The idea of immortality is the answer to a profound human question or, really, the answer to two such questions. The first question is, What happens to a person after death? The second is, How can a person live without overwhelming anxiety in the face of the certainty of death? Behind both questions lies the human aspiration to live forever.

It is possible to look at all of human history as a record of man’s diverse answers to these questions of immortality. Religions and empires have been founded, wars fought, and untold millions of people killed on behalf of conflicting notions of the path to immortal life. And the concern about immortality, as well as the debate about what it means, continues in our own time.

Freud said that the aim of life is death. By this he meant to convey at least two distinct ideas. The first implication of this concept is the idea of the death instinct as an innate tendency toward return to an inanimate state.

Instincts are modes of energy that lead to certain forms of life-preserving behavior. Therefore, the concept of an instinct that leads to death is something of a contradiction in terms. As we have suggested previously, however, Freud’s idea of a death instinct did contain an important element of truth that should be preserved: that death is psychically present from the beginning of life. We wish to preserve this Freudian insight about the psychological significance of death. But we believe that this influence of death on psychological life is due to the importance of symbolization in mental activity rather than to what Freud called a death instinct.

What we call experience can occur only insofar as our minds are able to give form to our perceptions. This form structures and orders sensory data. “Seeing” and “recognizing” are thus very closely related, because inner psychic structures create meaning and the possibility for recognition. The inner forms in our minds are images and symbols which can be either very clear and distinct or rather vague and cloudy. The most general psychic organization of these inner images and symbols takes place around the polarities of connection-separation, movement-stasis, and integrity-disintegration. The extreme form of separation, stasis, and disintegra-

tion is death, and imagery that relates to these is psychologically extremely powerful.

The second implication of Freud’s concept of the death instinct is that “every organism wants to die in its own fashion.” In that spirit, recent psychiatric investigators speak of the “appropriate” death, by which they mean a readiness to die because a full life has reached completion. But this sense is often inseparable from despair – the feeling that one no longer has sufficient purpose to go on living.

These problems have been dealt with chiefly in literature, philosophy, and theology – disciplines outside the realm of science. Only recently have psychologists become concerned with them. The scientific world view has generally been limited to questions of the “means” of life, rather than confronting problems of ultimate value. The purposes of human life and the question of what lies beyond it – these are precisely the issues that science has considered inappropriate to its proper concerns. Because science has great prestige in our society, scientists’ avoidance of issues of value has a profound influence on our culture and our lives.

Psychology has been partly within the scientific tradition in this sense and partly outside it. Most academic psychologists have been more interested in psychological mechanisms (such as how people learn) than in questions of ethical goals (such as what it is people should learn). On this point Freud was a great rebel, because he was concerned with alleviating psychological misery. To achieve that end, he believed people should be educated to accept reality, and he was convinced that the scientific truths discovered by psychology would lead to the abolition of man’s spiritual illusions.

Chief among humanity’s illusions, in Freud’s view, was religion. He saw the spiritual comfort given by religion as a false support used by people who had not outgrown childish dependence on parents. Maturity, according to Freud, would consist in facing squarely the hard realities of life, and death, and not searching after false hopes.

Freud saw the idea of immortality as supreme among civilization’s false hopes. He said that this illusion derives from clinging to the pretense that one will not die, and that it serves to compensate for the reality of death which is too hard to accept. Freud believed that by pinning its hopes on an illusion – the illusion that death is not total and final – civilization undermines its only real hope: the rational pursuit of the truth.

When, in his later writings, Freud attacked religion as an illusion, he aroused almost as much controversy and contempt as he had in his earlier emphasis on the importance of sexuality. Freud insisted that death is final and means the total annihilation of the organism. He believed that doctrines of the immortality of the soul derive from a childlike refusal to accept the finality of death.

In the early 1900s, Carl Jung, initially one of Freud’s followers, began to take psychology in a very different direction. Jung had done extensive study of world religions and mythology and was impressed by the discovery that myths from all parts of the world and in every age have contained beliefs about life after death. Jung felt that the long history of mythology must reveal deep truths about the nature of the human mind that psychology was ignoring. These truths Jung called “archetypes” – universal psychic images which he believed arose from the deepest level of the unconscious. Jung argued that humankind’s relatively recent stress upon narrow materialistic science could bring about the loss of the vital truths displayed in dreams and myths. To ignore these universal archetypal truths would result in the impoverishment of psychic life.

