

Near-Death Experiences with Hallucinatory Features

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ABSTRACT: Though little systematic attention has been given to near-death experiences (NDEs) with clear or suggestive hallucinatory features, reports of such experiences strongly imply that NDEs are not glimpses of an afterlife. This paper, Part II of a critique of survivalist interpretations of NDEs, surveys NDEs incorporating out-of-body discrepancies, bodily sensations, encounters with living persons and fictional characters, random or insignificant memories, returns from a point of no return, hallucinatory imagery, and unfulfilled predictions. Though attempts to accommodate hallucinatory NDEs within a survivalist framework are possible, they signal a failure to take the empirical evidence against a survivalist interpretation of NDEs seriously.

KEY WORDS: near-death experiences; out-of-body experiences; hallucinatory imagery; survival of death; life review; prophetic NDEs.

Though investigators engaged in survival research rarely acknowledge it, a survivalist interpretation of the phenomena that they study, including near-death experiences (NDEs), is severely undermined by the overwhelming evidence for the dependence of consciousness on the brain (Beyerstein, 1991; Churchland, 1984; Edwards, 1992; Lamont, 1990; Russell, 1957). But even if we disregard the positive neurophysiological evidence against any form of dualistic survival, there remains strong evidence from reports of NDEs *themselves* that NDEs are not glimpses of an afterlife. This evidence includes discrepancies between what is seen in the out-of-body component of an NDE and what is

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actually happening in the physical world at the time; bodily sensations incorporated into NDEs; encounters with living persons during NDEs; the typical randomness or insignificance of retrieved memories during near-death life reviews; NDErs who explicitly or implicitly decided not to return to life when given a choice, but whose lives were restored anyway; hallucinatory imagery in NDEs, including encounters with mythological creatures and fictional characters; and the failure of predictions among NDErs who report seeing future events during NDEs or gaining psychic abilities after them.

The cases cited in this essay show that many NDEs are hallucinations. NDEs incorporating false descriptions of the physical environment have been found not only by different near-death researchers, but by researchers searching for evidence that NDEs are *not* hallucinatory. This motivation among researchers makes it impossible to estimate the prevalence of NDEs with clearly hallucinatory features. As Bruce Greyson pointed out, the file-drawer problem is a likely factor here: NDE accounts with clearly hallucinatory features may end up filed away indefinitely, while only more dramatic accounts are deemed fit for publication (Greyson, 2000). Similarly, NDEs with obviously hallucinatory traits seem particularly likely to be under-reported by NDErs themselves, given the disparity between how real the NDE felt at the time and the realization that it could not possibly reflect reality if, for instance, the NDEr communicated with his or her still-living mother in an ostensibly transcendental realm. Given that many NDEs are already known to be hallucinations, it is likely that other NDEs lacking overt hallucinatory features are nevertheless hallucinations as well.

Out-of-Body Discrepancies

Some NDErs report that they saw things while ostensibly out of their bodies that did *not* correspond to what was actually happening in the physical world. Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick reported the NDE of a World War II veteran whose unit came under attack from aerial bombers:

The battery cook (a devout Muslim) came running in panic toward me.... He lay down, touching my right elbow, and calmed himself.... As I looked up one of the Heinkel pilots executed a tight turn over the rim of the *wadi* and lined up on us.... I flattened out like a lizard on the sand....

Instantly I was enveloped in a cloud of beautiful purple light and a mighty roaring sound ... and then I was floating, as if in a flying dream, and watching my body, some dozen feet below, lifting off the sand and flopping back, face downwards. I only saw my own body. I was quite unaware of the two Sudanese lying beside me.... And then I was gliding horizontally in a tunnel ... rather like a giant, round, luminous culvert, constructed of translucent silken material, and at the end of a circle of bright, pale primrose light. I was enjoying the sensation of weightless, painless flight.... I had a feeling it would be more interesting when I reached the light.

... I became aware that I was being ‘sucked’ back through the tunnel and then into a body that felt rather unpleasantly ‘heavy’, that the sun was burning my back.... [T]he Heinkels were still firing at us and a cannon shell knocked a saucepan off the truck above my head. This troubled me not at all; indeed I seemed to have lost all sense of fear, but my back felt wet and slimy so I looked over my shoulder to investigate the cause. My back was a red mass of blood and raw flesh.... Then I realised that I was looking at all that remained of Osman the cook, who had been lying beside me. I noticed also that my Bren gunner, who had been close to my other side, had disappeared. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, pp. 43–44)

The Fenwicks conceded that it was “quite clear” that this NDEr was not actually observing the physical world when he saw his body from above: “He was unaware of the cook, who had been lying beside him – and was now not simply lying beside him but spread all over his back, where he could hardly have failed to be seen” (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 44). Plainly this NDE must have been a brain-generated hallucination.

The Fenwicks also cited the case of a woman who had three spontaneous out-of-body experiences (OBEs) during her second pregnancy. In her third OBE, Mrs. Davey found it difficult to “return to her body” because, “although she was up on the ceiling, she did *not* see her body” (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 41).

In a case from the “Evergreen Study,” conducted at Evergreen State College in Washington, a woman who had had a ruptured Fallopian tube due to an ectopic pregnancy reported seeing things that did not exist in the room while she was ostensibly out of her body:

I saw this little table over the operating table. You know, those little round trays like in a dental office where they have their instruments and all? I saw a little tray like that with a letter on it addressed (from a relative by marriage she had not met). (Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981, p. 109)

This woman related her NDE to her sister-in-law, a nurse who was called into the operating room at the time of the NDE. But the nurse

was adamant that there was neither a letter nor a round table in the operating room.

However, the authors noted that there was a small *rectangular* table for holding instruments called a “Mayo” in the room, and quickly deduced a probable scenario for why this experience took the form that it did: “Notice [Mayo] sounds like ‘mail.’ She may have heard someone call the tray by name (since hearing is reportedly the final sense to fail at death) and connected it with ‘mail’” (Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981, p. 109). Moreover, the letter seen out-of-body was addressed from the nurse’s brother-in-law, which suggests that she might have heard the nurse’s name and incorporated that information into her experience as well. What is particularly interesting about this case is that it seems to confirm that out-of-body imagery in NDEs is sometimes obtained directly from scraps of conversation rather than from some paranormal source.

In a study of 264 subjects with sleep paralysis, Giorgio Buzzi and Fabio Cirignotta found that about 11 percent of their subjects (28 people) “viewed themselves lying on the bed, generally from a location above the bed” (Buzzi, 2002, p. 2116). However, these OBEs often included false perceptions of the physical environment:

I invited these people to do the following simple reality tests: trying to identify objects put in unusual places; checking the time on the clock; and focusing on a detail of the scene, and comparing it with reality.

