

# Social and Electronic Immortality

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“As long as we are not assured of immortality, we shall never be fulfilled, we shall go on hating each other in spite of our need for mutual love.”

-- Eugene Ionesco

## *Existential, Co-Existentialism, and Immortality*

How can we overcome the death barrier? Existentialism claims that we cannot. Our life is characterized by finitude which has death as its limit condition. But the sting of death--mortality--and our acknowledgment of this reality makes us wake up to life and be resolute for our projects of self-realization. Yet we die alone!

But which if this existential conviction is based on shaky ground? Are we not born into family-community and do we not die within a community of extended family and friends within the social body of our “existential ensemble” (von Eckartsberg, 1979) which we have co-created by our living? This cast of characters of our existence survives our death. The survival community is launched at the funeral of the deceased. While the dead person is lowered into the ground, the person’s spirit is raised in speech and imagination of the survivors. A spiritual rebirth occurs. To the deceased person a new state of being, a new life: social immortality is bestowed in and through our collective commemoration. It exists as a circulation in image-consciousness and speechy. This is the point of view of co-existentialism. Personal immortality for oneself may well be impossible, but social immortality, continued life in the consciousness and speaking of others is not.

Existentialism focused on subjectivity, the actor’s point of view, and the life-span of the individual. The individual experiences the world and him- or herself in consciousness which produces the meanings which guide our decisions and actions. In this article we will revision this ego- and conscio-centric attitude of existentialism with regards to the issues of immortality. Consciousness is not the autonomous creation of the person alone. It is grounded in and permeated by human language which co-articulates our experience. The life of the community, of others, life in interpersonal

relationships, life between us, precedes, envelops, and succeeds the life of the individual.

Co-existentialism, in my view, was founded by Buber and Rosenstock-Huessy (von Eckartsberg, 1985). The starting point of co-existentialism is the conviction that we exist in relationships, and that we communicate with others and with ourselves through interaction and language. The between of co-existence is our primary reality and language is equiprimordial with consciousness. We talk to ourselves, we process reality in a private mode shaped by language. This private experience has to be articulated to others to achieve interpersonal and thus irrevocable social and moral reality. Once communicated, the person's experience in principle can live on in the memory and discourse of the listeners and, as such, it can survive the death of the speaker or writer. Co-existentialism discusses the multi-generational nature of human discourse and it emphasizes the study of interpersonal relationships--our life in social network--which can survive the death of its members. Relationships may attain immortality in and through co-existence.

Language can accomplish immortality. It does so in a relative manner depending on the extent and duration of the circulating discourse in co-existential networks. In the view of co-existentialism immortality is a social reality of discourse, as was especially true in ages steeped in the oral tradition. Co-existentialism aligns itself with this wisdom, hoping to bring it back and to strengthen it in our fast-paced and forgetful modern era.

Immortality is understood as life after death, better, life after life. Humankind has striven for immortality from time immemorial. The earliest human traces of communal burial ritual are found in graves 60-70,000 years ago. Graves are the living addresses of the dead. The names of the dead are their addresses in our living language through which we can visit their presence and commemorate when alone or in discourse with one another. And the ritual observance of anniversaries bespeaks the continuing spiritual life-presence of the deceased in the surviving community. As was said of Lincoln: "And now he belongs to the ages."

Rosenstock-Huessy (1970) says that in biological reality: "life precedes death," but that in the realm of the spirit, in human reality: "death precedes life;" the founder's death precedes the life of the institution or school of thought which he or she founded. The United States of America exists on the inspiration of the "founding fathers." Their constitution is our heritage, their founding acts are alive and sustain us today. Remembering means being able to survive the death of what is remembered.

Even in the spiritual life of the individual in the course of a lifetime the principle that “death precedes life” holds in that we have to die to parts and stages of ourselves in order to free us to grow in new directions and to develop new spiritual life-forms. We have to die to but remember childhood and youth in order to be born into adulthood; we have to die to the activities devoted to a project such as writing a book when it is completed so as to find new life in another project. In all major milestones and turning points in our life, we have to learn to die to our “old self” in order to be re-born into a “new self,” we die to old existential relationships and communities and are reborn into new ones.

In this view death and immortality is very much a part of our own living and it plays an important part in the continuing life of our multigenerational social existence. Our life is punctuated by decisive events and by ends and beginnings which mark our life in terms of eras: B.E. before the event, and A.E. after the event. Through existential periodization which delineates the important chapters in our life, as individuals, as families, and as communities, we obtain our basic orientation in time: B.C., before Christ, and A.D., “anno domini,” in the year of the Lord.

