

## Translator's Introduction to *Alive in God's World*<sup>1</sup>

### John Hill

The visionary testimony of Joa Bolendas awakens us to the reality of spiritual life on earth and in heaven. To be alive in God's world is to live in a prayerful and powerful unity not just with God, but also with those risen from the dead, and with all the peoples of the earth. To live this unity is truly human. The visions in this book bring awareness of the deep bonds uniting the living with each other, with the dead, and with God. In fragmentary discourses, the risen ones tell us of their new life in God's world. They tell us to make God's kingdom alive on earth and so release a process of great spiritual energy to guide humanity and restore the earth to its spiritual axis. Immanuel Kant once dismissed Emanuel Swedenborg's visions on the afterlife as the work of a fanatic. An examination of Swedenborg's life, however, reveals the character of a man who was humble, discreet, and unassuming. No doubt Kant, though believing in the immortality of the soul, fell a victim to the general prejudice towards anyone who claimed to have had experience of life after death. It is hoped through meditation on the material in this book, the reader's soul can overcome old fears and prejudices and warm to a new call to the life of the spirit extending beyond our short life on earth.

"Awaken, open your eyes, behold, you are truly alive." Such words might express the mystery of this book. The life of an individual is but a short day in the ongoing process of creation. We can live according to the measurements of that one day, but the messages received by Joa Bolendas lift us beyond and place us in an unfolding universe to welcome a new morning. Through the tragic death of her first born son, Joa Bolendas was called to participate in his risen life. The unpublished visions that tell of this event bear witness to a mother's heart opening up to the radiance of the human spirit. The loving and searching openness of Joa's dialogue with her son, a quality that permeates all the visions in this book, is a testimony to the full potential of human life on earth and in heaven.

As we approach the subject of this book – human life, death and immortality – it is difficult to define what kind of reality we are about to investigate. Does our search for a deeper understanding of death and an afterlife begin with an awareness of the finitude of life; with visible and tangible realities of sickness, death, corpses, memories and loss of our loved ones? We must ask ourselves if the dead have survived the grave and if they can be our invisible partners in our search for meaning. Can we create a dialogue with them? Can our images, projections, fantasies, longings, hope, and despair be answered, encouraged, criticized, denied, as dialogue in any partnership requires?

Perhaps we will not be able to answer all these questions but the visionary narratives in this book may be understood as an appeal to be open to experiences with the dead and to evaluate them in terms of self-reflection, self-awareness, and the search for a life of meaning. Care is needed not to idealize, simplify, and thus anthropomorphize the continuity between

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction copyright © 2001 John Hill. In: Joa Bolendas, *Alive in God's World*. Lindisfarne books, Great Barrington, 2001.

the living and the dead. There is always an element of uncertainty in moving across the bridge that links the living with the dead. In the ancient religions of Persia, this bridge is imaged as a sharp sword, which cuts down all those who are unworthy to pass into the next life. The idea of continuity is in itself an abstraction and, if understood in a linear way, can blend out the polarity, disruption, uncertainty, pain and horror that accompanies the approach of death and the end of our life on earth. But if we live with this uncertainty – live fully in presence of suffering, degeneration of our bodies, and the pain of loss of loved ones – then continuity is no longer a flat ideology of sameness. Rather, it is a process arising out of individual experiences of a life that is continually broken up, out of joint, and reassembled again. This is a process of strengthening the spirit, a living with death and the dead, and a gathering of all those signs and messages that seem to communicate to us something about a life that is powerful enough to survive its disappearance from the human body.