I received a feedback [*sic*] from five individuals (unpublished data). Objects put in unusual places (eg, on top of the wardrobe) were never identified during out-of-body experiences. Clocks also proved to be unreliable: a woman with nightly episodes of sleep paralysis had two out-of-body experiences in the same night, and for each the clock indicated an impossible time.... Finally, in all cases but one, some slight but important differences in the details were noted: “I looked at ‘me’ sleeping peacefully in the bed while I wandered about. Trouble is the ‘me’ in the bed was wearing long johns.... I have never worn such a thing.” (Buzzi, 2000, pp. 2116–2117)

Buzzi concluded that his subjects’ out-of-body imagery must have been derived from memory and imagination rather than their surroundings at the time (2000, p. 2117).

Melvin Morse reported a near-death OBE where a young girl saw a teacher who was not present in the room and then encountered ostensibly transcendental doctors:

[O]ne child ... could see her own body as doctors wearing green masks tried to start an IV. Then she saw her living teacher and classmates

at her bedside, comforting her and singing to her (her teacher did not visit her in the hospital). Finally, three tall beings dressed in white that she identified as doctors asked her to push a button on a box at her bedside, telling her that if she pressed the green button she could go with them, but she would never see her family again. She pressed the red button and regained consciousness. (Morse, 1994, pp. 68–69)

Morse, using open-ended questions, also found a case in which a child who was clinically dead reported that while she was “above her body” looking down, “her mother’s nose appeared flattened and distorted ‘like a pig monster’” (Morse, 1994, p. 67).

The Fenwicks recounted an NDE where the NDEr “observed” a procedure that never took place during her heart bypass operation:

[S]he left her body and watched her heart lying beside her body, bumping away with what looked like ribbons coming from it to hands. In fact, this is not what happens in a heart bypass operation, as the heart is left within the chest and is never taken outside the body. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 193)

The Fenwicks noted that ribbons are indeed tied to *arteries* during an operation of this sort, attributing the false perception to mis-identification. However, it is difficult to see how a person truly out-of-body with vivid perceptual capabilities could confuse arteries, ribboned or not, with a beating heart lying next to her outside of her body.

Other NDErs have reported seeing friends out-of-body with them who are, in reality, still alive and normally conscious. The Evergreen Study included a clearly hallucinatory NDE after a major car accident:

Well, then I remember, not physical bodies but like holding hands, the two of us, up above the trees. It was a cloudy day, a little bit of clouds. And thinking here we go, we’re going off into eternity ... and then bingo, I snapped my eyes open and I looked over and he was staring at me. (Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981, p. 110; ellipsis original)

The authors of that study added: “In this incident a woman had lost consciousness but her male companion had not. In the experience, she perceived the two of them in an out-of-body state, yet her friend never blacked out” (Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981, p. 110).

OBErs who do not lose consciousness before their experiences often report watching their bodies continue to perform coordinated actions, as if they were still in control of their bodies, while nevertheless apparently viewing them from above. Recalling an OBE while on

patrol for the first time, chasing an armed suspect, a police officer reported:

I promptly went out of my body and up into the air maybe 20 feet above the scene. I remained there, extremely calm, while I watched the entire procedure – including watching myself do exactly what I had been trained to do. (Alvarado, 2000, p. 183)

After the suspect had been restrained and the danger was over, the officer returned to normal consciousness. Another OBEr, who had been running for over 12 miles training for a marathon, reported:

I felt as if something was leaving my body, and although I was still running along looking at the scenery, I was looking at myself running as well. (Alvarado, 2000, p. 184)

This ability to “hover” above the scene *and* continue to function as if “in” the body simultaneously strongly suggests the hallucinatory nature of these experiences. In some sleep disorders, for instance, subjects are able to exhibit “directed” behavior, such as sleepwalking and sleep eating, even though they are evidently *not* normally conscious. Taking on an extraordinary new perspective while functioning normally otherwise makes much more sense if OBEs are occurring “in” the body all along, rather than in some remote discarnate entity.

Finally, Harvey Irwin noted other intriguing examples of hallucinatory OBEs, such as reports of “seeing the physical body as if from a height of 30 feet (9 meters) or more ... [when] this would have entailed seeing through the roof and the ceiling of the house” (Irwin, 1999, p. 223). If something leaves the body and perceives the physical world during OBEs, he asked, “why do some OBErs report distortions in reality (e.g., [nonexistent] bars on the bedroom window), and how are some experiencers able to manipulate the nature and existence of objects in the out-of-body environment by an effort of will?” (p. 233).

As the Fenwicks pointed out, if OBEs and NDEs are hallucinations,

we should expect there to be major discrepancies between the psychological image – what the person sees from up there on the ceiling, which will be constructed by the brain entirely from memory; and the real image – what is actually going on at ground level. Mrs Ivy Davey, for example, did not see her body, although her body was clearly there. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 41)

As we have seen, discrepancies between what was seen out-of-body and what was actually happening in the physical world are found in spontaneous OBEs, in NDEs where a real or perceived threat of

imminent harm triggers an OBE, and in NDEs that include an OBE along with other NDE components, such as a tunnel and light.

Bodily Sensations

In other NDEs, bodily sensations are incorporated into an experience that, on the survivalist interpretation, is assumed to take place in a soul separated from the normal physical body. The Fenwicks reported an NDE during a hernia operation where a bodily sensation was felt well into the experience:

I left my body and went walking towards a very bright white light which was at the end of a long tunnel. At the same time I could see three figures standing at the end of the bed and I kept wishing they would go away so that I could go to the light, which to me was lovely and warm. Just as I neared the light I felt a stab in my thigh. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 91)

With that stab in the thigh this NDE ended. But if NDEs were literally journeys of one's "spiritual double" traveling through the physical world, free of the normal physical body, and entering a tunnel into the afterlife, one should not have *any* sensations arising from the normal physical body during any part of an NDE.

Also notice that although this NDEr reported leaving his body, "walking" toward a bright light at the end of a long tunnel, and finally getting close to the light, when he felt a sharp pain the experience immediately ended. He did not report "backtracking" through the tunnel and back into his body. At one moment he was close to entering the light; at the next he was back in his bed. If it was necessary for this person's double to "travel" to get from his body to the light, would he not have to travel back from the light to return to his body? The lack of a "return trip" also implies a hallucination that was suddenly interrupted by a sharp pain.

The Fenwicks provided us another case where bodily sensations were incorporated into an NDE. A Royal Navy sailor leaning against some chains was accidentally electrocuted when plugging in a badly connected portable fan. After hearing himself screaming, seeing flashes of electricity "licking around" his body, and hearing a roar, his body laid motionless on the ship's deck, but his mind was racing:

I seemed to be floating in a beautiful velvet-like darkness, feeling completely at peace away from the frightening flashes. I seemed to be going through a tunnel angled slightly downwards when suddenly I

found myself standing in a field of beautiful yellow corn.... I felt comfortable and appeared to be wearing a blue gown.

