

Another Light

Near-Death Experiences, "Reality," and the Case for a New Scientific Approach

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Introduction

The topic of Near-Death Experiences -- defined as incidents in which individuals who are pronounced clinically dead and are subsequently revived, often with fascinating tales to tell about what happened to them during the interim -- is of great interest to me. The reason why is simple: I believe consciousness is basically independent of matter, and that the process of death, as John Lennon once said, "is like getting out of one taxi into another. The ride continues." Of course, I can offer no incontrovertible evidence to prove these points, but providing proofs is not the business of this article. Rather, I'm more concerned with changing the terms of the debate.

When I was nine years old, my father, then 43 and seemingly fit, died, without warning, of a heart attack. For some time thereafter I can remember lying in bed at night, ruminating, and then sitting bolt upright in terror with the certain knowledge that I, too, would one day die, and there was nothing I could do to change that fact. Everything I am, I thought, everything I might one day become -- pouf! gone, nada. As I grew into adolescence I wondered why people bothered to live at all, given the rules of the game. Remember that song "Dust In the Wind"? Neither my Catholic upbringing nor the soulless logic of science were of much help to me; losing my dad appeared, at best, the capricious whim of an indifferent universe, at worst some kind of mysterious punishment. I was, therefore, inclined to look in unofficial directions for the answers to my questions.

That's when I began to investigate the realm of metaphysics, the paranormal, and what has been dubbed -- though, I'm pleased to reveal, not by me -- "the spiritualism of the New Age." The phenomena encompassed by these loosely defined and overlapping terms are many and varied -- from the apocalyptic predictions of alleged prophet Nostradamus, to bizarre claims of "alien abductions," to the relatively bland pleasures of simple meditation and the ancient discipline of yoga. Near-Death Experiences fall somewhere in the middle, depending upon who you talk to.

It is my intention to argue that although formal scientific research into NDEs is barely twenty years old, these incidents have in fact been part of "unofficial" human history for much longer, and that many features of the experience are essentially the same regardless of geographic or cultural differences. In this article, I'll detail aspects of the Near-Death Experience itself, and submit case studies and accounts that contain data (like incidents witnessed and conversations overheard during the time a person has been pronounced clinically dead, or the emergence of psychic abilities as the apparent by-product of an NDE) for which science has no easy explanation or glib dismissal.

Again, I'm less interested in producing evidence -- though obviously my belief that NDEs represent an important clue to the true nature of our existence compels me to provide some -- than in challenging inculcated assumptions about what is "true." Many of these assumptions come to us from science, a discipline which claims to investigate all things objectively and without bias. Yet scientists, whatever their pretensions in this regard, are first and foremost human beings, and as such they are subject to the same foibles of character as the rest of us. For the most part, science has

refused to accept as valid anything that does not conform to a set of arbitrary, rigidly circumscribed beliefs about what constitutes so-called "reality."

It is my contention that serious, truly objective scientific study of Near-Death Experiences (as well as related phenomena) *could* provide the evidence needed to completely revise the officially sanctioned definition of consciousness and in the process supply a more enlightened model of human existence -- one that would revolutionize how we relate to ourselves, our planet, and each other. Moreover, I believe that a growing number of intelligent, open-minded and thoughtful people are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with mainstream explanations for, and attitudes toward, occurrences like NDEs. The right questions have yet to be asked, and that is the problem.

So, if this article is about anything, it's about asking some of those questions. I don't pretend to have any answers, which suits me just fine. What I really hope to do is open a few minds -- if only a crack -- by offering an alternate view of human consciousness and its characteristics. Readers may decide for themselves whether Near-Death Experiences are legitimate; what is most important to me is that they expand their notion of what is possible. This article, then, will be an inquiry, an analysis, and something of a call to arms. . . .

The Near-Death Experience

Raymond Moody, M.D., the pioneer of modern research into the Near-Death Experience (it was he who coined the phrase), enumerates the core elements of the typical NDE this way:

1] A sense of being dead: the sudden awareness that one has had a "fatal" accident or not survived an operation.

2] Painlessness: the absence of physical pain, regardless of injury.

3] An out-of-body experience (OBE): the sensation of viewing one's own body (usually from above) and perhaps seeing the doctors and nurses trying to resuscitate it.

4] Tunnel experience: the sense of moving up or through a narrow passageway toward a bright light.

5] Feelings of ineffable peace, love, and joy; being "embraced by an all-knowing, all-forgiving presence/"Being of Light."

6] Meeting deceased relatives and/or loved ones.

7] Life review: being shown one's life by the "Being of Light."

8] Being compelled, or being given a choice to return to physical life.

9] Personality transformation: a psychological change involving loss of the fear of death, greater spiritualism, a sense of "connectedness" with the Earth, and greater zest for life. (Perry 15)

Because understanding these stages -- some of which occur at roughly the same time-- is central to any investigation of NDEs, I would like to examine them in greater detail.

A Sense of Being Dead, Having an Out-of-Body Experience and Feeling No Pain

These three stages often transpire simultaneously. The "experiencer" may be the victim of a drowning, auto or household accident, someone undergoing a surgical operation, or even a person who has attempted suicide. Whatever the case, at some point the individual realizes that his or her consciousness, the part of them that thinks and feels, has somehow left the physical body. Instead, they find themselves hovering above the accident site or operating room, watching in a curiously detached manner while rescue workers or doctors frantically work to save a life -- theirs. Regardless of the injury, feelings of physical pain are conspicuously absent (Ring 36-38).