A teacher of Buddhism once tried to emphasize a shift in human values by outlining two distinct ways to understand human nature. We understand ourselves either to be essentially human beings who undergo a spiritual experience or to be essentially spiritual beings who are undergoing a human experience. Unfortunately, the trend in contemporary civilization makes the process of understanding, nourishing, and strengthening the spirit very difficult, if not impossible. The continual influx of information about all the comforts and distractions that can alleviate pain, emptiness and unhappiness divert us from the truth of our spiritual reality. The ever-increasing isolation from nature, the cementing over of environment, the advance of medicine, the building of monumental structures for the control and consumption of material wealth, the increasing obsession with productivity to satisfy or create new needs in a world that is becoming ever more virtual and artificial - all these force us to live a lifestyle in which there is no time to stop, reflect, and ask ourselves what the point to it all is. Do we realize what part we have to play in a system in which we are one tiny unit with a short life in a perishable body? Things themselves are made to last far beyond an individual lifetime. But what about us human beings who are the most perishable of all? What about our enduring? In our culture today, death has become taboo. We seem to be no longer able to erect visible signs to remind us of our own passing away, our dead ones, our ancestors. It is becoming increasingly difficult to find roots and be at home in this world because the world, as we know it today, no longer reflects our true selves, no longer reminds us that we are human beings with an identity that may outlast physical death. The artificial worlds we are creating no longer reflect the possibility of a continuity of life, both visible and invisible.

This was not always the case. It is well known that most peoples of early civilizations attempted to accompany their dead ones, through myth, artifact or ritual, until they found rest in the next world. Anyone who has studied the peoples of earlier civilizations cannot but be impressed by their overwhelming concern about survival after death. They spared no means in erecting visible signs of a continued presence of the dead among the living: the vast burial mounds of Neolithic culture, the great pyramids of Egypt, or the wooden stretchers of native Americans reminded the living that the lands of the dead were near at hand, visible and tangible embodiments of a continuous universe. A universal characteristic of the funeral rites of many cultures evolved around the notion of a journey undertaken by the soul of the dead person. The dead must go on this journey so as to be united with their ancestors. Mourning rites provided a framework not only to allow the living to mourn the loss of the loved one but also to ensure the continued support of the living for the dead as they

undertook their long journey to join the spirits of their ancestors. These rites entailed a suspension of all normal social life, a living with the corpse in wakes and ritualistic wailings, fasting, and meals. The transition periods of mourning might have lasted several months, sometimes years, gradually coming to a close with the final burial of the corpse and a return to social life, until the next death occurred. The people of those cultures lived a different life than the people of today. They were deeply aware of the reality of spirit, having spent much of their short lives in creating a symbolic space to accompany their dead.

Many of these customs and beliefs have continued to survive in all the great religions of the world. Christians, throughout the ages, have lived a life of denial and undergone great hardships and sacrifices in order to prepare themselves for eternal life. The issue of life beyond death has always been of fundamental significance to the Christian experience and a great variety of images of the afterlife have blossomed within this context. In the Middle Ages heaven was imaged as a city resembling a Gothic cathedral or defined theologically in terms of a contemplative vision of the Godhead. In the Renaissance artists and mystics imagined it to be a place of sensuous delight and enjoyment, a beautiful garden with flowers, trees, animals fountains, in which the blessed danced, played, swam, bathed and discussed with one another. Still later, through the influence of Swedenborg, it became a place where the blessed would be given tasks and continue to do good works as part of their spiritual progress. Heaven was envisioned as a state of love, not one in which a beatific vision alone sufficed, but one in which family and social relations blossomed, and through which God became known and glorified. Compensating images of heaven as a place of light and purity, horror visions of purgatory as a place of punishment, and of hell as a place of eternal damnation developed. The afterlife was divided into images of eternal bliss and images of eternal torture, the latter being often associated with desires of the physical body. The ordinary man and woman were encouraged to live a life of renunciation. They also learned to live a life of fear.

Among theologians a powerful reaction has developed in our times against all too human conceptions of heaven and hell. The sometimes crude, simplistic, and concretistic images of a continuity of earthly life in heaven, which often reflected the cultural conditions of the times, have influenced theologians to reject literal conceptions of the afterlife. Tillich, Bultmann, and Rahner emphasize in different ways the radical distinction between the images, symbols, and myths of eternity and the actual temporal, psycho-physical conditions of human life on earth. They emphasize that we have no direct knowledge of the next life and we are to avoid naive literalism. Despite such risks, however, a non-sensuous intellectual understanding of the afterlife hardly suffices to capture the imagination, hardly encourages modern man and woman to be moved and inspired beyond the concerns of everyday life, so as to perceive that liminal transitional space, in which there is a real linking of the living with the dead.

