
Foreword

George L. Mitton: Eschewing the Ephemeral

By Jeffrey M. Bradshaw

In every conversation I've had with George, what impresses me most is his earnestness about the important, enduring matters of life. I didn't know him when he was younger, but I imagine that he was always that way. In this, he has been a personal model for me, providing tangible reassurance that it is a proper tendency for people of faith to consider mortal life as "a serious thing."¹

THE ANXIETY OF IMPENDING DEATH

With frightening eloquence, Ernest Becker describes how people variously respond to the inconvenient truth of their mortality in the wake of the wane of religious faith. In his Pulitzer-Prize-winning study, *The Denial of Death*,² he observes that many individuals—driven by an unconsciously suppressed anxiety that their short lives will end without a trace of

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1. Lewis, "Weight," 105.
 2. Becker, *Denial of Death*. Becker's book, first published in 1973, has remained remarkably relevant for more than fifty years (Nazaryan, *Hopeful Reminder*).

transcendent meaning or purpose—manage to console themselves with a heroic “immortality project.” According to Becker, the hope engendered by such a project—typically a private cause (*causa sui*) of some kind like a large family, a thriving business, or a charitable foundation—allows them to cling to the illusion that something they have done in life will somehow endure indefinitely, leaving an eternal mark for good in the universe.

But, as C. S. Lewis reminds us, even the spans of the greatest “nations, cultures, arts, civilizations . . . are mortal,” and in the grand scheme of things they compare in length and significance to “the life of a gnat.”³

Recognizing this truth, Becker also concludes that many people who either fail to set up an “immortality project”—or who, having established one, are not adequately consoled by the ultimately fleeting impact of their *causa sui*—eventually descend into some combination of hedonism, depression, or neurosis. Thus, in consequence of the erosion of the religious faith that previously allowed humankind to face death with joyous anticipation,⁴

Modern man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing [“Amusing ourselves to death,”⁵ as Neil Postman puts it]. As awareness calls for types of heroic dedication that his culture no longer provides for him, society contrives to help him forget. Or, alternatively, he buries himself in psychology in the belief that awareness all by itself will be some kind of magical cure for his problems.

We might say that such individuals, by whatever specific means of locomotion they choose, “double their speed when they have lost their direction.”⁶ Going further, this dilemma leads Truman G. Madsen to ask, “What about a person who doubles and quadruples his effort when he has found his direction?”⁷

3. Lewis, “Weight,” 105–6.

4. Becker, *Denial of Death*, chapter 11.

5. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*.

6. Madsen, “Power,” 235. Paraphrase of Santayana, *Introduction*, 13: “Fanaticism consists of redoubling your effort when you have forgotten your aim.”

7. Madsen, “Power,” 235.

GAINING AN ASSURANCE OF THE LIFE BEYOND

People of faith find their direction through personal knowledge obtained from God “by study and . . . by faith.”⁸ This is to be contrasted with the kind of self-generated “faith” that amounts to wishful thinking⁹ about reality—or, worse yet, pseudoscientific practices to bring about desired results based on the “law of attraction” and its ilk.¹⁰ For example, some people, concerned about the implications of Becker’s findings, might propose—as a purely practical measure to counter the malaises he mentions—that we, as a society, ought to promote “religion” as a way to provide comfort and give people a purpose to life, apart from any specific truth claims. However, as scientist and religious skeptic Richard Dawkins stated,¹¹

I . . . have no objection to people drawing comfort from wherever they choose and have no objection to strong moral compasses. But the question of the moral or consolation value of religion—one way or the other—must be kept separate in our minds from the truth value of religion.

