BOOK REVIEW

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In her book The Last Frontier, Julia Assante attempted to lay the foundation for a revolution. Her goal was to erase the line between life and death, replace it with an understanding that our essential humanness is immortal, and thereby affirm that our humanness continues to live after our bodies cease to function. What we perceive as life followed by death is just a transformation of our material bodies into an ethereal spiritual substance. Using the tools of the scholar, tools developed in her own doctoral work as a student of the ancient Near East, Assante has written a well-researched and amply documented text that aims to explore the afterlife and lessen our fear of death.

As a person who is skeptical by nature, I am not sure if I would have independently chosen this book to read. The author’s brief biographical statement indicated that she is a mystic and a scholar, a professional intuitive, a medium, and a past-life therapist. Most people I have experienced with who make such claims offer “readings” for $20 and have storefronts near major highways. Such are the prejudices with which I initially approached this book.

Two experiences led me to put aside my automatic dismissal of what I considered “flaky” pursuits to consider carefully and thoughtfully the author’s argument. The first experience was my earlier reading of another book that dealt with esoteric matters, Extraordinary Knowing. I had the good fortune to attend a lecture by the late author, Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer, a highly respected psychoanalyst. My first-hand knowledge of her intelligence, honesty, and psychological balance forced me

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to consider her perspective. After reading her book, I came to the conclusion that our conventional understandings are limitations that lock us into a worldview that is narrow and confining. Serendipitously, not long after reading Mayer's book, I had a client who, after several sessions, told me she saw dead people. Using good counseling technique, I began to explore her experience non-judgmentally, yet initially on the lookout for signs of psychosis. Finding no such signs, I listened with openness as well as curiosity to her stories of seeing what she called spirits. As she narrated her experiences, there was no glamorizing of the events, no attempt to persuade or impress me. She seemed relieved to share an important part of her that she had long kept hidden for fear of being labeled crazy.

These two experiences fractured my knee-jerk skepticism and led me to read Assante's book with an open, but still questioning, mind. An open mind is a prerequisite for absorbing and considering her perspective. I believe that living in a culture focused so totally on the reality of the material, the unreality of the spiritual, and the primacy of the scientific, purportedly objective, method leaves its members at a disadvantage when confronted with a very different orientation. Readers of this book need to be able to suspend, at least during their reading, ingrained presumptions about how the world works. If they are willing to consider as possible ideas and occurrences that are generally derided by our scientific culture, I think they will be amply rewarded. Assante assisted me in that process by writing in a conversational manner that was both well reasoned and engaging. She guided me through the intricacies of a painstakingly developed argument with a mixture of scholarly erudition, personal anecdotes, and numerous examples. The end result was, for me, challenging and, at times, unsettling.

The book is organized into four major parts: The Evidence for Survival; The Social Construction of the Afterlife; Dying, Death & Beyond; and All About Contact. This organization seems to place, quite intentionally, the most controversial material last; the author carefully constructed an argument that enabled me at least to consider that communication with the dead is possible. Each section was heavily footnoted with references to commonly accepted serious works as well as to more esoteric works by authors who have investigated past-life experiences, reincarnation, and appearances by the deceased.
**Part I: The Evidence for Survival**

The book’s first chapter, “Can Survival After Death be Proved?”, begins with an insightful analysis of the nature of the universe and of consciousness. Assante described how the materialist view of the universe has crumbled under the pressure of findings from quantum physics. The old dualisms of subjective and objective, matter and non-matter, material and spiritual have given way to an interplay of waves spreading out in time and space. From this perspective individuals are not bound by time and space. Rather, they are able to transcend both by loosening the grip of the material on their consciousness. The universe is not a single static entity; it is an evolving multiverse with many dimensions and unceasing bifurcations. In presenting these findings from quantum physics, Assante began to loosen my hold on preconceptions about life and death and about this apparently material world and the world of the afterlife.

Chapter two, “How Real is Real?”, continued the development of a non-material view of the world. Using analogies, metaphors, case studies, and scientific findings, Assante attempted to demonstrate that what appears to be solid matter is not solid and what appears to be limited by time and space is not limited. Citing both reported incidents of remote viewing, the ability to see something happening even though not physically present, and tests of perception that indicate that people react to a stimulus before the brain has registered it, the author attempted to prove that consciousness is not stored in the physical brain. Quite to the contrary, consciousness consists of energy, and energy flows like a quantum wave that is not bound by time, space, or material substance. These insights began to open a door between the worlds of the living and the dead. If consciousness is not anchored by matter, then it should not be difficult to accept that consciousness might continue to exist after what is material has ceased to exist.

