Can Understanding Death Change How We Live Our Lives?

The idea of healing the fears that we have around death led me to collect stories and interviews with scientists, with people from different cultural and religious traditions, as well as atheists and skeptics. How do we begin to awaken to the inevitability of our own mortality? **BY MARILYN SCHLITZ, PH.D.**

PETALUMA PICTURES

The Death Makes Life Possible Project

THIS PROJECT ORIGINATED before I can even remember, when I was a precocious, inquisitive, pink-jammied eighteen-month-old. At that time, exploring my environment, I did what toddlers do: I put things in my mouth. It happened to be a bottle of lighter fluid that my father had left on the table, and it sent me into three months in and out of intensive care. I think during that time there were some seeds planted: wanting to understand healing, consciousness, the impervious nature of living and dying. As a little child, holding on at some level to her physicality, at the same time I was dipping in and out of that state. This and other circumstances in my life catalyzed my curiosity and led me on an odyssey around consciousness, exploring the furthest reaches of our human capacities.

I gave my first lecture on the topic of possible survival of consciousness after bodily death back in 1979 at the Rhine Center in Durham, North Carolina. My talk included scientific inquiries into what happens after we die, what is the nature of the soul, and is consciousness something more than the brain? People at the Rhine Center were interested in how to bring an evidence-based perspective to these perennial questions that are part of every religious and spiritual community. These questions had only marginally been addressed by science in a formal way, so that captivated my interest. Over the years I started collecting interviews for diverse projects—some on healing, some on transformation—and in the process I learned a lot more about our views toward and relationships with death worldwide. It is ultimately the big transformation that we are all aware of and we all participate in.

The idea of healing the fears that we have around death led me to collect stories and interviews with scientists, with people from different cultural and religious traditions, as well as atheists and skeptics. In the newly released film, *Death Makes Life Possible,* we have perspectives from Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity all represented. We also hear from a man who was given a terminal diagnosis and tells about his experiences, which is very inspiring and also very heart wrenching.

About three years ago I was helping a friend, Deepak Chopra, at a time when his colleague, David Simons, had been diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. Deepak was teaching some workshops and I did some teaching with him, kind of on the fly, so that he didn't have to carry it all.

During that time I showed a video of interviews about death, about twenty minutes long, to the group that had come to his seminar in Sedona. Afterwards he told me, "You know what? We should make a movie." And who wouldn't want to make a movie with Deepak Chopra? That night when I went to bed I was overwhelmed with the thought that I could not possibly take on the production of a feature documentary. The fundraising alone was daunting. I woke up in the morning and thought, "you've just got to tell him no." We met for lunch and he said, "Marilyn, you must not worry about the money." Through a Kickstarter campaign and other donations, we raised a significant amount of funds, enough to make it happen up to this point, and it has manifested something that I think is really beautiful.

Exploring Consciousness

THERE ARE SO MANY different ways to think about the topic of consciousness, the nature of our direct experiences, glimpses of insights that aren't part of the standard physical-materialistic worldview. From a scientific point of view there have been attempts to document case histories of things like out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, reincarnation. There is a very rich body of research, done at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, where they have collected many cases evidential of reincarnation, including children born with birthmarks that seem to correlate with the cause of death of the person they are remembering. That provides another level of objective evidence to support the hypothesis that consciousness can survive bodily death. Researchers at the lab at the Institute of Noetic Sciences have been looking at what happens in the brains of mediums who believe they are communicating with the departed.

In *Death Makes Life Possible*, both the film and the upcoming book, we are trying to dispel some of the fears people in our culture have around death, to understand our own views, especially the fears, beliefs, opinions and emotions that lie below the threshold of conscious awareness. How do we begin to awaken to the inevitability of our own mortality? I think one of the critical factors for many—and why they are so fearful—comes from uncertainty. We are all co-existing, using the same supermarkets, going to the same schools and hospitals, yet each of us carries a different little bubble of beliefs and worldviews around with us. And I find that really fascinating.

