

WHAT
HAPPENS
WHEN I DIE?

A PROMISE *of* THE AFTERLIFE

BRIAN C. STILLER



CASTLE QUAY BOOKS

What Happens When I Die? : a Promise of the Afterlife

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*Dedicated to
my father,
Carl Hilmer Stiller (1910–1971),
who taught his family
that be it in living or dying,
greatness is our calling.*

CONTENTS

A Word from the Author vii

<i>One</i>	Why Do We Deny Death?	1
<i>Two</i>	Can Near-Death Experiences Tell Us What Life after Death Is Like?	12
<i>Three</i>	Why Do We Fear Death?	30
<i>Four</i>	What Do People Believe Happens to Us When We Die?	38
<i>Five</i>	Does God Exist?	53
<i>Six</i>	What Is the Makeup of Human Life?	64
<i>Seven</i>	What Can We Know about Heaven?	79
<i>Eight</i>	What Happens between Death and Resurrection?	109
<i>Nine</i>	Is Hell a Real Place?	118
<i>Ten</i>	Can We Hope Through Death?	141
<i>Eleven</i>	What Are the Benefits of Looking at Death?	153
<i>Twelve</i>	What Is Our Destiny?	162

Endnotes 177

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

I originally had no plans to take on this subject. It was only in discussion with my friend and editor at HarperCollins, Don Loney, that I was challenged to examine what dying is, not just as it relates to the mode or location of our forever-existence but to what it means to us in our earthly living. At first I was reluctant, assuming there was much already that had been said. But after beginning my research, I came to see that my assumption was wrong, and that I was about to be challenged in a personal way and in my faith.

To examine our future life forced me to first reflect on what it means to awake each day to life, today. After I rise in the morning, I head off to a local gym for a workout. My goal is to keep my body in shape for, as I age, I can feel my bones creak under the strain of just getting started in the morning. But there are other aspects of being human that need to be kept in shape, too. And as I began to write this book, I realized I was trapped and consumed by daily issues and guilty of neglecting why I am here.

I do myself good by finding ways to be reminded that life does not end and that what I do in this life reverberates out through the endless years of life beyond death.

For their help along my journey, I want to especially thank Audrey Dorsch who provided editorial assistance in the shaping

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I DIE?

of the manuscript, in shaping the content and arranging its flow. Joe Couto was a great help in interviews and research; Dr. John Vissers provided a theological review, for which I am so grateful; and Ruth Whitt assisted greatly in keeping us on schedule and in doing a final review of the manuscript.

Lily, my life companion, as always encouraged me throughout this project. She creates the environment so I can set my mind and heart to the text.

As well, this book came about because of our good friends Herb and Erna Buller who believed this project was worth the research and writing, and through their generosity helped make *What Happens When I Die?* a reality.

In the end, the words are mine, as are any shortcomings. It's not that there is a lack of information provided by the biblical text, but rather in my ability to mine its veins and make it plain. Even so, my hope is that the ideas herein will raise a consciousness that life now being lived is preparation for how we will live out our eternal life. Because for you and me, inevitably and irrevocably, this life will end.

BRIAN C. STILLER

February 2001

One

WHY DO WE DENY DEATH?

And come he slow, or come he fast,
It is but Death who comes at last.

Sir Walter Scott, *Marmion*

When I was born, so long ago,
Death drew the tap of life and let it flow;
And even since the tap has done its task,
And now there's little but an empty dask.
My dream of life's but drops upon the rim.

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*

One Sunday morning at our summer cottage I awoke to the quiet cries of our daughter, Muriel. I slipped out of bed and hurried into her bedroom, where I found her huddled over the cage of her hamster, Hammie the Hose-Head.

"Daddy, look." She pointed. There in the cage was her beloved friend in the final shakes of dying. It was awful, not just to her tender heart, but to her father, who usually was less than happy with the parents' inevitable task of helping clean up after their children's pets. Now, seeing my daughter in distress, I was surprised to feel loss as well.

I picked up the cage of the now-dead hamster and carried it outside. I didn't have to tell her that never again would she lovingly hold her prized friend or watch him endlessly run on his wheel. I put the cage at the back of the cottage, found a match box, and told her that after breakfast we'd have a burial.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I DIE?

After a weepy breakfast she lined up her older brother and mother. Armed with a shovel, I walked with them into the woods. There, after the final good-byes, we buried the match box containing the dead hamster.

“Where is the hamster now, Daddy? Is he with God in heaven?” she asked.