### *The Fixed Stars of Proper Names*

The name stands for the person. Every name is the title of a story, of the person's life-story (Schapp, 1976). Proper names are the fixed stars in the firmament of language. They act as foci, as crystallization points and magnetic poles which draw and hold all the facets of a person's life and all the stories which carry the meanings of these existential facts. Without names we would vanish in the anonymity of mass society, lost and forgotten in the oblivion of impersonal numbers and statistics. Names stabilize reality for us. They establish perceivable identities in the flux of changing perspectives.

Proper names, of persons, of groups, of places, and of times, constitute the foundation of language (Rosenstock-Huessy, 1981). Names identify entities: reference points. Without names we would lose all orientation in society, space, and time. We would be cast adrift in the ocean of the world-process. Names establish stable points of reference around which we can accumulate narrative knowledge and upon which we can pass judgments. The proper names of persons and groups are our trans-temporal addresses in language and society which make meaningful speech to and about persons possible. Names are the most immortal parts of language.

A person's life does not have an unequivocal meaning: the person's life story. There are as many stories as there are people telling them, although there is also much consensus. We find a myriad of written biographies and there may even be an autobiography in the paradigm case of famous people. The "self-story"--what my life means to me--is at best a privileged insider version of the life. A person's intimates, wife, husband, parents, children, friends, colleagues, enemies, critics are as close to the action--partners and participants in the life--and often can see clearer into the living truth and reality of the deceased person. There is no ultimately privileged point of view here for us. All circulating stories stand in a dialectical relationship with each other, demanding continual revision.

However, there are some "facts" which belong to the deceased, indisputable existential life facts, deeds and dates about which there is consensus, and artefacts: mementos and possessions. In our technical age we have created print and photography and electro-magnetic storage capacities: computer memories, laser discs, cassette recordings, videos, as well as the more traditional writings of letters, of diaries, which provide touchpoints and clues--traces--to a person's living. Every individual, especially in the industrial world, accumulates and collects a myriad of "things" which become disseminated or discarded after our bodily death. These things carry the spiritual meaning--traces of the person. Most of them vanish into oblivion over time. Fame is the crucial variable here. We remember and recollect more about persons who are deemed important in the life of humanity: our culture-heroes. Commemoration is relative to the size and the affection of the mourning community, of the circle of people who knew the deceased personality or through media.

### *The Process of Immortalization*

Love used to be considered stronger than death. Nowadays love often does not even survive life. In our era of disposable marriage and family relationships we are lucky to be remembered at all.

Fame once outlived the life of its hero. But, as Andy Warhol has remarked: "In the future, everybody will be world-famous for 15 minutes." Are we not entitled to more, to at least one day or at least one hour of commemoration each year which our folk wisdom and life praxis has institutionalized through anniversaries? But even anniversaries and their celebration diminish in frequency over time. The accelerating pace of our modern era

and its increase in information bombardment seems paradoxically to have undermined our capacity for remembrance and commemoration. Too many new events overlay and displace memory. We are in danger of becoming individuals and communities without a past.

The maintenance of the past as a living memory is of essential importance in the life of a group and of individuals. Knowing about origins, about past achievements and mistakes allows us to understand ourselves as links in the chain of generations, as partners in long-range, multi-generational co-existence. Commemoration also reminds us of our indebtedness to our ancestors upon whose achievements and shoulders we should stand. Through such remembrance we overcome our narcissism and we are reminded of the immortality of our spiritual social life.

The “process of immortalization” can best be studied in the reality of history and biographies. Historians shape and dominate our collective memories. Although the important names of personages, of places, and of events are first pronounced and propagated by the participant people, historians, after an initial surge of commentary, have been given the task of providing systematic accounts of the important people and their important events: to narrate the past and its actors. All narrative activity is devoted to the service of spiritual immortality.

The “great man” or “great person” theory of history has created the secular pantheon of the immortals, the luminaries of a culture, and accumulated and monumentalized the impressive documentations of these culture heroes. This approach has been based on an elitist bias: only the extraordinary personages and the leaders in their field have been accorded recognition and the honor of commemoration. All others have been more or less forgotten leaving only faint traces in the barren data-banks of genealogy.

### *The Democratization of Fame*

A democratization of fame seems in order, a democratization of the ancient Roman tradition of “*monumentum erecti*,” a monument has been fashioned, hence immortality is guaranteed in the life of the successors, until even these monuments topple. Of course, every grave and every tombstone is already a monument of the dead for the survivors. The names and the dates are engraved in stone or metal to last a few generations longer in sacred burial grounds.

