

Rev. Ron Phares

MVUU

Reflection: UU Book of the Dead

7.22.18

What do you think happens to you when you die? The answer always leads somewhere meaningful.

This is one of the fundamental questions that every religion, every person, has sought to answer since consciousness happened.

You've got heaven and hell. You've got reincarnation. You've got dust to dust. You've got ghosts and souls. You've got family planets or outer darkness. A bunch of virgins. Tunnels of light. All sorts of ideas. I know that there are people in this room that find at least one of those to be true to their understanding. Probably not the virgins one.

My own understanding of death begins with my thoughts on being, my ontology. And my thoughts on being rest on a proposition based on observation. The observation is that all being is interconnected and interdependent.

However, I must admit that I am relying in this on the wisdom and observation of others as much as my own. And even the understandings of the wisest have their limits and so this finally becomes a question of *faith*. My faith extrapolates the trajectory of my limited observation and makes of it a meaningful world.

Faith is required for this proposition because even the most sage yogi or most driven scientific philosopher can not comprehend the whole of being, nor even the whole of the being in their immediate vicinity. Consider that “the part of the electromagnetic spectrum that is *visible* to us is less than a ten-trillionth of its whole.”¹ There are entire ecologies and vistas of being in this room, in your body that we do not possess the senses to perceive.

I do not perceive, nor am I aware of *most* of the immediate reality in which I exist. This opens the door to many possibilities.

¹ <http://www.eagleman.com/blog/umwelt>

We craft ourselves and our world from our senses and interface that with our consciousness to make meaning. But our senses are not cued to the odor of butyric acid like the deaf and blind tick, nor to electrical fields like the black ghost knifefish, nor to air-compression waves like a echolocating bat.² We do not perceive these things at all or in any significant way.

That is understanding number 1. We don't see the whole picture.

We are limited by our senses. And we further limit, or regulate, what senses we have so that they make sense. And the sense they give us is that we are discrete beings differentiated from other beings that decide what to do in the framework of time. Our understanding, or I should say, *faith*, is that we are discrete beings differentiated from other beings that *decide* what to do in the framework of *time*

And yet of all the things we *are* geared to sense, the most amazing one has no single receptor (like skin, or eyes) and is entirely mysterious in its origins, location, and, to a significant degree, its component parts. This most amazing thing we sense is our sense of consciousness.

Consciousness has no mass. It has no weight. It has no volume. We can not measure its movement. But we know that it is there... just because we know it. Neurologists, philosophers, mystics and ministers are confounded to prove anything about the origin of consciousness.

So while most of what *is* is not sensible to us, the most important sense that we have doesn't make sense! The very "thing" we use to understand the world and ourselves can not itself be understood.

The question of consciousness is central to the post-life question. What is reincarnated, what lives on the family planet, what reconciles with god, what ceases to exist, what frolics with virgins if not *you*? And what are *you* if not your consciousness?

Understanding number two: "We" do not know what "we" are.

Let's return to the interdependent web of existence, because this observation does two really tricky things. If we imagine that every event, every action, every decision, every molecule and social movement is interdependent, then free will, as it has come to be thought of popularly, is an utter fiction. And in fact, the social, psychological, and neurological sciences generally agree that free will is a convenient self-deception.

² <http://www.eagleman.com/blog/umwelt>

How does free will have anything to do with death? Well, it doesn't. But what rises from its ashes does. More on that in a bit.

Secondly, if we imagine that every event, every action, every decision, every molecule and *evolutionary* process from the big bang onward is interdependent.... If because the very first thing happened the very last thing is bound to happen because they are interconnected... if that (right hand snap) is because this was (left snap)... and everything else in between *is* because (left snap) that was, but (left snap) this can only be if these things also happen... if all that, if existence is interdependent then *when* things happen does not matter... because of (left) this, then this (right)... It's all *bound to happen*. And if it is bound to happen, time is at most irrelevant and possibly as much a deception as free will.

If everything is interdependent, then everything that has ever happened or ever will happen, may well happen in an instant and time is the filter we use to make sense of it. Perhaps time, like taste and smell is a sense.

Understandings number 3 & 4. Free will is illusory. Time is not what we think it is.

But wait! There's more!

According to one of the more well known neuro-scientists on the scene today, David Eagleman, "The days of thinking of time as a river—evenly flowing, always advancing—are over. Time perception, just like vision, is a construction of the brain and is shockingly easy to manipulate experimentally."³

He can say that because, you know, he's done the experiments.

And from those experiments, he has determined that, "...awareness is postdictive" (which means that awareness registers or occurs milliseconds after events occur) the opposite of pre-dictive... postdictive. Got it?

We *perceive* (or sense) something before we are *aware* of it. Eagleman has found that, "awareness is postdictive, incorporating data from a window of time *after* an event and delivering a retrospective interpretation of what happened."⁴ That's awareness.

In milliseconds.

³ <http://www.eagleman.com/blog/brain-time>

⁴ <http://www.eagleman.com/blog/brain-time>

But while this is happening in an infinitesimally brief moment of time, what it means, nonetheless, is that *awareness happens after we act* which further undermines the common conception of free will. But also, and more mind blowing, that awareness is postdictive means that awareness... is memory. Awareness is a memory. This is a memory. Right now. Now is then!