Christopher Lasch agreed, observing, “Culture may well depend on religion . . . , but religion has no meaning if it is seen merely as a prop of culture.”¹² In other words, the conviction of religious truth must be taken as prior to the question of whether conversion will increase personal happiness. Indeed, such a conviction has sustained many believers over the ages who have embraced the tenets of their faith at the cost of great

8. Doctrine and Covenants 88:118; 109:7, 14.

9. Popularized in the 1950s by Norman Vincent Peale as “positive thinking” (Peale, *Power of Positive Thinking*).

10. The so-called “law of attraction” posits that the “universe” is so constituted as to reward positive or negative aspirations with their imagined outcomes. A well-known popularization of this idea was promoted by Rhonda Byrne in a book and a movie (Byrne, *Secret*). Purporting to be based on scripture (Matthew 21:22), the book argues that the simplistic formula of “ask, believe, and receive” will bring about a “manifestation” of the desired result.

11. Krauss and Dawkins, “Should Science Speak,” 91.

12. Lasch, *Revolt*, 228.

personal sacrifice. With respect to the specific claims of Christianity, C. S. Lewis wrote,¹³

Christianity claims to give an account of facts—to tell you what the real universe is like. . . . If Christianity is untrue, then no honest man will want to believe it, however helpful it might be: if it is true, every honest man will want to believe it, even if it gives him no help at all.

Besides the anxious individuals that Becker studied and the knowledgeable believers that Lewis described, we should also mention another large group: namely, those who give little or no thought to their mortality or to the meaning and purpose of life. Elder Neal A. Maxwell, quoting Walter Bagehot, described such “disbelievers[, who] do not necessarily deny the great truths but are simply too preoccupied with other concerns”:¹⁴

They do not deny them, but they live apart from them; they do not disbelieve them, but they are silent when they are stated. They do not question the existence of Kamchatka,¹⁵ but they have no call to busy themselves with Kamchatka; they abstain from peculiar tenets. . . . [Such] persons . . . do not, as it would seem *cannot*, feel all that others feel; [they] have, so to say, no ear for much of religion, [and] are [thus] in some sort out of its reach.¹⁶

Is there a remedy?

If you could extend before men the awful vision of everlasting perdition; if they could see it as they see the things of earth,—as they see Fleet Street and St. Paul’s; if you could show men likewise the inciting vision of an everlasting heaven . . . with undeniable certainty and invincible distinctness,—who could say that they would have a thought for any other motive?¹⁷

13. Lewis, “Man or Rabbit?,” 352.

14. Maxwell, *We Will Prove*, 88–89.

15. A remote peninsula in the far east of Russia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kamchatka_Peninsula (accessed May 3, 2021).

16. Bagehot, *Works of Walter Bagehot*, 1:42, <https://archive.org/details/cu31924024730941/> (accessed May 3, 2021).

17. Bagehot, *Works of Walter Bagehot*, 2:302, <https://archive.org/details/worksofwalterbag02bageiala/> (accessed May 3, 2021).

In a letter to Paul Springer, quoted in Boyd Petersen's biography of Hugh Nibley, Hugh said the same thing more succinctly:¹⁸

One peep at the other side and this [earthly] show looks too cheap for anything.

HOW HUGH NIBLEY LEARNED THAT THERE IS AN AFTERLIFE

Nibley could speak on this subject with the kind of authority that comes from firsthand experience:¹⁹

[I always had a testimony of the gospel] except for one short period—when the bottom of the world fell out. That was desperate. . . . I was terribly bothered about this afterlife business and that sort of thing. I had no evidence for that whatever. And I remember I went up to Mt. Wilson²⁰ at that time. I walked around in the snow and brooded about it and I came back.

We had a meeting at the old Hollywood Ward. Matthew Cowley's father[, Matthias F. Cowley,] was the speaker that night. So, I went up to meet Brother Cowley, and as soon as he took my hand, he says, "Come with me, I want to give you a blessing." The blessing was



Figure 1. *Hugh in 1933. "I was terribly bothered about this afterlife business."*

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18. Hugh Nibley to Paul Springer, February 2, 1964, in Petersen, *Hugh Nibley*, 131.
 19. Nibley, "Faith of an Observer," 161. See Dan Peterson's account of this event in Bradshaw, Ricks, and Whitlock, *Hugh Nibley Observed*, 164–66.
 20. Mount Wilson is above Pasadena, California. Hugh was living in Glendale, California, at the time.

that the Lord would give me an answer immediately to the thing that had been puzzling my mind. Within the week I had an appendicitis attack and so we went to the old Seventh Day Adventist Hospital out in Loma Linda[, California,] and had the appendix taken out.