While many strive frantically to achieve the “grand fame” of celebri-

ties and willingly assume the dangers of grandiosity and paranoia—real persecution by paparazzi, the press and curiosity seekers—most of us are accorded only “safe fame,” small fame, in the memories and discourse of our existential ensemble.

We remember the life of our public leaders in all fields: our culture heroes. But every family and friendship circle has its own leaders which carry on the tradition: the way we do things together, how we organize our time, what we devote our energy to, what values we hold sacred, what spirit we adore and serve. Parents and grandparents collaborate in this or come into conflict over these life-form issues. Multi-generational family life is the spiritual life form closest to our existence and calls out for renewed attention and appreciation. We need to move from cultural elitism to cultural personalism rooted in family life, in kinship, friendship, and inspired fellowship. The source and anchor of personal living and personal recognition lies equiprimordially in our love and family life, in our celebrative life, and in our work life (von Eckartsberg, 1988).

Today much of the wisdom of personal life seems to get lost when the person dies. Why do we not take the task of biography writing more seriously in our own families and kinship groups? It seems that most people think that they are not important enough to be considered historical figures. This calls out for revisioning. Everybody is an ancestor and has something to teach (Rosenstock-Huessy, 1970). I should think that this was implied in all the current talk about the “value of the family.”

In our super-competitive modern life the ladder of success is hard to climb. For every person who makes it into public celebrity and culture-hero status, hundreds if not thousands of others of equal merit and ability go unrecognized and suffer the agony of defeat in the winner/loser ideology of modernity. The success and publicity market devalues the accomplishments of the unrecognized, their genius goes largely unacknowledged. Yet they also need affirmation, encouragement and immortalization.

All of us are “luminaries” to some others in the however limited circles of our existential cast of characters: the people whom we encounter in our life and with whom we establish a lasting and meaningful personal relationship. In this social circle, which survives the individual, we can all reach limited immortality.

Everybody is a super-star in his or her own ensemble, an irreplaceable valued person. Every person’s life can be considered to be a work of art, worthy of appreciation. The way of life which a person fashions out of

his or her talents, means, and circumstances, is his or her dynamic work of art which needs to be articulated, preserved, displayed and celebrated. It calls for ways to express this life in artful and lasting forms beyond the often gossipy and fleeting circulation of stories.

We live in an age of cultural transformation in which, within one generation, high-tech electronic media became available to almost everybody and in which computer literacy became as prevalent as knowing how to drive a car. “Information navigation” entered our language as a new concept and reality. Using these computer/video skills, we can transform from being primarily media consumers to become media producers (Leary, 1987). Celebrity oriented elitist mass culture, already shook up by cable proliferation and constituency-television is further challenged by personal ensemble-television and culture. The democratization of fame is already under way, as personal knowledge becomes more important than mass media knowledge, and as personal, reciprocal and dialogal communication becomes more valued than one-sided, passive, mass media pseudo-communication.

The television habit, not to say the television addiction, is well established on a global scale. Today, according to a conservative estimate, the average person watches over five hours of television each day. This amounts to 35-40 per week. The same amount of time as “working for a living” is used to “play at living,” to watch living, paying others to play-act living for us, selling our attention to entertainment—and news—providers. How much of this bombardment is relevant to your own concrete inter-personal life? How much enters into conversation? Just recovering one hour a day for personal interaction would accomplish much for personal empowerment and for personal culture building.

Fame, of whom, by whom, for whom? Every person authors his or her life; the participants and first-hand witnesses testify to this life; the members of the existential life-community live in genuine reciprocity; they share a fate together and they also cultivate the fame of its members in living discoursing circulation including the fruits of video productions. Thus fame can be democratized.

### *The Spiritual Testament and the Electronic Immortality Portfolio*

Every person has the right and even the obligation toward his or her kin and the state to make a last will and testament—often a legal video-will—in which he or she can determine how the possessions are to be distributed,

what and how much is to be given to which heirs. Through the act of making a will, a person can reach beyond his or her personal death and affect the future. This is the self-willed reach and immortality of the person beyond his or her biological lifetime.

If the person has produced “works”: writings or creations such as artworks or knowledge works, these have long since become disseminated through publications and dispersed through the market place and thus have achieved their own immortality as creative mini life-sums in the listener’s or reader’s consciousness and discourse. Every story is a mini life-sum and enters the great stream of our collective discourse. However, the birth of a work is also, at the same time, the partial death of its author as the spirit-rector of its accomplishment. The work moves beyond the recall and control of its author into spiritual immortality even during his or her life-time becoming a voice on a record which repeats itself forever and ever in new encounters with newcomers, or in suspended animation on the shelves of libraries and shops, or in electro-magnetic storage in some data-base waiting to be discovered and resuscitated.