Suddenly, on the distant horizon I saw something that appeared to be a train, in fact a blue train. At first ... I hadn't noticed gentle music in the background plus the quiet rumble of the blue train.

For some unexplained reason I appeared to get closer to the train, which stopped in front of where I was standing. I could see people in the carriages beckoning to me and telling me to climb aboard....

Then, again almost as if by magic, I was in the train compartment with the faceless passengers, who, I noticed, seemed to be dressed in the same way as I was....

Then it began to happen. I felt a pressure on my shoulders and a strange sensation as I began to rise. It didn't make any sense – I felt I was being pushed down yet I was going up....

The speed of my ascent became faster and I felt a feeling of anger mixed with regret. I didn't want to go back. Suddenly I came to and was lying face down on the deck of the frigate passageway. My colleague was pushing on my shoulder blades in the old Holger-Nielson method of resuscitation. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, pp. 154–55)

This NDEr was baffled as to why he felt being pushed down when he was rising up out of a train. But his bodily sensation makes perfect sense if NDEs are brain-generated hallucinations which sometimes incorporate information from the senses, just as a person may dream about going to the bathroom when sleeping with a full bladder.

Remarkably, Morse mentioned a childhood NDE that occurred *while the child was conscious and talking* to nurses – but a person relating an experience could hardly be supposed *simultaneously* to be leaving his normal physical body and traveling elsewhere:

Boston Children's Hospital described a total of 13 pediatric NDEs. Seven of these experiences were told to nurses immediately after recovery, and one was reported *during* the experience. (Morse, 1994, p. 70; italics added)

Living Persons

Some NDErs report seeing *living persons* while in an ostensibly transcendental realm. The Fenwicks reported the case of a woman who encountered her live-in partner after a hysterectomy had caused heavy bleeding and an NDE:

I was outside my body floating overhead. I saw doctors and nurses rushing me along the corridor....

I recall floating in a very bright tunnel. Everything seemed so calm and peaceful. At the end of the tunnel [was] my father, who had died three years previously....

As I said, the feeling of calmness was indescribable. I heard music.... I heard someone calling me. I turned and saw his face at the other end of the tunnel. It was Fabio [the man she was living with]....

Like most people I had a tremendous fear of death. Now ... I have lost that fear of the unknown because I truly believe I have had a preview. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, pp. 32–33)

But Fabio was alive and normally conscious during his girlfriend's NDE, so he could not have possibly really been calling her inside a tunnel to another world. Clearly we can encounter both the living and the dead in NDEs, just as we can in dreams. This implies that it would be just as irrational to suggest that real people inhabit the NDE world as it would be to suggest that they inhabit the world you encounter in your dreams.

William Serdahely reported a case of a woman whose NDE was triggered by a sexual assault: "One of the female NDErs saw a *living* female friend in her 'windsock' tunnel. The friend told her to go back to her body" (Serdahely, 1995, p. 189). Serdahely elaborated, offering a psychological explanation for what triggered this NDE:

The NDE or OBE is tailored specifically to fit the needs of that person. For example, the woman who was sexually assaulted was able to dissociate from the trauma by having an out-of-body experience. The [living] friend she encountered in her experience was a "big woman" who worked for the sheriff's department that had jurisdiction for the county in which the assault took place and appeared to the NDEr in her sheriff's uniform. (Serdahely, 1995, p. 194)

Melvin Morse reported the following NDE of a young Japanese boy:

A 4-year-old boy, who had fulminant pneumonia, described floating out of his body and coming to the edge of a river. His [living] playmates were on the other side, urging him to go back. There was a misty bright light on the other side. (Morse, 1994, p. 70)

The Fenwicks cited an intriguing case that lacked feelings of peace. When Richard Hands was 9 years old, his appendix was removed but complications led to an NDE:

The first [image I recall] is of looking down on a body on the operating table, being fussed over by green-clad surgeons and nurses. I couldn't actually see the face – someone was in the way – but I assume it was mine. This image is particularly vivid, and despite its goriness is not associated with any pain or distress, even in recall.

The second image is of a blackness with a pinpoint of light far off in the distance. I feel drawn towards the light, but there is a terror and a feeling that I do not wish it to pull me towards it. My [living] mother is with me in this scene, trying to pull me back from the light. There is also a wind rushing past, towards the light. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 173)

Clearly his mother was not actually present in this “blackness” with light, since she was alive and normally conscious at the time. Interestingly, Hands never attached any spiritual significance to his NDE. Initially he thought that it might have been a reaction to anesthetics, but when interviewed was inclined to see it as an unrelated physiological event.

In the Fenwicks’ sample only 50 percent of those who had NDEs when they were between 3 and 9 years old reported becoming more religious afterward; by 16 or older that figure rose significantly to 90 percent (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997). Given that adults have more complex religious concepts than children, it is not surprising that adults are more likely to attach religious significance to an unusual experience that occurred when they narrowly escaped death.

Susan Blackmore reported that an NDEr who was suffocating after an operation encountered the medical staff trying to resuscitate her in a light at the end of a tunnel:

[I was] struggling along a dark tunnel in which someone was trying to hold me back. The figures in the bright light at the end of the tunnel proved to be the ward sister and her staff trying to resuscitate me. (Blackmore, 1993, p. 227)

As Blackmore pointed out, cases like these do not “make much sense if you think the beings seen in NDEs are ‘real entities’ inhabiting another realm” (Blackmore, 1993, p. 227). But they make perfect sense if NDEs are brain-generated hallucinations. The fact that living persons are occasionally encountered in NDEs severely undermines survivalist interpretations of NDEs.

Morse and others have found that encounters with living persons were more commonly reported in childhood NDEs than in the NDEs of adults. This is not surprising given that children generally know far fewer people who have died than adults do. While NDEs where living persons are encountered are *relatively* rare, apparently they still make up a significant fraction of all reported NDEs: 14 percent of the Fenwicks’ 350-person sample of NDEr encountered living persons in their NDEs (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 79).

Random Memories

Another feature which suggests that NDEs are not perceptions of an external afterlife reality is the random nature of the life review. Raymond Moody's artificial composite of NDEs portrayed the life review as a personally significant "learning experience" where one is judged either by other beings or by oneself for past wrongdoings. While this characterization does fit some cases – and indeed is found even in people who face life-threatening danger but never really come close to death (Blackmore, 1993, p. 183) – the frequency of "learning experience"-type life reviews appears to have been exaggerated. At least one researcher sympathetic to the survival hypothesis has found that most near-death life reviews do *not* fit this pattern.

