out our closet, someone else is going to have to do it, but it is also true at the broader, metaphorical level of our global community and what happens if we don’t take responsibility for those seven generations coming after us. If we don’t feel the continuity line with them, then we don’t have that sense of responsibility to take care of the planet, to take care of the institutions that are going to support our families into the future.

I think the issue of pondering consciousness, pondering the potential survival of consciousness after bodily death, really addressing our own perceptions and beliefs around death and what happens when we die can be a great liberator. It can help us to facilitate that paradigm shift into something that is more compassionate and sustainable for all of us.

**Lisa Regan**: What do you say to people who may think they are being asked to question their religious or spiritual beliefs?

**Marilyn Schlitz**: The film is pointing to the opposite intention, for people to go deeper into their religious practices and spiritual beliefs. According to the science and consciousness research, it is our beliefs now that determine what we find after death.

In the film’s trailer, Schlitz notes that while, “We celebrate the introduction of new life to the world, we’re often faced with fear when it comes to the end of our lives. How do we begin to change that story? How do we begin to think about, not the suffering and the fear that we face when we die, but really the possibilities that come when we embrace impermanence?”

It is Chopra who integrates the science through spiritual wisdom and reveals the unfolding of a new story of human experience as a seamless and continuous whole. Chopra shared these responses with LILIPOH’s readers:

**Lisa Regan**: How does acknowledging our common nature—everyone dies—move us toward personal happiness and health?

**Deepak Chopra**: When a soul has completely worked out all its karma, it loses all earthly desires. It has transcended all material objects and attachments to become enlightened. There is not a need to be reborn onto the physical or astral planes as we know them. This soul continues to spiral upwards to continue its evolution on planes we cannot imagine. We are reborn to express and exhaust the force of desire. In the absence of rebirth, the soul moves to higher and higher realms of existence, to an infinity of them that is beyond the scope of our imagination or understanding. As Rumi says, “When I die, I will soar with angels, and when I die to the angels, what I will become, you cannot imagine.”

**Lisa Regan**: You have said, death is not the opposite of life, but the opposite of birth. How does this understanding evolve our personal and collective consciousness?

**Deepak Chopra**: The human spirit is degraded when we confine ourselves to the span of a lifetime and the enclosure of a physical body. We are mind and spirit first, and that places our home beyond the stars.

Knowing that I will return to the field one day to find my source provides me with immeasurable confidence in the purpose of life. As fervently as any devout believer, I have faith in this vision. My faith is renewed every time I have a moment of witnessing, in which I can touch the silence of my own being. Then I lose all fear of death—indeed, I touch death right now, and gladly. Tagore said it so movingly:

When I was born and saw the light
I was no stranger in this world
Something inscrutable, shapeless, and without words
Appeared in the form of my mother.

So when I die, the same unknown will appear again
As ever known to me,
And because I love this life
I will love death as well.

*For more information on Death Makes Life Possible and its 2013 release dates for the film and book, visit noetic.org/deathmakeslifepossible/home.*

**Lisa Reagan** has been a passionate and committed advocate, journalist and community organizer for cultural creative families since she looked into the eyes of her newborn son 15 years ago. Lisa is a co-founder of the national 501c3, educational nonprofit, Families for Conscious Living and editor of the online conscious living magazine, *Kindred*. She served as the Institute of Noetic Sciences’ writer-in-residence in fall 2012. [www.kindredcommunity.org](http://www.kindredcommunity.org)