In this way of seeing, death is not the radical break we attribute to it from an ego-centric perspective. It is true that everyone dies as a body, but we also survive and are reborn through language in the remembrance of the heirs and the surviving community, through the circulation of life stories and life portraits. Through such lasting spiritual wills and testaments we continue to affect our progeny and the community at large, although we have no longer any control over this. From a socio-centric perspective, we survive our biological death in the spiritual life-time of the community.

In facing sickness, old age, and death every person craves some form of immortality (Lifton, 1968) and engaged in activities of “life-review” (Butler, 1971, 1975). This desire is expressed in the many varieties of activities which assemble and express essential events and features of the person’s existence.

Remembering and reminiscing, together, are the spontaneous activities we engage in. We also collect and review fotos and mementos which embody significant events and relationships in our life as traces. We articulate stories which weave them into the meaningful fabric of our lives. Let us call this documentation material and its narration the “immortality portfolio” of a person. It is a kind of existential time-capsule.

As individuals living in our modern era we cannot assume that the increasing accumulation of our existential data made possible by technol-



ogy will be welcomed by our heirs. They are kept too busy with their own lives to sift through all our materials and organize them into a coherent documented legacy-story. Each person shall have to initiate and accomplish this for him- or herself and learn to engage in the rewarding activities of psychological life-summing, by means of which we can refashion our lived life into an existential work of art.

Such an existential gathering and accumulation of life-traces—the immortality portfolio—can be overwhelming and an embarrassment of riches, or at least an avalanche of details. What to do with such an overabundance of materials of a person's whole life-time? There are several promising approaches that I have come across. Progoff (1975) has developed a complex psychological system of existential bookkeeping called the “Intensive Journal Process” which aims at recording the inner and outer events of a person's life and integrating the life-data through journal feedback and inner dialogue. Through keeping a journal workbook which has 19 sub-sections, and dialoguing with these dimensions in a workshop format, Progoff leads people on a personally meaningful journey of self-recording, self-exploration, and self-integration. Progoff's “Dialogue House” has become an important psychological and spiritual movement.

Van de Bogart (1985) has composed and exhibited a very elaborate and complex “immortality portfolio” entitled “Life-O-Mation.” A person's existential data are assembled and transferred onto a laser disk. An authoring program called the “immortality project” provides access to, organization and integration of these life data in multiple forms.

Leary (1988) has developed life-game computer programs under the collective title of “Head Coach,” and a specific program called “Mind Mirror” is available on the software market.

In the 1940's the artist Marcel Duchamp experimented with ways of summarizing and condensing his work in the form of boxes and the “valise.” In an interview he explains:

Here again, a new form of expression was involved. Instead of painting something new, my aim was to reproduce the paintings and the objects I liked and collect them in a space as small as possible. I did not know how to go about it. I first thought of a book, but I did not like this idea. Then it occurred to me that it could be a box in which all my works could be collected and mounted like a small museum, a portable museum, so to speak. (Schwartz, 1969, p. 513)

In my own work with graduate students in existential and co-existential social psychology, I employ the task: "Make a representation of your life-world using any creative medium or means you see fit. After the representation is made write a legend to narrative and explain your creative production." An amazing variety of life-world representations are made and shared in the classroom, first in a small group context and then in the form of a plenary class exhibition which is photographed or videotaped. This exercise of representing one's life is always very provocative and much appreciated by the students. It accomplishes its aim of personalizing and condensing the individual's life-world and experience.

The availability and increasing popularity of electronic recording devices, especially of VCR's and Video-cameras, this democratization of technology invites us to become video-artists of our life within a circle of inspired fellowship. Our own life together becomes the subject matter of artistic expression and representation: personalized television. We can and do record our highest events and appearances. We are accumulating an existential portfolio of experiences which can then be edited into presentation as we grow older. Retirement becomes a time for personal reminiscing, life-sum constructions and co-creative personal video-production. We can now create an electronic immortality portfolio which contains all the records of the person's life, be they written, photographed, filmed, spoken or videotapes. All this is now available for technologically assisted commemoration.