And then if we can roughly equate awareness with consciousness, then can we say that consciousness is a memory? And then what is memory if the experience of time is an illusion? Another way to say this is: what is memory if the *experience* of time is... a memory.

Understanding number 5. Awareness is a memory.

Okay, but what happens to you when you die?

I titled today's Reflection, "The UU Book of the Dead," modeled on "The Tibetan Book of the Dead," which is sort of a TripAdvisor for dying. But, I understand that it is also a guide to living. It is sometimes called the Tibetan Book of Dying and Living.

I think that's appropriate. Because if you ask me what I think happens to you when you die, I think the answer might be... the same thing that happens when you live.

Here's what I mean. Death is all a question of faith and faithfulness. I'll defend that in a moment. But first I want to say that I have a great deal of conviction that *life* is a matter of faith and faithfulness. But when it comes to death - having never died before - we will be entering deeply speculative waters.

How is life a question of faith and faithfulness? First, let's define terms. I know some folks hear words like faith and have a knee jerk reaction. But let us be less reactive in this perennial concern. To me, faith is a story that is meaningful beyond our ability to prove it as factual. Even if the story is factual, *its meaning is effective beyond its factualness*. What's more, given that we exist as motes of perception in an ocean of being, it would seem that all facts are facts only insofar as they are relevant to our senses.

Heraclitus once said, Man is the measure of all things. But this is only true of the things humans can measure. There is a lot more beyond our senses than our senses make sense of. And some of that other being is relevant to us beyond our perception. We make do with what senses we have to fashion a coherent and meaningful story of the world we perceive.

That story shapes our behavior. But wait. Isn't behavior an act of will and didn't I say free will is an illusion? Kind of. But here's another mind melting question: If we have no free will, what is the point of consciousness? Evolutionarily speaking, what's the point of postdictive awareness? That we have it would indicate a use.

Well, I believe it is because stories shape behaviour. Or, as Eagleman posits, "perceptions are representations of information that cognitive systems can work with later...."⁵

Stories are what rises from the ashes of free will. We can craft our stories. Our agency lies in the stories we tell about who we are.

Memory is a story of a kind. Memory is also shaped by the narratives we have of ourselves and the narratives handed to us by our culture.

We are the stories we tell given the sliver of reality that we perceive with the senses we have. This leads me to a hypothesis. Personal consciousness (or awareness) is the memory of our sensory input interacting with our guiding stories. Reality itself is not a story. But awareness, personal consciousness, memory are shaped by stories.

I'm not saying it is easy - it is not - but if you want to change your life, change the story you tell about yourself. And then, within the constraints of your biology, live into the story. I'm not saying you can tell yourself a story that will change your circumstance. It won't make you rich. But your story can change who you are within your circumstance... which I suppose may bear some influence on that circumstance by the by.

Look, stories take maintenance. They take work, especially heroic and transformative ones. We must make a habit of our stories until they are second nature, until it is subconscious and predictive.

Now, if you are telling one story and living another, you will have problems and probably make problems for others. You will not be exercising the agency you posses. That is an unfaithful way of living.

Faith and faithfulness. Story determines behavior. Story shapes memory. Memory is awareness.

So... what happens when we die? I don't know.

⁵ <http://www.eagleman.com/blog/brain-time>

But this is my faith: Everything is interconnected. We don't see the whole picture. "We" do not know what "we" are. Free will is illusory. Time is not what we think it is. Awareness is a memory. We are the stories we tell. Therein lies our responsibility and hope.

Based on that, I posit that when we die our senses break down as discreet and different receptors. That includes our sense of time and consciousness. That is to say our sense that we are a discreet consciousness in time breaks down.

This actually does occur. What scientists call our default mode network (a neurological term for the psychological term ego) breaks down during death. This same thing happens under the influence of psychedelics, incidentally. So those of you experienced in that arena, who have had that sense of "one with everything," may have had some practice at dying.

In that moment we discover that consciousness is part of the web of reality, that it is not generated by us and is not ours but that our particular consciousness is only the sliver of universal-consciousness that our personally particular senses perceive. That's pretty far out. Pure speculation. Except that it seems to be an experience shared by psychedelic minds. Experience does not equal fact. But it can not be discounted and is, in the end, the only thing that matters much. Of course, experience is a story, right?

Less far out, but still speculatively, perhaps in the instant of dying, when time fails and consciousness opens, we then might see the whole narrative all at once. Loves long gone. Maybe we see things yet to come. It may not be eternity, but with time set aside, it may as well be. It is a timeless, thus eternal moment. And that moment is resonant with the story we have deeply practiced into preconsciousness.

This would account for the variety of first hand accounts of death experiences. I don't think it necessarily invalidates any of them while including most of them as *experiences*. And again, if reality is different than experience, I am not sure that matters in the final moment.

This story helps me feel more comfortable with my own physical mortality. It also helps me fit alternative visions of death into my own. Further, it clarifies what I am to do with my life and with my position as a minister, that being faith and faithfulness or, in other words, habituating our story through the intentional practice of it.

In this death story, I have faith, based on observation, plausibility, and hope. Do I know it is true? No. I won't until I die. Which means that, for now anyway, I'm *okay* without verification.