Author Kenneth Ring, in his book *The Omega Project*, quotes Harold Jaffe, a Connecticut speech pathologist who in 1952 was wounded in battle while serving as a soldier in the Korean War. He was flown to Japan for spinal column surgery, where

Ineffective spinal anesthesia in mid-surgery required rapid use of gas/shots in a panic situation. I heard later that the combination went 'green,' i.e. sour. I recall lapsing into unconsciousness after having been awake and alert during the first hour of surgery. I 'sensed' my heart stopping and thought, 'hey, you guys are losing me.' The next moment I was floating against the canvas roof the O.R. tent, looking down on 'me' stretched out on the table, face down, still being operated on... I had no form, no mouth -- only consciousness; vivid, painless, unimpaired hearing, vision, and thought.

The surgeon was alerted to cardiac arrest; several people shouted at once. A heavy, muscular black Air Force sergeant rushed in on call. 'I'm not clean, sir,' he said. 'To hell with that, flip this man over!' The sergeant waited for the surgeon to pack the wound, then fork-lifted me onto my back. I clearly 'saw' an X-shaped scar on the top of the sergeant's scalp -- even though my vision without glasses was 20/400.

The medical team worked furiously on my body to resuscitate me. I saw the anesthesiologist (female, lieutenant, Air Force) wiping away tears, shaking her head and saying, 'Oh shit, oh shit, he's gone!' I 'yelled' to her that I was still there, but she couldn't hear me.

I felt myself being sucked back. Weeks later I spoke of my experience to my surgeon, hoping he wouldn't think I was crazy and declare me Section 8. Surprised that I could describe every detail of my 'death' and be aware of the black corpsman's X-shaped scalp scar, my doctor only shrugged and said, 'Well, nothing surprises me anymore.' (Ring 99-100)

There are many examples of similarly specific OBE accounts, some fairly impressive. One is the case of "Maria," a heart-attack victim who in 1976 claimed that while out of her body, she took a tour of her hospital; to prove it, she sent staff social worker Kimberley Clark Sharp searching for a "scruffy tennis shoe with a lace underneath its heel," evidently lying on a window ledge somewhere outside the building. Maria's bed was not next to a window, nor could it be moved, since she was critically ill and hooked up to a life-support system (what kind is not clear). Clark Sharp decided to humor her patient, and was shocked when she discovered the tennis shoe on a third floor window ledge, looking just as Maria described it. Moments later Maria correctly identified the color of the shoe (blue) as well (Iverson 70-72). Another heart-attack case, a woman who had been blind for 50 years, was able to provide a precise description of the instruments used to resuscitate her -- right down to *their* colors (Perry 15). Due to a lack of what is considered hard evidence -- OBEs definitely detectable by electronic monitoring devices, independent corroboration of same in triplicate, the role of "chance" and "coincidence" -- astral projections during the Near-Death Experience (never mind astral projections in general) remain a topic of controversy within scientific circles (Blackmore 165-182).

The Tunnel Experience

The sensation of traveling through some kind of tunnel marks a transition point in the typical NDE. The individual who for all practical purposes is dead to one world begins a journey to another, almost without exception guided by an extremely bright (if distant) light (Ring 39-40). Most of the research literature dealing with NDEs includes this stage, although those passing

through it may have different ideas about what it actually is. Some people believe the tunnel is, as parapsychologist Susan Blackmore reports in *Dying to Live*, a "construct of the astral plane," meaning that though it may not be composed of physical matter, it nonetheless exists "somewhere," perhaps in an "alternate reality" (Blackmore 76-77). Others feel that the tunnel is symbolic of an essentially transcendental experience. That is, the passageway itself may not be objectively "real," but rather representative of a spiritual journey toward enlightenment (the light at the end of the tunnel, as it were). Astronomer Carl Sagan declares in his book *Broca's Brain* that this particular stage of the NDE constitutes a reenactment of the birth experience, postulating that when we die, we make our way down a "birth canal" to be reborn into the afterlife (Blackmore 79). Most scientists, needless to say, flatly reject these assertions, claiming that any tunnel adventure, however one defines it, is merely the result of a dying brain deprived of oxygen (Blackmore 113-135). As we shall see, this is the explanation that orthodox science will supply for almost every aspect of the Near-Death Experience.

Feelings of Peace, Love and Joy

Once the NDEr makes his or her way through the tunnel and into the light (invariably portrayed as incredibly bright but not blinding), many find themselves enraptured by feelings of ineffable bliss and serenity. The source of these feelings seems to be the light itself (Ring 68). People speak of a divine intelligence -- sometimes described as a "presence," sometimes as a Being of Light -- that communicates telepathically and radiates compassion, omniscience, and all-encompassing love. These accounts from Kenneth Ring's *Heading Toward Omega* are illustrative of case after case:

The first thing you're told is, 'Relax, everything is beautiful, everything's okay'... The thing is, the light communicates to you and for the first time in your life... (there) is a feeling of true, pure love. It can't be compared to the love of your wife, the love of your children, or some people consider a very intense sexual experience as love and they consider (that) possibly the most beautiful moment of their life -- and it couldn't even begin to compare. All of these wonderful, wonderful feelings combined could not possibly compare to this feeling. If you could imagine what pure love would be, this would be the feeling that you'd get from this brilliant white light... (58-59)

As this loving and powerful being 'spoke' to me, I understood vast meanings, much beyond my ability to explain. It seemed whole truths revealed themselves to me. Waves of thought -- clear and without effort (were) revealed to me. I understood life and death... I realized that consciousness was life. New serenity entered my being. (75)

A large percentage of Near-Death Experiencers attribute the character transformations I will soon delineate directly to their encounter with the light; it appears that the experience need go no further than this for positive personality changes to result (Ring 120). Yet, it is equally clear that the longer the NDE, the greater the transformation (Greyson 530).

