

# Matters of Life After Death

## Symposium on the Soul Ponders 'Consciousness & Survival'

By Michael Kernan  
Washington Post Staff Writer

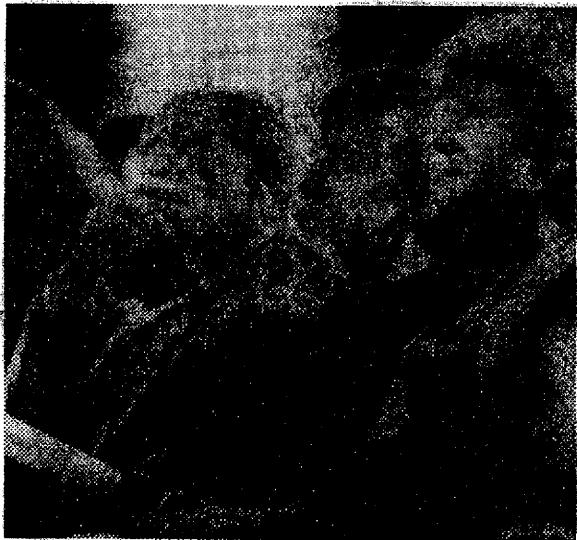
*I believe that primal attitudes toward life and death set the ethical environment and range of peace and violence in which we all live.*

— Sen. Claiborne Pell

Four years ago, at a dinner party given by the senior senator from Rhode Island, the guests got into a discussion on whether consciousness survives our death. The subject proved so intriguing, with so many different facets, that all the guests agreed it would make a most exciting symposium.

And unlike most great dinner-table ideas, this one was bullied and sweated into reality. This past weekend "Consciousness and Survival," sponsored by the Institute of Noetic Sciences and the ubiquitous Smithsonian, drew well over 500 people to the Georgetown University campus for a series of talks by international experts—including a Tibetan lama—in an amazing variety of fields.

Someone called the symposium "the most historic event of the century for survival-after-death research," and while that might be something of an overstatement, sponsors and listeners alike seemed



BY JOEL RICHARDSON—THE WASHINGTON POST

Sen. Claiborne Pell, left, Bishop John Spong and Carol Taylor at symposium on the hereafter.

to feel it was a landmark in the growing general recognition that life after death is worth serious attention and scientific study.

Pell outlined four broad points of view on the subject: "the possibility of reincarnation, where the soul remains, with or without memory"; the idea of the Great One "that the soul and its accompanying memory joins"; simple oblivion; and "the idea that the individual soul with its accompanying memory lives on eternally."

He also listed a fifth approach: that "what will happen is what you believe will happen."

The audience had come from all over the Northeast to hear about such increasingly popular subjects as

See LIFE, B4, Col. 3

WP B1 10/28/85

# Life After Death

LIFE, From B1

out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, memories of "past lives," parapsychology and assorted ways of communicating with the absent and the dead. What they got was a deadly serious, scholarly examination of how mainstream science is responding to the mounting pile of evidence and speculation on these things.

In the Saturday sessions, various positions on the question were outlined. Antony Flew, an Oxford educator now with the Social Philosophy Center in Bowling Green, Ohio, led off with a frontal attack on the notion that mind and brain are separate entities. He questioned the very idea that a mind or soul could be considered an "entity" or substance while remaining incorporeal.

Some scientists and philosophers, he said, tend to be confused among "the words 'minds' or 'souls' or 'selves' construed as referring to a peculiar kind of substance, and the same words interpreted as referring to aspects or capacities or dispositions of quite ordinary people."

"We are by this got into Wonderland, where grins are said to survive the disappearance of the faces of which they are a sort of configuration," said Flew.

Charles Tart of the University of California at Davis discussed altered states of consciousness from emotional peaks and troughs to dreams and beyond, to telepathy, clairvoyance and precognition. Stanislav Grof, a Czech scholar now at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, Calif., delved further into various, transpersonal experiences, "that transcend normal perceptions."

From his 30 years of research into unusual states of consciousness, he said, he perceived four categories: ability to identify profoundly with other people and with all creatures, plants and every aspect of the universe; the transgen-



BY JOEL ROBINSON—THE WASHINGTON POST  
Symposium speaker Charles Tart.

dence of linear time; an experience of the cosmos itself, and finally a perception of archetypal ideas, as C.G. Jung has suggested.

Paul Davies of the University of Newcastle in England showed how the uncertainty principle of quantum physics could lead scientists to the concept of two or more worlds superimposed on each other, and Candace Pert of the National Institute of Mental Health related the ambiguities in DNA research to the new ways of seeing the "bodymind." Kenneth Ring of the University of Connecticut discussed the significance of the innumerable near-death accounts he has researched, and John Hick of Claremont Graduate School in California cited the work of spiritualists and mediums from the 19th century on.

"At bodily death," he said, "the empirical self, with its culture-bound personality and time-bound memories, begins gradually to fade away, our consciousness becoming centered in the

...the millions who die in ignorance of the vagaries, the fact that consciousness "seem fitted for eternal bliss or eternal torment."

It remained for the Cambridge-educated Tibetan scholar, Sogyal Rinpoche, to caution those preoccupied with life after death that "the main point of life and death is how we live now. What you will be is what you do now. The next minute is a reincarnation of this minute."

Laughing heartily at the notion of reducing the teachings of the East to a 40-minute talk, he reminded the audience of Buddha's teaching that the point of life is the understanding of ourselves and that we should try to view life and death as a complete whole.

Surely the most original contribution was from Rupert Sheldrake, the British botanist whose hypothesis of formative causation—the notion that the sheer repetition of phenomena makes them easier to learn, that all experiences are somehow transmitted throughout the world—created a sensation in the scientific establishment a few years ago.

Sheldrake questioned the assumption that memories are stored in the brain. They could, he said, be contained in a sort of force field around the body, with the brain acting like a television receiver that tunes in on them.

The main thing, he added, is that these ideas can be tested. Actual physical experiments can tell us, he said, whether, for instance, the common "feeling of being watched" is a real phenomenon. He urged more testing of the apparent resonances that spiritists, pigeons to return to their nests, He suggested that we examine prayer, that ancient and respected belief that one can influence others far distant and even communicate with the dead.

"These things can be tested, it's perfectly testable," he concluded, "these questions are completely open."