Little girls know the heartbreak of saying farewell to a cherished friend.

Inevitably on this human journey I will die. Though I may live without giving it much thought, at some moment and in some place, life as I now know it will end. People will gather around my casket and look at my waxen face or file by a closed casket with my picture (I hope one of my best) perched on the top; they will speak of memories and times together. Whatever form the funeral or memorial will take, the experience of death is my destiny.

Even so, cultures take extraordinary measures to eliminate reminders of our impending death. It’s become a taboo in conversation. For years I’ve been interested in what life will be like after we die, and so, in various settings, especially with someone who is more senior, I’ll ask, “How do your thoughts about life after death change as you grow older?” A shocked expression tells me I’ve moved beyond the bounds of what they consider appropriate conversation.

We use phrases such as “passed away,” “slipped across the Jordan” or “crossed the great divide” to avoid more stark terms about the end of life. Or death is described as an enjoyable journey amid shimmering lights, leading to a flower-filled meadow. Such attempts can either foster the impression that there is nothing of substance after death or that life will go on somewhere in the universe.

As baby boomers age, end their careers, see their children grow up and leave the home, what they’ll do with retirement

begins to matter more than it did earlier in life. So, like others my age, I regularly check my investments, carefully planning for our future, ensuring that Lily and I will have enough money to provide for reasonable comfort in retirement.

Some years ago, in an enormously popular book, *The Wealthy Barber*, David Chilton described a fictitious barber who, early in his working life, set aside a few dollars a month in an investment account. With the help of compounded interest, by the time he was fifty-five years old, the barber was a millionaire, with more than enough to retire on. About the same time an insurance company launched a successful ad campaign on the theme “Freedom 55,” based on the premise that if you plan and invest properly, you’ll have enough to retire by the time you are fifty-five. You can then kiss your job goodbye and sail off into the blue, spending your life in Florida or Arizona, relaxing on a beach or a golf course.

Yet, while we spend enormous amounts of time researching and planning to make sure that life during retirement will be good, few of us give much thought to what life after death will be like or consider how we can shape that existence. Why is that? Could it be that we assume we have little or no influence over what will come, much as we assume we have little to say about our time of dying? Or could it have more to do with how we divide life: the physical body on one side and the spiritual, or soul component, on the other? In a world shaped by science, the idea of a nonphysical world has been viewed with skepticism and cynicism. Dualism is the result. We’ve learned to live in two worlds: the world of the material and the world of the spirit, or soul. And by so doing we define life by what we experience here and now, shutting off the possibility of life beyond a materially defined reality—that is, until we watch a casket lowered into the grave. Then we are brought face to face with the question, “Is this life all there is to living?”

Segregating life is something we've learned to do quite well. Those who attend church will be reminded by worship, prayers, Scripture, and sermons that quality of life does not equate with material possessions. But then we travel to work on Monday morning as if what we heard the day before has nothing to do with how we work, or the aims or objectives of our employment. Driven by the bottom line, our lives tend to be founded on the premise that life's achievements are best evaluated by what we own.

The extraordinary rise in the number of services providing financial counseling and investment strategy and management has skyrocketed. The astounding number of people involved in stock-market investment is a powerful signal that our multiple generations are shaped by a conviction that life is dominated by material and physical well-being.

Yet alongside this enormous preoccupation with the "Wealthy Barber" syndrome another movement parallels the baby-boomer drive to financial security, and that is what is sweepingly called "spirituality." Influenced by both New Age and charismatic Christian ideas percolating out of the last part of the twentieth century, books dedicated to the search for life beyond the material, addressing topics such as "conversations with God" and "journeys of the spirit," have jumped to the head of the best-selling book lists. These, along with apocalyptic material, fit with the search for the spiritual. Both rise out of a deeply felt need to connect with life in a way not defined or limited by traditional scientific definitions.

When Princess Diana died, call-in shows were plugged with questions such as, "Where is she now?" Following the deaths of John Kennedy, Jr., and his wife in a plane crash, American talk-show host Larry King invited a priest on his program to answer that question.

When death comes without warning, we search for some

sort of logic, forced to ask the larger cosmic question, “What is its nature and extent?” In those moments a materialistic definition of life is both cold and inadequate. Driven by fear and loneliness, we search for ultimate values. It is then that the acquisition of things pales in comparison to our need to see life beyond the present and to hope that our loved one has not ceased to exist, but is now in a place and state that are real and substantive.

