Near Death Experiences and the Christian Gospel: Concord or Conflict?

Kenneth Lance Tyler

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Near Death Experiences and the Christian Gospel: Concord or Conflict?

by

Kenneth Lance Tyler

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Clinical Ministry

June 2001
Each person whose signature appears below certifies that this thesis is in his/her opinion adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree Master of Arts.

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ABBREVIATIONS

NDE    Near-death experience
NDEs   Near-death experiences
NDEer  Near-death experiencer
NDEers Near-death experiencers
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Near-Death Experiences and the Christian gospel: Concord or conflict?

by

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Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Clinical Ministry
Loma Linda University, June 2001
Dr. Siroj Sorajjakool, Chairperson

The near-death phenomenon has initiated a new debate over Jesus’ and Paul’s claim in the New Testament that the gospel message therein outlines the only way to salvation. Despite twenty-five years of writing and research by near-death (NDE) advocates the dispute continues not only over the disparity between the gospel and NDE but over the origin and meaning of the near-death experience itself. Initially it was medical and pharmacological questions that focused the discussions. More advanced theories are being offered suggesting that the right temporal lobe of the brain acts as a “circuit board” or gateway for a range of mystical experiences including the NDE phenomenon. Thus the classic NDE may be stimulated by influences as diverse as drugs, Yoga, or even severe emotional or psychological trauma where death is not imminent. However, some believe, it is only by coming into contact with “the light” that real transformation takes place. This the “core experience.”

Researcher Kenneth Ring believes that the NDE is a catalyst that jump-starts a transcendent spiritual awakening and transformation in many experiencers. Ring’s detailed analysis catalogs religious and spiritual attitudes before and after the experience and show that few remain unchanged by it. He indicates that, as a result of a NDE, many become interested in Eastern
transcendental experiences, and psychic phenomena, and amazing prophetic visions which purport to detail the future of this planet. Ring concludes that millions of people have now experienced this phenomenon and are forming a new breed of humanity. This humanity moves beyond *homo sapiens* towards *homo noeticus*, in which there is according to Ring, who is representative of NDE philosophy, emergent higher consciousness for humanity at large. These transformed people embody our future destiny as a species.

But how can the gospel message and the experience of salvation through a relationship with Christ crucified compete with the immediacy and intensity of the NDE which seems to answer so many of the questions about death and to confirm the reality of human hope for life beyond. Christianity and the gospel also claim to effect transformation, but a transformation which results not from an encounter with the light at the point of death, but from the believer’s relationship with Christ and the reception of the gifts of salvation which God makes available in him. Upon resuscitation from near-death no mention is made, for example, of the death of Christ and his resurrection, or the second coming and bodily resurrection of the dead at the end of the age. However, the assurance of eternal life, forgiveness, love, and participation in the life of the kingdom of God are present realities available as the result of the substitutionary death of Jesus on the cross.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Individuals who have experienced near-death and those who write or advocate on their behalf are presenting, in general, views of life, death, salvation and judgment that are foreign to the teachings of Jesus and the writings of the apostle Paul. These views have received extensive coverage through print, film and video, popular radio and television shows, and the Internet. Significant numbers of anecdotes reveal messages, purportedly from God or Jesus, that seem to militate against what God has previously revealed about himself and his ways in the gospel as presented in Scripture.

Some are hailing this phenomenon as the ultimate answer to long held questions about religion and God. If this is the case, how do those who have had a near-death experience (NDE) or those who read their accounts of the experience, integrate it into their current religious and philosophical belief system? As will be shown, many are not able to accommodate prior religious understandings with the new revelation and are either downplaying the primacy of the biblical message or rejecting it altogether. Others take the NDE as evidence confirming the immortality of the soul and disconfirming the reality of death and judgment in the Jewish/Christian sense.

Hypothesis and Arguments

My hypothesis is that the interpretation of the near-death experience as advocated by Moody,¹ Ring² et al., promotes an unsatisfactory resolution of the existential crisis

defining the plight of humanity and is a decided turning away from the traditional understanding of the gospel. In the context of this paper, the core of the gospel is the biblical message of the substitutionary death of Jesus on the cross that makes available full and free pardon for sin for everyone who has faith. In the New Testament this essential concept is inextricably connected with the promise of eternal life, the parousia (Second Coming of Christ) and the resurrection of the body.

While the arguments surrounding the phenomenon of near-death experiences are complex and multi-directional, the issues I will address are limited to the following:

a. Do the messages purportedly coming from God in NDE comport with or contradict the Christian understanding of the gospel?
b. Do the NDE messages diminish the significance of other Christian doctrines such as the parousia and the resurrection of the body?
c. Do NDE messages conform in a coherent way to the NDEer’s previous theological or philosophical world view?
d. How are we to view the orientation towards Universalism & Eastern Mysticism in many of these messages.
e. How do we understand the origin of the phenomenon?

The arguments are complex since there exists at this time no single explanation for the phenomenon that completely satisfies the questions being raised by advocates of other theories. Medical and pharmacological explanations suggest that the phenomenon may be replicated by probing certain parts of the brain or by injecting drugs. Most returning from the experience assume that God is the author of the phenomenon and report it as such. While it is tempting to accept it as from God, thoughtful Christian writers such as
Groothuis\textsuperscript{3} and Ankerberg\textsuperscript{4} are asking if there may be other explanations, even that of the Satanic origin of the phenomenon. But, if as some assume, it is of God, why do many individuals who are declared to be clinically dead and are subsequently revived report no such experience? Others, however, report five or more experiences one after the other. Early studies in the area of NDEs have been criticized due to the lack of scientific controls, but researchers have learned much from these criticisms and have risen to the challenge by providing those controls.

While the majority of near-death experiences are of a positive nature, there exist numerous reports of negative, nightmarish anecdotes that conform to some popular theological concepts of the afterlife. How do we then factor these experiences into the seeming universal welcome recounted by others? It is for these reasons that the main focus will be the question of the messages conveyed as a result of the experience, and how they compare with the teachings of Jesus and the writings of the apostle Paul.

Methodology

A survey of a selection of the available literature published by authorities familiar with the phenomenon will be undertaken to ascertain the most significant arguments being advanced to understand both the dynamics involved and the motivations behind those who advocate NDE philosophy. Sources will include books, journal articles, the popular press and randomly selected anecdotal accounts available in these publications.

A review of the NDE arguments and their sources and a comparison with biblical teaching will provide the basis the conclusion that NDE is a serious erosion of the content

\textsuperscript{3} Doug Groothuis, \textit{Deceived by the Light} (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1995).
of the Christian gospel. Such attrition may be intentional or unintentional, of human or supernatural origin.

The paper will describe the medical, physical and pharmacological evidence adduced both for and against the phenomenon; the psychological implications that bear upon the interpretation of the experience; and the spiritual/religious questions that need to be addressed to illustrate the extent of the departure from the historical proclamation of the Christian gospel.

My hypothesis will be validated by assembling credible evidence to show that NDEers and those who write or speak on their behalf articulate concepts antithetical to the understanding of the gospel as found in the teachings of Jesus and the writings of the apostle Paul. For the comparison to be convincing, a clear statement of the gospel message and God’s response to the problem brought about by humanity’s sin will need to be established first. The writings that compose the New Testament and the theologians who have contributed to our understanding of it will constitute the source for the historical, theological concept we call the gospel. The overall purpose of this paper is to articulate how NDE theology diverges from the Christian gospel, and how the gospel is set aside by NDEers in preference for what many of them describe as the most awe-inspiring and profound experiences of their lives.

Scope and Limitations

In the investigation of the subject there arose a number of potential areas that could have been explored. However, the topic had to be limited. Others will undoubtedly expand the treatment.) I chose, for example, not to discuss possible Satanic influences, though the apostle Paul makes numerous references to Satanic activity and the influence
of evil spiritual forces (2 Cor. 11:14, 15; 2 Thess. 2:9; Eph. 6:10-18). I Also chose not to
include any critique of the writings of Christian authors engaged in a polemic against the
NDE and its advocates. Furthermore, there will be no extended treatment of Eastern
religion, though references will be made to issues raised by authors who acknowledge
connections between the NDE and Eastern religion. For example, Hinduism is well
known for its understanding of transcendent states and Buddhism for enlightenment.
These concepts occur frequently in the literature and therefore justify recognition in the
course of this paper.

I wish to concentrate the discussion on the message and mission of those involved
with Near-Death Experiences and to build the best possible case for NDE from the
writings of its chief promoters. In accomplishment of my purpose of critiquing NDE I
will provide an historical overview of the phenomenon, detail what is involved in a
"typical" near-death experience, review the main arguments offered to explain what
NDEers claim to experience in the near-death state, and compare NDE with the contents
of the gospel.

Assumptions

At the outset, I want to address two significant assumptions underlying my discussion
which follows. First, I am writing from a perspective informed by my Seventh-day
Adventist belief that the Bible contains God's primary and authoritative message to
humanity. Secondly, I believe that the gospel as contained in the life and teachings of
Jesus and the writings of the apostle Paul is not limited to a mere explanation of the
existential plight of humanity. Rather, the gospel describes God's proactive response to
the human problem that has a definite goal in mind: the redemption of humanity.
Individuals who avail themselves of the gospel's provisions receive the assurance of full reconciliation with God and a place in His eternal kingdom. Both of these elements are central to the proclamation of Jesus and Paul.

Significance of the Study

A Gallup Poll taken in 1982 indicated that an estimated eight million Americans have had what is termed a mystical experience which includes near-death experiences.\(^5\) Hundreds of books, films, radio and television programs, cartoons, together with countless firsthand accounts indicate that the near-death experience has long ago become part of everyday speech.

A scan of anecdotal accounts show that respondents cross almost all religious and cultural boundaries. Public and private media have capitalized on the age-old desire to know what comes after death. Traditional understandings provided by established religion don't seem adequate to compete with the sensational descriptions reported by those who have undergone a NDE. The Bible also has a limitation because it speaks to us primarily through the intellect. Therefore it is unable to match the vivid portrayals of the so-called afterlife that writers and film directors have presented for decades as representing what people believe to be true, based upon the NDE. Furthermore, there is credible evidence to suggest that the form in which the NDE presents itself may conform to symbolism familiar to the person.

While there are remarkable similarities between the accounts of those experiencing or writing about NDE, the NDE has by nature anecdotal and subjective elements that are open to interpretation. For many people there are strong reservations about disclosing

their experiences for fear of being misunderstood. The misgivings are even more likely if the NDE is a negative one. Up to eighty percent of persons who meet the clinical criteria for a NDE (i.e. they have the equivalent medical, physical, pharmacological or psychological trauma that precipitated a NDE in others) either experience nothing or have no recollection of it. Finally, as a person recedes from the event, the memory of it may be embellished in the retelling. However, there is some evidence to counter this view as comparisons of interviews taken at the time with those of a later period reveal little change.

A growing number of writers are taking a second look at the phenomenon which in its early manifestation seemed to provide a long sought after confirmation of the Christian hope that death is not the end of human existence. While there is a growing body of literature from various sources which is introducing new questions and challenging the whole basis for the phenomenon, evidence is mounting to support new world-views that rival the historical Christian understanding of the gospel. Many Christians, however, see the renewed interest in spiritual issues generated by the NDE phenomenon as a positive development that may attract non-believers to Christianity.
CHAPTER 2

MESSAGE AND MISSION: JESUS AND PAUL

Religion is an integral part of the fabric of this world. There is hardly any place on earth where some form of devotion to God or gods is not practiced. The earliest preserved records of each civilization trace the religious and spiritual strivings of human beings as they seek to solace the existential pain that is so often part of individual and community lives. Each religion has its own pathway to resolution of the difficulties and uncertainties that people face in their journey through life. But not all religions endure. All that remains of some of the earliest are inscriptions on stone or impressions on clay tablets. Though born in ancient times, a few great religions survive and thrive right to the present day.