Jung described the psychic vitality of “primitive” peoples who live in tune with archetypal truth. And he observed the positive effects of belief in myths for persons nearing death. He said that when man’s conscious thinking is in harmony with the deep truths of the unconscious revealed in mythology, then fear of death is no longer overwhelming. Life can then be lived to the fullest until the end. Therefore, Jung, in contrast to Freud, encouraged belief in religious teachings because he thought such belief was, in his words, “hygienic” – necessary for healthy living. He wrote:

When I live in a house that I know will fall about my head within the next two weeks, all my vital functions will be impaired by this thought, but if, on the contrary, I feel myself to be safe, I can dwell there in a normal comfortable way.
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Jung was convinced that the unconscious part of the mind has a timeless quality and that belief in eternal life is consistent with the timelessness of the unconscious. To achieve psychological wholeness, in his view, requires that one become more in touch with this part of the unconscious in daily living. In his autobiography, published posthumously, Jung wrote:

If we understand and feel that here in this life we already have a link with the infinite, desires and attitudes change.

We can learn something important from both Freud and Jung. But neither, in our opinion, had a totally satisfactory view.

Freud stressed what is biologically true about death: its absolute destruction of the organism. He was also aware of man’s great capacity for self-delusion. Though he knew that confronting death could heighten the vitality of living, he did not grasp the symbolic significance of images of immortality. In this he under-estimated the human need for images of connection beyond the life span of each individual. This need is not itself delusional, nor need it necessarily result in delusions. Freud was bound to a conception of psychic activity that we think fails to do justice to the characteristically human tendency continually to create and re-create images and inner forms. We speak here of symbolization as a process rather than the creation of specific symbols. What we have referred to as the psychoformative process encompasses this overall tendency, and its complexity is such that it cannot be reduced to the idea of the sexual or death instinct. The important question, then, is how and when symbolization can become rich enough to sustain full vital life.

Here, Jung made a real contribution. He took religious imagery very seriously and appreciated its significance in man’s search for meaning and the effort to express it. The problem with Jung’s position is that he did not always distinguish between man’s need for symbolization around immortality and the literal existence of an afterlife. We agree with Jung that the scientific tradition as reflected in Freud’s insistence on seeing religious symbols as mere delusion misses the point of such symbols.

But Jung’s refusal to distinguish between symbolic meaning and literal reference undermines and distorts both religion and science.

In the seventeenth century, a French philosopher named Blaise Pascal proposed what he called a “wager.” If there is no afterlife, and one doesn’t believe, then one has lost nothing. Pascal argued. But if there really is such a thing, and one fails to gain admission through lack of belief, then all is lost. Therefore, Pascal argued, since there is everything to be gained by believing, and nothing to lose, one should make the wager and decide to believe in the afterlife. Jung’s position is a bit like Pascal’s wager. Moreover, Jungian symbols tend to have a fixed quality, so that there is little connection between what Jung calls archetypal symbols and ongoing history.

Our own view of symbolic immortality draws from both Freud and Jung. We would stress not only the finality of death, but also the human need for a sense of historical connection beyond individual life. We [. . .] need to develop concepts, imagery, and symbols adequate to give a sense of significance to experience. This psychological process of creating meaningful images is at the heart of what we will now call symbolic immortality.

We can see the sense of symbolic immortality as reflecting man’s relatedness to all that comes before him and all that follows him. This relatedness is expressed in the many kinds of symbolization that enable one to participate in ongoing life without denying the reality of death. Without this unending sense of attachment to aims and principles beyond the self, the everyday formative process we have been discussing – as well as the capacity to feel at home in the world – cannot be sustained. When people believe in such cultural projects and expressions, they feel a sense of attachment to human flow, to both their biology and their history. They feel a sense of immortality which enables active, vital life to go on.