In the third chapter, “Near-Death Experiences”, by offering a compendium of accounts of these experiences, Assante continued to develop the argument that consciousness is not bound by the material. Whereas all these accounts are quite fascinating, those that appeal most to the more skeptical include some validating proof. For instance, one account tells the story of a woman who died in the hospital. While attempts were being made to resuscitate her, she found herself floating out of her body and out of the hospital. As she floated over the hospital she noticed a red shoe on the hospital’s roof. Later, she recounted her
experience to her doctors. One enterprising resident decided to check and see if there was a red shoe on the roof. Indeed, the shoe was there.

Assante also described other aspects of near-death experiences. There are some commonly recurring themes—moving through a tunnel or over a bridge, being met by deceased relatives, undergoing a life review. Some scholars have viewed these commonalities as a validation of the experience, whereas others have attributed these occurrences to physical changes in the brain and body as the death process begins. Whatever the case, Assante asserted that near-death experiences prove that the mind continues to function outside the body.

Chapters four and five are the heart of this first part of the book. Starting with chapter four, “After-Death Communication” and continuing into chapter five “Reincarnation”, Assante presented evidence of survival after death. In chapter four the evidence presented came from experiences people have had with the deceased, usually loved ones and friends, but sometimes a deceased individual who shared similar interests or just sought to assist the living in some way. These experiences range from spontaneous encounters with the deceased, sometimes occurring in the form of a visual apparition and sometimes via an auditory communication, to encounters through an intermediary such as a medium or through what is referred to as instrumental communication—when a deceased individual seemingly uses devices such as tape recorders or radios to communicate with the living.

The chapter on reincarnation continued the author's attempt to demonstrate that consciousness survives the death of the body. Citing the extensive literature on reincarnation, gathered anecdotally and more formally, including by Western trained scholars, Assante made a pressing case for past-life remembrances. Although reincarnation is widely accepted in many parts of the world, and was once a part of the Christian worldview, most modern-day Westerners view the possibility with skepticism, and often with intellectual disdain. Clearly, Assante hoped that the groundwork laid in the first two chapters would enable a reader to consider the possibility that an individual’s consciousness is not finite and bound to a single material entity.

**Part II: The Social Construction of the Afterlife**

Although I found this part of the text interesting, it seemed to diverge from the main focus of the book on transforming readers' fear of death. The first chapter, “A Comparative History of the Afterlife”, is a fascinating account of the development of various conceptions of the
afterlife. Focusing primarily on cultures that have influenced Western notions of the afterlife, Assante drew on her own scholarly training about the cultures of the Near East to explain where the common conception of hell as fiery hot came from (the hot desert), and how the afterlife notions of Mesopotamia and Egypt have influenced Western perceptions today. From her study of these two cultures she concluded that views of the afterworld are social constructions that coincide with a particular culture’s experience and values. Indeed, hierarchical Egyptian society created institutional monopolies that structured the death process through prescribed rituals, and posited an afterlife that was accessible only after a period of trial and judgment. This view of the afterlife is in marked contrast to the more egalitarian afterlife in Mesopotamia: the Netherworld is where all the deceased ended up without a period of trial and judgment.

From her initial review of the belief systems of the Near East, Assante turned her attention to a review of the afterlife beliefs of Greece and Rome, Ancient Israel, Early Christianity, Roman Catholicism, and traditional societies. In each case she made the point that views about death and the afterlife arise out of a particular culture’s experience and values. In this way, notions about the afterlife are relativized: There is no single, true view; present conceptions are as socially constructed as those from the past.

In chapter seven, “The Genesis of Sin”, the author described how the judgmental approach of the Egyptians found its way into several of the world’s major religions. The notion of sin, from the misdeeds of Eve to the later development of the concept of Original Sin, reflects a dualistic outlook in which people conceptualize the world as a battle between good and evil. The notion of sin may serve to regulate behavior, but it also engenders a fear of death and of the afterworld. It is clear that Assante would readily abandon the notion of sin. She associated sin with coerced faith, belief, and actions that spring from fear rather than from love. She contrasted this belief system with real faith: a felt connection to all living things, and to the inherent goodness of creation.

The discussion of the afterlife and of sin is followed by a chapter that I find extremely difficult to categorize, and even more difficult to summarize. Chapter eight, “Spiritual Evolution, Nontime and the Ego”, is an analysis of the spiritualist movement, a defense of mediumship, a critique of some aspects of the New Age movement, an explanation of how linear time does not exist, and a defense of the ego as the carrier of each person’s uniqueness.
The three chapters of Part II of the text could easily be expanded into several fully developed separate books. Indeed, chapter eight itself could be developed into three books, one a critique of the notion of spiritual evolution, another an extended reflection on the non-linearity of consciousness, and the third a nuanced analysis of the necessity of accepting and working with the ego. Although I found the concepts discussed in Part II interesting, except for the notion of the social construction of the afterlife, I found they detracted from the main thrust of the text.