The most significant is Judaism which traces its ancestry back to the days of Abraham almost 4000 years ago. Despite long periods of bondage, exile from the homeland and persecutions, the Jews have preserved an essential continuity of thought and practice over the centuries. Judaism has stood as a powerful witness to a long tradition of belief in the one God who first introduced himself to Abraham. It has a developed and systematized world-view that has undergone the most searching scrutiny imaginable. Not even the incredible assembled muscle of Nazi Germany or Communist USSR has succeeded in obliterating Judaism, and its witness in the world. But God destined an even fuller revelation of his grace and character than the Hebrew people of God were ever able to provide. This is found in Jesus Christ and in the Christian gospel which witnesses to him.

It is essential to recognize that the New Testament writers understand Christianity as both an outgrowth and extension of the Hebrew people that God chose long ago and
through whom he elected to reveal his love and purpose of redemption to the world.

Though the Hebrews were often flawed and fickle, God gave them a heritage, a sense of mission, and a destiny. These themes are evident in the following scriptural references:

7 The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. 8 But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. 9 Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands. 1

4 After the LORD your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, “The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.” No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you. 5 It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. 6 Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people. 2

Thus began Israel’s journey with God whose faithfulness stood supreme.

Biblical scholar John Bright captures Israel’s sense of identity and hope in the following words:

We can find no period in her history when Israel did not believe she was the chosen people of Yahweh. And this choosing had taken place in history. The Bible story traces this history of election back to Abraham, but it was in the Exodus events that Israel saw her beginnings as a people. The memory of the Exodus towered over the national consciousness for all time to come. The prophets harked back to it repeatedly. Here is the unforgettable example of the power and grace of God (Amos 2:9-11; Mic. 6:2-5; Ezek. 20:5-7), here he carried infant Israel as a little child (Hos. 11:1), here he married her in the covenant ceremony and claimed her loyalty forevermore (Hos. 2; Jer. 2:2-3). 3

1 Deuteronomy 7:7-9 (All Bible verses taken from the New International Version).
2 Deuteronomy 9:4-6.
Since this is so, far more important than the actual events is the interpretation Israel laid upon them in the light of her faith. The Exodus was viewed as a sheer act of God's grace. The signs and wonders in Egypt, the wind that drove the sea waters back, the deliverance from pharaoh's army—all are illustrations of that grace (hesed). It was grace because it was absolutely unmerited. The Old Testament never suggests that Israel was chosen for any merit that was in her; on the contrary, the Exodus narratives are at pains to depict a people who are cowardly, ungrateful, and utterly unworthy. The Exodus was the act of a God who chose for himself a people that they might choose him. 4

But at the same time this covenant-people idea imparted to Israel a tremendous sense of destiny and a confidence that would not down. Every reader knows that the Old Testament faith housed a hope which no tragedy, however total, could defeat. The careful reader knows, too, of a fatuous popular optimism which had no business to exist, but which the fist of the prophet [sic] word was powerless to demolish. Israel's faith was strongly eschatological in orientation, because history itself was to the Hebrew mind eschatologically orientated: it was guided to a destination by God. And this gave to the Israelite a robust confidence in the future. 5

These words are sufficient to catalogue the intention of YAHWEH for the people through whom he chose to display his grace to the world. Strategically located at the crossroads of the known world, Israel had opportunity to tell merchants and travelers passing through of the God who guides and blesses them. However, the newfound prosperity and optimism followed a checkered path for most of the next millennium and ultimately resulted in the breakup of the nation into two main entities. Then for nearly four hundred years there was no word from God and much tumult wearied the faithful among his people. Greece and then Rome ruled the world, and the people who once were the apple of God's eye (Hos. 11:1-11) rankled under the bitter oppression of their captors. Words of hope including the promise of a redeemer came to the people through the prophet Isaiah (Isa. chapters 40-44, 53). New Testament writers call him the Messiah (Jn. 1:41).

5 Ibid, 29.
One Christian writer interprets the setting for the birth of the long-awaited Messiah in this fashion:

The earth was dark through misapprehension of God. That the gloomy shadows might be lightened, that the world might be brought back to God, Satan’s deceptive power was to be broken. This could not be done by force. The exercise of force is contrary to the principles of God’s government; He desires only the service of love; and love cannot be commanded; it cannot be won by force or authority. Only by love is love awakened. To know God is to love Him; His character must be manifested in contrast to the character of Satan. This work only one being in the universe could do. Only He who knew the height and depth of the love of God could make it known. Upon the world’s dark night the Sun of Righteousness must rise, “with healing in His wings.” Mal. 4:2.

This passage serves to set the stage theologically for YAHWEH’S breaking into the human realm. The gospel of Matthew shows by the genealogical list that Jesus Christ did not come as an afterthought: God had been preparing for generations for this day (Matt. 1:1-17). And the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews reinforces the intentionality of God’s purpose in this way:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.

There is an essential continuity being spoken of here. Among theologians there seems to a general consensus that Christianity arose from the soil of historical Judaism as interpreted messianically by Paul and other New Testament writers. John Bright affirms the following:

...That assertion [that Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah, fulfillment of all the hope of Israel, who has come to set up the Kingdom of God among men] is of especial interest to us, because in it the unity of all Scripture is plainly affirmed; in it New Testament is linked unbreakably to Old, and all biblical theology is made to hang together. For in affirming that Jesus is the Messiah, the New Testament affirmed that all the Old Testament faith had longed for and pointed to

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7 Hebrews 1:1-2.
has been given in him: he is the fulfillment of all that the law community had tried
to do, and all that prophet hope had envisioned.\(^8\)

There exists among theologians considerable discussion as to what the focus of the
gospel is. These words by Ladd frame the context of the discussion.

However, the kerygma and the gospel cannot be limited to the activity of
preaching; they designate also the message itself, the content of preaching. God’s
purpose to save people through the “foolishness of preaching” (1 Cor. 1:21, KJV)
does not refer to the activity but the content of preaching, and this content is
“Christ crucified” — an event in history that is offensive and foolishness to all but
believers (1 Cor. 1:23). Thus the gospel includes the proclamation of facts in
history: the death of Christ, his resurrection, his appearances to his disciples (1
Cor. 15:3ff.). However, it is not the proclamation of mere events, but of events
meaningfully understood. Christ died for our sins. The gospel is both historical
event and meaning; and the meaning of the event is that God was acting in history
for humanity’s salvation. The historical facts must be interpreted to be understood
for what they are: the redeeming, revealing act of God; and in the gospel, this
redemptive event is proclaimed.\(^9\)

John Bright and the editors of the Wycliffe Dictionary of Theology\(^10\) each
independently assume that the gospel finds its basis in the historical life and teachings of
Jesus and in the preaching of Paul. Here we find a comprehensive resolution of the
dilemma posed by mankind’s rebellion against God and its attendant consequences.

This gospel, this proclamation (kerygma) of the earliest church, may be said to
form the most primary element in the New Testament. We may see it particularly
in certain passages in Paul (e.g., Rom. 1:1-3; 10:9; I Cor. 11:23-25; 15:3-7; Phil.
2:6-11) where the apostle echoes confessions of early Christian faith, and also in
certain sermons in Acts (e.g., 10:36-43; 3:12-16). It was a very simple gospel and
very clear. It announced that the New Age of God proclaimed by the prophets had
begun; that the long-awaited Messiah had come, who is none other than this Jesus
who did mighty works, died and rose again according to the Scriptures; that this
Jesus has now been exalted to highest heaven to sit at the right hand of God, from
whence he shall shortly come again “to judge the quick and the dead” (K.J.V.).

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\(^8\) Bright, 190-191.
Let men then make decision for this New Age by repentance and baptism to the remission of sins!\textsuperscript{11}

It will be noticed that the essential core of this message is not the dawn of the messianic age (as Dodd implies) — although this is most certainly involved — but that sequence of redemptive events which sweeps the hearer along with compelling logic towards the climactic confession that Jesus is Lord.

The gospel is not the product of a bewildered church pondering the theological significance of Good Friday. It is rather the result of a natural development which had its origins in the teachings of Jesus himself. . .The resurrection was the catalyst which precipitated in the minds of the disciples the total significance of God’s redemptive activity. It released the gospel!

This gospel is power (Rom. 1:16). As an instrument of the Holy Spirit it convicts (I Thess. 1:5) and converts (Col. 1:6). . .To those who refuse the gospel it is both foolishness and a stumbling block (I Cor. 1:18 ff.), but to those who respond in faith it proves itself to be “the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16).\textsuperscript{12}

The apostle Paul was a staunch defender of the gospel. He gave his life to its proclamation. The strength of his passion and the seriousness of his concern may be seen in his words of shock to those who appear to be subverting the message he previously delivered to them.

\textsuperscript{6}I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - \textsuperscript{7}which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. \textsuperscript{8}But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! \textsuperscript{9}As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned.\textsuperscript{13}

Here we see that the gospel is not to be tampered with by dissonant understandings and experiences. The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4 adds an element of great importance for the comparison we will later make between NDE and the gospel.

\textsuperscript{11} Bright, 189-190.
\textsuperscript{12} Harrison, Bromiley, and Henry, 257.
\textsuperscript{13} Galatians 1:6-10.
This story illustrates that the goal of Jesus’ mission and teaching was the transformation of individual lives. This passage is long, but it is particularly helpful as seen in full.

So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

The woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?” Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.” “I have no husband,” she replied. Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

“I can see that you are a prophet.” Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus declared, “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”

The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” Then Jesus declared, “I who speak to you am he.”

Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?” Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?” They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

Meanwhile his disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.” Then his disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought him food?” “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more and then the harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at
the fields! They are ripe for harvest. 36 Even now the reaper draws his wages, even
now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be
glad together. 37 Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. 38 I sent you
to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you
have reaped the benefits of their labor.”

39 Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the
woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.” 40 So when the
Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two
days. 41 And because of his words many more became believers. 42 They said to the
woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard
for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.”14

The Samaritan woman’s encounter with Jesus was a surprise to her. It was not
something she had anticipated. Jews and Samaritans had as little association with each
other as possible. Furthermore, Jewish custom forbade a male teacher to talk with a
woman. In this case it was Jesus who initiated the conversation with a question. Barclay
states that John’s record of this conversation is likely only the briefest account of what
may have been an extended dialogue. He notes the following:

To a Jew this was an amazing story. Here was the Son of God, tired and weary
and thirsty. Here was the holiest of men, listening with understanding to a sorry
story. Here was Jesus breaking through the barriers of nationality and orthodox
Jewish custom. Here is the beginning of the universality of the gospel; here is
God so loving the world, not in theory, but in action.15

Following several spirited exchanges over the importance of water, Jesus suddenly
injects a command for her to get her husband and return with him. Again Barclay offers
the following insight into the practical nature of the gospel.