This sense of immortality is expressed in five modes or categories: biological, creative, theological, natural, and experiential.

Biological immortality is perhaps the most obvious mode. It means simply that a person lives on through
(and in) his sons and daughters and their sons and daughters in an endless chain. In addition to generational continuity, this mode also symbolizes the reproductive cells as they are passed along from parent to child.

The biological mode of immortality has been greatly emphasized in East Asia, especially in China and Japan, where the failure to have offspring implies lack of respect for ancestors. But the idea of a continuing family and a “family name” protected from blemish is important in all cultures. The act of writing a will to insure the transmission of inherited wealth to one’s descendants reflects this concern for the preservation of one’s posterity.

This mode is never purely biological. It is experienced emotionally and symbolically and transcends one’s own biological family to include one’s tribe, organization, people, nation, or even species. Similarly, the sense of biological continuity becomes intermingled with cultural continuity as each generation passes along its traditions to the next.

We can speak of a kind of “biosocial immortality” that occurs through the continuity of one’s family and other important social groupings. Historically this mode has been a mixed blessing. It has encouraged cooperation with those beyond one’s immediate family (one’s people), but has also led through chauvinism to the killing of those whose one views as “different.” Nevertheless, there has been a significant trend among large numbers of people throughout the world to view all of humanity as a single species sharing a common destiny. Unfortunately, that beginning recognition has hardly touched ideological and nationalistic antagonisms.

A second mode is that of human “works,” or the creative mode. One may feel a sense of immortality in this mode through teaching, art-making, repairing, construction, writing, healing, inventing, or through lasting influences of any kind on other human beings— influences that one feels can enter into a general human flow beyond the self. In professions like science or art that have a long heritage, one is frequently aware of the historical sources of one’s own work and the tradition that one’s own contribution is maintaining.

In such service professions as medicine or education, one has a sense that one’s direct influence on patients or students is transmitted to more distant persons not seen or known. When efforts at healing or teaching seem unsuccessful, one may feel a profound despair originating in the perception that one’s efforts are not making any lasting difference. This despair itself reveals a deep human need to have an enduring effect—to leave a trace.

Ordinarily, when one’s work is progressing well, there is little conscious concern with its immortalizing effect. But when the products of creative effort do not seem sufficient to embody one’s sense of self, then the question (previously unconscious) of the value and meaning of one’s life and work begins to become a conscious concern.

The Christian tradition has distinguished between “work” and “works.” “Work” in this sense has referred to mundane, often unsatisfying toil which regenerates neither the worker nor his community. “Works” imply contributions of lasting value to the larger community; these contributions are made in part through one’s “vocation.” Entering a vocation was originally dependent upon feeling oneself “called” to do some particular kind of work, and the word vocation still suggests something beyond just a job. It implies that one feels in one’s work connections and commitments beyond the self. At some level of consciousness, such actions are perceived to involve the lasting extension of the valued elements of one’s own life into the lives of others. Through such doctrines as karma, service, and duty, other religions have expressed similar ideas.

The theological mode of immortality is the one most readily suggested by the word immortality. For, historically, it has been through religion and religious institutions that people have most self-consciously expressed the aspiration of conquering death and living forever. Different religions give the assurance of immortality in different ways, but concern with the problem of the meaning of life in the face of death is common to all religious traditions. No religion is based on the premise that human life is eternally insignificant. Thus, Buddha, Moses, Christ, and Muhammad, through various combinations of moral attainment and revelation, transcended individual death and left behind teachings through which their followers could do the same.
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The danger with religious images of immortality is that they can quickly lose their symbolic quality and result in the assertion that people don’t really die. For centuries, great religious teachers have attacked institutionalized “religion” as the real stumbling block to authentic spiritual attainment. Such images as heaven, hell, reincarnation, and the resurrection of the body are often understood in the same sense as scientific observations of nature. Thus, the concept of the “immortal soul” — a part of man that escapes death — was seen by Freud as a characteristic example of the human capacity for self-delusion through religion.