According to Phyllis, Hugh swallowed his tongue during the operation and actually was at one time technically dead until they brought him back with a resuscitator. “But during that period, he had one of these ‘life after death’ experiences very much like the ones that Dr. Moody describes.”²¹ Hugh related the experience as follows:²²

Then all of a sudden down this thing like a tube, you know, you get sucked down this thing and you come out. [I thought,] Oh, boy, I know everything, and everything is there, and this is what I wanted to know! Three cheers, and all this sort of thing. . . . All I wanted was to know whether there was anything on the other side, and when I came out there, I didn’t meet anything or anybody else, but I looked around, and not only was in all possession of my faculties, but they were tremendous. I was light as a feather and ready to go, you see. Above all I was interested in problems. I’d missed out a lot of math and stuff like that. Now in five minutes I would be able make up for that. Remember, as Joseph Smith said, “If you could look for five minutes into yonder heavens,” you see, you can forget about all the rest you ever bothered about.²³

21. Phyllis Nibley in Nibley, “Faith of an Observer,” 161. According to son Tom, Phyllis “had a similar experience during a difficult pregnancy” (Bradshaw, Ricks, and Whitlock, *Hugh Nibley Observed*, 563). On “Life after Life” experiences generally, see Moody, *Life after Life*. Tom recalls that “examining and explaining what this sort of thing was about and telling us about his own experience” became the subject of two family home evenings (Bradshaw, Ricks, and Whitlock, *Hugh Nibley Observed*, 564).

22. Nibley, “Faith of an Observer,” 161–62.

23. Compare Joseph Smith: “Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that was ever written on the subject” (Smith, *Teachings*, 9 October 1843, 324. Compare Smith, *Journals, May 1843–June 1844*, 109; Smith, *Words*, 254). In the report in the *Times and Seasons* (September 15, 1843, 331–32), the Prophet also writes, “Knowledge of [our condition and true relation to God] can *only* be obtained by experience in these



Figure 2. *A successful businessman learns he has about three weeks to live.*

Trying to help those who have little ear for spiritual things relate to the profound impact of such an experience on his own life, Nibley provided the following parable:²⁴

Imagine . . . a successful businessman who, responding to some slight but persistent physical discomfort . . . pays a visit to [the] doctor. Since the man has always considered himself a fairly healthy specimen, it is with an unquiet mind that he descends the steps of the clinic . . . [knowing] that he has about three weeks to live. In the days that follow, this man's thinking undergoes a . . . quick and brutal reorientation. . . .

things, through the ordinances of God set forth for that purpose . . . and in answer to prayer" (Smith, *Teachings*, 253. Regarding the requisite ordinances, see Smith, *Teachings*, 53–54n19).

24. Nibley, "Way," 302–5.

Things that once filled him with awe seem strangely trivial, and things which a few days before did not even exist for him now fill his consciousness. For the first time he discovers the . . . beauty of the world of nature. . . .

The perfection of children comes to him like a sudden revelation, and he is appalled by the monstrous perversion that would . . . destroy their sensibilities. . . . Everywhere he looks he gets the feeling that all is passing away— . . . he sees all life and stuff about him involved in a huge ceaseless combustion, a literal and apparent process of oxidation which is turning some things slowly, some rapidly, but all things surely to ashes

“What has happened to our solid citizen?” his friends ask perplexed. He has chosen to keep his disease a secret, . . . [but] he cannot conceal his change of heart. As far as his old associates can see, the poor man has left the world of reality. . . .