She was suddenly compelled to face herself and the looseness and immorality
and total inadequacy of her life. There are two revelations in Christianity: the
revelation of God and the revelation of ourselves. No man ever really sees himself
until he sees himself in the presence of Christ; and then he is appalled at the sight.
There is another way of putting it—Christianity begins with a sense of sin. It

14 John 4:5-42.
begins with the sudden realization that life as we are living it will not do. We awake to ourselves and we awake to our need of God.\textsuperscript{16}

What follows is a discussion regarding worship which terminated with Jesus’ admission that he indeed was the Messiah. At about the same time the disciples returned from their trip to buy food. The woman sets out for her village forgetting about her errand to get water and leaving the waterpot at the well. Her meeting with Jesus had worked within her changes that all of her desperate casting about for acceptance and love could not provide. She was transformed. Barclay speaks of it this way:

This very desire to tell others of her discovery killed in this woman the feeling of shame. She was no doubt an outcast; she was no doubt a byword; the very fact that she was drawing water from this distant well shows how she avoided her neighbors and how they avoided her. But now she ran to tell them of her discovery. A person may have some trouble which he is embarrassed to mention and which he tries to keep secret, but once he is cured he is often so filled with wonder and gratitude that he tells everyone about it. A man may hide his sin; but once he discovers Jesus Christ as Savior, his first instinct is to say to men: “Look at what I was and look at what I am; this is what Christ has done for me.”\textsuperscript{17}

The concept of personal transformation after coming into contact with the person or words of Christ is integral to the New Testament. Whole families and even communities may experience deep and profound reorientation of life priorities and perceptions of purpose. Individuals attribute their altered state to the ministry of the Holy Spirit making effective the words recorded in the Scriptures. Stories abound, and the transformations are often for life.

The personal ministry of Jesus as recorded in the gospels is replete with examples of individuals experiencing dramatic and often unanticipated life changes as a consequence of meeting him. Witness the calling of the disciples (Matt. 4:18-20), the forgiveness and

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 156-157.  
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 164.
acceptance of Zacchaeus the tax collector (Lk. 19:2-10), the instruction about new birth to Nicodemus (Jn. 3:1-21), and Mary Magdalene who experienced forgiveness for adultery (Lk. 8:1-4).

The commencement of Jesus’ official ministry was a transformative event creating a new era. To those who had been awakened by the ministry of John the Baptist, the arrival of Jesus with this rousing proclamation created deep stirrings of spirit.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God comes like a cloudburst after long ages of unfulfilled expectation. Mark’s summarization of Jesus’ message is terse and powerful and represents the nature of the change that is impinging upon the world. There is no ambivalence in the words spoken by Jesus, “The time has come.” No longer any delay or stalling. No more pondering over the meaning of the prophecies. Why? Because the kingdom, or reign, of God was near. And the One who would mediate that reign was here. In consequence of this, the call was, “Repent and believe the good news.” There is no time left except for a radical decision, for Jesus is speaking good news and calling for a response.

The reign of God through the ministry of Jesus advances into the very territory claimed by the evil spirits. Ladd, who has written much on the topic of the kingdom comments on the significance of Jesus driving the evil spirit out of man who was possessed:

What is the Gospel of the Kingdom? What means the announcement that the Kingdom of God has come near? It is this: that God is now acting among men to

18 Mark 1:14, 15.
deliver them from bondage to Satan. It is the announcement that God, in the person of Christ, is doing something—if you please, is attacking the very kingdom of Satan himself. The exorcism of demons is proof that the Kingdom of God has come among men and is at work among them. The casting out of demons is itself a work of the Kingdom of God.19

The breaking in of the kingdom of God drives back the evil spirits (Mk. 1:27). The disciples express amazement that even the evil spirits are subject to them (Mk. 1:27; Lk. 10:17-20). Jesus responds that they should rejoice more that their names are written in heaven” (Lk. 10:20). In the heat of the battle with the evil spirits Jesus reminds his disciples that while exorcism is important, there are even greater realities. When accused that he was using the power of Satan to cast out demons Jesus responded decisively: “But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Lk. 11:20). He uses this occasion to state unequivocally his authority to reign.

The New Testament presentation of the kingdom of God powerfully affirms that God is moving to complete his work of redemption in this world. The reign of the kingdom inaugurated during Jesus’ ministry on earth will spread like leaven in a loaf of bread, will shine like a lamp that is set up high on a stand and, as salt it will flavor every aspect the believer’s life and mission. The many parables of the kingdom introduce fundamental concepts to inform and encourage those who work in behalf of the gospel (Matt. 13:1-52). Furthermore, Christ’s followers are not sent out to labor alone. The power and comfort of the Holy Spirit as the personal representative of Jesus accompanies them on their mission (John 14:15-18, 25-27; 15:26; 16:12-15). In this way Jesus makes provision for every need his disciples may encounter in the service of the kingdom (Luke 11:9-13).

The gospel of Luke summarizes the intent of Jesus’ ministry this way:

18 “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

These words were fulfilled repeatedly as Jesus moved among people, many of whom responded positively to him after receiving back their health. As Luke emphasizes the kingdom of God as mediated by Jesus brought both freedom and grace. Aspects of this included healing of body and mind, forgiveness and acceptance with God (Mk. 2:16-17; Lk. 5:30-31; Lk. 7:29), and liberation from the oppression of evil spirits (Matt. 4:24, 25; Mark 1:34; Luke 6:17-19; 8:1-3). The arrival of the kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus confirms the promise of “God with us” (Is. 7:14; Matt. 1:22, 23).

But the changes wrought by the advent of the kingdom were to extend beyond the earthly ministry of Jesus. In fact the number and rate of transformations rises rapidly in response to the proclamation of the gospel through the word of the apostles (Acts 2:42-47). Paul’s dramatic conversion, as a result of encountering the risen Jesus on the Damascus road, is one that turned a driven persecutor into a dedicated servant for Christ and humanity. Paul’s unique mission to the gentile world offered the opportunity for them to hear the words of reconciliation and acceptance from the God which had for so long been seen as reserved only for the Jews. From these fledgling beginnings, the gospel of the kingdom which proclaimed a message of hope to all people was soon traveling via ambassador converts to the outermost reaches of the known world. Today the message of

the life, death, resurrection of Jesus and his imminent return are heralding reconciliation, hope, meaning and purpose in most of the world, even in places where it is strongly resisted.

No discussion of the gospel and the message of the New Testament is complete without incorporating the future return of Christ (1 Thess. 4:13-18), and the resurrection of the body (1 Cor. 15:1-58, esp. vss. 51,52; 2 Cor. 5:1). We must also acknowledge that in the thinking of the New Testament these two last great events are yet future.

Oscar Cullmann in a thought-provoking lecture at Harvard offers an impressive argument that the New Testament view of the personal resurrection of the body at the end of the age is the hope of believers. His presentation is useful in the context of this paper as he compares the death of Socrates with the death of Jesus. He eloquently demonstrates the diametrically opposed viewpoints between Jesus and Greek thought in these words:

In Plato’s impressive description of the death of Socrates, in the *Phaedo*, occurs perhaps the highest and most sublime doctrine ever presented on the immortality of the soul. What gives his argument its unexcelled value is his scientific reserve, his disclaimer of any proof having mathematical validity. We know the arguments he offers for the immortality of the soul. Our body is only an outer garment which, as long as we live, prevents our soul from moving freely and from living in conformity to its proper eternal essence. It imposes upon the soul a law which is not appropriate to it. The soul, confined within the body, belongs to the eternal world. As long as we live, our soul finds itself in a prison, that is, in a body essentially alien to it. Death, in fact, is the great liberator. It looses the chains, since it leads the soul out of the prison of the body and back to its eternal home. 21

In contrast to Greek and NDE understanding (described in the following chapters) death is not seen as a celebration by New Testament Christians. Rather it is viewed as an enemy to be conquered at the consummation of all things. For example, Paul wrote to the

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Thessalonians to encourage them with resurrection hope in face of the death of their loved ones before the parousia. He asserts that the promise has not failed, but that the first act in the coming of Christ will be the resurrection of the dead to meet the Lord. According to Cullmann, the New Testament belief of apostles and converts in the resurrection is an indispensable aspect of the theology of the New Testament. If this is not understood, then a significant understanding about the faith of the early Christians is lost. Here is how he articulates this thought:

If we want to understand the Christian faith in the Resurrection, we must completely disregard the Greek thought that the material, the bodily, the corporeal is bad and must be destroyed, so that the death of the body would not be in any sense a destruction of the true life. For Christian (and Jewish) thinking the death of the body is also destruction of God-created life. No distinction is made: even the life of our body is true life; death is the destruction of all life created by God. Therefore it is death and not the body which must be conquered by the Resurrection.

Only he who apprehends with the first Christians the horror of death, who takes death seriously as death, can comprehend the Easter exultation of the primitive Christian community and understand that the whole thinking of the New Testament is governed by belief in the Resurrection.

Death in itself is not beautiful, not even the death of Jesus... Whoever paints a pretty death can paint no resurrection. Whoever has not grasped the horror of death cannot join Paul in the hymn of victory: ‘Death is swallowed up - in victory! O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?’ (1 Corinthians 15:54f)\textsuperscript{22}

Cullman also affirms that the resurrection of the body not only occurs at the end of the age, but it is inseparably linked to the redemptive process and hope.

Because resurrection of the body is a new act of creation which embraces everything, it is not an event which begins with each individual death, but only at the \textit{End}. It is not a transition from this world to another world, as is the case of the immortal soul freed from the body, rather it is the transition from the present age to the future. It is tied to the whole process of redemption.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 26-27.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 38.
On the other hand, the gift of eternal life is often understood as belonging solely to the future, though part of the blessing of that gift is available to believers now as they associate with Jesus and his message. In an almost universally familiar statement, Jesus promises believers eternal life as a result of placing their trust in him (John 3:16). Known for his conceptual understanding of inaugurated and consummated eschatology, Ladd makes this statement in relation to eternal life:

While eternal life is eschatological, the central emphasis of the Fourth Gospel is not to show people the way of life in the Age to Come but to bring to them a present experience of this future life. Here is a teaching that is not found in any explicit form in the Synoptics, that the life of the Age to Come is already imparted to the believer. The purpose of Jesus' mission was to bring people a present experience of the future life (10:10). He came down from heaven to give life to the world (6:33), to satisfy the world's spiritual hunger and thirst (6:35).24

Believers, then, may anticipate some of the future reward while they live and minister in the present age. The Lord's assurance is with them and confirms the acceptance they have with him that will be fulfilled ultimately at the parousia.

Before taking up the work of reviewing the message and mission of those who have either experienced or advocate for the NDE phenomenon, a summary of this chapter is desirable to provide a clear picture with which to compare what follows.

The message of the gospel and the mission of Christianity provides transforming power to every believer. Beginning in antiquity and continuing to the present day, God has consistently held that sin is the root cause of humanity's predicament. In harmony with that understanding, he has acted in history to make redemption available for everyone who chooses to accept his provision. God chose to work through Israel until the leaders of the nation rejected Jesus as the Messiah totally by turning him over to the

Romans for crucifixion. Unrecognized by many in their midst, Jesus Christ had come bearing a message of glad tidings for a people weary for a word of hope. Many during Jesus’ brief lifetime did find solace in his words and actions, and many more in the years after Jesus’ resurrection found it in the gospel message from the apostles, especially Paul.

It was the message of the substitutionary death of Jesus on the cross for their sins that gave individuals hope and opened the way to full reconciliation with God. The grace of God was available to everyone through faith in Jesus. None need go away unrequited. Daily, the apostles proclaimed the good news and it spread rapidly to distant places.

The lives of individuals, families and whole people groups were transformed by accepting the gospel and living out the principles found in the apostles’ teachings. New, enriched lives were possible, even in very difficult circumstances.