Life reviews are generally rare in NDEs. The Fenwicks found recalled memories in only 15 percent of their 350-person sample. A similar incidence (13 percent) of life reviews among NDErs was subsequently found in a more representative prospective study of NDE incidence and transformation (van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, and Elfferich, 2001). Thus, in the Fenwicks' sample the incidence of recalled memories is comparable to that of encounters with living persons. Their 350-person survey is one of the largest retrospective surveys of NDEs ever compiled. Their findings contrast sharply with portrayals of the life review popularized by Moody and others.

For example, the Fenwicks found only one person in their sample who had recalled a "learning experience"-type life review during his NDE. Here is the sort of life review typically found in their sample:

The seconds that went by as the car was turning [over] for me seemed an eternity.... Then, suddenly, I became detached from my worldly body – I was seeing my life flash before me, recalling my family, friends, the man on the bus, the lady in the shop – and feeling confused but happy. At this time I was in a tunnel-like black space. Just beyond a light was glowing invitingly. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 57)

This is hardly the "morality play" life review we have come to expect from the popularized picture of NDEs. Blackmore acknowledged that a physiological explanation of such a coherent life review would appear implausible to many:

[In NDEs] there is generalized amplification of [brain] activity and so lots of memories can be invoked all at once or in sequence. You might then object that such generalized activity could only produce random

memories and not the connected and meaningful experiences of the near-death life review. (1993, p. 216)

But, remarkably, the Fenwicks almost always found *random* memories in their sample:

Although 15 per cent of the people we questioned said that scenes or memories from the past came back to them during the [near-death] experience, most of these were simply fragments of memory, sometimes quite random memories. Only about half said the memories that came back to them were 'significant'. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 116)

The Fenwicks concluded that near-death life reviews "are not necessarily particularly significant memories. They seem just as likely to be random moments plucked haphazardly from memory, trivial events or people or places" (1997, p. 118).

These findings imply that the memories recalled during NDEs are barely distinguishable from the flashbacks of temporal lobe seizures. While this is not flatly inconsistent with a survivalist interpretation, it is readily explicable on physiological models of the NDE, making a survivalist interpretation unnecessary.

Threshold Crossings: Returns From the Point of No Return

Some NDErs encounter a barrier or divide felt to be a threshold between life and death: a fence, gate, door, river, line, mist, even "the light at the end of the tunnel" itself. Kenneth Ring even found a case where a woman ferried across the River Styx during her NDE (Zaleski, 1987). Those NDErs who encounter a threshold typically state that they were told or somehow knew that if they crossed it, they could not turn back and return to life. This prompted the Fenwicks to ask: "If the whole [near-death] experience is psychological, then why hasn't someone crossed the barrier and come back to tell the tale?" (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 111).

The Fenwicks speculated that the answer may be that we cannot psychologically form an image of our own deaths. This may be why we never "die" in our dreams, for example. But the explanation that NDEs are literally glimpses of an afterlife is flatly inconsistent with features of some of the very NDEs that the Fenwicks have found.

A better answer than either of these possibilities is that some NDErs *have indeed* crossed a divide thought to be a point of no return, or otherwise decided to stay in the “NDE world” when given a choice, and yet still returned to life. An NDEr cited earlier was beckoned to board a blue train “into the afterlife” and did so, though his experience ended with the sensation of being resuscitated. Did not boarding the blue train seem a lot like crossing a “point of no return”? But if this NDEr had really crossed a final threshold in another realm, why did he eventually “come to” on the deck of the frigate?

The NDEr reported that the passengers had beckoned him to board the train, implying that doing so would be a decision to cross a point of no return. Moody, for example, reported the case of a nurse giving birth for the first time who found herself sailing across a large waterway being beckoned by dead relatives to join them. The nurse reported immediately telling them that she was not ready to die, implying that she automatically knew that crossing over to the shore would be going past a point of no return (Blackmore, 1993). In the Fenwicks’ case the NDEr actually did board the blue train – he *did* appear to cross a point of no return – yet still returned to tell the tale anyway.

This NDEr did not describe boarding the train explicitly as crossing a point of no return, but it certainly seemed reminiscent of the one-way trip across a river felt to be a point of no return described by other NDErs. Ultimately, the Fenwicks conceded this:

David Whitmarsh meets no barrier. When people on the train beckoned to him he was actually able to go aboard. Nothing seemed to be holding him back or preventing him from boarding. One feels that David was well on his way [to the afterlife?] when resuscitation intervened. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, pp. 155–156; bracketed comment added)

But if his double had already detached from his normal physical body and was well on its way to “the other side,” how could he have felt his resuscitation, and how could it have brought him back into his body? We would expect these features if he had been “inside” his body the entire time and bodily sensations eventually became part of his hallucination.

Serdahely reported a case where an NDEr explicitly said that she crossed a barrier between life and death and yet still was restored to life:

One of the three [NDErs told to return] was instructed apparently by a deceased grandmother not to cross a line in front of her. The OBER *did* cross the line, at which point the grandmother said, “I told you

not to cross the line.” The older woman “got right in [her] face” and said, “You are to go back now!” (Serdahely, 1995, p. 191)

After a near-death life review in 1978, Tom Sawyer both was given a choice and decided *not* to return to life, but nevertheless recovered:

I was given a choice. I could return to normal life or become part of this light.... I chose to stay and become part of that light. I then had the feeling of going through the tunnel in reverse, and I slammed back down into my body. (Harris and Bascom, 1990, p. 129)

If NDEs are brain-generated hallucinations, nothing would seem to prevent experiences where NDErs decide not to return to life, or cross a “point of no return,” but find themselves restored to life anyway; and in these cases we find exactly that.

Who Makes the Decision to Return?

Blackmore was impressed by the fact that so many NDErs were uncertain about just who made the decision for them to return to life (Blackmore, 1993). Moody also found that many of his subjects were unsure of how or why they returned to life:

The accounts I have collected present an extremely varied picture when it comes to the question of the mode of return to physical life and of why the return took place. Most simply say that they do not know how or why they returned, or that they can only make guesses. (Moody, 1975, p. 79)

Many NDErs appear to be reaching, after the fact, for some sort of explanation for why they returned to life, when none was apparent in the NDE itself. Some NDErs in the Fenwicks’ sample openly wondered why they were “sent back,” for they found no reason to continue living; after their NDEs they continued working menial jobs, for instance. Blackmore’s conclusion about the “decision to return” is poignant here:

So who does make the choice to return to life? ... There does not seem to be a clear answer. It could be that there are genuine choices available to some NDErs and not others; that some can really make a choice and others have it made for them.... It seems more likely that they are all trying, and with difficulty, to describe something that is not either their own choice, nor someone else’s choice. (Blackmore, 1993, p. 232)

When you wake up from a dream, do you suppose that one of your dream characters decided to wake you up? Or that you woke up

because in this dream world you made a decision to wake up? Or does your dream end simply because your brain is no longer in the right electrochemical state for the dream to continue? I think this last explanation is the best one, even in lucid dreams where the dreamer has some control over dream content. Occasionally, a dream character may even pronounce that a dream is coming to an end, or a lucid dreamer may seem to have the ability to end a dream. In such cases, it is likely that a physiological change, from an external sound to a change in one's wakefulness, causes dream content to coincide with actually waking up.