**Part III: Dying, Death & Beyond**

The three chapters of Part III offered a guidebook for approaching death. In chapter nine, “The Fear of Death: Causes and Cures”, Assante described the societal fear of death and the medical community’s complicity in supporting that fear by attempting to prolong life even when it is clear that death, always inevitable, is near. She asserted that in order to move beyond a fear of death, individuals need to become aware of the positive experiences of those who have had near-death experiences. Reflecting on these positive experiences begins the process of releasing fear about dying. This process can be accelerated by each person envisioning their own dying process and working through the issues that emerge as they begin to let go of life. Finally, Assante posited that one of the best ways to let go of fear about dying is to encounter someone who is already deceased. Through such an encounter death is experienced as a part of the continuum of consciousness. In the same way that travelling to another state is not to be feared, neither is death to be feared. Being in the dying state is a change, often a change for the better where many of the limitations of an embodied existence are no longer present.

From letting go of the fear of death, Assante transitioned to how to die well. Chapter ten, “Preparing to Die”, provided an overview of the death process. Topics ranged from a consideration of the unfinished business family members may inflict upon the dying to the process of unconsciously orchestrating one’s own death. It was the author’s contention that most people know, albeit unconsciously, that the death process has begun. Citing numerous cases she detailed how the dying are aware of what is happening and to some extent plan their final hours. Oftentimes reconciliation between the dying and loved ones and friends occurs; frequently the dying wait for a family member to
arrive at their bedside before they move on to non-material existence. Finally, she detailed encounters that the dying have with deceased family and friends, encounters that may occur in dreams or in more alert hypnogogic states. In general, dying persons experience these encounters as positive: Loved ones act as guides to assist them as they transition and to welcome them when they arrive in transmaterial domains.

In the final chapter of this part of the text, “Going Through the Threshold”, the author detailed the process of moving from the body into a disembodied state. Although she discussed some of the more common occurrences—moving through a tunnel or a dense fog, encountering familiar people there to assist, and encountering more ethereal, spiritual presences—Assante made the very strong point that it is best never to tell people definitively what they will experience when death occurs. They will draw largely on their own personal history, culture, and beliefs in constructing their after-death experience.

Part IV: All About Contact

The five chapters that constitute this final section of the text posed some of the most difficult material for me as a skeptical reader. Whereas Assante had not hesitated throughout the text to include her experiences as a medium, in this section those experiences moved to center stage. Beginning in chapter twelve, “It’s Ok to Talk to the Dead, But what Happens when the Dead Talk Back?”, and ending with chapter sixteen, “How to Make Contact”, the emphasis was on normalizing contact with the departed and providing a manual to assist those who want to contact them. She dealt in some depth with several subjects, such as ghosts, telepathy, automatic writing, and the subtle signs that indicate an encounter is occurring. Because there is no easy way to summarize the steps the author provides, suffice it to say that Assante offered an interested reader a clear method for attempting to enter into communication with the departed.

Conclusion

Assante concluded with a consideration of how people’s lives would be enhanced if they had a sense of their own immortality. She returned to the theme that began the book, overcoming the fear of death, by more than suggesting that people no longer need to fear death because
death does not truly exist. Her conclusion flowed logically from the argument she had constructed and the material she had presented throughout her work.

Clearly, much of her argument rests on a worldview and an experience of being in the world that is very different than the conventional one. Many potential readers would automatically dismiss anything said by someone who purports to communicate with the dead. My own training in anthropology and psychology, and my inherent suspicion of a kind of group-think which has people accept as real only that which is conventionally agreed upon, makes me hesitant to simply dismiss her perspective and her personal experiences. On the contrary, I think the book offers many valuable insights that do not require a reader to agree with everything as it is set out. In particular, I found the early chapters in Part I fascinating and filled with interesting information and examples. Individuals interested in near-death experiences, and in an extended consideration of how present day conceptions of death have evolved, would benefit from reading this text. In addition, those willing to consider that individual consciousness is not tied to a material body would find much of interest in Assante’s more esoteric discussions.

If the book has an inherent shortcoming, I think it is that the author tried to do too much and cover too much territory. The chapters of Part II are a compendium of interesting but somewhat disparate information. Only tangentially connected to the main argument of the book, much of this information took me down some interesting conceptual roads, but did not seem to connect fully with the author’s main thesis.

If the goal of a book is to make a reader think, ponder, and question, then Assante has succeeded—certainly with me. In this regard at least, I am glad that this book was “forced” upon me for this review. My immediate take-away is a heightened sense that the world is not nearly as “cut and dry” as a conventional perspective would indicate. If physicists contend that the solid is not so solid, and philosophers understand the human take on reality as a social construction, then perhaps it is not so far-fetched to argue that there is no such thing as death.

References