Meeting Deceased Relatives and Loved Ones

Those who report NDEs also swear that dead relatives and loved ones were present during the episode, frequently acting as guides or simply providing reassurance. Dr. Elizabeth Kübler Ross recounts the story of a former businessman who, having lost his entire family in an auto accident, became an alcoholic derelict because he was unable to cope with the pain of their loss. One day, he was struck by a car while lying in a gutter, and had an NDE. The man related to an audience at one of Kübler Ross's seminars on death and dying that as the NDE progressed, he was able to see his

family. They did not speak to him but he felt they transmitted, collectively, a sense of love and deep sorrow at the turn his life had taken. The man concluded from the experience that his wife and children had "survived death," and by the time he told his story, had begun to pick up the pieces of his life (Kübler Ross 56-58).

Near-Death Experiencers who meet deceased family members and friends remark that they function as a calming influence, there to explain the situation and provide needed comfort. Statements like "Do you know where you are?" and "We've been waiting for you" are sometimes reported. They can also prompt the person having the NDE to return to physical life with the remonstrance "go back, it's not your time" or words to that effect (Mauro 55). William J. Serdahely investigated the story of a seven year old boy, "P," who saw not relatives or friends but Andy and Abby, family pets who had previously died. Since Serdahely, like others, believes that the reason dead loved ones appear in NDEs is to offer reassurance and then send people back to the land of the living, it follows that his interviewee P would see his deceased pets, as no family members had yet died (Serdahely 59-60). Some accounts, however, stretch credulity: a 45-year-old teacher from the Midwest proclaims she saw not only her father and grandparents, but Elvis Presley as well (Mauro 55).

Life Review

Perhaps no other element of the Near-Death Experience is as conducive to personal transformation as what has been labeled the "life review." In this process, which is not universal, the NDEr is treated to a retrospective of his or her life up till that point, which unfolds before him or her in vivid 3-D fashion. They are able to view all of their relationships, both from their own emotional vantage point and that of others. They are also able to see how their actions effected the people they came into contact with, and how these individuals reacted in turn to those *they* encountered. This procedure is almost always facilitated by a Being or Beings of Light, and apparently its purpose has nothing to do with punishment. Rather, it seems to involve "taking stock" of one's life and values. (Ring 67).

Dannion Brinkley, whose first NDE (he had two) occurred as the result of being struck by lightning, recalled with shame how his actions as a covert intelligence operative during and after the Vietnam War led to many deaths, all of which he claims to have experienced from the perspective of the victim while undergoing a life review. He also maintains that he experienced the emotional anguish of the victims' families (Brinkley 33-36). I will return to Mr. Brinkley later, but for now it is enough to say that the life review altered his life in no small degree. Another NDEr sums up her "mini-movie" like this:

I had total complete knowledge of everything that had ever happened in my life -- even little minute things that I had forgotten... just everything.

You are shown your life -- and you do the judging. You are judging yourself. You have been forgiven all of your sins, but are you able to forgive yourself for not doing the things you should have done? Can you forgive yourself? This is the judgment. (Ring 70)

Returning

After the life review has been completed, the individual may be given a choice to stay (and presumably complete the journey from carnate to discarnate reality) or return to physical existence. Either that, or they're summarily dispatched with the aforementioned "it's not your time," only to

find themselves back in their bodies, unable to adequately convey the meaning of their experience (Ring 78-79).

Personality Transformation

The one aspect of the Near-Death Experience which science finds most difficult to dispute is that people who have had them habitually undergo striking personality transformations. No one has been strapped to a polygraph machine both before and after the experience to ascertain whether an authentic metamorphosis has taken place, it's true, but the anecdotal evidence is strong.

Psychologist Kenneth Ring has identified a set of value and belief changes that appear to effect a high percentage of Near-Death Experiencers. These include: greater appreciation for life; higher self-esteem; greater compassion for others; a heightened sense of purpose and self-knowledge; desire to learn; greater ecological sensitivity and concern for the planet; a feeling of being more intuitive, sometimes psychic; rejection of materialistic and competitive attitudes; and a corresponding predilection toward altruistic and spiritual values. Physiological changes consist of: increased physical sensitivity; diminished tolerance to light, alcohol, and drugs; a "feeling" on the NDErs part that their brain has been "altered to encompass more;" and a "feeling" on the NDErs part that since the experience they have been using their "whole brain" rather than just a small portion of it (Mauro 82).

In an article titled "Reduced Death Threat in Near-Death Experiences," Dr. Bruce Greyson submitted the results of a study which suggest that while the Near-Death Experience can induce a romanticized view of death -- the lure of reunions with dead loved ones, the sense of unconditional love, etcetera -- it also produces a noticeable reduction in death anxiety. Simply put, people who have had NDEs no longer fear death (Greyson 530-531). In another study, which appeared in *Omega* ("The Journal of Death and Dying"), Greyson tabulated the responses of both NDE and non-NDE participants to a questionnaire probing attitudes toward suicide, and found that "NDErs endorsed significantly more of the anti-suicidal statements than non-NDErs. Among NDErs, (the) number of statements endorsed was positively associated with depth of experience" (Greyson 84-85). Greyson had actually expected the opposite would prove true; if life after death is so wonderful, why continue living in a decidedly imperfect world? Yet, paradoxically, his study shows that although NDErs may romanticize death, the reassurance they glean from their experience tends to engender rejection of suicidal thoughts. And, once again, it appears there is a correlation between the length and depth of an NDE and positive affect.