We believe Freud was justified in his attack upon literalized doctrines that deny death. But Freud did not appreciate that religious symbols of life after death or life beyond death can mean something other than literal images of angels living serenely in a blissful heaven or, negatively, damned souls condemned to eternal suffering in the fires of hell. The image of immortality can connect with the experience of spiritual death and rebirth which may occur many times during one’s earthly existence. Spiritual rebirth in this sense may be interpreted as a dying to profane or vulgar existence and a regenerated life on a more intense and meaningful plane, an experience that gives rise to profound and revitalizing hope. The Jewish religion has emphasized rebirth as something that happens to the whole people or nation. Christianity has focused more on individual spiritual attainment and salvation.

Imagery of rebirth is found in the Hindu and Buddhist as well as the Jewish and Christian religions. And whenever such imagery is present, the danger of its being literalized is always present, too. But central to all these traditions, and more compatible with our own psychoformative position, is the conception of transcending death through spiritual attainment that connects one with eternal principles.

Thus the idea of being “chosen by God,” experiencing the grace of God, or, in Eastern religions, removing the veil of ordinary existence — all these images speak symbolically of a changed experience of time and of death somehow losing its sting. Whether through prayer, worship, contemplation, or meditation, all religions have taught methods of reorienting oneself in relation to time and death. This reorientation is often spoken of as a spiritual rebirth that must be preceded by a death of the old self. This is expressed in the Christian tradition in the words “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it,” a paradoxical image suggesting both death and rebirth.

A fourth mode is the sense of immortality achieved through continuity with nature. “From dust you come and to dust you shall return” is an Old Testament injunction against pride, as well as an expression of confidence that the earth itself does not die. Whatever happens to man, the trees, mountains, seas, and rivers endure. Partly for this reason, we constantly go back to nature, however briefly, for spiritual refreshment and revitalization.

In traditional Japanese culture, nature has been seen as a divine embodiment of the gods of mountain, valley, rain, wind, field, and stream. The delicate beauty of Japanese gardens is an expression of this cultural legacy. In India, the gods are always pictured as residing amidst lush mountains and valleys — nature being the ideal spiritual home. Americans, too, have had an intense concern with the “great outdoors,” a concern originally demonstrated by the importance of the great frontier — that ever expanding horizon of the earthly realm of man.

The image of nature as the great frontier still exists in our journeys to the moon and aspirations beyond. (These journeys and aspirations, being human, become corrupted by the competitive insistence of a single nation upon being the first there — in effect, upon claiming an immortalizing advantage for this priority.) An avid interest in outdoor sports of all kinds and a growing preoccupation with ecology witness the continuing importance of being in touch with a surviving natural habitat. The concern with ecology has arisen from the very real possibility of the destruction of the environment, and also from the continuing importance of nature for our imaginations. In this sense, the enduring rhythms of nature have a significance that is undiminished, and perhaps intensified, for those city-dwellers to whom they are no longer visible.

A fifth mode of immortality, which we call experiential transcendence, is a bit different from the others in that it depends solely on a psychological state. This state is the experience of illumination or rapture attained as time seems to disappear. The term
transcendence – meaning “going beyond” – refers to the feeling of being beyond the limits and confines of ordinary daily life. Moments of transcendence have an ecstatic quality, and the word “ecstasy” means “to stand outside of” – to be outside of oneself. In this sense, moments of experiential transcendence are moments of being beyond prosaic life, and beyond death.

Experiential transcendence is similar to the spiritual reorientation which we spoke of as religious rebirth. But such psychological experience may also be found in music, dance, battle, athletics, mechanical flight, contemplation of the past, artistic or intellectual creation, sexual love, childbirth, comradeship, and the feeling of working together with others in common cause. This experience can occur in relation to any of the other four modes (biological, creative, theological, natural) and, in fact, may be essential in order to integrate any of them into one’s life. However it occurs, experiential transcendence involves a sense of timelessness, of which Jung spoke. There does seem to be a universal psychic potential and even need for occasional suspension of ordinary awareness of time.

The state of experiential transcendence may be brought on with the aid of drugs, starvation, physical exhaustion, or lack of sleep. However induced, this state is felt as involving extraordinary psychological unity, intensity of sensual awareness, and unexpressible illumination and insight. After such an experience, life is not quite the same. In fact, it is the result of such experiences – the sense of “new life” – that is often valued more than the experiences themselves.

