

# Next?

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Hunter S. Thompson once said: “Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well-preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming “Wow! What a ride!” Of course, Hunter committed suicide, so his ride might not have been everything he bargained for.

I don't know whether or not I'll skid in broadside, but I'll certainly be thoroughly used up and totally worn out, and I think qualified to say: “Wow! What a ride.” As I write this I've been together with a beautiful and intelligent wife for 66 years, helped raise four amazing sons, all successful in their own right, flown fighters and various other aircraft for ten of my 26 military years, gone to war three times and had two Southeast Asian wartime commands, taught computer science for a brief period, been mayor of my city for six years, run a moderately successful software engineering business, written a bunch of poetry, and been an enthusiastic amateur photographer for 75 years.

But at 89 it's time to ask: “What comes next? What comes after this?” The conventional alternatives seem to be Heaven, Hell, or Nothing. I have trouble with ideas of Heaven and Hell. I don't think there's a big Guy up in the sky ready to give me wings so I can fly over streets paved with gold, and I have equal difficulty with the idea of a horned monster cackling as he commits me to eternal flames. That leaves Nothing. And I believe in Nothing even less than I believe in Heaven and Hell.

I *know* there's an entity connected to my life that's beyond my ability to comprehend, but is the reason I exist. I can't examine that knowledge because I have to think in terms of space and time. There's an up, a down, a right, a left, a forward, a back, and finally in hindsight the gradually fogging traverse of 89 years. But I seem to exist in a universe with no beginning and no end, in space or in time. Space runs from where I sit to infinity and time runs backward and forward to eternity, both of which obvious realities are meaningless because the mind can't encompass them. They're abstractions and must remain abstractions. Then there's the idea of the big bang, the point at which space and time began, though “began” implies a point in time. But even if you're a physicist and mathematician who can grasp such a thing with numbers, your mind still asks, “What went before the bang?” There's no way around it.

Decades ago I wrote an essay entitled “True Reality and Life Reality.” Can’t find it now, but here’s an example of the distinction I posed: In Life Reality the desk supporting my keyboard is constructed of heavy wood with a plastic finish. But quantum physics tells me that in True Reality my desk is composed not of wood and plastic, but of energy, a force, an abstraction. As am I. As are you. As is our entire universe of massive galaxies crashing through space and time. But I live in Life Reality, and working at that desk I rarely stop to ponder the idea that though the mundane desk is solid it probably contains enough energy to blow up a city.

Nevertheless, every once in a while True Reality leaks through. I think of the close calls I’ve had flying airplanes. With each of those close calls I learned something new, but more importantly each time a gentle hand rescued me from disaster. Same thing’s true of other fiascoes in which I’ve been involved, situations where my own arrogance or voluntary stupidity put me in difficulty. In the end that gentle hand saved me from myself. Which sort of answers the question: “Do I have free will?” Obviously I have, otherwise it wouldn’t have been necessary for that gentle hand to rescue me from my free will excesses.

So when I look at my universe it seems I live at the center of something less like a collection of physical objects advancing through space and time and more like an all-encompassing mind, creating what we see as substance out of thought, teaching me and telling me that class isn’t over. There’s more yet to learn, more that I need to understand before I can graduate and move on.

But move on I shall, with or without my certificate of understanding. We call that final move “death.” Some believe the spirit leaves the body and continues to exist in Heaven or Hell. Others believe we exist only in the body and that when the body dies, that’s the end. Many of the same people seem to believe that instead of beginning at conception life begins at or after birth.

But it seems to me it’s equally possible that I existed *before* conception, and that I’ll continue to exist once I leave the space and time dimensions of life. Of course, when you say “exist” in a Life Reality setting you’re talking about a body, an illusion that’s actually a collection of energy, and when you say “always” you’re talking about an illusion called “time.” I say “illusion,” but in Life Reality neither is an illusion.

The possibility of existing forever (there’s time popping up again) raises the question of reincarnation. Unfortunately “reincarnation” always seems to imply

returning to the world in the flesh, perhaps as a rabbit or a deer, but most often as a human, in other words that the world of space and time in which we live is the only possible Life Reality. I suspect there may be others, but I'm not equipped to imagine what they might be.

So, I think it'll be interesting when the bell rings and class is out. There are infinite possibilities out there.