Jesus had returned to heaven, but his parting words reaffirmed that he would return at the end of the age. The world in which we live will not endure forever in its present form. Jesus and Paul clearly state that in the purpose of God, the present order of things will be swept away as the kingdom inaugurated during his time on earth will be finally and fully realized. The return of Jesus is the hope of the church.

At that time, according to Paul, those who have died in faith will be resurrected and clothed with immortality. The reign of death upon God’s people will be vanquished when they receive their new resurrection bodies products of the power of Christ. Eternal life, while anticipated in the believer’s life day by day, now becomes a full and vital reality with opportunity to perpetuate activities and relationships in ways never possible before.

The gospel message provides for the resolution of guilt and sin in relation to God and the assurance of a part and a place in the future with other believers. What Jesus has to
offer is not just another philosophy. Individuals and groups who deeply intersect with him and his teachings come away transformed. People with their existential concerns and traumas are empowered with the new perspectives inherent in the gospel message. While the concept of an absolute perfection is not sustainable, love toward others modeled upon God's love is commended (Matt. 5:43-48). Such love gives the individual a confidence and a purpose in life that was lacking before. These persons have a profound awareness that they are of supreme value to the God of the universe.
CHAPTER 3
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE PHENOMENON

The publication of Raymond Moody’s work *Life after Life*, in 1975, created a wave of interest that continues to spawn reports and books that document thousands of anecdotal accounts known as near-death experiences (NDEs).\(^1\) While there is some evidence to show that the phenomenon may date back to the Middle Ages, the majority of interest focuses in the last twenty five years.\(^2\)

Aside from Dr. Raymond Moody, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross,\(^3\) Kenneth Ring\(^4\) and many more are writing about and interpolating all aspects of NDEs. *Flatliners, Ghost, Ghost Dad, Resurrection* and *Fearless* are examples of recent feature films that have themes similar to NDEs. Television shows such as *Unsolved Mysteries* have given air time to exploring the phenomenon. Magazines and journals such as *Redbook, Psychology Today, Lady's Home Journal, Reader's Digest, Discover* and *Guideposts* have featured articles on NDEs. Well-known individuals such as Ernest Hemmingway and Carl G. Jung are among those who claim to have had near-death experiences. Hypertext links on the Internet and internal references in the literature lead to a wide range of associated articles on reincarnation, karma, immortality, parapsychology, transmigration, disembodied existence, psychedelic drugs, physics, chemistry, astral projection, and the mind/body problem. The appearance of references to NDEs in casual contexts such as cartoons and jokes, indicates that the phenomenon is passing into the vernacular. Self-help books with

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4 Ring.
instructions on how to have an out-of-body experience have been in print since 1989.\(^5\) In the realm of Christian television programming, TBN's *Praise the Lord*, and CBN's *700 Club* have featured people who have reported on their own near-death experiences.

Christian author George G. Ritche, MD, wrote *Return From Tomorrow*\(^6\) and *My Life After Dying,*\(^7\) and Betty Malz wrote *My Glimpse of Eternity.*\(^8\) Numbers of Christian authors have added to the store of works on this subject.

There is a rapidly growing body of data in print and also on the World Wide Web. A March 11, 2001 search of the online Barnes&Noble.com bookstore lists two hundred and one titles published between 1972 to the present. Although a number of these are no longer in print, seventy nine or roughly forty percent of them arrived on bookstore shelves between 1994 and 1996. The Barnes and Noble listings are by no means exhaustive, though they do indicate that since these peak publication years, new titles are not being released at the previous rate. A case could be made that the Internet has become much more accessible in the last few years, allowing an explosion of web sites to disseminate anecdotes and ideas in a readily available form.

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CHAPTER 4
A TYPICAL NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

In Raymond Moody’s first work he identified fifteen separate elements that occur again and again in the classic NDE.¹ Researchers including Moody eventually settled on nine “core elements” that make up what is known as a “full-blown” NDE.² The various researchers are agreed that it is rare for a NDE to contain all of the nine elements. Morse illustrates the nine elements in the following excerpts of real, though different, individuals who, according to clinicians, had begun the transition from life here to whatever lies beyond. They had “died.”

The nine essential traits are listed below. Each trait is illustrated by an actual story of someone who has returned from death’s door:

1. A Sense of Being Dead
   “It was hard to explain. It was a time when I was not the wife of my husband, I was not the parent of my children, I was not the child of my parents. I was totally and completely me.”
   —A 65-year-old Chicago woman after a cardiac arrest

2. Peace and Painlessness
   “It was as though the ribbons that bind me to the world had been cut. I no longer felt fear nor did I feel my body, for that matter. I could hear them (doctors and nurses) working around me but it meant nothing.”
   —A Georgia housewife who “died” after an auto wreck

3. Out-of-Body Experience
   “I was able to look down at myself in my hospital bed. There were doctors and nurses moving busily around me. I could see them roll a machine into the room and put it near the foot of my bed. It had two handles sticking out of a kind of box. I found out later that it was one of those machines they use to shock the heart and get it started when it has stopped.
   “A priest came in and began to give me last rites. I moved down to the bottom of the bed and watched everything that was going on. It was like being in the audience at a play.
   “Behind me in the bed was a clock. It was up on the wall. I could see both myself in the bed and the clock, which read 11:11 A.M.

¹ Moody, 21.
² Melvin Morse, Transformed by the Light (New York: Villard Books, 1992), ix-xiii.
“Then I went back into my body. I remember waking up and looking for myself at the foot of the bed.”
—An Arizona woman who nearly died from a reaction to medication

4. Tunnel Experience
“I was playing golf as a storm was brewing when — wham — I got hit by a bolt of lightning. I hovered above my body for a few seconds and then I felt myself being sucked up this tunnel. I couldn’t see anything around me, but I had a sense of moving forward very rapidly. I was clearly in a tunnel and knew it when I saw this light at the other end getting bigger and bigger.”
—A Southern car dealer after being struck by lightning

5. People of Light
“I was met at the end of the tunnel by a bunch of people. They were all glowing from the inside like lanterns. The whole place was glowing in the same way, like everything in it was filled with light. I didn’t know any of the people I met there, but they all seemed to love me very much.”
—A 10-year-old boy who experienced a cardiac arrest

6. Being of Light
“I remember waking up in a garden filled with large flowers. If I had to describe them, I would say they looked like big dahlias. It was warm and light in this garden and it was beautiful.
“I looked around the garden and there was this Being. The garden was extraordinarily beautiful, but everything paled in his presence. I felt completely loved and completely nourished by him. It was the most delightful feeling I’ve ever known. Although it was several years ago, I can still feel that feeling.”
—A middle-aged woman describing her childhood NDE

7. Life Review
“This Being of Light surrounded me and showed me my life. Everything you do is there for you to evaluate. As unpleasant as some parts of it are for you to see, it feels so good to get it all out. I remember one particular incident in this review when, as a child, I yanked my little sister’s Easter basket away from her, because there was a toy in it that I wanted. Yet in the review, I felt her feelings of disappointment and loss and rejection.
“I was the very people I hurt and I was the very people that I helped to feel good.”
—An Ohio woman who had a near-death experience at age 23

8. Reluctance to Return
“After the review of my life I didn’t want to return to my body. I was comfortable there, and the light that surrounded me was pure love. He (the Being of Light) asked me if I wanted to go back and I said, ‘no.’ He then told me I had to go back, that there was more work to be done. I was then sucked back into my
body. There was no other way to describe it. Suddenly I was lying there, looking up at a doctor with paddles in his hand.

“For a moment I was angry at being brought back to life. ‘Don’t ever do that to me again!’ I said. It was a shock to my friend who had worked so hard to save me.”

—A cardiologist who was resuscitated by one of his peers

9. Personality Transformation

“The first thing I saw when I awoke in the hospital was a flower, and I cried. Believe it or not, I had never really seen a flower until I came back from death. One thing I learned when I died was that we are all part of one big living universe, If we think we can hurt another person or another living thing without hurting ourselves, we are sadly mistaken.”

—A 62-year-old businessman after surviving a cardiac arrest. 3

The following anecdote illustrates a number of the elements as they manifest themselves in a single experience.

“Another woman abused drugs for twenty-three years, her life scraping the bottom of the barrel over and over again, until she had a near-death experience (NDE). Because she was familiar with so many drugs, she was also familiar with hallucinations. She said that her NDE was different, ‘a very real voyage’ (Ring, 1991, p. 24). In 1987 she overdosed on two bags of heroin mixed with cocaine and died. She rose out of her body while watching it turn purple, blue, then gray. She watched the paramedics, unable to get a pulse for almost three minutes, working on her body, injecting Narcan and using a defibrillator. She then floated away into a dimension of total peace and serenity, better than any drug-induced feeling. She went toward a Light, ‘more brilliant than a diamond’ into a beautiful city, and saw her life flash before her. Then she felt the Light’s total love, acceptance, and peace. She was jolted back into her body, annoyed at having to be back on earth. But now she knew she was forgiven and had things to do. She was transformed.” 4

These anecdotes are sufficient to give a feel for the overall dimensions of a typical near-death experience. The specific variations are endless though they conform in the main to parameters outlined by Moody and other researchers. Browsing the Internet and following the links will provide numberless examples similar to the above, diversified among the racial, cultural, academic, religious and socioeconomic strata of society. This

3 Ibid.
4 Bailey and Yates, 2.
was also Moody’s observation in 1975, before the Internet as we know it today.\textsuperscript{5} There is a clear perception and general acknowledgment among writers that it was Moody’s pioneering research, and the publication of his first book in 1975, which was the catalyst that generated sufficient interest and awareness to provide respectability to the field of near-death studies.\textsuperscript{6} Now, with the basic concepts of the phenomenon introduced, we can begin to explore some of the main arguments for and against the experience itself as illustrated above.

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\textsuperscript{5} Moody, 15.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
CHAPTER 5

PHYSICAL, MEDICAL, AND PHARMACOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

Several of the most commonly posited explanations that attempt to refute NDEs are based upon understandings of the medical and pharmacological circumstances that immediately precede or accompany the NDE. Without devoting an undue amount of coverage to these aspects of the topic, the physical aspects surrounding the near-death experience do serve to highlight several questions that must be resolved if the predominant explanations are to be confirmed. One intriguing thought is that of the term used for the phenomenon: near-death-experience. In the anecdotes and in the literature there is some ambivalence surrounding the use of the term. On one occasion it may be stated that the person died and on another as dying.¹ Some “overhear” the medical staff pronouncing their death as their soul is leaving the body. But what actually is involved in this transitional state and what do we understand by the terms “death” and “near-death?” A brief review and definition of the concepts involved will aid our understanding of all that follows.

Defining Death

Jack Provonsha MD, is one of many who elucidate the criteria for the levels or stages of death. In modern times, at least since the advent of life support technology, brain death or “cortical death” is seen as the first step in a process that ultimately leads to a state of irreversible death. Provonsha states that it is:

characterized by deep, irreversible coma with no response to stimuli, absence of reflexes, fixed pupils, the need for mechanical assistance for respiration and

¹ Ibid, 147-52.
circulation, and is usually confirmed by flat tracings on the electroencephalograph for a period of twenty-four hours or so.²

The older and more traditional definition of death, according to Provonsha, involves the absence of certain clinical vital signs of life such as respiration, heartbeat, and blood pressure. He comments that the term "organic death" is sometimes applied to this state as the vital organ-systems have shut down.