Transcendent experiences result in a reordering of the dominant symbols and images by which one lives. The result can be a new tone of vitality in living, a new sense of commitment to one’s projects, or the abandoning of one’s old projects and commitments in favor of a totally new style of life. The reordering can also lead to greater ethical integrity and more courageous moral actions. Experiences of this kind can be of greater or lesser intensity. But even such relatively less intense and more common occurrences as exertion on a tennis court or in a sprint, a moment of insight or quietude, or gentle sensual touching can involve an altered sense of time and a feeling of expanded life space.

Over the centuries, men have frequently used drugs in pursuit of these experiences. In recent years drugs have been increasingly used, often in combination with music, to achieve various kinds of “highs.” Many people in describing such “trips” have emphasized the importance of the setting in which the drug is taken, the person with whom one shares the experience (the “guide”), and the expectations that one brings to the experience. All these refer to the symbolic context or set of images present in the mind prior to and during the use of the drug. This, in turn, suggests that drugs by themselves do not bring about spiritual reorientation. Large numbers of people are finding forms of spiritual discipline, such as meditation, which can offer similar experiences without recourse to drugs.

The “highs” which some people experience with drugs (or alcohol) are obtained by other people in different ways. William James long ago remarked that getting drunk was the poor man’s substitute for what the rich get from going to the symphony. Whether that is precisely true or not, we might wonder what he would say now about the more modern combination of listening stoned to the Stones. In any case it is interesting that the use of marijuana has come to be termed getting “stoned” – almost in the way getting drunk is sometimes referred to as being “plastered.” In each case the image is of becoming desensitized, even inanimate – but in a very special way that is thought of as highly pleasurable and beyond pain. Although alcohol is primarily a depressant and marijuana characteristically intensifies perception, both can result in either heightened sensitivity or the reverse, depending upon the setting and the expectations that one brings to their use.

Those who would connect the use of drugs with the experience of transcendence (as we are doing here) are nevertheless compelled to recognize the addiction and deterioration which can also result. The deaths of Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix, for example, suggest the way in which drug use may involve the user in destructive experiences, even death trips.

When reordering and renewal give way to exclusive reliance upon the chemical influence of the drug, habitation and addiction can be said to
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occur. No longer having access to liberating images, the "old self" remains in a state of symbolic death. Use of the drug then becomes more desperate, and the breakdown of inner integrity becomes increasingly associated with the death imagery of separation, disintegration, and stasis. The anxiety associated with these impulses the user to return even more desperately to the drug in a pathetic downward spiral. There are many people whose relationship to drugs is a mixture of these extremes, containing elements of symbolic reordering and rebirth as well as habituation and anxiety.

The quest for experiential transcendence is usually related not only to the search for the new, but also to the unfolding of that which is oldest and deepest in the self. Rebirth and new life are recurrent images in all religious traditions; the Christian spiritual message is, in fact, referred to as "good news." The experience of addiction, not only to drugs but to anything else as well, is a desperate search for novelty (always a new high) with continually less experience that is actually new. Thus, addiction comes to be the experience that nothing is new—a nullification of the life imagery of movement. It becomes instead a deathlike numbness from which recovery is difficult.

The process of therapy in psychiatry involves a symbolic reordering analogous to that which occurs in experiential transcendence. When therapy is successful, a patient feels a widening of the space in which he lives. It is as if the narrow images through which he has seen reality have been reorganized so that the past appears more coherent and the future more inviting. Death imagery is reconceived, and life imagery of connection, integrity, and movement becomes dominant.

In many societies experiential transcendence is encouraged through fiestas, festivals, holidays, and celebrations which help people to break free of the restraints of routine and to sing, dance, drink, laugh, and love in a spirit of excess. Such celebrations radically interrupt ordinary daily life and allow participants to forget time and responsibility. The occasions for these celebrations are often religious holy days which derive from society's myth of its own beginnings. The celebration is a kind of birthday in which the society's birth is commemorated and its people's lives renewed.

