

## **Dr. Michael Egnor Reads From His New Book *The Immortal Mind***

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Announcer:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News. Recently we interviewed Dr. Michael Egnor about his views on the nature of free will, the human soul, and near-death experiences from his perspective as a neurosurgeon. Dr. Egnor is also an author of the recently released book, *The Immortal Mind*, a Neurosurgeon's Case for The Existence of the Soul. Today we have the introduction of this book for you as read by Dr. Egnor himself. If you enjoy this introduction, please consider picking up a copy of the complete book. Enjoy.

Michael Egnor:

Hi, I'm Dr. Michael Egnor and today I'd like to read to you read the introduction to my new book, *The Immortal Mind*, a Neurosurgeon's Case for the Existence of the Soul, co-authored with Denise O'Leary. You can learn more about it and get your copy at [TheImmortalMind.org](http://TheImmortalMind.org).

The introduction. Neuroscience from the Chapel Floor.

"When I was a medical student, I believed that science could explain everything. I was sure that answers to the big questions, how does consciousness emerge from the brain? Do we have a soul? Do we continue to exist after death? Would be found in the laboratory and the operating room. And so, I was surprised when late one night I found the answers on the floor of a hospital chapel. This book is the story of what I learned after I got off that chapel floor. It is about my search for the evidence that the mind is immortal and that by extension the human soul exists.

First, some background. My family was not religious. We believed in God, in a sense. My mother taught me the Lord's Prayer, for example, but we almost never went to church. I was not baptized, probably because my parents never thought of it. We lived in a poor rural area of upstate New York and we were just scraping by, putting food on the table and clothes on our back was work enough. My escape from a hard-scrabble childhood was science. Science was where facts and truth were found. I was a good student, mostly because I loved science. I was fascinated with the structure of the brain and the motion of the planets and the working of atoms. In elementary school, I memorized the names of the planets and even sent a letter to a publisher when a children's book about astronomy got the number of Jupiter's moons wrong.

My cousin was a nurse and she had assisted in brain surgery, so I spent hours asking her about how the brain worked. What I loved most about science was that it provided objective answers about the world, not mere opinions of the sort that were offered by other ways of investigating things. I dreamed of exploring the planets, discovering the laws of nature, and figuring out how the brain worked. In science, all the mysteries of the world, how the universe began, how the brain works, how atoms linked together to make molecules, are laid open to explore. I realized that the scientific method, careful dispassionate collection of data and thoughtful contemplation of what it means, would be my ticket to understanding the grandest mystery of all, how the world works and why we are here to ask that question.

When I was 12 years old, I sat transfixed in my living room and watched the breaking news of the first human heart transplant in Cape Town, South Africa. I thought of it as a miracle that a dead person's heart could be removed and placed in the chest of a person who was dying of heart disease. My

mother's life had been saved by a surgeon. She had a ruptured brain aneurysm when I was a toddler and had life-saving brain surgery at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York City.

In our house, surgeons were heroes who performed delicate, dangerous operations with great skill in order to save lives, including my mother's. To be a heart surgeon or a brain surgeon was the pinnacle of achievement. To be a surgeon was to play a central role in life and death drama. That was when I decided I would be a surgeon. It seemed like the most intimate way to get to know what it is to be human and to unravel the mystery of life. I would not merely read books about the heart or the brain. I would see them for myself, and I would learn how to heal people in a hands-on way. Surgery would be a front-row seat to the drama of life.

In 1980, I entered Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York, the same medical center where my mother's life had been saved by neurosurgeons. Medical school was heady stuff. Like all medical students I was exhilarated, fascinated, and terrified. I fell in love with the anatomy and physiology of the brain. I couldn't put the textbook down. I had been torn between becoming a heart surgeon or a brain surgeon, and there was my neuroanatomy textbook with its beautiful and intricate drawings of the pathways in the brain that let us see and hear and think and feel. That neuroanatomy textbook was the answer to my dilemma. I was going to be a neurosurgeon.