The final level of death is termed cellular death. With the brain and organs no longer being supplied with oxygen and nutrients, and with waste by-products of cellular activity building up in the tissues, irreversible damage to the body quickly follows. Provonsha adds that by artificially perfusing the tissues with the necessary fluids and nutrients the cellular deterioration can be prevented for some time. Temperature is also a factor, as in cases where drowning occurs in a cold body of water and resuscitation is effected some time beyond what would ordinarily have led to major brain damage. Lastly, cellular deterioration does not occur uniformly throughout the body. The higher centers of the brain are impacted first and suffer damage more severely.

In the early days of the phenomena of near-death experiences the major arguments surrounded what was considered the medical impossibility that any rational cognitive functions could exist in the rapidly deteriorating brain and consciousness. Moody, writing in 1975 included in the last part of his book a section devoted to questions he had been asked often enough that he had developed general answers to obviate the need to repeatedly deal with them. Following are some of the relevant questions in that section.

Have you investigated the medical records of your subjects?

I have heard that, after five minutes, resuscitation is impossible, yet you say that some of your cases have been “dead” for up to twenty minutes. How is this possible?

Were any of these people really dead?3

Moody ends his book with a section titled “Explanations” in which he covers certain medical, physiological and pharmacological arguments that had been raised to refute his research. It is necessary to briefly review what has been termed by some as the “naturalistic” or “natural” explanations so that the later discussion will be as informed as possible about the context in which the near-death experience occurs. The list that follows is not intended to be exhaustive, though it does represent many of the main arguments that have been raised against what the near-death experience purports to be; a survival of bodily death, temporarily at least, in order to visit and experience what lies beyond death.

Medical Explanations

In the world of medical science there is a growing suspicion that the NDE phenomena may be associated with abnormal organic, metabolic and chemical conditions surrounding recent trauma. Moody and many others have in one way or another addressed the potential role of abnormal blood gases as causative of NDEs. What happens as the brain becomes starved for oxygen and enters a state of hypoxia (low O₂)? At the same moment carbon dioxide, the byproduct of respiration, is building up in the system to produce a state of hypercarbia (excessive CO₂). Provonsha provides the following to illustrate the role of CO₂ in replicating NDE-like scenarios

The following reports by subjects on carbon dioxide are typical: “I felt as though I was looking down at myself, as though I was way out here in space . . . I felt sort

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3 Moody, 146-47.
of separated.” “There was a large audience in an amphitheater or something and I just floated whirling above the audience.”

Moody, on the other hand anticipates the medical arguments regarding oxygen deprivation and also potentially with CO₂ abnormalities with these words:

The main thing wrong with this hypothesis is simply this: As can easily be seen from a survey of the dying experiences reported earlier, many of the near-death experiences happened before any physiological stress of the required type took place. Indeed, in a few cases there was no bodily injury at all during the encounter.

What seems to be evident from the literature is the fact that individuals can utilize the same or similar data and present cogent arguments according to a previously held opinion. This is something to be considered in assessing any of the arguments presented either pro or con.

Provonsha cites a case at Loma Linda University Medical Center a number of years ago where a patient with a slow growing pituitary tumor reported experiencing at least fifteen out of body experiences. After surgical removal of the tumor these episodes apparently ceased.

Morse quotes pioneering neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield, who is referenced in several publications for observing NDE-like results in a patient after stimulating the brain with electrodes and that ‘mind’ results from neuronal activity.

Neuroscientists have documented the existence of these circuit boards of mysticism within our temporal lobe . . . The other indicators of the near-death experience [other than the loving white light] can be recreated by short-circuiting the right temporal lobe. This was done by Wilder Penfield, the Canadian neurosurgeon, who used electric prods to touch this area of the brain during surgery, thereby producing out-of-body states in patients.

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4 Provonsha, 25.
5 Moody, 163.
6 Provonsha, 20.
7 Morse, 196-97.
Medicine and philosophy alike have wrestled with the mind-body identity for decades without resolution. Occasionally a NDEer will wonder during the experience how this is possible since that most perceive they no longer possess a physical body or senses in any usual form. One writer puts it this way:

Within a scientific paradigm, it is not possible that 'the spirit rises out of the body leaving the brain behind, but somehow still incorporating neuronal functions such as sight, hearing, and proprioception.

Pharmacological Explanations

The action of hallucinogenic drugs on the brain may include effects such as profound religious experiences. In a chapter titled, “Dreams, Drugs and Death Visions,” Provonsha cites multiple instances of individuals commenting on NDE-like phenomena after taking the drug LSD. Recollections of the experiences include most of the elements common to NDEers including out of body, life review, etc.

A second area of interest in regard to NDEs is the dissociative drug Ketamine. In its intravenous form it consistently induces NDE-like experiences. Thirty percent of subjects given Ketamine were certain they had not been dreaming or hallucinating, but that the events really happened. While Ketamine is chemically related to PCP, it is considered safe enough to be used as an anesthetic for children. Timothy Leary, a frequent user of LSD, described Ketamine use as “experiments in voluntary death.” For some decades now, it has not been uncommon to hear reports of persons experimenting with drugs who were convinced that they could fly or perform other exorbitant feats.

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10 Provonsha, 21-26.
11 Bailey and Yates, 270.
12 Jansen, 55-81.
Moody, in 1975, also acknowledges that LSD, Ketamine and anesthesia may produce NDE-like states, though there are differences between the drug-induced experience and what is considered the “real thing.” Melvin Morse makes a very significant argument that follows on from an earlier quotation in this paper.

These circuit boards have also been activated by the use of anesthetic drugs such as Ketamine, in which patients on the operating table say they are leaving their body. LSD, peyote, and other psychedelic drugs can also trigger some of the circuitry, leading to out-of-body sensations, tunnel experiences, and the like. Yes, I even believe this area of the brain works its magic during periods of intense fear, when a person needs to disassociate from something that is going on or even to slow down time, possibly to avoid an accident.

These building blocks of the spiritual journey can be activated in many ways, since they are part of the basic circuitry of our brains. The experience of the light cannot be activated artificially.

Again, the NDE-like reports from persons taking powerful hallucinogenic and dissociative type drugs may recommend postponing premature decisions regarding questions of origins of the NDE. These data serve to illustrate the fact that a more comprehensive analysis is needed before a final verdict on NDEs may be pronounced. Scientific understandings rest on the two premises of repeatability of the experiment and verification of the results. Jansen is unequivocal that Ketamine can produce NDE-like results consistently and predictably.

If the NDE can be precipitated on multiple occasions by medical and surgical intervention, and additionally by drug induced states, then further questions seem advised. For example, it is commonly presented that one of the primary reasons for the NDE it is to provide either a warning to a person or a refocusing of their life direction. What then, is the rationale behind repeating this process multiple times as with the man

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14 Morse, 197.
who had the pituitary tumor mentioned earlier? Would this not seem to trivialize the whole idea behind the NDE?

Habermas, however, raises the bar even higher on the contrary side. He submits a fascinating discussion dealing with the issue of corroborative evidence, to establish that "life" continues throughout the entire spectrum of the definitions of death mentioned at the beginning of this section. Later in the book he summarizes four types of evidence that would be needed to provide the necessary verification.\(^{15}\)

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Table 4.1 Types of Evidence Corroborating Death

To illustrate the above he cites numerous cases of individuals who reported details totally beyond possibility of sensory perception, like that of a young girl named Katie who had almost drowned in a pool. The details reported by her and others returning from the experience are not merely fragments of awareness but an extended cataloguing of what occurred over a considerable length of time. Researchers offer these kinds of accounts to counter the accusation that the NDE may have occurred at a point of time when the person’s senses were alert enough to obtain information through ordinary means. Moreover, they say, there is no easily discernable way to account for the logistics involved when the patient reports on events occurring at a distance from where they are receiving medical attention. Here is Katie’s story.

After her emergency room resuscitation, a CAT scan showed a massive brain swelling, and her doctor had an artificial lung machine attached to her to keep her breathing. He gave her a 10 percent chance of living. But three days later she totally recovered and relayed an amazing story. She accurately described the physical characteristics of the doctors involved in her resuscitation, details of the hospital rooms she was taken into, and reported particulars of the specific medical procedures used on her, even though she was “profoundly comatose,” with her eyes closed the entire time.

As if this was not enough, Katie claimed to have met “Jesus and the heavenly Father” and an angel named Elizabeth. She also “followed” her family home during the time her body was comatose in the hospital and remembered seeing specific minutiae such as the selections for the evening meal prepared by her mother, how her father was reacting to her accident, and which toys her brother and sister were playing with at the time.

Her doctor investigated these claims— from his personal presence in the hospital emergency room and the procedures he used to the testimony of the nurses, and to the whereabouts of Katie’s family when she watched them at home. The family members were astounded at her descriptions of their clothing, where they were positioned in the house, and the food served at dinner. All the information she gave checked out.16

This next case pushes the envelope even further. It is the story of another child.

In another instance, an eight-year-old girl who was swimming in a pool got her hair caught in the drain and almost drowned. It took forty-five minutes of CPR to get her heart beating again. In the meantime, she said that she floated out of her body and visited heaven. Additionally, in spite of her condition, she was able to totally and correctly recount the details from the time the paramedics arrived in her yard through the work performed later in the hospital emergency room. So her report was not a brief recollection but a blow-by-blow account of the long process of emergency treatment she received.17

A third example illustrates corroboration of “life” continuing even after all detectable signs of brain activity have ceased.

As a specific example, a woman who had a flat EEG reading and no vital signs had been declared dead. But she spontaneously revived about three and one-half hours later. In fact, she regained consciousness and lifted the sheet off her face as she was being taken to the morgue by an orderly. Then she reported that she had floated over her body during the resuscitation attempts. She precisely described not only the procedures used in her attempted rescue but also the number of persons who came into the hospital room, what they said (she even repeated a

17 Ibid, 159.
joke told to relieve the tension), and perhaps most interestingly, she described the designs on the doctor’s ties.

All of these claims were carefully checked with the medical records and the doctors present. It was determined that her entire description was correct, even though her EEG reading had been flat during that entire time.¹⁸

This fourth and last example is one of a number that illustrate that individuals in a coma can receive information concerning events happening at a distance which even those present are unaware of. One young girl met her brother during her NDE, even though she did not have one. After this revelation, the father confessed that there was indeed a brother, but he had died before the girl was born. The following example is one that involved the well-known Elizabeth Kubler-Ross as she sat at the bedside of a child.

One of the most moving as well as evidential accounts of this nature involves a family who experienced a fiery car wreck. The mother died at the scene, and her two sons were taken to different hospitals. While Kubler-Ross sat at the bedside of the youngest child, he came out of his coma during a commonly observed “clear moment.” Although in considerable pain, the child was quiet and at peace.