Through electronic technology we can digitize all information and make it easily and instantly available for review and reworking. All types of life-data can be scanned and entered into the memory banks and the "hypertext" of electronic immortality. These existential data can be organized by various authoring languages and programmed for multiple access "information navigation." We become enables to travel through our life and that of others. Our role becomes indeed that of "cybers," pilots in our own information ocean: personal electronic databases. Technically, a person's life-data would be available as an electronic immortality portfolio in the form of, for example, a DVD or CD-Rom.

### *Psychological Life-Summing and the Life-Sum Video*

The approaches discussed in the previous section are very instructive, and they illustrate the immensity and complexities of one person's life-data. But, we think yet another step has to be taken. A condensed form—a

synopsis—has to be given to these materials, an ordering and editing, and creative rearrangement must take place. Representative episodes and icons must be selected. A storyline must be fashioned from our total life-collage. The isolated events, the relationships, the projects, the achievements and failures, the glories and defeats, the joys and sorrows need to be condensed and integrated into a coherent bio-narrative. The “life-sum” of a person’s existence, which expresses this unique life as a work of art, calls out to be created.

To do this life-summing on one’s own can be very difficult. It calls for the guidance of a professional collaborator who is trained in “life-sum counseling.” The counselor’s role is to help the person who may be overwhelmed by his or her life-data and memories to attain a self-accepting and even celebrative attitude and to engage in philosophical reflection on the essence and wisdom of his or her life-experience and existence. The counselor must assist in finding the most appropriate form for the person to work out a “life-sum presentation” whether this be in the form of writing, audio, or a “life-sum video,” whatever the client feels is most congenial.

In our experience and work in psychological life-summing, we have found that it is important to clients to dwell on the important milestones of their life, both as achievements and as losses or defeats, on their value-experience and emergent life-philosophy, and on their interpersonal relationships which are often illustrated by photos and stories. The person’s favorite books, art-works and music, places, celebrative and vacation-activities, are also significant dimensions of existence to be woven into the life-narrative. The way a person arranges his or her home and belongings is typically already a “personal work of art” which can be videographed as a guided tour narrated by the person, creating a vivid portrait of personal living. A television production in the series “The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” featured a “video-souvenir” of several of Liberace’s houses, their furnishings and collections of art-objects which were filmed in their original setting and arrangement. The video reflects and preserves Liberace’s unique taste before everything was auctioned off and dispersed. It is a good example of one possibility or dimension of life-summing which is adaptable also to the lifestyle of “the not so rich and not so famous.”

The lifestyle portrait combined with an existential “show and tell” format in which the person selects the most important photos and mementos from their portfolio and narrates them to an evocative interviewer and is also asked to draw some “life-lessons” in the form of maxims or a poem,

is our preferred mode of working. This is easily video-taped integrating pictures, voice and the speaker into a unified production. We call this the Life-Sum Video.

In preparatory meetings, the clients are instructed how to gather and collate the materials of their life for the immortality portfolio and to put them into disk storage. More than one session may be needed to complete the preparation engaging the client in short term life-sum counseling, especially since clients often have to face and work through strong emotions associated with their memories. Collecting all materials, organizing them and thinking about them inaugurates the life-summing process which is intended to accomplish an existential harvest. The fruits of one's life are to be identified, articulated, and then fashioned into a spiritual form which expressed the person's life as a work of art and as a morality play, as a video-performance within a given limited time frame demanding summarization and condensation. This life-sum video will then be both a crystallization of the immortality portfolio and a hypertext which provides points of access to the more detailed and complex life-data portfolio of the person.

Most everyone, in the future, will be retired computer-video literates with time on our hands to make our life and its digitized immortality portfolio into audio-visual art-works. We will engage in life-summing, electronic life-summing, as a most meaningful therapeutic as well as personality-integrative endeavor. With the rising population of the elderly, life-sum counseling and life-sum creation may well become a popular trend in psychology, we hope. A new way of "thanking-thinking" (Heidegger, 1969, von Eckartsberg, 1981) will develop which expresses the spirit of appreciation and thanksgiving in a condensed form to others. Through life-summing everyone can complete their lives which otherwise might remain fragmented and "unfinished symphonies," so to speak.

These creations of life-summing will constitute a person's lasting spiritual will and legacy, perhaps to be placed into national archives, a sort of "universal population life data bank" as Butler (1974) has also suggested. Life-sums and their matrices, the immortality portfolios, may also become accessible at "electronic wakes" and in "electronic cemeteries and memorials" and even in "immortality communication satellites," by means of which the survivors and successors can engage the deceased and his or her life via interactive video—especially at anniversaries—thus commemorating the deceased and enlarging and deepening their understanding and appreciation of who and what this person was and remains in our living discourse: in electronic immortality.

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