Personality changes brought about in people who have been through the Near-Death Experience are extraordinarily consistent. Those who once considered themselves extremely insecure no longer care how they are viewed by others. Negative and judgmental attitudes diminish, while self-love and empathy increase. Material wealth and status cease to matter. Instead, a new, more "spiritual" orientation toward life takes hold:

Before I was living for material things. I was conscious of only me, what I wanted... I went from a person who was selfish, empty, vain, *completely vain*, frightened of life, of living, of death, of anything and everything to... a real sense of freedom in my inmost being, a complete sense of knowledge with God; I've grown to really know what love is in a universal sense, and I'm still growing in that area. (Ring 144)

Well, to me, a lot of things people think are important are just not very important. I find that love, giving love, is sufficiently important. To me the human heart is what it's all about, and the rest doesn't matter. (Ring 127-128)

It's very difficult for me to lose my temper anymore. I can see the pain in people's eyes. That's why they hurt other people because they really don't understand. The most important thing that we have are our relationships with other people. It all comes down to caring and compassion and love for your fellow man. Love is the answer. Love is the answer to everything. (Ring 127)

These are the kind of statements that pop up again and again in follow-up conversations with Near-Death Experiencers. At present there is no practical way to prove with absolute certainty that these individuals are any different than they were before their NDEs, but Bruce Greyson's interviews with spouses, family, and friends have yielded at least anecdotal corroboration that this is the case (Mauro 82). Kenneth Ring and Raymond Moody, who both believe the NDE phenomena provides legitimate circumstantial evidence for life after death, present similar confirmations in their work. Susan Blackmore sharply disagrees with the afterlife hypothesis, yet she too admits that NDEs precipitate undeniable changes in personal values and beliefs (Blackmore 263).

Near-Death Experiences in History and Different Cultures

Raymond Moody published *Life After Life* in 1975, and in the two decades since, most research into NDEs has focused on contemporary examples from Western nations, primarily the United States. Apparently, however, the basic Near-Death Experience has a long history in many diverse cultures. If that is true, then a strong case can be made for their legitimacy. Can people from disparate social environments in different historical periods *all* have the *same* hallucination?

One may look as far back as Plato's *Republic* for parallels to the NDE phenomenon (Schorer 111). The Bible also contains a number of references to the soul departing from the body (Gen. 35:18), the spirit proceeding toward the Creator after death (Eccl. 12:7; Luke 23:46), the body reviving upon return of the soul (1Kgs. 17:22), and stories of people returning from the dead (Mark 5:41; Luke 7:15; John 11:44; Acts, 9:40; Acts 20:12) (Lundahl 66).

Craig Lundahl, in his article "A Nonscience Forerunner to Modern Near-Death Studies in America," states that modern research was actually preceded by writing on the subject in England as early as 1864 (Lundahl 64). More than this, Lundahl demonstrates that knowledge of, and teachings derived from, Near-Death Experiences have been part of the Mormon Church's literature since at least 1839, well in advance of any published reports. The first president of that church, Joseph Smith, had grown up hearing stories of deathbed visions (including those of his older brother and father), and an aunt evidently had an NDE in approximately 1789. In his sermons, Smith taught that the spirit separated from the body at death and was immortal, and, possibly referring to the "Beings of Light," that there were angels without wings who were more advanced than the spirits of the departed dead (Lundahl 67).

Lundahl goes on to provide five accounts of NDEs from Mormons that predate 1864, and two more from the late 1800's, all of which exhibit characteristics remarkably similar to present-day anecdotes (out-of-body state, feelings of peace and happiness, seeing the light, meeting deceased loved ones, deciding to come back, etc.) (Lundahl 68-74).

In 1825, H.R. Schoolcraft recorded two Native-American tales in his *Travels in the Central Portion of the Mississippi Valley* that bear more than a passing resemblance to modern NDE accounts. These stories were related by the Chippewas of Michigan. In one story, "The Funeral Fire," a warrior was shot in battle, had an out-of-body experience, and tried unsuccessfully to gain the attention of his companions, who assumed he was dead. Unable to communicate with the members

of his tribe (including his wife), the man returned to his body, leapt through an apparently non-physical fire, and regained normal consciousness. Thereafter he advised his kinsmen to keep a fire alight on the grave of every warrior. The other story is much the same, but includes a trip to a beautiful, peaceful place and an encounter with dead people. Since these and many other tales dealing with adventures into "the land of the dead" were part of the Native-American oral tradition prior to contact with white settlers, it is reasonable to assume they originated among the indigenous tribes of North America (Schorer 111-112).

The largest volume of Near-Death reports come from the United States, England, and Canada, possibly because research into NDEs is most developed in these countries. However, accounts have also come from China, India, Africa, Japan, Melanesia, Micronesia, the Philippines, Guam, aboriginal Australia, and among the Kaliai of Western New Britain and the Maori of New Zealand (Kellehear 148-156, Mauro 56, Serdahely 179).

There are significant differences between an NDE account from, say, a stock-broker living in Manhattan and a subsistence farmer in India. Allan Kellehear found that the tunnel stage of the Near-Death Experience, while familiar to those in China and the West, was unknown to experiencers in India and tribal people like the Kaliai or Maori. Kellehear also discovered that the life review stage followed a similar pattern, with the exception of the Indian descriptions, which contained a variation on the life review. His explanation for this was that Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism -- the predominant religious faiths of the West, India, and China, respectively -- all preach a moral ethic of personal responsibility and conscientious behavior toward others. Hence an evaluation of one's attitudes and conduct in life might fit the cultural expectations of NDE participants from these regions, whether they take the form of self-appraisal or judgment from a spiritual superior, as is the case in India. Those living in "hunter-gatherer" societies, by contrast, do not share these religious beliefs, and consequently life reviews in their NDEs are absent (Kellehear 155).

Still, Seattle pediatrician Melvin Morse, author of the best-selling *Transformed by the Light*, cites the work of Dr. Nsama Mumbwe of the University of Zambia, who studied 15 NDEs in Lusaka, Zambia, and found that all had the same core experience as their counterparts in other countries (Mauro 56). The fact that many of the Africans Mumbwe examined felt their NDE was a harbinger of evil, that East Indians occasionally experience heaven as a sprawling bureaucracy (where they are sometimes sent back to physical existence because of "clerical errors"), or that Americans feel they must return for the sake of loved ones, or to complete a task, does not invalidate the universality of the phenomenon. As James Mauro points out, the *interpretations* may vary slightly according to cultural dictates, but the basic NDEs themselves remain worthy of investigation (Mauro 56).

