



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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The Survival Instinct – Or Whatever!

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Just about everywhere I turn, somebody seems to be trying to prove that immortality is a fact. There is life after death. The “I” that is my identity survives. And I raise a question. What’s the big deal about immortality?

IMMORTALITY – survival – life beyond the grave – reward or punishment in that life – that my identity be preserved.

My identity preserved. Maybe that is the key. If I can be assured of my immortality and how to obtain it, I don’t ever have to worry about losing my identity – that is, my sense of myself – nor do I need to be concerned about whether or not I will survive. It is necessary that I be occupied and preoccupied with determining if immortality is reality, and if I can be sure that I will have life (my identity) beyond the grave?

A year or so ago, a friend enrolled me in the Institute of Noetic Science. I appreciated being enrolled, although I had no idea what Noetic Science was. Nor did I know the purpose of the Institute. I soon discovered that the word, “noetic,” is derived from the Greek word, “nous,” and that it means mind, intelligence, or ways of knowing. Further, I learned that the Institute has as its purpose, “The study of the mind and its diverse ways of knowing in a truly interdisciplinary fashion.” I soon became aware that a major focus of study was the issue of postmortem survival, or the survival of consciousness, after the death of the body. The Institute, as I understand it, is seeking to establish as proven reality that a person’s life does not end when death comes to the body. They, along with many others, both in and out of the religious community, are trying to prove beyond question that immortality is a fact. Consciousness survives. Or that I, somehow, keep my identity, even though my life in my body comes to an end.

I have a lot of questions around this issue. What goes on with us human beings that immortality (the preservation of our identities) is of such great concern to us? It appears to be so universal as to seem like an instinct to survive, or a primal motive to try to make sure one’s identity is never lost. The motive seems to be so pervasive that it extends to our institutions as well. They, too, must survive no matter what the cost. If they don’t, they are lost. They cease to be. They no longer have an identity except in memory and history. But, we humans seem to be saying, “We must survive. We are too significant – too important – for this span of life to be all there is to life. And our institutions must also survive.”

Many years ago, a doctor/friend said almost exactly these words to me. In his personal life and in his practice of medicine, he had had to deal with many disturbing and tragic things – to the point that he questioned the meaning of life. So he said to me one day, “This life is pretty miserable, and pretty much without meaning. There has to be more to life than this. There has to be life after this life.”

I wonder, why isn’t it OK for persons and institutions to die? What is so important about preserving identity at any cost? If the entity – person or institution, group, or community – has ceased to serve its purpose (other than trying to survive), why

isn't it OK for it to cease to be? Why is it so important to us to preserve identity beyond death? In other words, why isn't it the thing to do to focus on reasons for being in terms of here and now, instead of trying to preserve self beyond this life.

Insofar as I can tell, we humans are the only life forms in creation that are dead set on preserving this particular identity we now have, whether we enjoy our life or not. We, alone in creation, are concerned about immortality.

One of the things that impressed me about Bernie Seigel, the noted surgical oncologist and writer, was his oft-repeated statement that went something like this: "The mortality rate for living is 100 percent. So let us focus on living until we die." I like that statement. While I am reading the literature on immortality, survival, or life after death, be it metaphysics, the renewing of the church, powers of healing, or related subjects, I am well aware that I don't ever want to get fixed on the question of whether or not I survive beyond this life. Nor do I want the church to continue to be fixed on trying to preserve itself as a visible institution, whatever the cost.

I'm aware that I have written on the general subject of immortality several times, and that what I include in this paper may, in many ways, be repetitious. Nonetheless, I continue to wrestle with this subject both in my thinking and in my writing.

In my belief system, it is important that I take care of myself – physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. I want to do this so that I can live as fully as I can each of the days of my life. I believe that it is God's intent for me that I focus on being who God has enabled me to be right here and right now. I believe God does not intend for me to be preoccupied with trying to preserve my identity now – nor beyond this life. Over and over, I am reminded of Jesus' words, "Whoever would save his life, will lose it." It seems to me that, in this saying, as well as in his other teachings and in his attitude, his survival was never the issue for Jesus.

Of course, I want to live, and I want to live well. However, that is different from being dedicated to preserving my identity, both now and beyond the grave. I want to discover, tap into, and use all the power there is to be healthy, and to stay healthy. I want to do this so that I can really use up my life in being. Will I survive? Yes, for as long as I live. Will I survive after I cease to live? Who knows, and besides, what difference does it really make?

It seems evident to me that there is truth in the belief that, in this creation, energy is never lost. One might even say, nothing is ever lost. However, it seems clear that the changing of form and identity takes place routinely. If what I am is never lost, isn't that a form of immortality? Of course it is, but I don't have to spend time and energy trying to establish that form of immortality. Nor do I have to spend time and energy trying to establish that my "I" sense will somehow be preserved. Instead, I am free to be about the business of living this life that God has given me as fully and completely as I can determine. After all, what I already have in life is pretty significant.

I note, as I have before in my writing, a general belief about this life is that we are to be about the business of trying to achieve status, importance, rewards, happiness, the good life, and so forth. Our presumption seems to be that we do not have what we need for this life to be meaningful and worthwhile. Therefore, we have to achieve or acquire something so that it will become meaningful and worthwhile. I think that belief and attitude lead to preoccupation with achieving, preserving identity, and trying to find assurance that there are yet other opportunities after this life comes to an end.