Today many of these older beliefs concerning death and renewal are to be rediscovered in the outpourings of patients and clients who find they can reveal the secrets of their soul in the protective and trusting atmosphere of psychotherapy. In the intimacy of a consulting room, imagery, thoughts and experiences about survival after death may be discovered and explored in a transitional space, which has now ceased to exist as an outer social framework. I have been working as a Jungian analyst in Zurich for nearly thirty years. My patients, with

their troubled lives, have formed much of my attitude to life. Inevitably the theme of death arises again and again. The dead appear in my patients dreams, fantasies and active imaginations. Very often they have helped patients at most critical periods of their lives.

I remember the case of a woman who had suffered severe abuse as a child. After years of analysis, she suddenly began to draw pictures of sarcophaguses, on which a stone figure in the shape of a young woman was placed. We had no difficulty in recognizing that the woman was the analysand herself. Through the violent abuse she had suffered, a whole section of her personality had been murdered, causing it to disappear into the underworld of her psyche, and was thus lost to consciousness. The only signs that something was buried in the depth of her unconscious, were dreams of corpses and tortured animals, as well as tense moments of terrible irritability, fear, guilt, and shame. Through careful therapeutic work, the analysand could find trust in humanity once more. She began to draw pictures of herself as a young woman full of vitality – a clear sign that the stone figure on the sarcophagus was coming back to life again.

Each time a client embarks on such a journey, I stop and marvel at the incredible capacity of the psyche to bring back to life what was previously thought to be dead. I also stop and wonder if this intrapsychic process does not point to something deeper. When this happens, are we not witnessing the very foundations of the soul's immortality? Do not such experiences already imply the soul's capacity to survive physical death? There are other kinds of dreams and fantasies, which possess a visionary quality, that appear to point more clearly in this direction. They don't represent lost parts of the individual psyche, but have an existential quality informing us about survival after death, not only about ourselves, but also about our ancestors and loved ones, as the following examples show.

A patient of mine, for instance, was suffering from a relapse of cancer and was about to be operated upon. She was convinced her time had come. Just before the operation, her dead grandmother, for whom she had very positive associations, appeared in a dream, assuring her that all would be well. This appearance brought tremendous relief and my patient lost her fear of the illness and of death. She did in fact get better and there was no sign that the cancer would return. She was convinced that her beloved grandmother had returned from the realm of death to help her overcome her despair.

Another patient had suffered from a major depression for nearly twenty years. He had been in analyses for many years. I was his second analyst. One day, he began to relax into a trance-like state of consciousness. Suddenly he began to wail. Previously, over many sessions, an old woman from the past, who claimed to be a distant ancestor, had explained to him that he held the key to redeem her sufferings and save "the child" who seemed to symbolize the survival of her family. Now, slowly he realized that he was the "child" she had been talking about. She spoke in an old-fashioned dialect, different from the one this man used, telling him that all had been destroyed by a great famine in the land of his ancestors. She was caught in that terrible vision of death and destruction, and could not move on in the next world. My patient's suffering was her suffering. Only when he began to understand this and accept responsibility for an ancestral chain and for "the child," could the old woman let go and promise to no longer haunt him. After several weeks, the strange dialogue came to an end and the woman informed him that now that he had accepted her suffering, which was

part of his own history and the history of his people, she was redeemed and could go to heaven. The event and the working through of another traumatic event in his personal life, finally and indeed unexpectedly, brought this man's major depression to an end. To the surprise of this man and myself, the old woman's promise did come true.

The following dream reveals in a startling and direct way, the soul's capacity to prepare us for physical death and for a further life beyond the grave:

*I am tugging and pulling at a rubber inflatable dinghy of a gray rubbery color. I am trying to get it to fold up. I am making great efforts but nothing is happening. All of a sudden the dinghy becomes a small silver vessel, and a voice says: "This is the vessel of the spirit; treat it gently." I am holding the vessel in my two hands, and feel a great sense of peace.*

The dreamer was a fifty-year old woman. She was dying from cancer in a nearby hospital. The dream was presented for group discussion. In the discussion, we could understand the dream as foretelling the woman's death. Indeed we were informed that her body, through the illness, had become all gray and rubber like. The patient was hoping to die quickly so that she would not have to suffer. Jung once said that the unknown voice in a dream usually meant a voice from the Self – from the core of our personality. I understood the silver vessel as being similar to those tiny ancient Egyptian boats of precious metal. These vessels were to carry the dead across the night waters of the Underworld, so that they are reborn with the new sun. This mysterious dream was obviously intended to inspire the dying woman towards a new attitude to life beyond death. Her dying body was to be transformed into a spiritual body. Through her dream, the woman was being prepared to cross those dark waters that separate life from death in a gentle and peaceful way, and thus assume a spiritual identity that could survive the breakdown of her body and begin to participate in a continuous universe.