Naturalistic Science and the Near-Death Experience

The collective attitude of naturalistic science -- "the doctrine that scientific laws account for everything in the universe" -- toward the Near-Death Experience is perhaps best illustrated by the perspective of parapsychologist Susan Blackmore. In her book *Dying to Live*, Blackmore systematically breaks down the major facets of the typical NDE and provides a biological justification for each one of them. When accounts cannot be verified beyond all doubt, or fail to meet any of her criteria for "proof," they are summarily dismissed.

Blackmore's description of good scientific theory is instructive: "A good theory is specific... Generally speaking, a theory that uses known and well-understood principles is to be preferred... A good theory is one that makes testable predictions... What distinguishes the useful theories from the

useless ones is whether the predictions they make come true. A theory that makes no predictions is useless... A good theory (provides) good evidence" (Blackmore 75-76).

Blackmore's stipulations as to what makes "good theory" and what does not is, to me at least, problematic. Her assertion that a specific theory is *necessarily* superior to a more general theory does not convince. A specific theory can be just as flawed as a general one, and equally wrong. In the same vein, why is the deployment of "known and well-understood principles" over unknown and misunderstood principles fundamentally better? Do principles of scientific investigation need to be officially sanctioned and in wide use for them to be legitimate? Why are "testable predictions" a litmus test for authenticity? If a theory postulating the existence of a given phenomena is eventually proven correct, yet makes no predictions, is it any less true? Finally -- and this is a crucial question -- what constitutes "good evidence," and who decides how that term is defined? These objections may seem like clever word games, so much sophistry. However, they are as valid as Blackmore's criteria.

I cannot provide irrefutable proof for the Near-Death Experience. I can offer circumstantial evidence and persuasive arguments, but, strictly speaking, that is not the intention of this article. What I really want to do is address the invisible questions beneath the questions: given the data, we cannot be certain NDEs are real, but are we to extrapolate from this the unequivocal statement that they are the product of an overactive imagination? Is absence of proof -- *a particular kind of proof that science deems acceptable* -- proof of absence? Such attitudes strike me as both arrogant and reductionist, akin to the belief, also expressed by many naturalistic scientists, that because man has yet to discover intelligent life in the universe, it therefore must not exist.

With all of this in mind, I would like to take a look at the major points Susan Blackmore makes in rejecting the efficacy of NDEs and her counter-argument that they are essentially a function of the brain. Blackmore analyzes the out-of-body state, the tunnel and bright light, feelings of euphoria, and the life review.

Out-of-body states, induced by the extreme stress of an NDE, supposedly allow people to view incidents and overhear conversations while they are clinically "dead." Not so, says Blackmore. The information NDErs are able to relate upon resuscitation -- what happened, who was there, what they said, and so on -- can be explained as "prior knowledge, fantasy and lucky guesses, and the remaining operating senses of hearing and touch" (115). Many people who have NDEs, states Blackmore, can well imagine what happens at the scene of an accident or in the operating room. They are also likely to have some prior knowledge about what might occur after they lose consciousness, and therefore can construct a fairly accurate picture of the proceeding events. "As they lose touch with sensory reality and their internal expectations take over as real (sic), their expectations will come to life" (116).

Blackmore also notes that when someone is said to be "unconscious," they are often quite aware of their surroundings. Everyone has heard stories of coma patients who respond to the emotional entreaties of family and friends, or people who have undergone surgery complaining about an insensitive remark by a doctor or nurse while they were "out." Under anesthesia, hearing is allegedly the last perceptive mechanism to go, and Blackmore extends this fact to include NDEs; lying unconscious pool-side, by the wreckage of a car, or on the operating table, NDErs hear the voices of paramedics or doctors discussing this detail or that and manufacture an analogous visual image. "It does not take much information from such sounds for a person to piece together a very convincing and realistic visual impression of what is going on" (124). An individual's ability to feel what is happening, though ostensibly unconscious, may be equally important.

What, then, of the Near-Death out-of-body accounts contained within this article? Remember the soldier having spinal column surgery who was able to see an X-shaped scar on the

scalp of a man he had never met before? What about Maria and her mysterious tennis shoe? In her book, Blackmore includes the story of a woman, blind since birth, who had an OBE during surgery and correctly identified the number of people in the room (fourteen), and also describing the medical procedures (133). Because cardiologist Fred Schoonmaker, who originally confirmed the case for author Kenneth Ring, failed to submit a report for publication, Blackmore discounts the story.

Also included in *Dying to Live* is an account from a retired Air Force pilot who suffered a massive heart attack. Interviewed by cardiologist Michael Sabom five years after the fact, he furnished minute details about CPR procedure, describing the defibrillator's meter and, specifically, the behavior of two needles on the meter and how each differed from the other ("the fixed needle moved and then stayed still while the other needle moved up"). Sabom was impressed by the former pilot's description of the needles (evidently more intricate than Blackmore's excerpt) as well as the defibrillator itself. In 1973, the year of his heart attack, meters like the one the man described were widely used on defibrillators, but are not found on more recent models. He also denied having witnessed the same kind of CPR procedure before.

Blackmore's response: "Yes," she allows, "the man gives a plausible account and it seems unexpected given his lack of knowledge, but without access to complete details of what happened (and these can never be obtained), we cannot know just how closely it really did fit the facts at the time" (118). Again, if an NDE cannot be 100% confirmed, then it automatically loses credibility.