A similar explanation seems plausible for the so-called "decision to return" in near-death experiences. In the study by Pim van Lommel and his colleagues, only 5 out of the total 62 NDErs (8 percent) even reported encountering a border between life and death; this was the least common element found (van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, and Elfferich, 2001). Most NDErs simply find themselves "back in their bodies" with no idea of how they transitioned back to normal consciousness, just as we would expect if the physiological conditions necessary to maintain hallucinations had disappeared.

Hallucinatory Imagery

One feature rarely noted in popular NDE accounts is hallucinatory imagery. When accidentally electrocuted, one man encountered a *mythological creature* during an NDE:

The next thing I remember, there was a cloud and a male, related to Jesus, 'cause he looked like the pictures of Jesus. He was in this chariot type [thing] ... the torso was a horse, everything above the torso was a man with wings; sort of like a Pegasus except instead of a horse's head it was a man ... and he was beckoning to me ... and I kept backing up.... I remember telling him no, I had too many things to do and there was no way I could go now. Then the clouds sort of filled over and as it filled over I hear Him say, "O.K.!" (Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981, p. 116; ellipses original)

Perhaps a centaur with the head of a man resembling depictions of Jesus and the body of a winged horse is waiting to guide us into the afterlife in a chariot; but the fantastic quality of this and other NDEs strongly suggests that NDEs are hallucinations.

In one of the Fenwicks' cases a hospitalized man had an OBE following a heart attack where he was flying as a "junior member" in

a formation of swans he had seen earlier; while flying, the landscape appeared to regress quickly backward in time. He “saw” a cathedral being built and men in medieval garb sailing on large lakes (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997). Such fantastic imagery suggests that this NDE was a hallucination; it seems absurd to ask whether swans were really flying with him backward in time.

In his 1982 study *Recollections of Death*, Michael Sabom found a rather bizarre case which also suggested that NDEs are hallucinations. Sabom’s subject I-21 reported feelings of peace, bodily separation, traveling through a dark void, and encountering a light after a heart attack, but also encountered “four unknown nurses” who interrogated him “about possible ‘subversive activities’” (Sabom, 1982, p. 210, Table XIII).

Notably, Sabom also found encounters with living persons during NDEs. In case I-8, a woman encountered her living children in her NDE but did not communicate with them, and case I-24 included an encounter with a living granddaughter (Sabom, 1982).

From time to time Western reports describe the NDE world in uncomfortably familiar terms, mirroring the transient technological advances of present-day living. After being resuscitated from a heart attack, for instance, one woman reported “watching details of her life being noted down ... [by] a computer” (Zaleski, 1987, p. 129). Serdahely also found cases of rather prosaic medical imagery seen in NDEs:

One male respondent said he traveled through a tunnel on a cart or gurney on his way to being greeted by his deceased father, godfather, and coworkers, all of whom beckoned him into the light. I had previously come across an NDEr who indicated he had been transported to the light in an ambulance-like vehicle. (Serdahely, 1995, p. 189)

In a case from the Religious Experience Research Centre archives (RERC account 3583), a hospitalized woman had an unusual NDE that started as an OBE. After moving through the ceiling, instead of seeing her Australian hospital from above, she found herself on a Russian battlefield “piled with dead men,” Russian tanks, and machines. Then she found herself in a hospital run by nuns where a screaming woman giving birth was silenced by nuns “stuffing a pillow on to her head to stop her cries” (Fox, 2003, p. 283). Then she felt ill, back in her bed, wondering if her NDE was caused by medication.

In another of the Fenwicks’ cases, a woman had an NDE during a particularly bad case of influenza. She reported an OBE, floating up

to a green field containing a large tree “with a brilliant white light on top,” and meeting her deceased father. When her father waved her away, she returned to her body, opened her eyes, and saw that “there was steam coming out of my hands” (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 29). The Fenwicks conceded that the steam was one of the “hallucinatory qualities” of her experience and speculated that her high temperature might have produced it (1997, p. 30).

Sometimes a prototypical NDE will incorporate terrifying hallucinatory features. After skidding on black ice, wrecking his car, and pulling out other passengers, a student collapsed and had to be resuscitated at the scene of the accident. While on life support in the hospital, he had two heart attacks and reported the following distressing NDE:

I was in a tunnel and sensed I was travelling towards a brightish light hidden behind a bend in the cave.... I felt I was simply floating – I did not have the use of my arms or legs at all....

As I passed round the bend in the cave I saw a giant Dracula-type of mouth opening. I say ‘Dracula’ because there were two monstrous fangs with blood dribbling off them.... I gained the instant impression that if I proceeded towards the mouth, it would shut and the teeth would slice me in two and kill me. (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, pp. 190–191)

The student woke up screaming for his mother, was comforted by her, was given a tranquilizer, and then slept for a few hours.

Morse recounted the NDE of a 4-year-old boy who almost drowned after the car he was in skidded on ice and plunged to the bottom of a river. The boy reported accidentally going to “animal heaven” and speaking to a *bee* after losing consciousness:

I went into a huge noodle.... It wasn’t like a spiral noodle, but it was very straight, like a tunnel. When I told my mom about nearly dying, I told her it was a noodle, but now I am thinking that it must have been a tunnel, because it had a rainbow in it....

I was being pushed along by a wind, and I could kind of float. I saw two small tunnels in front of me. One of them was animal heaven and the other one was the human heaven. First I went into the animal heaven. There were lots of flowers and there was a bee. The bee was talking to me and we were both smelling flowers. The bee ... brought me bread and honey because I was really hungry. (Morse and Perry, 1994, p. 4)

He reported going next to “human heaven,” which he described as a “regular old castle,” encountering his dead grandmother, hearing

loud music, then finally simply “waking up” in the hospital surrounded by nurses (Morse and Perry, 1994, p. 5).

Interpreted at face value, this NDE implies that life after death is not limited to humans, mammals, or even vertebrates. While we cannot rule out the possibility that persons may encounter insects in the afterlife and have discussions with them, it seems more likely that this NDE was a hallucination, and unlikely that one’s double would feel a bodily sensation like hunger in the afterlife, satisfied only by astral nourishment.

In another case, a childhood NDE was also triggered by nearly drowning. In this NDE, an 8-year-old girl encountered seven other children, a butterfly, and a deer:

I was in a garden, right behind a bush.... [T]here was this one, big, large tree and there were children playing a game.... I saw a bunch of flowers, there was a butterfly and a deer next to me who I felt lick my face.... The children saw me and they beckoned me to come over.... [W]hen I finally decided to step over ... then I felt this heavy tug, like a vacuum and then I was forced out and the next thing I knew I was back in my own body. (Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981, p. 112)

Here another favorite insect of children was encountered in an NDE (cockroaches and mosquitoes are not reported) along with a very popular wild animal.