Now the question arises, has this man been jerked out of reality or into it? Has he cut himself off from the real world or has cruel necessity forced him to look in the face what he was running away from before? Is he in a dream now or has he just awakened from one? Has he become an irresponsible child, or has he suddenly grown up? . . . Some will answer one way, some another. But if you want to arouse him to wrathful sermons, just try telling the man that it makes no difference which of these worlds one lives in.

THE ROOTS OF GEORGE MITTON’S CALM WITNESS OF ETERNAL TRUTHS

What has all this to do with George L. Mitton? In our acquaintance over a period of nearly two decades, I have come to realize that he is, like Hugh Nibley and the eschatologically minded man in Nibley’s parable, a man who has been largely drawn out of the troubles of this world and into the larger and more permanent concerns of the next one. He has “not conformed to this world” but rather has become “transformed by the renewing of [his] mind.”²⁵ Expressing it differently, we might say that, in his

25. Romans 12:2.

advancing years, he has accelerated his effort to eschew the ephemeral—having discovered that “when you cannot do what you have always done, then you only do what matters most.”²⁶

As a believer in the efficacy of the keys and authority received in the Restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ, George’s faith has a more specific character than what is expressed in the general idea of repentance and redemption offered through the Atonement of Christ and the hope of a glorious resurrection hereafter. His faith is also grounded in and enabled by his acceptance and understanding of the authentic and ancient nature of essential ordinances and covenants, including those available only in prophetically restored temple rites. Thus, his long-standing interest in echoes of these rites is illustrated in the exchange with Hugh Nibley at the end of this essay (see below).

Admittedly, George’s personal witness of eternal truths grew through his scholarship. However, the sparks that first animated his interests did not arise through such studies, nor did it take a near-death experience to awaken his faith in the afterlife. Rather, he seems to have been born with this faith and to have nourished it by following spiritual promptings such as the ones described in his preface to this volume. Such promptings came as a natural consequence to his efforts to hear and heed inspiration throughout his life.

The sacred experiences of divine inspiration and brushes with the living reality of those who continue to take an interest in our lives from the other side have been shared by George in this volume only after careful reflection and prayer. George has not sensationalized them nor proffered them as incontrovertible evidence for worlds beyond our world. The accounts are given in a matter-of-fact way that betokens their truthfulness.

His publication of this collection of essays, as illuminated by accounts of the germs of inspiration that produced them, continues a lifelong effort to fulfill his sacred duty to bear witness to others. As he writes,²⁷

I believe it’s true that the things on the other side are very, very real.
And that if we strive to do what’s right on this side of the veil, we’ll be

26. Bednar, “Chosen to Bear Testimony,” citing a conversation with Elder Robert D. Hales during Hales’s last years of physical decline.

27. Preface to this volume, p. lii.

very happy on the other side. Very happy indeed. The things discussed in these essays offer much guidance for our preparation to meet the Lord at the veil, and at his Final Judgment.

PREPARING FOR THE FINAL JUDGMENT

George's view of life as preparing for the Final Judgment contrasts with those who, "in one form or another, depend on some hope of perpetuating and improving the human species for the whole meaning of the universe—that a 'scientific' hope of defeating death is a real rival to Christianity."²⁸

The scientific quest for immortality has been a part of countless myths and stories, including one from 1889 entitled "In the Year 2889." Published under Jules Verne's name but written by his son Michel,²⁹ it contains an account of a Dr. Faithburn, "a firm believer in human hibernation," who had his vital functions "suspended" and was carefully placed in a coffin, with instructions about the proper way for him to be awakened one hundred years to the day later. As the whole world awaited the news, the casket was opened. Dr. Faithburn, "a veritable mummy," was taken out, and efforts were made to revive him. "'Dead!' proclaims Dr. Wilkins. 'And how long has he been dead?' Dr. Wilkins makes another examination. 'A hundred years,' he replies."³⁰