The tunnel NDEs describe traveling through is not objectively real, not birth revisited, not imaginary, and not symbolic of a spiritual transition from one world to the next. According to Susan Blackmore, the tunnel effect is due to "disinhibition of the visual cortex," itself the result of cerebral anoxia (lack of oxygen to the brain). Disinhibition of the visual cortex means that the cells located there begin firing randomly, and because the majority of these cells are devoted to the center of the visual field, Blackmore hypothesizes that "the effect would appear like a flickering speckled world which gets brighter and brighter towards the center. This is like a tunnel form" (84).

The next step follows logically from the first: if all of the cells within the entire visual cortex began firing simultaneously at a rapid rate, "the whole area would appear light. In other words, one would have entered the light. It might appear to be brighter than anything you have ever seen because the stimulation to the cortex could be stronger than any that visual experience could actually produce. This might explain a common claim made by NDEs, that the bright light did not hurt their eyes. Naturally, it would not hurt (their) eyes, because the eyes are not involved in any way" (86).

Similarly, Blackmore explains the life review by pointing to the dying brain. In times of pain and stress, the brain produces morphine-like chemicals, called endorphins, which reduce physical distress and create feelings of euphoria. Endorphins can cause seizures in two areas of the brain, the limbic system and the temporal lobe. The resultant abnormal activity in the temporal lobe can cause flashbacks and associated feelings of familiarity and meaningfulness. The hippocampus, located in the limbic system, is responsible for memory. Lack of oxygen can occasion disinhibition, and all of these occurrences combined can fool an individual into believing they are undergoing an intensely realistic life review (214).

What Blackmore does not mention is that, as already noted in a previous section, both the tunnel experience and the life review are evidently culture-specific phenomena; tunnels are prominent in Western NDE accounts, but missing in many non-Western reports. The life review stage is chronicled in Chinese, Indian, and Western NDEs, yet conspicuously absent from cases reported in primitive hunter-gatherer and cultivating societies (Kellehear 152). Blackmore does not

address why a "Being of Light" would direct or be part of such a process; she can only offer the same kind of inconclusive statements she decries in others (201).

Nor does Blackmore present any theory which explicates why, as they examine their lives, many Near-Death Experiencers say they experience not only their own emotions, but the feelings of those they came into contact with. She does not explain why these NDErs claim to see, and feel, the "chain reaction" of their effect on others. Whether these assertions are objectively true is in some ways beside the point: if the life review that transpires during the Near-Death Experience is merely the consequence of chemically reactivated flashbacks or memories, as Blackmore maintains, what place do feeling the emotions of *other* people and observing how one's actions impact them (and everyone *they* subsequently meet) have in that scenario?

The activation of endorphins certainly suggests a logical reason for feelings of peace, painlessness, and bliss. That is undeniable. Yet just as there is no hard evidence that feelings of rapture and serenity during Near-Death Experiences occur at the behest of some beneficent intelligence, there is likewise no concrete proof that this is not the case, or even that endorphines play any role at all.

Blackmore also fails to offer adequate explanation for the appearance of deceased loved ones during Near-Death Experiences. Are these the result of the disinhibited and dying brain? In what memory or flashback do dead people beckon individuals by calling "we've been waiting for you" or turn them away with the admonition "go back"?

Pediatrician Melvin Morse devoted an entire book (*Closer to the Light*) to the Near-Death Experiences of children, and William Serdahely and Barbara Walker have even documented an NDE at birth (Serdahely and Walker 178). Susan Blackmore herself includes the story of Ben Bray, a little boy of six who had never seen his paternal or maternal grandfathers, either while alive or in pictures, with anything but grey hair. During his NDE he saw both, one with black hair and the other with brown. His mother later confirmed that the hair colors each man had in his youth matched Ben's description. This is hardly startling "proof" for the Near-Death Experience, but Blackmore won't even entertain the possibility that something other than coincidence might be involved (127). She says little about pediatric NDE cases in general, possibly because they do not buttress her argument that Near-Death Experiences are attributable, in part, to the fervent desire of emotionally vulnerable adults to believe they will survive death. A plausible theory, but it does not explain why many children, who are presumably less needy in this regard, also see and communicate with "Beings of Light," deceased loved ones, or even unknown spirits.

In 1983, Morse published the story of a girl of seven who claimed that during her NDE, she was assisted through a dark tunnel by an adult female named "Elizabeth," and that the two of them then traveled to "heaven," where the girl met deceased grandparents, a dead aunt, Jesus, and God. An interview with the Almighty and his only begotten Son might be the hallucinatory outgrowth of perfect attendance at Sunday school (although, again, who's to say?), but what is most interesting about this account is that the girl also claimed to meet "two adult females waiting to reincarnate" (Serdahely 58). What does a seven-year-old child know about reincarnation? Maybe someone explained the concept to her, maybe not. We do not know, and in the absence of more complete information, why should anyone -- including Susan Blackmore and other adherents to the doctrine of scientific naturalism -- blithely reject such reports out of hand?

Finally, let's revisit the strange case of Dannion Brinkley, whose book *Saved by the Light* was published in 1994. The reader may recall that Mr. Brinkley, a former Marine who "contributed to the deaths of dozens of people" in Southeast Asia while attached to an intelligence unit during the Vietnam War, was electrocuted by lightning on September 17, 1975, and clinically dead for 28

minutes (Brinkley 1-27). During that time, Brinkley contends that he was shown "boxes of information" by a group of celestial beings which contained images of future events. In one of the boxes, for example, Brinkley saw satirical newspaper cartoons lampooning an American president named "RR" as a gun-toting cowboy riding roughshod over his enemies. The dates on the newspapers ran from 1983 to 1987, and Brinkley even felt certain the "cowboy" was an actor (Robert Redford was his initial guess). In another box, Brinkley witnessed a nuclear meltdown and, telepathically, was given the year 1986 and the word "wormwood." A decade later, when the Chernobyl nuclear disaster took place in the Soviet Union, Brinkley was able to associate both the images of nuclear destruction and the curious word he had received with an actual event. Chernobyl means "wormwood" in Russian (44-45). Brinkley related all of his "visions" to Raymond Moody a few months after his first NDE (heart failure in May of 1989 precipitated a second Near-Death Experience), and declares that out of 117 of them, 95 have already come true.