I came across a web site that speculates on when a person will die.¹ I plugged in my date of birth and was told that my predicted date of death was Saturday, May 21, 2016, which meant that by their calculation I had some 493,527,620 seconds of life left. Though I plan to live longer than that, it is a reminder that death is as sure as tomorrow’s sunrise, and that with each passing day my life is shorter.

In Jesus’ time the average life span of a Roman was twenty-two years. During the Middle Ages a human’s life span rose to thirty-five years. By 1840 in England, it had reached forty-one, and by the time my father was born in 1910, female North Americans lived fifty-five years on average, and males fifty-two. By 1945 that average had risen to sixty-six years. Today in Canada it’s 75.7 years for men and 81.4 years for women.

Today, death is covered by our antiseptic world of hospital gowns and paramedics and capped off at the end with kindly funeral directors. We go to extraordinary lengths to beautify the corpse, pay significant sums for funeral services that provide viewing rooms for guests, arrange for flowers, plan the memorial, organize a caterer for food following the service and then, in some cases, sit for a couple of hours listening to accolades and stories and memories. At its heart this elaborate scheme is a desperate need to soften the harshness of death and postpone the inevitable loneliness and sorrow.

But what was it like a hundred years ago, out on the prairie

landscape, for my grandparents as they were forced to witness and deal with death? The entire family would be part of a loved one's dying moments. They would hear the last words, the last gasps for breath. They would see the body stop functioning. The cries of pain would cease, the words of goodbye trail away. The body would become stiff, the face lose its color, becoming pale and pasty.

Then family and friends would gather around the corpse—minus embalming fluids and preparation. In those small rural communities a funeral was a rite of passage, as the loss of one person upset the equilibrium. In that era death was “in your face”—not in the comfort of an efficient funeral home with personnel who handled the difficult details. Not in a large cemetery disguised as a park. But right there. In the home. The burial in the cemetery in the center of town, where family members passed every day. Ignoring death then was difficult.

So, while astounding advances are being made for the betterment of human life, we distance ourselves from the actual event of dying, hiding it away from our own living. We keep those who are dying behind the curtains of the intensive-care unit. The aged we move to a nursing home. We feel guilty about moving elderly parents into such facilities, where they will receive the more extensive care they need. But we solace ourselves—and so we should—that they will be better off compared to our attempting to care for them at home, where tension and unrelenting annoyances can make life miserable for everyone.

Regardless of our good reasons for doing what we believe is best, as a culture we shelter ourselves from the death moment. How much easier it is to arrive at the funeral home after the embalming is complete and the dead person is nicely laid out in a coffin. Led by a courteous staff we walk softly into a quiet

room where we observe our loved one in silence, or grieve along with friends and family.

On the flip side is the fascination death holds for us. What news bulletins get our attention? Someone famous has died. People will not soon forget what they were doing the day they heard that John F. Kennedy had been shot. For weeks headline writers worked with increasingly bizarre creativity to tell the world the gory and minute details of everything from the grassy knoll to various conspiracies. Newscasters know what pushes up their ratings: killings, accidents, and fires.

And so while we go out of our way to distance ourselves from death, we are still exposed, over a lifetime, to countless numbers of deaths in movies and television. It is estimated that by the time the average North American child graduates from high school, he or she will have watched forty thousand violent deaths. The daily fare of violence pushes death—often horrible death—in our face. Blockbuster movies depict mayhem and violence. Death is all around us, though mostly at arm's length. As much as blood and guts are part of the regular fare for movies and books, we segregate that from real life with the rationale that it's just fiction.

Like most artists who want living, breathing persons to sketch and paint, we want to avoid the lifeless. Not surprisingly, we avoid going into the rooms where medical examiners perform autopsies. But could it be that by such compartmentalization, by keeping the dying out of sight, we lose the benefits of seeing death as an inevitable part of living? Since death is as real as birth, it is my conviction that our lives are enriched as we consider what death means in life, and the impact that life today will have on what happens in the hereafter. For surely the matter of life after death is inevitably linked to what I do in life to prepare for death.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I DIE?

Even so, regardless of how we handle death, when it comes, it seems so unfair. Unless the person who has died has lived to an elderly age or is in such desperate physical stress that dying is a relief, we see death as a thief—as it is. While we may not have thought much about death, when we receive the sudden and shocking news that a friend or family member has died, we have the sense to know that life is more than breathing or the heart beating. Life has a quality compared to nothing else and we measure it by its quality. In our wills my wife, Lily, and I have given instruction that if our lives so deteriorate that we can be kept alive only by machines, the medical authorities are to disconnect them. We know that having to sustain our breathing and keeping our organs functioning by mechanical means is not what we call life. Life implies a quality of living and that sense of “good” living plays itself out in our vision of what life after death will be like.