The doctor asked him how he felt. The little boy responded, “Yes, everything is all right now. Mommy and Peter are already waiting for me.” Then, with a contented little smile, he lapsed back into his coma and died. But he had not been told that the other members of his family had already expired. Then as Kubler-Ross walked past the nursing station, she was told that a call had just come in from the other hospital telling them that Peter, the older brother, had died just minutes earlier.¹⁹

Going on the assumption that the examples selected from the many cases offered represent a faithful rendering of the events that transpired, they seem to build a compelling case that awareness and cognition continue long beyond the time we have believed it to have ceased. At least we should take it as a sobering reminder to be aware of our conversation and deportment around those whom we believe to be in a coma or to have already died. There is no need to multiply examples, as the foregoing discussion is enough to provide a feel for some the complex issues that have arisen in discussions

¹⁸ Habermas and Moreland, 195.
¹⁹ Ibid, 163.
regarding the biological basis for the near-death experience. The arguments continue to be refined on all sides to address new insights and new questions as they surface. While Morse is perhaps the closest to building the bridge between the polarities of science and what is seen as the true mystical experience of the NDE with his "circuit board" right temporal lobe hypothesis, there is no evidence that this will result any time soon. As we will see later, there is more at stake here than may seem evident at this point of our discussion.
CHAPTER 6

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The medical, physical and pharmacological aspects are not the only places where the near-death experience is facing challenges. Considerable interest has been aroused in other disciplines such as psychology and psychiatry. Enough time has elapsed, and sufficient studies have been undertaken to provide a significant body of data for analysis from a longitudinal perspective. Some have taken the “so what” attitude and are asking questions regarding the implications to a person’s life and relationships. Given that this person or these individuals have experienced something so extraordinary, how has that played out years or even decades after the event? What are some of the hypotheses that seek to provide a framework, other than from the medical perspective, that accounts for the manifestations reported upon return from an NDE? Again, it is not the purpose of this paper to cover all of the possibilities, but to provide a representative range of observations so that the reader sees that the medical arguments are by no means the only ones that raise questions or provoke deep reflection. Further, not all of the implications will be fully dealt with at this point as they factor in later in the paper when the message and mission aspects of NDEs are more fully considered.

Psychological explanations raise awareness of and seek to rule out such obvious precursors such as mental illness, hallucinations, temporal lobe epilepsy and some commonly overlooked possibilities such as fabrication, embellishment, faulty recall, or the fact that they could have acquired the data from some unaccounted-for natural source. Other attempts to reconcile the data center around depersonalization, regression, sensory deprivation, isolation studies, and birth memories. Taking the latter as an example, the
seeming parallel of the experience of our birth and that of our death provides at first glance an intriguing confirmation by way of explanation of the phenomenon. Groothuis quotes astronomer Carl Sagan and outlines the argument.\textsuperscript{1} There is the pain and trauma of being forced into the birth canal that resembles the tunnel seen by many in the NDE. At the end is the bright light of the delivery room and the beings surrounding the emerging infant as it reaches the end of the tunnel. But it is here that the similarity ends. There is no life review or even the giving of a life mission and certainly there is no going back again.

This may seem to be a superficial concept, but it illustrates an ability to come up with plausible answers from perspectives other than the most popularly accepted ones. Some NDE researchers welcome the challenge as it assists them to refine their research and methodologies and therefore increases the credibility of the studies being undertaken. We will explore a number of the psychological effects that deserve elucidation. Persons are often affected profoundly in the aftermath of a NDE in ways that shape their lives, sometimes forever. Atwater tabulates several of the transformations that are common among those having a NDE.\textsuperscript{2} While they may have lived and acted quite differently prior to the event, NDEers are now more inclined to extol the virtues of unconditional love. The warmth and acceptance they received during their experience is something they feel compelled to emulate. Even if they do not fully live up to the ideal, they are inclined to believe they are acting in a fully loving manner. Family and friends talk about the confusion they feel by this sudden transformation. The suddenness of the change may

\textsuperscript{1} Groothuis, 169-70.
\textsuperscript{2} Bailey and Yates, 241-42.
have many of the characteristics of a religious revival and the family may struggle to integrate the altered priorities of their loved one.

Part of this change involves how the NDEer deals with boundaries. These may become quite fluid at times, as the person does not see himself or herself as one who transgresses upon someone else's rights or property. The recently "enlightened" mental and moral processes cause them to disregard long held codes of conduct that they now see as restrictive. Relaxing the boundaries is effectually a two-way street, and the person may be taken advantage of because of failure to exercise due caution and reserve in dealings with other people. NDEers are more inclined to attribute to strangers the same loving benevolence they desire to manifest to others.

For some the quality and importance of time is altered. Those that had been driven by clocks and schedules prior to the NDE now may reject them. Having peeked into the future, there is less sense of urgency about things temporal. Companions describe them at times as being "spacey" and easily distracted. Those who were always on time or even early, are now inclined to arrive late or miss the appointment altogether if another opportunity intervenes. Some could be seen as emulating the biblical maxim expressed by Jesus, "Do not worry . . . about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear" (Matt. 6:25).

Atwater indicates that psychic abilities, including extrasensory perception, become part of the normal lives of NDEers and do not seem to be precluded by a person's religious beliefs. These "powers" are often not understood by others who may interpret them as "the Devil's work" when she believes they really ought to be seen more in the line of "gifts of the spirit." Depending on how the gifts are manifested, this argument

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3 Ibid, 241.
could be hard to negate since the apostle lists such gifts as miraculous powers and
distinguishing between spirits as part of the full complement of gifts.

These so-called psychic abilities may be coupled with reality switches, according to
Atwater. Transformations may affect the basic attitude to life, slowing down high
achievers and materialists, and enlivening the previously uncommitted with purpose and
near missionary zeal. Atwater states that all of the psychological aftereffects comprise a
universal pattern that can take a minimum of seven years for full integration.\(^4\)

Pediatrician Melvin Morse has undertaken extensive studies with children and
individuals who had their NDEs as children. In his 1992 book, *Transformed by the Light*
he provides considerable documentation to support the view that significant change has
occurred in many of those who have experienced a NDE. To sample his research, I will
look more closely at four areas of his Transformation Study that illustrates his thesis. To
accomplish this in the most efficient manner I will let Morse state the case in his own
words.

**AMAZING RESULTS**

The results of the Transformations [sic] study were exciting. After we finished
analyzing the data from the more than four hundred people who participated in
the research project we discovered that the near-death experience causes many
long-term changes in the people to whom it happens. These changes include:

A Decreased Death Anxiety: Near-death experiencers have approximately half the
fear of dying that the normal population does. When asked for their feelings about
death, the typical NDERer would say something like: "I no longer fear it," or, "I
now know that we go to a better place when we die." This very common written
response corresponded with their low test scores on the death anxiety
questionnaires.

An Increase in Psychic Abilities: Those tested in the NDE group had more than
four times the number of validated psychic experiences as the normal and

\(^4\) Ibid.
seriously ill group. Not only that, but they had twice the number of verifiable psychic experiences as those we tested who claim to be psychic.

A Higher Zest for Living: NDEers have the positive traits of the type-A personality, which means they have a drive to work hard without negative compulsions like anger and the willingness to step on others in their march to the top.

A Higher Intelligence: Although this is difficult to prove, it is almost impossible to ignore. Many of those in the NDE group felt they had evolved into higher beings, becoming more intelligent as a result of their brush with death and the spiritual experience it caused.⁵

The following excerpts are from individuals who have “died” and reveal their perceptions of death at the time they were interviewed.

It’s not death, It’s another kind of life.

Heaven is a nice place to go.

Death? Not worried about it at all.

I think about it and it kind of scares me. I do smoke and drink too much. Yet I know the reality of death, and it is nothing to be afraid of.

I don’t fear it. It will be like going into another dimension. Death is simply an open door. I don’t mourn too much when people die.

Death is something our society fears, and that people learn to fear. It is too bad, because it actually is really nice.⁶

Many NDEers acquire one or more of a range of psychic abilities such as ESP, precognition, premonitions, clairvoyance, and even the ability to heal. Anne’s story that follows is one of a great number, coming in the wake of a full-blown near-death experience. She dreamed that the neighbor’s dog would be run over the night before it happened. Others noticed her wince in anticipation of the dish that would fall to the floor

⁵ Morse, 58-59.
⁶ Ibid, 64.
and break. Then it was premonitions about people being hurt in accidents across town.

Unexpectedly, she dreamed that her brother was about to be seriously injured.

These experiences disturbed her family. None bothered them as much as the time she announced that someone was going to try to kill her brother, who lived across town. Anne saw it in a dream that she told her family about at the breakfast table the morning after she had it. She saw her brother coming to her out of the dark, screaming in pain. He had blood dripping from both hands and an open wound in his belly. He was screaming.

The dream was very disturbing for her. She told her stunned family. On account of the location of the wounds, it was suggested that perhaps she had dreamed of Christ and the crucifixion. Anne insisted she had dreamed of her brother’s future.

Two weeks later, her nightmare came true. Burglars broke into her brother’s house. He confronted them with a gun and shooting broke out. As he came around the corner of a room holding his weapon in a two-handed grip, one of the burglars fired a shot that passed through both of his hands. A shot also struck him in the abdomen. They left him bleeding on the living room floor and screaming in pain.7

These “gifts” however, came at a price. Anne eventually sought out a neurologist and sufficient medication to disable her ability to see into the future, and preferred to live with drug induced grogginess than the awareness of portending trouble.

On the other hand, sixteen-year-old Annie is an example of a life turned around. She had her NDE during a suicide attempt after her boyfriend left her for another girl. She had experimented with drink, drugs and other teenage vices and decided to end her life in the same way her mother had a few years before. During her NDE Annie was told by her Guardian Angel that, “... my body was a gift and I was supposed to take care of it, not kill it.” This is a frequent response to those who attempt suicide, from beings on the “other side” Annie’s life experienced a major turnaround according to Melvin Morse.

Annie says the experience changed her attitude immediately, as it does with many NDEers. She told her boyfriend to beat it, she stopped drinking and drugging and as a result developed a new set of friends.

I don’t want to give the impression that the experience made me a goodie two-shoes, but it certainly changed her attitude for the better. She no longer dwelled

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7 Ibid, 93-94.
on her mother’s suicide. Instead of thinking of life as a series of trials, she found it a pleasure to behold.

The transformation has been a long-term one for Annie. Her near-death experience happened more than twenty years ago. Now she is happily married with four sons. “Immediately after the experience I felt as though I had been given a mission in life, like I was born to accomplish something,” says Annie. “The experience gave me an inner energy that has never left me.”

The case for amplified intelligence following a NDE is well illustrated in Olaf Sunden who had his NDE during a routine tonsillectomy. Olaf stopped breathing after an overdose of ether and slipped into a brief coma. He reported. “My first impression was a total surprise. How could I exist in such a comfortable way, and how could I perceive and think while being dead, and yet have no body?” Olaf said. “I felt I had a total comprehension which made everything understandable.” During this brief period he met with a “bright orange light,” which he called the “point of annihilation.” His life was never to be the same again.

The near-death experience immediately changed Olaf’s character. He went from being an average student to one who was arrogant and even heretical, refusing explanations presented at school in search of his own. He used theories he had learned on “the other side” to explain the work of Albert Einstein.

Olaf at first felt that the near-death experience was little more than an extraordinary dream. As he progressed to the honors program from being a student who seemed learning disabled, he realized that something had happened in the course of his cosmic adventure.

Still he did not trust his vision until the early sixties, when he was in his mid-forties. It was then, when the discovery of the neutrino was made public, that Olaf realized that his near-death insights were correct. A neutrino is a type of nuclear particle that is able to pass through the massive core of a star without being affected in any way. When Olaf read about neutrinos he realized that they were among the particles he saw in his experience, the “soap bubbles” that passed through solid bodies.”

Morse states that Olaf holds more than one hundred chemical patents now and is credited with a host of research accomplishments. This story and many others are cited

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9 Ibid, 12.  
10 Ibid, 12-14.
by Morse and other writers to document the transforming power that is the core of what we call the near-death experience. While it is nowhere claimed that everyone who has a NDE will be changed in as significant a manner, it is clear that many are affected in remarkable ways. That lives are sometimes turned around, that wisdom is accrued and utilized for the good of humanity and that the fear of death is mollified to a degree; are not these valuable assets?

