

FROM DEATH TO REBIRTH

Teachings of the Finnish Sage Pekka Ervast



Literary Society of the Finnish Rosy Cross

Compiled and edited by Jouni Marjanen, Antti Savinainen and Jouko Sorvali
Foreword by Richard Smoley

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Foreword by Richard Smoley

For at least a century and a half, students of the Ancient Wisdom have been hoping for—and predicting—a point at which scientific discoveries will validate the truths of esoteric teaching.

Up to now this hope has been disappointed. Each time science seems to be on the verge of confirming esoteric truths, it seems to hold back or reverse course. It is true that some fields—such as quantum physics—hint at such notions, suggesting, for example, that ultimately it is consciousness that is the groundspring of the universe, but these findings are bizarre, paradoxical, and difficult to apply to everyday life, for which, we are told, the old, deterministic laws of what William Blake called “Newton’s sleep” still hold fast.

It is only in the last fifty years that scientific dogma is being forced—slowly and reluctantly—to break out of this shell. And this impulse has arisen not from the abstract and baffling discipline of theoretical physics, but from medical advances. This is because, at last, medicine has pushed back the boundaries of death. For a long time, death, from a clinical point of view, meant the stopping of the heart. But as cardiological progress made it possible to revive individuals even after their hearts had stopped, this definition has had to be revised, and death was defined as “flatlining”—having no discernible brain activity.

But that boundary has had to be pushed back as well, because there have been instances of individuals who had no discernible brain activity and yet still had conscious experience, usually of an otherworldly, mystical kind. The most famous of these cases (in the United States at least) is Eben Alexander, a neurosurgeon who reported an intense and sublime journey to other dimensions while he was in a coma—that is, when his brain was, by the standards of neurology, not functioning.

Alexander's story, told in his best-selling book *Proof of Heaven*, struck the imagination of millions. In 2012, the American magazine *Newsweek* even featured his story on its cover, with the blurb "Heaven Is Real: A Doctor's Experience of the Afterlife."

Alexander's story is among the most publicized and most impressive accounts of the near-death experience (NDE), but it is far from the only one. In 2007, Natalie Sudman, working as a military contractor for the U.S. in Iraq, was in a truck that was hit by a roadside bomb. She, too, had an NDE, but unlike Alexander's, which stretched over seven weeks, hers took place in a few seconds, at which she found herself lecturing in what she later would call "the Blink Environment" to an assemblage of beings from other dimensions. They were evidently extremely curious to learn about this rare and exotic experience called "getting blown up."

Most of the NDEs reported have been beatific—or at least experienced as more pleasant than life on earth—but there have been exceptions. In his book *My Descent into Death*, Howard Storm, a former atheist, recounts that during his NDE, he experienced an episode in which he was attacked by countless demonic entities, and was only freed when he heard a voice that told him, "Pray to God," and he managed to remember a fragment from Sunday school, "Jesus loves me," which he repeated over and over again until he was rescued by a luminous being that he identified with Christ. Eventually Storm was brought back to consciousness, recovered, and became a Christian missionary.

A more recent case was that of the American publisher Samuel Bercholz, who at age sixty had a heart attack requiring sextuple coronary bypass surgery. In his coma Bercholz, like Storm, had an experience of hell, but from a different viewpoint. Bercholz had long been a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, and he was not subjected to hell but was given a tour of it. (His memoir of this experience is called *A Guided Tour of Hell*.) Escorted by a being he calls "the Buddha of Hell," he was shown various infernal realms that recapitulate the traditional Buddhist hells in almost textbook fashion. His conclusion is similarly in accord with Buddhist doctrine: "The sufferings of each and

every one of these beings are due to their own mental conceptions. In fact, their suffering in hell is an unbroken continuation of their own states of mind during life, which persisted even after the death of the physical body.”