In this attempt to understand the nature of life after death, we run into a roadblock because of our notion of time. Einstein’s theory of relativity postulates that in traveling at the speed of light, time stands still, which leads to the idea that if one goes faster than the speed of light, time reverses. Now try to translate that into living. Life is so earth-centered that to conceive of life beyond our parameters of time befuddles the mind.

In the Western world we view time on a linear paradigm, in which time moves from the past to the future in measurable units. It has a beginning and an ending. Eastern religions see life as cycles, in which life goes from one body to another after death. Regardless of how one sees time—be it linear or cyclical—we act as if life revolves around us. This egocentric view diminishes our understanding of time outside of either time-paradigm, and makes it difficult to imagine what is going on with those who have died, those who now live outside our current time framework.

Our sense of spatial realities also complicates our understanding of an afterlife. Even though our understanding has expanded over the centuries, we are stuck with being able to see only our universe. The ancients viewed a universe in which many gods lived in the heavens, evidenced by the impact the sun, moon, and stars had on the earth. As the moon controlled the tides, and the sun the day, the night, and the seasons, so the ancients believed that it was the many gods who ruled over human life.

In Dante's *Divine Comedy*—one of the most important books on life after death—the fourteenth-century writer builds a seven-tiered heaven and a three-tiered hell, with God living in the highest heaven and Satan in the lowest hell. This view changed during the Enlightenment, as the ideas of heaven and hell were seen as metaphorical rather than physical. Then Isaac Newton changed our view of the relationship of God to creation by describing life as a machine God created, leaving it alone to run on physical principles. His theory was called Deism.

During this period of the Enlightenment, creation was no longer seen as having been designed by a loving and caring God. The instant fame of Darwin and his theories of natural selection heightened the view that life on planet Earth was not the result of a sure-handed designer, but rather the haphazard evolving of a chance development of all species, including humans.

Underlying this was the conviction that science was the only means by which one could discover and determine what is truth. Telescopes and microscopes were but the beginning of a surge of scientific thought that became the prime framework of research. This scientific preoccupation opened the way to understanding human personality and social interaction in the newly designed “sciences” of psychology and sociology. So, for example, Freud interpreted religious beliefs within the ego and id, and sociologist Max Weber attributed the rise of capitalism out of the beliefs

and social influences of the Protestant community led by the Reformers, Martin Luther, and John Calvin.

Shaped by two philosophical views—rationalism and empiricism—the increasingly dominating world of science distanced itself from discussion of the supernatural, viewing such matters as only belonging to the world of religion: rationalists seeing truth as the result of thought and empiricists asserting that all that can be known is to be learned only from our senses. Thus science and logic became the accepted foundation by which theories or beliefs would be tested. As a result, propositions not tested in this scientific way would be rejected.

In such a world ruled by science, ideas such as the afterlife, because they were not testable, were deposited in the basket of fables and feelings. Serious work on the afterlife would then be left to the paranormal.

This diminishing of the importance of understanding the afterlife was tragically reinforced by some churches and theologians who interpreted the Scriptures in such a way as to discredit much of what the Bible had to say about life after death, interpreting texts that describe heaven and hell as being so metaphorical as to mean little about what life beyond death might be.

There came a swift reaction against this reduction of the Bible to fables and myths. Resisting the hold of the scientific world, various religious movements jumped beyond the boundaries of reasonable debate and research, including in their repertoire ideas and persons that tended to discredit the search. Religious cults and groups emerged, promoting various visions of the end of time. Some ended up like the Jim Jones mass suicide or the Heaven's Gate cult of southern California.

Even with these bizarre and tragic results, the genie of spirituality has been let out, and the resurgence to find what is beyond life on earth is changing the face of the Western world.

WHY DO WE DENY DEATH?

The preoccupation with a materialistic universe wore thin as people saw past such narrow thinking, seeing rather that human life is more than the sum total of its physical parts.

Rejecting the juggernaut of science, beginning in the 1960s, a religious upheaval helped to rewrite our sense of the real, incorporating the spiritual as legitimate. While some of this search for spirituality led, at times, to religious quackery and even though much of what passed for insight was nothing more than verbal mumbo jumbo, the human instinct for the non-material could no longer be rationalized away. Today this search continues with remarkable strength and dynamism.