While at this point questions regarding origins of the phenomena and cause and effect remain outstanding, I will now proceed to outline the message and mission aspects as articulated by NDEers and writers advocating for them.
CHAPTER 7

MESSAGE AND MISSION: WHAT IS BEING PROCLAIMED BY THE NDE

Negative or Aberrant Experiences

For the sake of clarity I have decided to treat whatever material is available on the negative experiences in a separate section, before moving on to Kenneth Ring’s main work. While I don’t wish to enter into extensive analysis of this aspect of the topic, I want to recognize that other and very different perspectives do exist aside from those most commonly held. This is a somewhat controversial area of research and there is not a great deal of consensus in the literature, with researchers voicing considerable polarity of opinion.

A quick review of the books, articles, television shows, and thousands of accounts on the World Wide Web, reveals a sublimely common theme, for the most part, among the anecdotes shared by the millions who have told their experience. The moment of terror and trauma is rewarded with a trip into the tranquility of the “divine” presence where all is light and harmony. A glimpse of the very gates of paradise and a renewed focus on life after recovering from the nearly fatal episode are among the most common highlights reported by people upon their return to consciousness. However, deeper research reveals that not all NDEs conform into this utopian scenario.

One study found that nearly twenty percent of NDEs could be classified as “negative.”

My first awareness of this possibility came in an early clinical experience as a hospice chaplain. The caregiver of one of my patients informed me that the lady had told her of a recent NDE and that it had terrified her. She reportedly stated that she did not want to ever see that light again. If negative NDEs do occur, what would constitute

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1 Bailey and Yates, 212.
criteria by which to judge the unpleasantness of the event? Culling through the negative NDEs allows a separation into three main categories. The first would be those that are experienced as unpleasant at the time but may be seen at a later time as of a more peaceful nature. They may contain the “light,” “tunnel,” and other features, but because this is an unanticipated experience and unlike anything up to this point, it generates a deep fear of what is going to happen next. Greyson and Bush have compiled the results of some thirty individuals who have written to them over a period of ten years with accounts of terrifying NDEs. This first account by a professional author, without any religious upbringing, occurred at age 35 after an anaphylactic reaction and was interpreted as terrifying.

I was taken to emergency suffering from a severe allergic reaction to black fly bites. Both of my eyes were completely swollen shut, and I was having difficulty breathing. I was placed on a table and immediately given an injection of Benadryl and an IV of adrenalin.

After a few minutes, my body began to shake violently. I then saw a clear picture of myself lying on the table. I saw the doctor and the nurse, whom I had never seen before, and my husband standing by my body. I became frightened and I remember strongly feeling I didn’t like what I saw and what was happening. I shouted, “I don’t like this!” but I was not heard by those in the room.

I then started to breathe more easily, and after a while one eye opened a little. As I looked around, I saw that the room and the people were exactly as I had seen them during my floating sensation.²

A second category might include those experiences that strike at the very core of a person’s identity. Some in this grouping are shaken by torments over whether they and/or their family really ever existed except in the imagination. In some cases this may be as, or more, distressing than the third group, which is categorized by the presence of hellish landscapes, demons, and other entities. This example comes from the daughter of a Unitarian minister and occurred during the delivery of her second child at age 28. Like the previous story, she had never heard of NDEs before this event.

First there was only unconsciousness, but at some point farther into delivery my blood pressure suddenly dropped. I was aware, not of the flurry around me, but 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; to this day my mind holds a sharp picture of them down there, though I don’t know how I could so clearly have seen something I didn’t look at. 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. I recall arguing that I knew details of my mother’s life before my birth, things about her childhood in another part of the country; how could I have made that up? And my first baby—I knew her. I knew I hadn’t made her up. And childbirth—why would I ever have made up that? 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. It was empty, except for me and them, and dark. Not like night dark somehow, it was thinner—whatever that means. It was very dark and immense all around, but somehow I could see them; the voidness seemed to thin out somewhere off by the horizon, if there had been a horizon, but it wasn’t lighter, just thinner. It seemed to go on forever.3

The third group of manifestations with hellish symbolism or threatening demons was more common in an earlier era, although I have witnessed dying patients recoiling from “demons” coming out of the walls in their final hours. Sometimes the person may see themselves suspended over a deep pit or find themselves falling into it. Considering that the vast preponderance of NDEs being reported are of a positive nature, the person experiencing these scenarios would likely have cause to further question their eternal worth and status. The following example comes from a woodworker aged 48 years, who had no previous interest in religion, though he does admit to being married to a “religious fanatic.”

From the roof of the utility shed in my back yard I jumped to the ground. Luckily for me I had forgot [sic] the broken lawn chair that lay near the shed. My feet hit the chair and broke my fall, or my neck would have been broken. I hung in the rope and strangled. I was outside my physical body. I saw my body hanging in the rope; it looked awful. I was terrified, could see and hear, but it was different—hard to explain. Demons were all around me; I could hear them but could not see them. They chattered like blackbirds. It was as if they knew they had me, and had all eternity to drag me down into hell, to torment me. It would have been the worst kind of hell, trapped hopeless between two worlds, wandering lost and confused for an eternity.

I had to get back into my body. Oh my God, I needed help. I ran to the house, went in through the door without opening it, cried out to my wife but she could not hear me, so I went right into her body. I could see and hear with her eyes and ears. Then I made contact, heard her say, “Oh, my God!”

She grabbed a knife from the kitchen chair and ran out to where I was hanging and got up on an old chair and cut me down. She could find no pulse; she was a nurse. When the emergency squad got to me my heart had stopped: my breath too was gone.4

Kenneth Ring admits to the existence of negative experiences but feels they are quite rare in comparison to the positive.

Occasionally one hears reports of NDEs that not only fail to conform to the general pattern given at the beginning of this section but also are alleged to be very unpleasant, even hellish. It is true that a few such experiences have been described in the literature, but they are far from being typical. Most authorities seem agreed that they may represent perhaps 1 percent of all reported cases.5

I am indebted to Atwater for mentioning a fascinating historical account of what seemed at the outset to be a very profound near-death experience. The quotation is lengthy, but valuable to illustrate the power of the phenomenon as worked out through the convictions of one man over a number of years. I include it in this section because it wreaked so much havoc in so many lives and for so many years.

History gives us an example that shows how society can be affected by an individual who has had a transcendent episode. In 1837 a Chinese peasant farmer’s son Hung Hsiu-ch’uan failed for the third time to pass the official state examination. He fell into a prolonged delirium, his body wasting away as he lay near death for forty days. He revived after having a miraculous vision that

5 Ring, 44.
portrayed him and an “elder brother” searching out and slaying legions of evil demons in accordance with divine will. Six years later Hsiu-ch’uan came across a Christian missionary pamphlet. He used what he read in the pamphlet to “substantiate” his conviction that his vision was real and that he, as the younger brother of Jesus Christ and God’s Divine Representative, was ready and willing to overthrow the forces of evil, which he saw as the Manchus and Confucianism. With the help of converts to his cause, he established the God Worshippers Society, a puritanical and absolutist group that quickly swelled to the ranks of a revolutionary army. Hsiu-ch’uan joined forces with the Taiping Rebellion of 1850 to help lead a massive, bloody civil uprising which lasted fourteen years and cost the lives of twenty million people (Chien 10, 36; Curwen, 11; Hamberg; Lee).

Near-death survivors such as Hsiu-ch’uan (who changed his name to T’ien Wang, the Heavenly King) may be transformed by their unusual near-death experiences and become zealous in their desire to “wake up” the so-called “deluded.” They may be convinced that only REAL TRUTH has been revealed to them, and thus it is their sacred duty to “save” the populace. In the case of Hsiu-ch’uan, his near-death experience led to wholesale carnage and helped to forge a “Heavenly Dynasty” that ripped asunder the very fabric of China.

Transcendent cases are powerful in both content and consequences, yet they are a risky business because they can affect experiencers’ lives plus the lives of countless others. This enigma repeats itself each time an individual is changed so utterly by the near-death phenomenon. Clearly, seeing “heaven” does not make one holy, nor does it make anyone “chosen” or “savior.”

If we think about the impact of this story and then consider the millions of individuals that have had near-death experiences, the potential for significant change exists in ways that could influence society profoundly, for good or ill. The experience itself may be neutral, but the human vessel that implements it is often flawed and even dedicated individuals may act out of misunderstanding; much as Saul did before he became the apostle of Christ.

Positive or Normative Experiences

In this chapter I want primarily to concentrate on the manner in which religion figures in the way that NDEers and writers articulate their understanding of this experience, and the implications they perceive as far as human life and destiny are concerned. There is

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6 Bailey and Yates, 240.
much written in this regard. I have chosen not to critique the few books available, such as
those by Ankerberg\textsuperscript{7} and Groothuis,\textsuperscript{8} that argue against the phenomenon from a more
doctrinal perspective; preferring to concentrate on how the proponents of the NDE
present their case. The early works, such as that by Moody,\textsuperscript{9} are more concerned with the
experience itself and it's immediate impact upon the individuals concerned. Moody
traveled and lectured around the country and even compiled a list of the most commonly
asked questions, but it was left to later writers such as Ring\textsuperscript{10} and Morse\textsuperscript{11} to conduct
extensive research and begin to develop substantial cosmologies to interpret the data
being gathered. In what follows, religion and spirituality pepper the writings and the
anecdotes in both positive and negative associations. It is possible that this occurs
because religion and death have functioned in a somewhat symbiotic relationship in
almost every culture on earth, as humans try to grapple with this most ultimate event we
call death. Also of significance in the following are the connections that thread the near-
death experience through a whole range of paranormal phenomena that would likely not
be seen as part of religion as we conceive of it here in the West. In recent times the
Internet has proven a valuable tool for sharing of anecdotes as the proliferation of web
sites reveals. On April 1, 2001, I made a web search for the term “near-death experience”
with the GOOGLE.COM search engine and returned 44,300 web sites providing
information on the phenomena. And, with the many books, articles, film and video, and
radio and television programs there is no shortage of information for those interested.

\textsuperscript{7} Ankerberg and Weldon.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{9} Moody.
\textsuperscript{10} Ring.
\textsuperscript{11} Morse.
Raymond Moody comes from a Presbyterian background, and over time has developed his own religious beliefs, devoid of doctrinal leanings, while satisfying his fellowship needs in the Methodist church. He states that at the beginning of his research he noticed that people who had a NDE came from "highly varied religious, social and educational backgrounds."¹² Kenneth Ring noticed the same correlation.¹³ An early example in Moody’s book illustrates how one Christian saw his experience.

Suddenly, I was in a very dark, very deep valley. It was as though there was a pathway, almost a road, through the valley, and I was going down the path . . . Later, after I was well, the thought came to me, “Well, now I know what the Bible means by ‘the valley of the shadow of death,’ because I’ve been there.”¹⁴

In the section describing the being of light that people encounter, Moody shows how the identity of it varies according to prior beliefs.

Interestingly, while the above description of the being of light is utterly invariable, the identification of the being varies from individual to individual and seems to be largely a function of the religious background, training or beliefs of the person involved.¹⁵

Of interest to us here is what happens at the point of meeting with the being of light. The overwhelming preponderance of accounts, at least those which have been selected for the purposes of this book, reveal that while there may be some pain and embarrassment during the life review, the outcome is almost universally positive regardless of the life lived. One man reported his “visit” with the being this way:

The voice asked me a question: “Is it worth it?” And what it meant was, did the kind of life I had been leading up to that point seem worthwhile to me then, knowing what I then knew.