Experiential transcendence is thus a key to the sense of immortality in any mode. For what lies at the heart of experiential transcendence—reorientation of time—is necessary to the other modes as well if they are in fact to connect with a sense of the eternal. Experiential transcendence involves entry into what has been called "mythic time," in which the perception of death is minimized and the threat of extinction is no longer foreboding. One feels oneself alive in a "continuous present" in which ancient past and distant future are contained.

We spoke earlier of the innate death imagery of separation, disintegration, and stasis. The five modes of symbolic immortality provide avenues through which the death anxiety associated with these images can be mastered. By achieving significant relation to these modes, one's life assumes qualities of continuity and the life imagery of connection, movement, and integrity is affirmed. We can speak of the need to master death anxiety as basic to the human condition, and we can see the modes of symbolic immortality as providing paths for this mastery.

It is possible to think of human life at every moment as moving between two poles: imagery of total severance (death imagery) and imagery of continuity (symbolic immortality). Both are present in a kind of balance; neither is able totally to abolish the other. Death imagery makes the quest for symbolic immortality more urgent and provides a stimulus for creative effort of all kinds. Images of continuity and immortality make the certainty of death less threatening. Feeling moments of experiential transcendence or a strong sense of relation to one of the other modes of symbolic immortality enables one to affirm the continuity of life without denying death. Much of the time these matters are not part of conscious awareness, although they underlie and support the tone and quality of one's awareness. At crisis points and times of transition, however, they become very conscious issues.

Periods of historical dislocation are characterized by lack of confidence in a society's institutions. But institutions—family, church, government, work, schools—are themselves structures through which to facilitate the sharing of images of immortalizing
connectedness. In times like our own when these institutions are in flux, the task for each individual of maintaining a sense of immortality becomes vastly more difficult.

Death anxiety becomes overwhelming when one has to confront it in isolation. Societies and social institutions – when people believe in them – are able to aid in mastering death anxiety by generating shared images of continuity beyond the life of each single person. The capacity to live with death is generated by available social forms as well as by forms made available by one’s own life.

Suicide is therefore never a purely private matter. When a person takes his own life, not only does he demonstrate his own failure to master death anxiety; he reveals a social failure as well. The society has not managed to share with him its symbols of continuity. In committing suicide a person makes a once-and-for-all total effort to master death anxiety.

Paradoxically, suicide can be an attempt to assert symbolic integrity: It is a way of holding to certain principles, of actively defining one’s life boundaries, and of affirming value. This is not to say that suicide does not result from despair. But to live with despair is one thing; to perform the final act of ending one’s life is another. Suicide can be seen as a kind of false mastery: One commits suicide when one is unable to live with the knowledge of death or envision a viable connection beyond it.

That suicide cannot be understood solely as an act of valueless despair is shown by the traditional Japanese practice of hara-kiri. In this act of ritual suicide, dying with dignity overcomes the humiliation of defeat. In accordance with the samurai code, suicide is an honorable act through which one can maintain the purity and immortality of one’s name and country and, in the act of dying, reassert immortalizing principles. Yukio Mishima, the great Japanese novelist, attempted to revive that tradition and to convey in his recent suicide the message that contemporary Japan is losing its national essence. Though many found his act of ritual suicide absurd, it had a profound impact on Japanese society.

What about other kinds of suicide? Certainly not everyone who commits suicide lives by so demanding a code as that of the samurai. Nevertheless, a person who voluntarily ends his life is asserting in a positive way – although through a negative act – that under certain conditions life is not endurable. The act of suicide thus presumes the presence of some standards as to what a livable life would be. Under extreme conditions, such as Nazi extermination camps, suicide could become an assertion of freedom (to take one’s own life rather than to wait to be killed) and even an inspiration for rebellion. For this to happen, suicide must be associated with a vision of life renewal beyond the death-dominated moment.

Suicide can rarely be the source of such renewal. More characteristically, it is the ultimate failure to master that which can never be completely mastered: death itself. But destructive and self-destructive acts are less likely to be resorted to when one feels oneself to be animated by a sense of immortality.