Of course, the most important lesson of this story is not that science will never be able to revive a dead body but rather that only the Atonement of Christ could resurrect a soul to glory and eternal life, meaning the life that God Himself lives.³¹

Fittingly, it was also Michel Verne who commissioned Albert Roze, a pupil of Rodin, to create this unusual tomb in the Cimetière de la Madeleine, Amiens, France, attesting his father's firm hope in the resurrection—an unattainable feat for the science of 2889 but certainly not impossible to God.³² The monument, entitled "Vers l'Immortalité et l'Éternelle Jeunesse" (Toward Immortality and Eternal Youth), features a sculpture of

28. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, July [August] 9, 1939, 2:262.

29. Butcher, *Jules Verne*, 250.

30. Verne, "In the Year 2889" (English). Compare Verne, "In the Year 2889" (French), 38, 44.

31. Lee, *Teachings*, 226.

32. Lee, *Teachings*, 495n6–19.

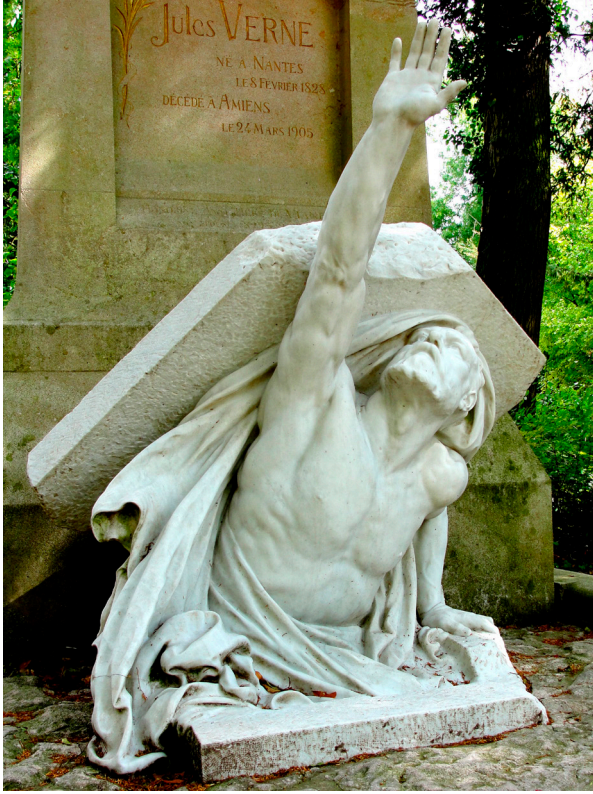


Figure 3. Albert-Dominique Roze, 1861–1952: *Toward Immortality and Eternal Youth*, 1907.

Jules Verne raising a broken tombstone.³³ With his right arm extended, he looks steadily upward at the heavens, reaching out to the hand of God. That hand, though invisible to us, is the object of Verne’s fixed gaze. That divine hand will not return us to our old earth life, but instead will raise us to a new life, a kind of life we have not yet fully experienced.³⁴ This is *real* life.

33. The head is modeled on Verne’s death mask. In 1984, the Czech astronomer, Zdenek Kopal, then at the University of Manchester, England, visited the grave and there buried a pinch of moon dust he had obtained from NASA in tribute to the man who had famously imagined such a voyage (Kopal, *Of Stars and Men*, 48).

34. As C. S. Lewis writes, “One sometime wonders why God thinks the game worth the candle. But then we share, in some degree, the cost of the candle and have not yet seen the ‘game’” (Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 91–92).

As C. S. Lewis wrote, describing the resurrection to a new life of the adventuring siblings at the culminating moment of his *Narnia* series,³⁵

“There *was* a real railway accident,” said Aslan softly. “Your father and mother and all of you are—as you used to call it in the Shadow-Lands—dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning.”