My most important day in medical school came at last, that was the day I first scrubbed for a brain operation in the same operating suite in which years before my mother's surgery had been performed. I was transfixed. The surface of the brain was beautiful, cream-colored swirls of gyri, which are ridges, and sulci which are valleys, with pulsating arteries and veins coursing through the ridges and valleys. This was, I was sure, the seat of the soul, if we had souls. I wanted to solve the mysteries of the brain and the mind, where our perceptions and thoughts come from, how consciousness comes from this landscape of gyri and sulci, how the mind emerges from this elegant three-pound organ.

At a nursing school dance I met the love of my life. After we married, we moved to Miami where I began my training in neurosurgery. It was a grueling but instructive six years. Miami was a huge, violent city, which meant that there was a lot of neurosurgery to be done, brain tumors, aneurysms, gunshot wounds, brain hemorrhages, day and night. It was the hardest work of my life, but I could work in a remarkably intimate way with people with injured and ill brains.

I saw what happened when specific parts of the brain were injured, examining and talking with the injured patients during their recovery. I had the privilege of learning firsthand how the mind, I will explain more about this later, but by this I mean the personality at the core of who a person is, changes when the brain is injured. It was a close-up look at the great trauma, the mystery of life and of the difference between mind and brain. I was still an atheist at this point. God meant nothing to me. I wasn't an angry atheist, I liked Christians and I thought that Christianity was a lovely story, but I felt that it was a fairy tale. Science was my road map to reality. Prayer and the Bible seemed to me so unscientific. Faith felt like a fairy tale whose origins existed in the brains I was operating on each day.

The truth I thought was in the operating room, in the laboratory, where I spent my days and nights. I was sure that the brain and the body were all there is. I never entered a church because I feared that I would have to leave my brain at the door. Christianity seemed to me pure emotion without contact with scientific evidence or tangible reality. What did a preacher have to teach me that could compare to my neuroscience textbooks and my professors in the operating room? But I was nonetheless haunted, I got eerie feelings occasionally, I called them hauntings that took my breath away. They were disturbing and enticing at the same time. They came mostly when I was alone with time to let my mind wander, when I was waiting in line, or when I awoke during the night, or I had trouble getting back to sleep. They were the sense that there was a profound truth pressing in on me that I was ignoring, because I was so caught

up in the ordinary affairs of everyday life, work and family and leisure that I was ignoring this elephant in the room.

Why was I here? Why does anything exist? What is life all about? The hauntings came unexpectedly when I was alone or glimpsed a sunset or woke up at night. In retrospect, I think they came from God, although at the time I believe they were just momentary breakthroughs of the deepest reality into my ordinary life. Sometimes the hauntings took the form of recurring daydreams. I imagined waking up one morning in a huge mansion, ornate, rich and beautiful, but I had no memory of how I got there or where I came from, and no knowledge of where I was going. Of course, an urgent phone call or an emergency page on my beeper or a word from my family would quickly interrupt these dreams. As an atheist, I found it easier not to ask myself questions about this mansion. I thought questions could only be explored through science. Medical science was my day job, and I believed it was the only reliable way of understanding the world and what happened in it.

So what changed? This sense of being haunted got worse when my kids started to arrive. When my first son was born, I looked at his perfect little head, beautiful hair and thought, 'He came from somewhere else, from someone. He was a gift.' I was not only living in a mansion, but I was getting beautiful gifts. Family and friends would say, 'He's such a beautiful baby and he came from you and your wife.' I would always reply, 'He came through us, but not from us.'

I still didn't even admit even to myself that I believed in God, but my hauntings were getting more intense. Sometimes I had trouble not thinking about them. Why was I alive? Where did I come from? Where am I going? Why had I been given so many wonderful things in life and why was I given such difficult challenges as well? But something else was happening too, and it's something I want to talk about in this book. As I learned more about the brain, I saw many patients with brain damage, whether from birth, bullets, blood clots or tumors, and yet their minds, their ability to think and reason and believe and desire didn't seem as damaged as their brains.