In the wake of his brush with death, Dannon Brinkley also claims the acquisition of some very intriguing "special powers." One of these was the ability to know what someone was going to say before they said it. In his book, Brinkley includes many such anecdotes. A typical example is one about a business deal that almost went bad because he read the thoughts of his negotiating counterparts (who were conversing in Norwegian, a language Brinkley did not know) and then told them what they were thinking (140). Brinkley's luck at the gambling table improved dramatically as well; he predicted the winning team in football games 156 times in a row, including, in about 80% of those games, the correct scores (146). Brinkley also realized that touching a person, an object they had handled, or simply looking at them allowed him to see "movies" of their lives. At a restaurant in Georgia, a skeptical Raymond Moody picked out people at random -- first a waitress, then a woman sitting nearby, and then five other individuals -- and Brinkley "read" them all: where they lived, what kind of car they drove, the friends they kept, their financial status, and what their personal problems were. These facts were verified on the spot by the participants (148-151).

Whether or not one is inclined to take Mr. Brinkley at his word, *Saved by the Light* is nonetheless chock-full of fascinating episodes like those recounted above. Obviously, he may be a nut. He could also be a liar. It is at least possible, however, that he is neither. What if the Near-Death Experience -- or any other "paranormal" phenomena, for that matter -- is indicative not of delusional thinking, but, rather, another aspect of reality? Why does orthodox science stubbornly refuse to contemplate this prospect, and why are *its* methods the *only* methods that count?

The Heart of the Matter

Concepts which have proven useful in ordering things
easily acquire such an authority over us that we forget
their human origin and accept them as invariable.

-- Albert Einstein

I assume that most of my readers are familiar with actress Shirley MacLaine, who, with the publication of her book *Out On a Limb* in 1984, "came out" as a believer in reincarnation and related metaphysical ideas. The book was a sensation, and Ms. MacLaine became a much in-demand speaker on the lecture circuit, as well as the butt of a good many jokes. In a later book, *Going Within*, MacLaine described two displays of spiritual healing that defy conventional attitudes about what is "real" and what is not.

The first of these concerned a Brazilian man named Mauricio Panisset. As a boy, Panisset claimed that he could see "balls of light" in the wooded area near his village, and that these lights would "speak" to him. Much later the lights reappeared, urging Panisset to devote himself to the healing of the sick. He refused and became ill himself. When at last he relented, the lights began to appear while Mauricio attempted to heal others (typically through what is called "the laying on of hands"). By the time MacLaine requested a private session with Panisset, his healing abilities had evolved to the point where jagged currents of electromagnetic light emanated directly from his finger-tips into the bodies of his "patients." Mauricio's light-show also included the capacity to illuminate not only the particular room he was in but many rooms simultaneously (MacLaine swears she saw Panisset *urinate* light at one juncture in their meeting; further investigation of this disclosure is left to the interested reader). After treating Shirley MacLaine, Mauricio demonstrated his healing technique for at least three hundred people at one of the actresses' seminars. Many who attended affirmed the positive health benefits of his unusual approach to medicine. Panisset later duplicated his pyrotechnics in broad daylight, wearing nothing but a G-string to prove he was not concealing any kind of mechanical light device (MacLaine 241-256).

The second means of extraordinary healing described in *Going Within* is called "psychic surgery." In this process, the healer gently kneads the skin of the patient's body until it somehow opens up, whereupon he inserts his hands into the effected area (say, the kidney or heart) and extracts clots of blood and other internal matter. After the hands are withdrawn for the final time, the "incision" closes up, leaving blood on the patient's body but only the trace of a scar. Shirley MacLaine had seen this procedure numerous times on videotapes brought back from both Brazil and the Philippines. One had been given to her by an M.D. who had personally undergone the treatment and was "cured" of an eye disease (259). MacLaine had also seen very sophisticated psychic surgery acts performed on television by professional magicians intent on debunking the phenomena. Yet the "surgery" on the videos that MacLaine viewed was different, she felt, because it was performed in clinics with certified doctors and nurses present, no money changed hands unless desired by the patient, and because in at least one case, the camera ran continuously, without any cuts.

Eventually Shirley MacLaine, her daughter Sachi, and friend Chris Griscom would all undergo the procedure at the hands of Reverend Alex Orbito of the Philippines. (Orbito's methods were analyzed by Swedish scientists in 1974 under laboratory conditions. They examined him, searched him, had him heal with no clothes on, measured his pulse, heartbeat, brain waves, rate of perspiration, and so on. Using Kirlian photography, they also observed the energy flowing out of his hands as he operated) (272). After her initial session with Orbito, MacLaine invited nearly a hundred people to her Malibu home and watched, along with her guests, as he removed teeth, cysts, uterine fibroids, hemorrhoids, breast and brain tumors and even an eyeball. This last he extricated from the eye socket, cleaned, and then returned to its rightful owner (who felt no pain, only "pressure") (274).

Days later at a Unity church in Ojai, California, thirty more eyewitnesses looked on as Orbito again placed his hands inside MacLaine's body. A surgeon who appears in *Going Within* under the pseudonym "Ted Bennet" observed many of these operations, standing right next to Alex Orbito as he worked. No anesthesia or surgical instruments were used; there was no pain, no post-operative shock, and, as far as the good doctor could tell, no trickery. "I'm very uncomfortable with what I'm seeing," he told MacLaine. "I can't understand. I've spent my life training in medical science, yet what I am seeing seems to make a mockery of that" (287).

