

Life After Death: What Happens to Your Body After You Die?

Michael Wilson

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This book is dedicated to Carolyn Cross, an entrepreneur and philanthropist, who has devoted her life to developing a new approach (known as “photodisinfection”) for preventing and treating infectious diseases. Her innovative technology has cured many people suffering from such diseases as well as preventing others from catching them in the first place. Thanks to her, therefore, the onset of the processes that are described in this book will be delayed for huge numbers of people.

Preface

There must be very few of us who haven't considered, at some point in our life, the question of what happens after we die. Most of us muse on this in a rather detached, philosophical fashion when we are young, but usually regard it as something that doesn't really affect us and quickly move on to occupy ourselves with more exciting activities. However, as we grow older, we generally get more interested in this question. Once we reach the age of around 70 it finally dawns on us that death is something that really is going to happen to us, probably in the not-too-distant future. Although we start to think more about it, we usually get no nearer to finding an answer to that intriguing "what comes after" question.

Many religions claim to know what happens after we die and this provides comfort to huge numbers of people. But for the rest of us, death remains an interesting, rather worrying, one way journey into the unknown. However, while we may not be able to work out what happens to the essential "me" after death, we can take comfort in knowing what happens to the physical carrier of the "me" i.e. our body. Yes, it will certainly decompose and become smelly. Yes, it will be eaten by microbes and insects and all sorts of other creatures. But, think positive! Our body is a very rich and valuable source of nutrients that will end up feeding huge numbers, and an immense variety, of other creatures. You will end up being recycled in the biosphere and will support the continuation of life on our beautiful planet - this book describes how this comes about.

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the topic that provides an overall perspective on what happens to our body once we die and the benefits this has for other creatures and the environment. The human body is then discussed in terms of it being an important source of a wide range of valuable nutrients.

The third chapter focusses on the concept of a human being as a symbiotic association consisting of a mammal and a variety of microbial communities known collectively as the “human microbiota”. This symbiosis is a complex, highly-evolved biological association which benefits both the mammalian and microbial components and this relationship is discussed in detail. Death is followed by a series of physical changes to our body and these are described in the next chapter. While death marks the end of life for their human host, our microbiota lives on, although the composition of the microbial community at a particular body site begins to change. The human microbiota, with the help of environmental microbes, makes sure that the constituents of its human host are recycled so enriching Earth’s biosphere and this is the subject of Chapter 5. Insects also play an important role in the decomposition process and, as in the case of microbes, different insects become active as this progresses. The types of insects involved, and the contribution they make to the decomposition process, are described in the succeeding chapter. Finally, the impact that nutrients from a human corpse have on the environment is revealed in the last chapter which also has a little poem to send you on your way, hopefully in a positive frame of mind.

For those of you who would like to know more, a reading list has been included at the end of each chapter. Many of the references provided, whether they are websites or scientific papers, have been chosen because they can be accessed freely by the general public. However, some of the more specialised ones are not freely-available and you’ll have to try and obtain them through a library.

Images of dead human beings and other animals can, of course, be very disturbing to look at. Consequently, to spare the feelings of readers, those images that may be upsetting have been included in an Appendix at the end of the book. These can be viewed by those whose curiosity is able to outweigh their sensitivity.

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