I learned in my training that certain parts of the brain control certain abilities, movement, perception, emotion and memory, for example. But I also saw that other abilities didn't seem to come from the brain at all, or at least not in the same way. For example, I operated on one woman I'll call Sarah, who had a brain tumor in her left frontal lobe. The tumor was invading the regions of her brain that controlled her ability to speak, so I had to remove both the tumor and the brain tissue it had invaded, but I also had to protect the speech area and the cortex of her brain.

That meant that she would need to be awake during the surgery so I could map the surface of her brain to ensure that her speech area was not being damaged. As frightening as it sounds, this awake brain surgery is not painful, because the brain itself feels no pain and local injections of anesthetic are sufficient to numb the scalp. During the surgery, I spoke with her continuously as I was quietly removing most of her left frontal lobe. She maintained a perfectly normal conversation throughout the surgery. That left me wondering, 'How does the brain relate to the mind? How can I remove such large parts of her brain without any effect on her mind, her thinking and her reasoning and believing and desiring at all?' This question is a central focus of our book, and we will explore the answers in the chapters that follow.

Day in and day out I lived in my familiar and busy world of work, family and ordinary things, but my hauntings continued. There were moments when I felt the chill, when I wondered about the questions that followed me for years. Why was I here? Where was I going? Who made this world? These questions came to a crisis, the turning point in my life, when my younger son was born. The serious questions were catching up with me.

When my son was a few months old, my wife and I noticed that he wasn't smiling or making eye contact with us. He would look at objects with interest, but not at people. We started to face the possibility that

he might be autistic, this terrified me. I had always dreaded autism. I knew it would be the worst agony to have a child you love who didn't know you or love you back. I had nightmares about my son as an older child sitting in a room alone and rocking back and forth, while the schoolmates played baseball and enjoyed normal childhoods.

We took the child to an autism specialist, but he said it was too soon to be sure, we would have to wait before we could know more. But at nearly six months of age, he still wasn't responding to us. I found it harder each day to go about my daily tasks because I thought about him all the time. One night it all came to a head. I was called to see a patient at a Catholic hospital in another town. As I was leaving the hospital, I passed the chapel. I thought, 'I don't believe in God, but I'll do anything now. I just want my son to know me.' So I went into the chapel and knelt before the altar.

'God,' I said, 'I don't know if you exist, but I need help. I'm terrified that my son is autistic. It's agony to have a child who will never know me or love me.' Then I heard a voice, it was the only time in my life I've ever heard a voice in my head that wasn't mine, and the voice said, 'But that's what you're doing to me.' I collapsed in front of the altar. The voice I heard had only spoken seven words, but I felt like he knew me intimately and had been watching me with love and wisdom all my life, and that he knew me better than I knew myself.

It was certain it was like a curtain that was lifted and the source of my life was speaking to me directly. My heart burned in me. When I recovered, I prayed, 'Lord, I will stop doing it to you, I'm sorry, I won't be autistic to you any longer. Please heal my son and please heal me.' I walked out of the chapel, a shaken man and a different man. The next morning, I called my local Catholic church, my epiphany had happened in a Catholic chapel and I sensed that this is where he wanted to meet me and asked to be baptized. A few days after my prayer in the chapel, I went home in the evening to my son's six-month birthday celebration. That night, he was behaving like a completely normal child, looking us in the eyes, smiling and laughing. I knew I had experienced a miracle. It seemed as if, just as I had stopped ignoring the Lord, he had also allowed my son to see me. Next Easter, I was baptized along with my son and other members of my family.