And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read:³⁶ which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.³⁷

Regarding the expression that “the game is not worth the candle,” this means “What we would get from this undertaking is not worth the effort we would have to put into it.” The saying alludes to a game of cards in which the stakes are smaller than the cost of burning a candle for light by which to play” (*Dictionary.com*, s.v. “The Game Is Not Worth the Candle,” <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/the-game-is-not-worth-the-candle>).

35. Lewis, *Last Battle*, 210–11.

36. Of course, Lewis knew that prophets such as John the Revelator have been given glimpses of the life beyond. But presumably neither John nor any other human has seen and understood that life in its fulness while still a mortal (Moses 1:5).

37. Some portions of this essay have been adapted from Bradshaw, *Creation*; Bradshaw, “One Peep,” 463, 717nE-54.

Sept. 28, 1975

Dear Bro. Nibley:

I want to express my appreciation for your remarkable new book. It is surely of very great interest.


Since I heard you lecture on the Egyptian Endowment about three years ago, I have been very interested and have tried to be alert to apparent references and allusions to the ordinances in the scriptures. One thing in particular has intrigued me for some time, and I would be very grateful if you would share with me any thoughts you may have on it.

I refer to the eye-ear-heart formula which I find in many places. All three elements are not always present, but the motif is usually clear. It is most familiar from Paul's "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard" etc. (1 Corin. 2:9 after Isa. 64:4) but it was John's use of it in the chapter where Christ was anointed that impressed me as ^{an} the "opening of the mouth" ordinances--or lack of preparation for the same--"He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them." (John 12:41 after Isa. 6 where the ear is also mentioned and purification begins at the lips (vs. 7, 9-10).

I believe the earliest use of this motif is in the Enoch part of the Book of Moses where it appears in negative Form (Moses 6:27) in reference to those who are involved in the counter mysteries. (v. 29) I have found it in several key places, as at the beginning of King Benjamin's address--open ears, heart "that the mysteries of God may be unfolded to your view." (Mos. 2:9) The motif opens Sec. 1 of the D & C (judgment theme, Way theme, vs. 2, 15f), and also the Lord's appearance to the Nephites (3 Nephi 11:3-6, 14f. cf. 17:16f, 19:32-34) I am particularly impressed with the setting and usage in D & C 38:6-8 since this is the Section where the Endowment is first mentioned and it is filled with temple imagery--Council, creation, embracing, veil, purification, darkness, mystery concept, robing, oneness, etc.

There are many more references, but the question is whether I read too much into them. Once accepted as an allusion to the ordinances, the relationships multiply. Thus even the words of the First Vision (lips, hearts, power) could be viewed as foreshadowing the ordinances. It seems significant that these concepts appear in the earliest writings produced by Joseph Smith.

Sincerely,


George L. Mitton
P. O. Box 88
Salem, Oregon 97308

allusion
to

Figure 4. 28 September 1975 letter of George Mitton to Hugh Nibley about the eye-ear-heart motif in ancient temple teachings.



Brigham Young University

Hugh Nibley
Director

October 20, 1975

George L. Mitton
P. O. Box 88
Salem, Oregon 97308

Dear Brother Mitton:

You do not read too much into the passages. Since getting the book out of the way I have turned wholly to the Enoch writings and this has led me into extensive floundering around in, of all things, Cabbalistic writings.

Hasidic
We have here with us at present Professor Shunary, a professor from a Hebrew university whose inclinations are strongly ~~esoteric~~ and who is enthusiastically cooperating in the Enoch research. Our principal efforts at present are in the Midrash in which I tend strongly to favor the Zohar, a thing which slightly disturbs Shunary, though he shows signs of weakening as evidence accumulates.

The imagery to which you refer meets us at every turn. Going through old notes, I am simply overwhelmed by it. How could we have overlooked it for so long? Your references I think are very well taken. Thank you for the boost. We must discuss these things further when we have made some progress.

Yours truly,

Hugh Nibley
Hugh Nibley

HN/lw

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Figure 5. 20 October 1975 letter of Hugh Nibley to George Mitton agreeing with Mitton's findings.

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