I'm aware that scripture is used a great deal to undertake to confirm the presumed fact of immortality.

The scripture passage in First Corinthians 15:42-58 is frequently used at funerals. It is used to underscore for us that, in Christ, we shall never die, and that we will achieve victory over death. We have chosen to interpret that this passage both assures that we live after we dies, and that we know one another then. Our identity is preserved. However, Paul ends that part of his letter with the words, "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (Verse 58). I wonder if Paul might have been trying to call the attention of those Corinthian Christians to the challenge of this present life that God has given us. I wonder if he was trying to tell us that the real intent of God is for us to be doing the work of the Lord here and now, and not to be preoccupied with worry about immortality.

Certainly, in these verses (Cor. 15:50-57, especially), Paul is writing about victory over death, whatever he may be meaning by death. "Death has been swallowed up in victory." (v. 54b) "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (v.57) And he assures the Corinthian Christians that this victory takes both victory and sting out of death. (see v.55)

Paul also writes in this passage, "This perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality." (v. 54) Earlier in the passage, he describes what he is writing about as a mystery, and affirms clearly, "We will be changed." (v. 52)

It may be Paul is, indeed, stating his belief in immortality beyond the death of the body, and in life after death. Given that that is what he is doing, he is also writing about rewards (or punishments) that come to us after we die.

But suppose Paul is writing about what he believes happens to us in this present life when we choose to become followers and doers of God's will through Jesus, the Christ.

Suppose he is writing about moving from death to life now. Suppose his message is about becoming free from anxiety and fear about death while we re living this life. Suppose that is what he means about taking both victory and sting out of death.

Jesus, you remember, told us that, to inherit the Kingdom of God, it is necessary to be born again – to be born a spiritual body as well as a physical body. Suppose Paul is telling us the same thing in this part of his Corinthian letter. Suppose, further, that the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes in seeking to make the same point.

In the Book of Ecclesiastes (Ecc. 12:7-8) are the words, “And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it. ‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the teacher, ‘all is vanity.’” Then the writing ends with these words, “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone.” (Ecc. 12:13) Maybe the writer of Ecclesiastes was also wrestling with this issue of the meaning of life, and what there is after this life. Throughout the writing, the author underscores that all the ways that people function to try to gain the rewards of life, present and future, and to preserve their lives, end up with the discovery that “All is vanity.” I like the picture that I see in this scripture from Ecclesiastes. It encourages me to do as Bernie Seigel suggests – that is, to live this life as fully and completely as I can until I come to the end of it. Then, in a manner of speaking, I will be recycled back into the creation that is, and my breath (spirit) returns to God who gave it. May I be so bold as to suggest that my true identity is God, and that that identity is never lost? In that sense, I am immortal – but not my “I.”

In the midst of all this pondering on my part, I recall the words of Paul in his letter to the Galatians (Galatians 6:8), “If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the spirit, you will reap eternal life from the spirit.” I am reminded, of course, that the phrase “eternal life” suggests something about the wholeness and completeness of the life that God has given me – us – to live here and now.

So I come back to the question with which I started, “What’s the big deal about immortality?” I believe that there is a survival instinct. I suggest, however, that it applies more to the intense effort of all life forms to survive as long as possible in this life. As I stated earlier in this paper, it appears that we human beings are the only life form in creation that is preoccupied with the issue of survival after the end of this life.

Let me be very clear here, as I have undertaken to be on many other occasions. I am not addressing the issue of whether or not there is life after death. I am not seeking proof one way or the other. I am quite aware that I do not know if God has structured this creation to include life after death – immortality, or continued human identity – for us mortals. I do not know, and I am unaware of any way to find out. Therefore, I am willing to leave that issue in the hands of God.

Since I don’t know and can’t find out, I see little reason to spend time and energy trying to find out. It makes sense to me to leave the matter in God’s most capable hands. I must recognize, however, that the search appears to be virtually universal among humans – both in and out of the Christian community. I wonder why that is true, and I come up with at least two answers.

One possible answer could be that the focus on the question of life after death is a way to excuse myself from really coming to grips with how I live this life, here and now, and why. If I stay sufficiently concerned with what happens to me after I die, I can avoid having to wrestle with many of the issues that confront me as I devote myself to being God’s person in response to what God has given me of life, talent, opportunity, and challenge here and now.

I don’t want to avoid wrestling with those issues.

Another possible answer lies in the reality that many people derive great comfort from the belief that human beings live and are known to each other in the life God has for us after we die – especially when we are grieving because of the death of a loved one.

I don’t want to take that comfort away from anyone. However, I do want to encourage people to believe that God is able to provide for all our needs in time and eternity even though God does not always reveal to us just how God does it.

However, I answer my own question by observing that whether or not there is immortality is no big deal to me. Living now is – and how I go about doing that. I intend, as Bernie Siegel has encouraged me, to be about living each day of my life as fully and completely as I can until I come to the end of it. At that time, as the author of Ecclesiastes wrote, my body will return “to dust as it was, and the breath to God who gave it.” That being the case, death is not my enemy, and I have no need to fear death.

How is that for immortality? When it comes right down to it, who could ask for anything more?