What is science? Since I now believe God is real, we had after all had a brief conversation, I rethought my slavish devotion to using only conventional material as science to understand the world. What had been haunting me all my life was the quest for truth. And when I found that truth, it changed me. I began to see science in an entirely different way. Science is the organized study of nature according to the causes of things. This means that the causes in nature, the Big Bang, the laws of physics, the astonishing complexity and purposefulness built into living things, that could not have arisen by mere evolutionary mechanisms, the marvelous human ability to reason and dream and desire goodness, need not in themselves be natural things. It's entirely possible that ordinary scientific causes in nature come from outside nature. Nature is not a closed system. There is room for God, a need for God in science.

The purpose of good science is to follow the evidence where it leads and to pursue the truth about the world without ideological blinders. I had followed the evidence and it had shown me that the supernatural was real. The inference to God's existence and to creation, design in biology, and the reality of the human soul is compatible with science, because it's true. So, I went into the library and the operating room with a new resolve to do neuroscience and neurosurgery without blinders. I reread classic research papers on the relationship between the mind, our perceptions, emotions, memories, thoughts, capacity for reason, our free will and so on, and the brain, the three pound organ in our skull that generates electrical signals and neurochemicals. I read up on well-respected theories about how consciousness works, and we will discuss them in this book.

But now I read neuroscience without materialist blinders. That is, without the presumption that we are simply flesh and blood creatures without spirits or souls. I also read the work of many of the greatest

philosophers, Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Ludwig Wittgenstein, to explore a logical framework for understanding these profound questions about our minds and bodies. With this new insight into the human mind and brain, I began for the first time really to understand the truth about the human soul.

My journey and our journey. My own Christian journey began with me face down on the floor of a chapel, and in many important ways my scientific journey began there as well. It was only after that moment in the chapel that I began to ask the deeper important questions, the haunting questions, who are we? Where do we come from? And where are we going after we die? And I no longer settled for the stock answers that many scientists, like me up to that point, had naively accepted for so long.

My experience in the chapel that night had turned out to be only one instance of my encounter with thin places, as some theologians call them, where the wall between God and man is so thin that we see right through it, if we know how to look. I have since found many thin places at mass, during quiet prayer, on long walks talking with the Lord, and during visits to Rome and St. Peter's Basilica and several other beautiful churches in the Eternal City. In my journey, I discovered that much of what I thought I knew was wrong. Like many scientists, I've been trained to believe that the soul is a myth and the mind is nothing more than a brain that is a physical machine. And as we shall see, the general intellectual atmosphere in which neuroscience is done today entails the denial of the soul.

Like a machine, the brain is supposed to be operated by physical forces beyond its own control. When the brain is damaged, our mind is damaged, we learned, sometimes irretrievably. When the brain breaks down and cannot be fixed, we cease to exist. Yet the more I investigated, the more I understood these supposed findings of science were myths. The real findings point in another direction. As a busy neurosurgeon who has performed over 7000 brain operations, medical school professor who has taught young medical students and aspiring neurosurgeons for 40 years, and as a researcher who has applied the rigorous methods of science to discovering about how the brain works, I have come to see that the human soul is real and that human beings are not mere machines made of meat.

I have come to see through practical everyday experience with neurosurgery patients, through working with neuroscientists, doctors and students, through devoted study of 2000 years of philosophical discoveries about the human mind and soul, that we human beings are spiritual, not merely physical creatures, created by God and destined for eternal life.

In the pages that follow, we will explore together some of the most amazing discoveries of modern neuroscience and medicine, discoveries you may never have heard of, and we'll explore how they show that there's overwhelming scientific evidence that human souls exist, that some abilities of the mind are actually separate from the brain, and that our souls do not cease to live when our bodies die.

You will learn about compelling scientific evidence that our minds continue to exist and function even when our brains are severely damaged. You will learn how the personal identities of loved ones continue to exist, even if they're in a coma or have dementia. You will learn how we have free will and can exert control over our physical brains. You will learn how science has uncovered powerful evidence that our minds survive death. Finally, you will learn how science points to the existence of a cosmic mind behind the universe. Join me on a journey that started many years ago that night on the chapel floor."

Announcer:

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