Gingerly, then, the Western world is groping, not only toward an admission of the existence of the afterlife, but toward some kind of mapping of it. Certainly this has long been known in traditional societies, as evidenced by *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, its Tibetan equivalent, the *Bardo Thödol*, and in simpler, more homely forms as well, such as the medieval English “Lyke-Wake Dirge,” which tells of the soul’s passage from earth to purgatory in an archaic Yorkshire dialect:

*From Brig o’ Dread when thou may’st pass,
To Purgatory fire thou com’st at last;
If ever thou gavest meat or drink,
The fire sall never make thee shrink.*

It would be unwise, I think, to try to compress and distill all these accounts wholesale. They do not all say the same thing. Many of the Western accounts—from the “Lyke-Wake Dirge” to the accounts of Alexander and Storm—suggest a preliminary passage through a dark realm, which sounds very much like the traditional concept of hell, whereas *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* presents almost a mirror image: the “Clear Light” that bestows liberation dawns upon the deceased at the moment of death, while the wrathful deities appear only toward the end, when the individual is already well on the way to rebirth.

We can avoid rigidly reducing all accounts of the after-death state to one overarching schema while still delineating some common features. Pekka Ervast’s, as presented in this book, offers one possible approach. Ervast’s account is based on Theosophical teachings, along with his own clairvoyant insights. It recapitulates the inner structure of man as portrayed by Theosophy, which involves a number of nested bodies of increasing subtlety.

The lowest of these is the physical body, and the meaning of its death is obvious. Physical operations stop, all physical activity ceases, and from this point on, the body, having lost its organizing principle,

immediately begins to decay. (One is reminded of Aristotle's view that the soul or psyche is the "form" of the body.)

At this point, conventional knowledge stops. Few things are more obvious than the fact that a living body differs from a corpse, but mainstream thought—up to this day—is very vague about what makes it differ. In the Theosophical view, this principle is, at its lowest level, the *etheric body*, the subtle energy structure that organizes and motivates the flesh.

Like its material counterpart, the etheric body is mortal, but it does not die at the same time as the physical body. Traditional thought tends to agree with Ervast in saying that it lives on, usually for another three days or so. During this period, the deceased has some limited capacity for contact with the living.

Such was my own experience with my mother's death. One or two days afterward, I was sitting in her house alone, meditating. I heard a voice calling, "Richard, Richard!" I thought it was my aunt, who lived next door. But when I went to the door, there was no one.

My aunt, my mother's sister, had a similar experience. She was on the street in front of her house, walking her dog. She too heard my mother's voice; the dog seemed to hear it as well.

These encounters are relatively common. They take all kinds of forms. A friend of mine, a Kabbalist, tells me that his father appeared to him after his death to tell him to make sure to wear a suit to the funeral. And when I was editor of *Gnosis*, a journal of the esoteric traditions, I got endless numbers of articles written by people who had had similar encounters. We did not publish this kind of article, but people sent them in anyway—probably because they had no one else to describe their experiences to.

Conventional practice seems to reflect, however unconsciously, this view of the lifespan of the etheric body. In Western cultures, at any rate, it is a general practice to bury or cremate the remains around three days after death, so that the funeral marks, or coincides with, the death of the etheric body. Subjectively, the loved ones have a sense that the deceased is no longer around in the way he was immediately after death.

What happens to us when we die?

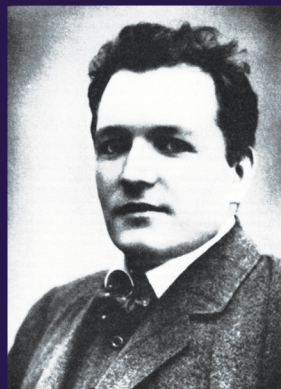
What is afterlife like?

Is it possible to know anything about it?

Through the ages there have been stories about people who have visited the abode of the death.

These people, seers, and sages of different cultures, have reported what they have seen there.

One of them was a Finnish spiritual teacher Pekka Ervast.



This book contains Ervast's teachings on the afterlife: He tells of the phases and states people will undergo after they pass through the door of death.

Pekka Ervast (1875–1934) had a profound spiritual awakening at the age of twenty. He then became a pioneer of the theosophical movement in Finland. Ervast wrote and lectured regularly for over 30 years on the multitude of spiritual topics. Previously four of his books have been published in English:

The Sermon on the Mount, or the Key to Christianity; “H. P. B.”: *Four Episodes from the Life of the Sphinx of the Nineteenth Century*; *The Key to the Kalevala*; and *The Divine Seed: The Esoteric Teachings of Jesus*.



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