Many dreams, visions, and near-death experiences encountered today reveal modern man and woman's continual search for a meaningful attitude towards death and survival. Let us not fall a victim to old prejudices, but gather all these signs and messages that tell us about the greater life beyond physical death. We need to remember that most peoples of early civilizations attempted to accompany their dead for a long time until they found rest in the next world. Following them, for the last two thousand years countless theologians, poets, artists, and mystics have devoted much of their energy to understand and make tangible visions of a life beyond death. Within this context we may appreciate the visionary texts of Joa Bolendas in a fuller way, and thus open our hearts and our minds to participate in the life of the risen ones.

The visions of Joa Bolendas, published here, have much to say on the soul's progress in life after death. I have known Joa Bolendas for more than thirty years. She is Swiss, Protestant, wife of a pastor of the Reformed church, and mother of three children. She is now over eighty years old and lives in retirement in an old people's home.

Joa Bolendas' visions are not just the work of her own intellect or imagination. She has described the process of receiving visions as being in an infused state - infused with an energy, that has a quality of communication with some being other than herself.

Concomitantly, or sometimes shortly afterwards, she hears or sees the words and images that accompany her infused state of being. Joa has lived two lives. One is concerned with everyday life and involves her role as wife of a pastor, mother, and housekeeper. She has always maintained a complex network of social relationships. Her second life is oriented towards God and eternity.

Her visionary life started forty years ago and may be divided roughly into three parts. The early visions express her personal struggle to accept the gifts she had been offered. She never wanted visions. Often she was asked to do things that she would otherwise never have done, had she lived a normal life. The visions are essentially ecumenical, and Joa had to understand and integrate aspects of Christianity, such as the significance of icons, Mary, the saints, the rosary, and the mass, which were foreign to the traditional practices of her own Reformed church. Already in the early visions, a Johannine mysticism of Divine light, life and love, inherent in all being, is infused throughout the messages she received. The affirmation of a spiritual life, which is linked with God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and through which we are born to eternal life, is common to both the fourth Gospel and Joa's visions. Here is a promise of a fulfillment of human nature, expressed in a deep spiritual love of God and one's fellow human being. According to the visions, the mystery is best experienced in the Eucharist. A Johannine understanding of Communion implies that, through the life of the risen Christ, the primal light of creation is passed on to human beings, strengthening them to participate in God's creation as people of light, now and in the afterlife. The second part of her visionary life focused on a Joannine transconfessional unity of the churches, of the peoples of the world, and of the forces of life in an individual. Much of this material has been published in the book: *So That You May Be One*.<sup>2</sup> The third, and probably final part of Joa's work, concerns the spiritual evolution of humanity, here on earth and in heaven. The visions, some of which are now published in this book, include testimonies of deceased people who have spoken to Joa in vision about their experiences of the afterlife.

The content of these conversations with the risen people of the afterlife elaborates on theological issues and is to be understood as an integral part of the overall message of Joa's visionary life. The visions are rooted in the Christian framework. Similar to the images of Orthodox Christianity, heaven, the afterlife, and the resurrection of the dead unfold within a theocentric framework. The risen ones in heaven open their eyes to the wonder and magnificence of creation, giving praise and thanks to the Creator. They continually encourage us to seek relationship with God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, Mary, the saints, and the angels. Despite the theocentric emphases of heavenly life, heaven in Joa's visions is not just made up of solitary individuals contemplating the divine essence. Similar to recent astronomical discoveries of the enormity of the physical universe, God's heaven appears to be a vast and complex expanse, composed of many different realms. The people of these visions tell us that they are alive and continue to develop in heaven and, at the same time, maintain their presence on earth in an active, social way.