One of the things that we are discovering through science, the wisdom traditions and spiritual/religious traditions, is this idea of interconnectedness. Western science has been very objectively oriented: the only

valid form of truth is that which can be manipulated, measured, somehow touched or physically represented. What we are starting to see through quantum physics and information biology is that non-local consciousness provides data points for an emerging new paradigm. I think all of this research offers us a new kind of map or model as we are facing our own mortality. It begins to empower all of us every day. So I think of it as a practical application of consciousness science.

In traditions where they don't have the sense of separation, where death is not considered so finite, people have a much more permeable relationship with the departed. On the Day of the Dead, *Día de Muertos*, in the Mexican community, they believe that the membrane between the living and the dead is thinner, so spirits come in and there is a lot of celebration, communication and appeasement. In the film I also interview Lauren Artress at the Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, who introduced the labyrinth to America. She talked about the stages of grief and how one can process them in the labyrinth where there is a natural cycle of beginning, middle and end. We can walk a labyrinth in a meditative way, asking a particular question, describing a certain experience, connecting, praying in whatever form, and it can be very therapeutic. I think that the world's traditions offer us a lot of tools that we forget when we are in the middle of our own crisis. Dreams are also a very potent way for people to stay connected with their loved ones.

Visioning Global Transformation

The boomers are coming of age and returning to their spiritual or religious origins, or exploring new forms of spirituality that connect us with something bigger than ourselves. The catalyst for transformation is often crisis. An event like the bombing of the World Trade Center was beyond comprehension, yet it opened people to breakthroughs that in the research on consciousness we call transformation. A trauma or crisis or something that shakes us out of our steady state propels us to ask new questions, think in new ways or shut down and not want to deal with it at all. Maybe we've been stuck in certain things that do not work for us or for others any more.

I see three things that are preparing us for transformation: the demographic change, crisis as a catalyst, and the merging of different worldviews. Everything is accelerating and contact with alternative points of view is available to us in ways that were never there before. Through the internet and through global travel we have access, on a routine basis, to folks who live or experience the world in very diverse ways. A fourth factor in this global transformation is that those from the boomer generation, who were influenced in the sixties and seventies and beyond, are coming into positions of power. Those who began decades ago exploring interiority, contemplative practice and meditation, now have positions that allow them to set certain agendas. I am seeing colleagues in the areas of healthcare who are really interested in mindfulness practices and understanding the extended reaches of consciousness, and they are bringing this into mainstream medicine. The leadership is shifting and the value system of that leadership can ultimately be very, very powerful. But we still have a long way to go.

Publications like *Light of Consciousness*, this new film and my book, in addition to internet communication and social media, can be very powerful for raising questions. More and more scholars, scientists and practitioners of diverse traditions are becoming bridge makers. They are coming to some similar conclusions about what identity means, about who we are and what our potentials are. And I think it's pretty exciting. It's still on the edge. We still have dogmatism, whether it is in science or religion. So how do we find balance? How do we find the discernment that helps us to articulate our own projections, our own memories, our own life experiences? And how do we begin to move beyond our fears around dying, to help to liberate ourselves? I think that is the point of this work. And more than anything, how does this self-inquiry make us happier and healthier while living these complex lives? I believe a part of that is how we vision together. How do we come to a place where a critical mass of humanity can look into the future and see what we want to push toward or be pulled toward? I think that is really the key.

© 2014 by Marilyn Schlitz, Ph.D., social anthropologist, researcher, writer, public speaker and Founder and CEO of Worldview Enterprises. She also serves as President Emeritus and a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Noetic Sciences, as a Senior Scientist at the California Pacific Medical Center where she focuses on health and healing, and a board member of Pacifica Graduate Institute. For more than three decades Marilyn has been a leader in the field of consciousness studies. This article is excerpted from a *Light of Consciousness* interview in February 2014. The Death Makes Life Possible project is a partnership of The Chopra Foundation, the Institute of Noetic Sciences, Petaluma Pictures, and Worldview Enterprises. *Death Makes Life Possible* is reviewed on page 49 of this issue. For more information and to view the film trailer, visit marilynschlitz.com.

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