If stories like these are true, then it is clear that our definition of "reality," largely inherited from naturalistic science, must be called into serious question. Modern quantum physics has demonstrated conclusively that on a sub-atomic level, all matter is composed of *patterns of energy*, and that the perception of matter as solid is, in fact, an illusion (Iverson 205). Quantum physics has

also confirmed what many who have studied metaphysics have believed for some time: that the very act of observation effects and alters the status of an "objective," seemingly separate occurrence. In other words, our perceptions contribute to the formation of a given event and are a part of it (Iverson 193).

Since one of the principal objections of naturalistic (i.e. mainstream) science to the Near-Death Experience is that NDEs cannot be verified using objective measurements, the findings noted above are pertinent. If the observer directly influences what he observes, then how are we to arrive at a single, uniform definition of "reality"? On a smaller scale, how can we be sure that the confident proclamations of science dismissing NDEs as fantasy are likewise accurate?

One school of thought in metaphysics posits that each of us create the experience we know through our beliefs, attitudes, and expectations. A proponent of this theory was the late Jane Roberts, who began "speaking for the spirit of a dead man" in 1963. Actually, the "spirit's" name was Seth, and he referred to himself as "an energy personality essence." Over the period of twenty years and seven books, Seth had some interesting things to say about science and its methods of inquiry. A few of them are applicable to the study of NDEs:

You cannot separate your beliefs about reality from the reality that you experience. That is, your beliefs about reality form it. Your ideas about what is possible and what is not possible are reflected in all areas...

The instruments your scientists use will conform to the rules of the game. They will faithfully mirror the beliefs and expectations of those who construct and use them. The versions of "reality" they record will be distorted, because the instruments themselves will be distorted...

Gadgets will, ultimately, teach you nothing about the dimensions of your own consciousness... (They are) useful only in measuring the level of reality at which they themselves exist. They help you interpret the universe in horizontal terms, so to speak. In studying the deeper realities within and "behind" that universe, the instruments are not only useless, but misleading.... (Roberts 217-218)

It is worth mentioning as well that although science refuses to grant legitimacy to an NDE phenomena it cannot quantify, dissect or view through a microscope, many of the analytical methods scientists place great store in, such as mathematical equations, suffer from the same problem. Ironically, while most scientists reject Near-Death Experiences and the idea of life after death as misguided articles of faith, the same might be said of some of the more pervasive scientific beliefs regarding the nature of reality. As Professor Brian Josephson, winner of the 1973 Nobel Prize for physics, puts it:

There are all sorts of things that scientists claim that are really acts of faith, just as much as religious belief. When a scientist says, for example, "We understand how the brain works," or "We understand how man came into existence through natural selection," that's an enormous extrapolation... Similarly, somebody produces a theory that explains a little piece of evolution... and scientists then say, "We understand how evolution works."

To apply this to the evolution of man or to say how man's mind works involves an enormous leap of faith, which I'd say is almost bigger than the kind of faith involved in religious belief. (Iverson 196)

What is needed, it seems to me, is a radical reworking of long-accepted, little-challenged mainstream beliefs about what is "true," what is "false," what is "real," and what is "not." Science must expand its vision of what is possible, not because unexplained phenomena like Near-Death Experiences are necessarily real, but because they just might be. NDEs deserve serious, comprehensive study from scientists who are willing to confront the issue squarely and without prejudice. It is not enough to say the evidence is anecdotal or inconclusive and leave it at that. After all, if science has claimed to be dedicated to any one ideal, that ideal has always been the relentless pursuit of the truth, never mind how disagreeable. If this dictum still holds, then let the true scientist explore the Near-Death Experience and discover what he may.

Mainstream science, with its mechanistic model of the universe and wholesale rejection of any countering view, has come close to a declaration that life is meaningless. I can offer no definitive evidence to prove otherwise, yet turnabout is fair play: can science prove beyond all doubt that human beings are nothing more than the accidental amalgamation of random biological elements? Can it *prove* there is not a divine intelligence operating within, and responsible for, the universe? Can science prove that death annihilates consciousness? I do not think it can, and that is reason enough to keep the collective scientific mind wide open and available to alternative explanations.

If NDEs were somehow proven authentic, the knowledge that our consciousness survives physical death would inevitably have profound ramifications on the way we live. I believe that many of the insecurities that bedevil humanity can be ascribed to the fear of death, and that this fundamental, unacknowledged anxiety is the motive force behind many of our less savory exploits. If that basic fear ceased to be relevant, then, conceivably, a more benign world order might emerge. It's possible that people would be less likely to indulge in greed, envy, or violence, because the uncertainty that plagues many of us about who we are, how we fit in, and where we come from -- an uncertainty that can lead to less than enlightened behavior -- would no longer be an issue. We'd *know*, and our apprehensions would diminish accordingly. Maybe the deep-seated fear that obliges nations like the United States to construct weapons of mass destruction capable of obliterating the earth many times over would also abate, for the same reasons.

After all the research I've done on the subject, I'm still not sure that Near-Death Experiences are the gateway to another dimension. Nevertheless, I rather suspect *something* is going on, and I would very much like to know what it is. It's obvious that someday we are all going to die. Where -- or whether -- we go on from there is anybody's guess. As for me, I don't mind the thought of dying; I just don't want to be there when it happens. On the other hand, in a weird way I'm actually looking forward to the experience, because the process of death promises to be a stimulating adventure indeed. Will it be the end of the road, or a ride like no other? I don't have a clue, but that's okay. The only thing I'm certain of is that death will be the supreme event. The trip of a lifetime, you might say.

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