The most striking quality of Joa Bolendas' visionary accounts is the candid, matter-of-fact way the dialogues with the departed are held. Through these conversations, Joa Bolendas

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<sup>2</sup> Joa Bolendas, *So That You May Be One*, Hudson: Lindisfarne Books, 1997.

brings the inhabitants of heaven in close, almost tangible proximity. Similar to some of the earlier anthropocentric conceptions of heaven, the dead behave in very human ways. They express gratitude, are amazed at seeing things they had never seen before, need time to get used to their new surroundings, and are very concerned about their children, grandchildren, and the future of humanity. Much of what is witnessed corresponds to the reports of Raymond Moody.<sup>3</sup> Upon dying the dead experience great peace and relief. They can see what is happening on earth, their body is transformed into a spiritual body of energy and light, they meet loved ones who have passed on before them, they are guided by beings of light, and they witness a review of their life on earth. Unlike the subjects of Moody's reports, however, the people of Joa's visions cross over the barriers separating the living from the dead, they do not return to their physical bodies, and they move into deeper dimensions of heavenly life. Love and the search for inner truth are of paramount importance to both Moody's reports and Joa's visions.

Despite the Christian emphasis of these visions, earlier ways of understanding life after death are not condemned but are appreciated as an integral part of human evolution. These ways are practiced still today in Buddhism, Shamanism, and the ancestor worship of the Shinto religion. Nevertheless the resurrection of life, understood from a Johannine perspective, is to be distinguished from reincarnation and belief in the soul's eternal recurrence. The message, here presented, is eschatological in nature. It speaks about the final fulfillment of man and woman, even if the life of the resurrected human being is described as a state of continual activity and process.

The relationship between time and eternity remains a paradox. After death, risen man and woman can experience a whole lifetime, collective history, or periods of evolution in a condensed time-dimension, and begin to participate in a continuous unfolding of creation. The content of these visions may serve as an opportunity to translate contemporary visions of the universe, as a process of condensation and unending expansion, in terms of human consciousness. Henri Bergson has reminded us that states of the self are usually perceived through forms borrowed from the external world.<sup>4</sup> Consciousness cannot be understood by adding separate units of linear time, just as time cannot be reduced to a measurement of space. Care is needed not to confuse extension with duration, succession with simultaneity, and quantity with quality. The first are the properties of matter, the second of mind. According to Bergson, the quality of consciousness can be grasped in those serious moments of decision where there is an interpenetration of psychic states, in which "their dynamic unity and wholly qualitative multiplicity are phases of our real concrete duration, a heterogeneous duration and a living one."<sup>5</sup> In the visions of Joa Bolendas, time references are not to be understood within a linear framework, but imply a duration of ever-deepening interiority, in which psychic states of an increasing multiplicity undergo an equivalent condensation. The visions indicate that human consciousness, once linked with God, undergoes a transformation, through which events in time become progressively subsumed under the auspices of a duration that embraces a mysterious totality, hardly to be grasped with normal consciousness.

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<sup>3</sup> Raymond Moody, *Life After Life*, New York: Bantam Books, 1977.

<sup>4</sup> Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, New York: Harper 1960, p.223.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p.239.

According to the Gospels, Christ came not to destroy but to fulfill. The gift of eternal life is but a further development of those countless myths and rituals, created by man and woman to ensure survival after death. With the new creation outlined in the New Testament, humans no longer need embalmings, belongings, or artifacts to ensure their passage into the next world. Yet similar to the older cultural patterns, the saints and angels of Joa's visions tell us that we are to accompany the dead with our prayers as they undertake their long journey through the realms of heaven. The dead need not worry to whom they were married to whom they will be married, for those who attain resurrection take neither wife nor husband (*Luke 20, 34-36*). However, Joa Bolendas has seen that a deep spiritual love, which has developed between man and woman while they lived on earth, does survive in the afterlife and becomes part of eternity. It is not the physical body, but a transformed spiritual body of energy that is alive in heaven. The new link with God through Christ is not to be understood as an abstract ideal, but as a living reality. Saint John's testament grasps, through a symbolic understanding, the living quality of the risen life when he tells us to eat and drink the bread and water of eternal life. Thus the Godhead will dwell within us. Only the spirit gives life (*John 6. 64*) and this life-force, which perhaps make physical life possible in the first place, is not subject to the laws of corruption and death.