In other NDEs, sentient *plants* are encountered: one woman reported worrying about the flowers she was stepping on in her NDE, when the flowers telepathically communicated to her that they were all right (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997)!

Occasionally even dead celebrities are encountered in NDEs. In one of Moody’s cases, a middle-aged woman who had shaken hands with Elvis Presley as a child reported encountering Elvis in her NDE. After having an OBE during surgery, she reported:

I then entered into a dark round tube or hole. I could call it a tunnel. I seemed to go headfirst through this thing and suddenly I was in a place filled up with love, and a beautiful bright white light....

As I walked through this meadow I saw people separated in little bunches. They waved to me, and came over and talked to me. One was my father who had died about two years before....

Just as I turned to go, as I felt myself being drawn back, I caught sight of Elvis. He was in this place of an intense bright light. He just came over to me, and took my hand, and said: “Hi Bev, do you remember me?” (Morse and Perry, 1992, pp. 109–110)

While an Elvis sighting in an NDE may not be as problematic for a survivalist interpretation as an encounter with a living person, it seems unlikely that a real glimpse of the afterlife would include a greeting from a deceased celebrity.

In a case sent to Ring by a Canadian researcher, another NDEr described an exceptionally detailed NDE world where he encountered Albert Einstein. After touring spotless streets that “appeared to be paved in some kind of precious metal,” talking to a street sweeper, listening to a choir of angels, and viewing an art gallery:

Next we materialized in a computer room. It was a place of great activity, yet peace prevailed. None of the stress of business was present, but prodigious work was accomplished. The people seemed familiar to me, like old friends. This was confusing, because I knew there to be present those who lived on earth still, and those who had passed on. Some of them I knew by name, others by reputation; and all had time for me.... One of them was Albert Einstein.... He asked me if I would care to operate the computer. (Kellehear, 1996, p. 14)

There is a fantastic quality to this story, such as transferring from place to place “instantly,” as if by magic. The fact that this NDEr claimed to see people who were still alive in this supposed afterlife environment also points to its hallucinatory nature.

But if encounters with conscious plants, talking insects, and dead celebrities are not enough to give you pause about accepting NDEs as visions of an objective afterlife reality, perhaps NDEs that include encounters with *fictional characters* will. Morse reported that a 10-year-old boy had an NDE where he encountered a video-gaming wizard who loved Nintendo and said to him: “Struggle and you shall live” (Abanes, 1996, p. 116). Karl Jansen similarly reported finding childhood NDEs that included encounters with video game and comic book characters:

Claims that near-death experiences are always identical, regardless of the set and setting, are contradicted by the variety actually found in published reports.... For example, instead of a tunnel and angels, East Indians may describe the River Ganges and a particular guru. A child having a NDE may “see” his or her still-living friends and teachers, or Nintendo and comic book characters, rather than God. (Jansen, 2001, p. 96)

In a collection of pediatric NDEs published in 1990, Serdahely even found a case where a girl encountered an old stuffed animal. Morse summarized the case as follows:

A 10-year-old girl had a full cardiopulmonary arrest while in the intensive care unit after spinal surgery. She described her experience 2 years later, stating she was “peaceful and relaxed, and remembered seeing a whitest blue light at the end of the tunnel. She saw the shadow of a dog, and also a white lamb that was loving and gentle, which led her back to her body.” Her parents reported at age 2, she had a lamb that doubled as a music box that was her favorite stuffed animal. (Morse, 1994, p. 62)

One of the most bizarre types of NDEs is the “meaningless void” experience that usually occurs during childbirth. In a typical case, a 28-year-old woman became unconscious when given nitrous oxide during the birth of her second child, but when her blood pressure suddenly dropped, she reported:

I was aware ... of moving rapidly upward into darkness. Although I don't recall turning to look, I knew the hospital and the world were receding below me, very fast.... I was rocketing through space like an astronaut without a capsule, with immense speed and great distance.

A small group of circles appeared ahead of me, some tending toward the left. To the right was just a dark space. The circles were black and white, and made a clicking sound as they snapped black to white, white to black. They were jeering and tormenting – not evil, exactly, but more mocking and mechanistic. The message in their clicking was: Your life never existed. The world never existed. Your family never existed. You were allowed to imagine it. You were allowed to make it up. It was never there. There is nothing here. There was never anything there. That's the joke – it was all a joke.

There was much laughter on their parts, malicious. I remember brilliant argumentation on my part, trying to prove that the world – and I – existed.... They just kept jeering.

“This is eternity,” they kept mocking. This is all there ever was, and all there ever will be, just this despair....

Time was forever, endless rather than all at once.... Yes, it was more than real: absolute reality. There's a cosmic terror we have never addressed. (Greyson and Bush, 1992, p. 102)

Since meaningless void experiences paint a far-from-gleaming picture of what the dying sometimes experience, many New Age near-death researchers are reluctant to accept them as visions of another world. Ring, for example, ultimately concluded that meaningless void experiences “are not true NDEs as such but are essentially emergence reactions to inadequate anesthesia” (Ring, 1994, pp. 20–21).

There is something disingenuous about Ring taking this position. On the one hand, Ring and like-minded researchers have argued that

prototypical Western NDEs are evidence for an afterlife at least in part because they are consistent across accounts, feel real, and have a transformative effect. At the same time, Ring argued that meaningless void experiences are merely reactions to anesthetics, even though they are also consistent across accounts (different people report similar experiences), feel real, and have a transformative effect – albeit a negative one: “our preliminary observations indicate that ontological fear is a common result of the experience” (Greyson and Bush, 1992, p. 109).

In fact, meaningless void experiences probably *are* reactions to anesthesia, given their rare incidence and tendency to occur during childbirth, when anesthetics are almost always administered. The point is that meaningless void experiences have the same characteristics that have been used to justify viewing more standard NDEs as glimpses of an afterlife, yet are rarely themselves seen as actual visions of another world.

Ring’s argument is a tacit admission by a major near-death researcher that a person can have an experience near death that has commonalities with the others’ experiences near death, feels incredibly real, and produces lasting transformations, *even though it is only a hallucination*. If meaningless void experiences can be reasonably viewed as hallucinations, so can prototypical Western NDEs.

In her 1997 book *In A World of Their Own*, Madelaine Lawrence also acknowledged that persons sometimes experience hallucinations near death, after finding reports of visions of the Grim Reaper in her cardiac patients.

In 1926, Heinrich Klüver systematically studied the effects of mescaline on the experiences of its users. In addition to producing potent hallucinations characterized by bright, “highly saturated” colors and vivid imagery, Klüver noticed that mescaline produced four recurring geometric patterns he called “form constants”: lattices, including honeycombs, checkerboards, and triangles; cobwebs; tunnels; and spirals (Blackmore, 1993; Bressloff, Cowan, Golubitsky, Thomas, and Wiener, 2002).

Klüver’s form constants have appeared in other drug-induced and naturally occurring hallucinations, suggesting a similar physiological process underlying hallucinations with different triggers. And they also appear in NDEs. After a heart attack, one man from the Evergreen Study had an NDE that included seeing a lattice (“grid”) or cobweb, one of Klüver’s form constants:

The more I concentrated on this source of light the more I realized that it was a light of a very, very peculiar nature... it was more than light. It was a grid of power ... if you could imagine the finest kind of gossamer spider web that was somehow all pervading, that went everywhere. (Lindley, Bryan, and Conley, 1981, p. 111, ellipses original)

A similar NDE was reported by Johann Christophe Hampe, in his book published prior to Moody's coining the term "near-death experience" in *Life After Life*:

I was moving at high speed towards a net of great luminosity. The strands and knots where the luminous lines intersected were vibrating with tremendous cold energy. The grid appeared as a barrier that I did not want to move through, and for a brief moment my speed appeared to slow down. Then I was in the grid. (Fox, 2003, pp. 57–58)

Other form constants have also periodically appeared in NDEs. Carol Zaleski notes that, among the variety of "paths" that NDErs have taken to the NDE world, some NDErs have found themselves "spinning in vertiginous spirals" rather than traveling through a tunnel or darkness (Zaleski, 1987, p. 122). While tunnel experiences are well represented in Western NDE reports, the occasional presence of other hallucinatory form constants, such as lattices, cobwebs, and spirals, suggests that NDEs are hallucinations.

Unfulfilled Predictions: Psychic Inability

Despite the contributions of serious neuroscientists, psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists, the near-death literature is rife with wildly irresponsible claims about NDErs gaining psychic abilities, healing powers, and accurate prophetic visions of the future after their NDEs. These unsubstantiated assertions recall those of crop circle researchers who have "discovered" that the wheat found in crop circles has been genetically altered. P. M. H. Atwater, for example, claimed that NDErs looked younger after NDEs when before-and-after pictures are compared, and claimed that NDErs' "energy fields" interfered with electronic devices like watches and microphones.

In *Heading Toward Omega*, Ring (1984) claimed that many of his NDErs had "prophetic visions" of the future of humanity, including earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, marked climate change, economic collapse, and humanity on the verge of nuclear annihilation. "Massive

upeavals” were to start in the 1980s and end with world peace just after the dawn of the new millennium (Fox, 2003).

But despite repeated assertions of widespread and even quite frequent paranormal abilities manifesting after NDEs, no NDErs, so far as I am aware, have ever volunteered for a controlled experiment to test their alleged psychic powers. Given that such a demonstration would easily validate their claims, one simple question begs for an answer: Why not?

Cases where predictions have failed to come to pass suggest that NDErs have not attempted to demonstrate their psychic powers experimentally because they have no powers to demonstrate. Apparently NDErs’ predictions are no different than those of other modern-day prophets: either vague enough to cover almost any event, or specific but unfulfilled.

Dannion Brinkley’s NDE visions provide an excellent example of unfulfilled predictions. After lightning struck the telephone line he was using in 1975, he was thrown across the room, lying on the floor looking up. His searing pain was replaced with a feeling of peace and he found himself looking down on his body until paramedics loaded him onto an ambulance. He reported next seeing a tunnel forming in the ambulance, which came to him and engulfed him while he heard rhythmic chiming. He noticed a light ahead and rapidly approached it until it surrounded him. A silver form emerged, which he identified as an empathetic “being of light” emitting all the colors of a rainbow. The being engulfed him, causing him to review the events of his life. Next they both “flew” into a city of crystalline cathedrals where Brinkley arrived at a “cathedral of knowledge.” His guide disappeared, only to be replaced by 13 others behind a podium when he sat down on a bench. As each being approached him, a “box” appeared on its chest, which “zoomed” out toward his face, showing a “television picture” of a future world event. Brinkley was restored to normal consciousness in the morgue just shy of a half hour since he was struck by lightning (Brinkley and Perry, 1994). He also claimed to have spectacular psychic abilities since his NDE.

In his best-selling *Saved by the Light* (Brinkley and Perry, 1994), Brinkley often gave dates to the prophetic visions shown to him. They included visions of an Israeli settlement spreading into Jordan until Jordan was replaced by a new country. This was to be followed by a war between Israel and an alliance of Russia and a “Chinese-and-Arab consortium” over “some incident” in Jerusalem (Brinkley and

Perry, 1994, p. 35). An alliance between Saudi Arabia, Syria, and China was to be made in 1992 to destroy the American economy, while Saudis were to give money to North Korea in order to destabilize Asian markets. By 1993 Iran and Iraq were predicted to have both chemical and nuclear weapons, including an Iranian submarine with nuclear missiles on a religious mission to stop the shipment of oil from the Middle East.

Brinkley claimed to have foreseen the Chernobyl incident in 1986 and the 1991 Gulf War during his NDE, but these occurred well before the publication of his book. Chernobyl was supposed to be followed by another nuclear accident in 1995, which was to have contaminated a northern sea to the point that ships would not travel through it.

He also saw “border disputes and heavy fighting between Soviet and Chinese armies” over a railroad taken by the Chinese (Brinkley and Perry, 1994, p. 39). China then invaded and took over half of the Soviet Union, including Siberian oil fields. Brinkley confessed that in his NDE he did not know that the Soviet Union would fall.

He also predicted the collapse of the world economy “by the turn of the century,” resulting in “feudalism and strife” (Brinkley and Perry, 1994, p. 39). The government closing of banks in the 1990s was to be followed by “the bankruptcy of America by the year 2000” (Brinkley and Perry, 1994, p. 40). America would cease to be a superpower “sometime before the end of the century” due to two horrific earthquakes which weakened the economy to the point that starving Americans waited in long lines for food.

Brinkley envisioned a terrorist attack prior to 2000 in which a chemical released into a French city’s water supply killed thousands in response to the French publication of “a book that infuriates the Arab world” (Brinkley and Perry, 1994, p. 41).

Brinkley also saw democracy replaced with a fundamentalist government in Egypt in 1997. In his final visions people in towns all over the world ate their dead out of desperation, “weeping as they cooked human meat” (Brinkley and Perry, 1994, p. 42). Meanwhile, wars in Central America and South America broke out, leading to the formation of socialist governments in all of the countries of this region before 2000. As a result, millions of refugees crossed the American border, forcing our government to deploy troops to the border to push the refugees back across the Rio Grande, destroying the economy of Mexico. Again, all of this and more was predicted to happen *before* 2000.