If we are to speak of heaven, then it is certainly not a heaven modeled on patriarchal society. It is not a place where men run the show and women serve. Neither is it a place filled with pious virgins. Nor does it mirror an all too human tendency to bathe in self-righteousness, splitting good and evil and projecting evil on all those who are opposed to us, as can be implied in some traditional images of heaven and hell. With the breakdown of the patriarchal power structures in the churches and in society and the gain of a new freedom for men and women, a corresponding change in our imagery of the next world is taking place. The visions here presented tell us that man and woman are made in the image and likeness of God and that God's heaven is exciting, open, alive and human.

Resurrected life is not to be understood as a quality of space. All too often Christian iconography has illustrated life after death as a place - heaven, hell, or purgatory. Heaven is but a further dimension of resurrected life and resurrected life is but a further dimension of human life and is to be appreciated in terms of a continuity of individual consciousness. Neither should resurrection be understood from a purely temporal point of view. It is not just something to happen in the future, after death. Christ's death and resurrection changed the pattern of creation and cut right through the division between the living and the dead. Eternal life, given by God through Christ, unites the living and the dead. The people of Joa's visions exhort us over and over again to link our lives with God and Christ and thus, while still alive on earth, we are born into eternal life. We are to share that life with all human beings whether they are alive on earth or in heaven. Death may never lose its sting, but we learn the sting does not have to be final. The visions of Joa Bolendas help us catch a glimpse of the other side and thus further our understanding of death as a point of transition, in which life appears to be shattered, recovers in God's world and begins to blossom in a new way.

Joa Bolendas experienced the transition through death with great hardship and intensity. On the third of May 1965, her eldest son, Peter, had a car accident. Joa herself did not want the

visions concerning that event to be included in the book, because of their intense personal nature. She feared that they might detract from the overall intention of this work, which is to emphasize the variety of experiences open to individuals as they try to understand the loss of loved ones or as they prepare themselves to pass through the doors of death to risen life. There is no one model for this kind of transition. She saw many times that the separation of body and soul is an experience unique to every individual, requiring each time a different attitude, different support, and different prayers.

She did, however, experience the suffering and anguish of a mother who has lost her son. In a unique way she tried to come to terms with the will of heaven. Despite her great loss, Joa Bolendas was reassured over and over again that the love between her and Peter could not be broken by death. In truth this love took on new meaning. The experience of the death and resurrection of Peter transformed Joa's whole life, prepared the ground for a deeper committed conviction about her calling and her work, and helped her understand the full significance of the truly human and of the greater life beyond death.

### ***This Translation***

The original German text was privately printed in 1998. I have used that text as the basis for the present translation. *Risen from the Dead* was printed in 1982, and first published in English in 1997 in *So That You May Be One*.

Joa Bolendas' style of writing is direct, spontaneous, and at times telegraphic. Its beauty lies in its simplicity. It is not the language of the Greek or Latin theologians. It is not a language of definitions. Joa Bolendas receives answers that explain not just what things are, but also what they do. According to Hans Küng, this kind of language is closer to the spoken language of biblical times.<sup>6</sup> Wherever possible, I have tried to retain this original style. Changes have been made only where the full meaning could not be contained in a direct rendering of the German text – and these changes only with the permission and help of the author. It should be noted that words in small italic print were not directly spoken in the visions, but were implied. It is also important to remember that much space lies between these words. I have often sat in a church with Joa Bolendas for more than an hour, during which time she wrote down a mere five to ten lines of vision. Most of this time was spent in beholding a spiritual presence in prayer and silence.

I would like to express my gratitude to the team of editors who, besides myself, included Christopher Bamford and Therese Schroeder-Sheker. Without their inspiration and support, this edition of Jos's work would not have been possible. My special thanks to Lela Fischli, Simon Mason, and Miriam Mason for their valuable help in the translation.

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<sup>6</sup> Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, London: Fount Paperbacks, 1989, p.46.