Elaborate as these visions are, none of the events predicted to occur after *Saved by the Light* was published in 1994 have come to pass. Brinkley's prophetic visions appear to be no different from those of any other run-of-the-mill prophet. Even the Fenwicks commented that while "pre-publication happenings came into Dannion's head with pinpoint accuracy..., those events due to take place after 1994 are foretold with less precision" (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1997, p. 167). Brinkley did tend to be vague in places, omitting dates or using phrases like "some incident" or "sometime before the end of the century." But his predictions were precise enough for us to recognize that nothing even close to them came to pass when he predicted they would.

It would not be surprising for NDErs to come back from "the other side" with vague or false predictions if NDEs are a particular kind of brain-generated hallucination. But if NDEs were literally journeys of one's double into "the next world," it would be surprising for denizens of that realm to offer false information. In Brinkley's case particularly, it would be surprising for otherworldly beings to provide him with accurate predictions about future events occurring *before* the publication of his book, but false predictions about events occurring *after* the book was published. Might Brinkley have exaggerated claims about the accuracy of his pre-publication predictions?

Exaggerated claims of psychic power are not limited to NDErs who write best-selling books. Journalist Art Levine tested the reputed powers of a woman who had three NDEs and claimed to have predicted the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Levine noted that, although he carelessly supplied some information about his life, she revealed nothing about him that could not have been guessed by the average person, and many of the details she provided were flat wrong:

Her initial results were promising. During that first interview, for instance, she casually demonstrated her skills by asking, "How's your low-back pain doing?" and mentioning in a vague way problems I'd had with my father. I didn't know whether to be amazed or just chalk it up to a lucky guess anybody could make about a middle-aged Jewish guy....

After a long wait, she began speaking. "You had two avenues of education, but you took a break in one and totally shifted gears," she pronounced. Since I always intended in college to be a writer, even though I dropped a course or two along the way, Shoemaker's reading wasn't off to a very promising start. Later, when discussing my work, she claimed that I once planned to have a medical career, but now, as

an investigative reporter, “you’ve gone into medicine through the back door.” Wrong again: I never once in my life thought of becoming a health professional.

... I became worried when she claimed that I was developing Crohn’s disease, a serious, painful inflammation of the small intestine. But because she also asserted that I suffered from regular headaches, I felt relieved – that’s one health complaint I *don’t* have. But since I’m actually at risk of digestive problems because of an anti-inflammatory medication I take, I didn’t take chances: I later asked my doctor to look for signs of the dreaded Crohn’s disease. There weren’t any.

She didn’t seem to be much more accurate when discussing my parents. “I get a missing of the father. It’s almost like he’s not around; you’re not able to converse as much. The brilliance of his mind isn’t the same,” she said. Later, she gave additional poignant insights: “Your father’s health is wavering.” There is, as it turns out, a good reason for all this: He’s *dead*, a little detail that she missed. She also described my mother: “I get your mother as spunky. She can be quite feisty, and she has her own set of rules.” Perhaps, in the afterlife, she has adopted this new personality. She died several years ago in a tragic accident, but when she was alive, she was generally bossed around by my domineering father. (Levine, A. Tunnel visions: People who claim to have seen the light come out of the dark. Posted on <http://www.citylinkmagazine.com/archives/031903coverstory.html> on March 19, 2003)

That some NDErs are given false visions of the future in their NDEs, or get a false sense of having psychic powers they do not have, is not flatly inconsistent with a survivalist interpretation of NDEs; perhaps otherworldly beings supply us with false information during NDEs, or NDErs become more skilled at self-deception than at precognition after their NDEs. But false prophecy and psychic inability are exactly what we should expect if NDEs are not really journeys into another realm. And the proclivity of many NDErs to claim paranormal abilities they do not have should make us wary of uncorroborated claims of paranormal perception during OBEs (Augustine, 2007).

Conclusion

Many near-death researchers interpret NDEs as evidence for survival of bodily death. Because many people would like to *know* that there is an afterlife rather than simply take the notion on faith, the study of NDEs tends to attract researchers who already believe

that they provide evidence for survival. NDEs are a natural lure to survivalists, since they offer the prospect of bolstering belief in survival and of offering hints about what exactly is going to happen to us when we die. Aside from cases where the persons encountered during NDEs are obviously culture-bound projections or could not possibly reside in the afterlife at the time of the experience, many near-death researchers urge us to take what NDErs report at face value. If an NDEr reports feelings of peace, an OBE, traversing a tunnel, and entering an illuminated garden where he or she encounters a deceased grandfather, researchers often advocate interpreting the account literally. We are typically encouraged to think that the NDEr really left his or her physical body, traveled through the physical world in a disembodied or astrally embodied state, traversed a tunnel from the physical world to a transcendental realm, and actually communicated with his or her deceased grandfather. It is only when an NDE contains obviously hallucinatory features that such near-death researchers resist interpreting it as a literal glimpse of the afterlife.

But how do near-death researchers sympathetic to the survival hypothesis explain hallucinatory NDE characteristics? Typically, they invoke a rather *ad hoc* rationalization: whenever culturally conditioned or other clearly hallucinatory features are found, the NDEr must have made a mistake. For example, one could argue that when NDErs report encountering living persons “on the other side,” they must be misidentifying the person seen.

Here survival proponents urge us *not* to take NDErs’ accounts at face value; at the same time, they expect us to accept the “core NDE” as reflecting some afterlife reality. The standard explanation is that NDE features inconsistent with literal glimpses of an afterlife are interpretative embellishments, but that the core NDE, whatever that is said to be, really reflects another reality that awaits us after death. Morse, for example, wrote: “The core NDE is then secondarily interpreted according to the age and culture of the person experiencing the event” (Morse, 1994, p. 70). Atwater, by contrast, implied that living persons seen in NDEs either represent an early hallucinatory phase of an otherwise veridical experience or are comforting disguises taken on by transcendental beings:

There is another greeter, though, who is sometimes encountered – a *living person* – more commonly reported by children than by adults. This may be a favorite teacher, the kid down the block, a friend or

a relative. Does this fact call into question the validity of near-death imagery? No, and here's why.

In every case I have thus far investigated where this occurred, the *living greeter* did not remain in the scenario any longer than it took to alert or relax the experiencer. Once that happened, the *living greeter* disappeared, and imagery more common to near-death states emerged *as the episode deepened*. It is almost as if the sole purpose of *living greeters* is to ensure the continuance of the episode so that it can become more meaningful. They don't "stick around" like other greeters usually do. (Atwater, 2000, p. 12)

No doubt recalcitrant proponents will simply continue to give a new spin to evidence that otherwise appears to falsify a survivalist interpretation of NDEs.

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