Incidentally, all insist that this question, ultimate and profound as it may be in its emotional impact, is not at all asked in condemnation . . . for they still feel the

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¹² Moody, 15.
¹³ Ring, 46.
¹⁴ Moody, 33-34
¹⁵ Ibid, 59.
total love and acceptance coming from the light, no matter what their answer may be.\textsuperscript{16}

Thanatologist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross benefited on more than one occasion from a trip beyond, and conveys that sense of peace and love experienced in this way in the forward to Kenneth Ring’s book.

It was many years later, during a much more intense experience of this nature, that I was allowed to experience and become part of that light so many people try to explain in words. Anyone who has been blessed enough to see this light will never again be afraid to die. The unconditional love, the understanding and compassion in the presence of this light are beyond human description.\textsuperscript{17}

Moody states what seems to be a common sentiment in the literature, that this probing is intended in a positive manner. It is aimed at eliciting from the individual a thoughtful reflection on their life so as inspire possible changes in direction. The review itself is characterized as being very rapid, and can range from touching on the highlights of a person’s life to a thorough review of every aspect and emotion. This can prove painful in that in some cases the person also feels the emotions of others they have hurt, from their perspective. Invariably, and obviously, each person comes to a point in the experience where they are faced with the decision to return. For some it is a line, others an individual or the being of light itself which will initiate the return. In the case of this person it was a long-dead relative who forced the issue.

Yet it wasn’t my time to go through the mist, because instantly from the other side appeared my Uncle Carl, who had died many years earlier. He blocked my path, saying, “Go back. Your work on earth has not been completed. Go back now.” I didn’t want to go back but I had no choice, and immediately I was back in my body.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 61.
\textsuperscript{17} Ring, 12.
\textsuperscript{18} Moody, 76.
The following incident attributes prayer as the means that prevented one woman from making the final transition. This elderly person endured a lengthy illness. She had stopped breathing several times and had been resuscitated successfully each time. She had seen the beauty of the place and wanted to stay over there.

"Joan, I have been over there, over to the beyond and it is beautiful over there. I want to stay, but I can't as long as you keep praying for me to stay with you. Your prayers are holding me over here. Please don't pray any more." We did all stop, and shortly after that she died.\(^{19}\)

Common among NDEers are perceptions such as the following. New views and understandings of life and death and challenges to previous ways of thinking are widespread. Western Christianity has characteristic ways of depicting biblical imagery which have become part of the way we understand and express ourselves. Cartoons often utilize the "pearly gates, Saint Peter at the gate," and hell, as parodies of life and relationships. One of the surprises, say NDEers, is that this is not what it like over there.

Even those who previously had some traditional conviction about the nature of the afterlife world seem to have moved away from it to some degree following their own brushes with death. In fact, in all the reports I have gathered, not one person has painted the mythological picture of what lies hereafter. No one has described the cartoonist's heaven of pearly gates, golden streets, and winged, harp-playing angels, nor a hell of flames and demons with pitchforks.

So, in most cases, the reward-punishment model of the afterlife is abandoned and disavowed, even by many who had been accustomed to thinking in those terms.\(^{20}\)

Interestingly, Moody acknowledges that individuals have attempted to reconcile some of these new insights from NDEers with the Bible's message. Saul's conversion on the Damascus Road is often cited. Here he meets the light, identified as Jesus on this occasion; there is some review of his life, and he is transformed as a result of the experience. But, Moody states, there are differences, namely that Saul wasn't near death

\(^{19}\) Ibid, 81.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid, 97.
and that he was blinded for three days following the event, whereas NDEers are unanimous in stating that the light, as bright and intense as it was, did not affect their eyes and was not painful as they would have expected. Others have suggested links, such as Jesus’ claim that he was the light of the world, and his transfiguration, offer evidence that he is the one NDEers meet at the end of the tunnel.

Moody has his PhD in Philosophy and appears well read. He takes time to draw upon parallels he sees in ancient literature that show possible manifestations of the NDE. Plato’s works, including Phaedo, Gorgias, and book X of the Republic qualify for a closer look. This last work mentions a Greek soldier named Er who had an out-of-body experience, met with other spirits, was not judged, and was told to return to the physical world with a message describing what the other world was like. The Tibetan Book of the Dead likewise has descriptions of the afterlife in similar fashion to the NDE, and includes the out-of-body stage, roaring noises, the person being able to pass through rocks and even mountains, sensations of peace, and a life review.

In the section of his book devoted to questions, Moody takes the opportunity to comment on suicide and its impact on the type of experience a person has as a result. While other researchers paint a contrary view, Moody indicates that, “These experiences were uniformly characterized as being unpleasant.” He quotes one woman as saying, “If you leave here a tormented soul, you will be a tormented soul over there, too.” Some who had attempted to take their lives entered a kind of ‘limbo’ state that would endure for a long time. They said that this was a punishment for ‘breaking the rules’ and

21 Ibid, 118.
22 Ibid, 121-122.
23 Ibid, 143.
24 Ibid.
for "trying to release themselves prematurely from what was, in effect, an 'assignment'—
to fulfill a certain purpose in life." 25 One man shared this on his return.

[While I was over there] I got the feeling that two things it was completely
forbidden for me to do would be to kill myself or to kill another person. . . . If I
were to commit suicide, I would be throwing God's gift back in his face. . .
Killing somebody else would be interfering with God's purpose for that
individual.26

Ring offers this contrary opinion according to his research:

Research published since Life at Death has tended to lend strong support to the
invariance-hypothesis. We now have cases on file of almost every mode of near­
death circumstance that you can imagine: combat situations, attempted rape and
murder, electrocution, near-drownings, hangings etc., as well as a great range of
strictly medical conditions—and none of these seems to influence the form and
content of the NDE itself.

Subsequent research on suicide-related NOEs by Stephen Franklin and myself
and by Bruce Greyson has also confirmed my earlier tentative findings that NDEs
following suicide attempts, however induced, conform to the classic prototype.27

As Ring moves into his topic he begins to unfold a far-reaching hypothesis. Writing
some nine years after Moody's initial work, he begins to develop an understanding that
centers on what he terms the "Core Experience." This is, as he describes it, a person
coming "face to face" with the "light." While many who come close to death leave their
bodies, some travel up the tunnel, some meet other beings and others journey through
paradisiacal meadows; a lesser number have what is also known as a "full-blown NDE."

Ring is convinced that this latter event is a life-changing, transformational event. The
person will never be the same again. It is a spiritual transformation.

The NDE is essentially a spiritual experience that serves as a catalyst for spiritual
awakening and development. Moreover, the spiritual development that unfolds
following an NDE tends to take a particular form. Finally, as a by-product of this

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid, 144.
27 Ring, 45.
spiritual development, NDEers tend to manifest a variety of psychic abilities afterward that are an inherent part of their transformation.\(^{28}\)

A common feature of reports of Core experiences is that the person struggles to find language to describe what they experienced. There is an overwhelming sense of the ineffable that defies all ordinary means of human expression and attempts to do so are palpably frustrating in the extreme. A forty-year-old father nearly drowned in a flash flood in 1956 and subsequently described as best he could his Core experience.

As I reached the source of the light I could see in. I cannot begin to describe in human terms the feeling I had at what I saw. It was a giant infinite world of calm, and love, and energy and beauty. It was as though human life was unimportant compared to this. And yet it urged the importance of life at the same time it solicited death as a means to a better, different life. It was all being, all beauty, all meaning for existence. It was all the energy of the universe forever in one immeasurable place.\(^{29}\)

Sometimes individuals in this state have enough presence of mind to ask pertinent questions of those they meet. Jayne had her NDE while giving birth to her second child in 1952. During her time in this state one of the beings present approached her, not anyone she knew, and this interchange ensued.

“I know what’s happened, I know I have died.” And he said, “Yes, but you aren’t going to be staying because it isn’t time for you yet.” And I said to him, “This is all so beautiful, this is all so perfect, what about my sins?”

And he said to me, “There are no sins. Not in the way you think about them on earth. The only thing that matters here is how you think.”

“What is in your heart?” he asked me.

And somehow I immediately was able to look into my heart and I saw that there was nothing in my heart except love.\(^{30}\)

On the same topic but with a different perspective is this insight from Belle who was clinically dead for 20 minutes due to a heart failure while having back surgery.

\(^{28}\) Ibid, 51.
\(^{29}\) Ibid, 54-55.
\(^{30}\) Ibid, 62-63.
You are shown your life – and you do the judging... You are judging yourself. You have been forgiven all your sins, but are you able to forgive yourself for not doing the things you should have done in life? Can you forgive yourself? This is the judgment.\footnote{Ibid, 70.}

To date there is no agreed upon understanding of who or what the light is except for the most common statement, God. Ring states that so far only one Mormon woman has definitely identified the light as Jesus and two others have implied it. No one has said that the light identified himself or itself as Jesus. Belle, mentioned earlier, makes the following comment.

\ldots no matter what religion you are in, of the five major religions \ldots you are still worshiping the one God, no matter what you call it: Allah, God, Jesus, or whoever. And if you are of the Jewish inclination you will recognize him as Abraham or an angel.\footnote{Ibid, 87.}

One woman believed that she had actually been conversing with the Holy Spirit during her experience with the light.

I was exhilarated! I wanted to tell my story before my insides burst. What a magnificent wonder I had seen! Oh, but to share my joy, to tell about my heavenly experience of being in the presence of the Holy Spirit and of talking with it!\footnote{Ibid: 94.}

Such intense experiences though, often create a corresponding sense of sorrow upon return to the body and the world of pain, according to Ring. Some would say anguish is a better description of their return to the mundane. “Who could ever begin to understand what one has left behind?\footnote{Ibid, 90.} Betty Eadie paints this picture as graphically as anyone as she commences the chapter titled, “My Return.”

No good-byes were said; I simply found myself in the hospital room again. The door was still half open, the light was on above the sink, and lying on the bed under the blankets was my body. I stood in the air and looked down at it and was
filled with revulsion. It looked cold and heavy and reminded me of an old pair of coveralls that had been dragged through the mud and grime. . . The body’s cumbersome weight and coldness were abhorrent. . . I had become a prisoner to the flesh again. . . as I lay trapped in my body. 35

In time the depression will lift and persons will commence the long period of returning to “normal” living and setting out to fulfill what they learned about their remaining mission in life. What does carry over from the experience is the affirmation of love and acceptance received while in the presence of the light. For some the transformation is so thorough-going that they have divorced spouses who were unable to relate to the changes in them, and joined a different religion. Statements such as, “My life is totally different now,” and “This experience has really changed me and my whole attitude toward life,” are not uncommon. Jayne recalls, “It [her NDE] was a very spiritual experience and I have been very spiritual, but not particularly religious, ever since.” 36 Barbara turned her attention to a “variety of consciousness disciplines,” and an interest in “higher consciousness.” As we will see, words and concepts of knowledge, consciousness and illumination will begin to crop up more and more further along the road to discovering the essence of the spiritual implications of the NDE. Ring includes a full chapter in his book on the “Religious and Spiritual Orientations Following NDEs.” We will notice additional aspects and emphases to those already mentioned as Ring raises them.

This chapter deals with data that resulted from NDEers completing the Religious Belief Inventory designed to probe an individual’s responses to a series of questions concerning religious beliefs before and after the experience. Of immediate interest is the

35 Eadie, 123-124.
36 Ring, 136.
fact that NDEers are likely to shift towards a universalistically spiritual orientation. Ring then defines the seven components that comprise that designation:

- A tendency to characterize oneself as spiritual rather than religious per se.
- A feeling of being inwardly close to God.
- A deemphasis of the formal aspects of religious life and worship.
- A conviction that there is life after death, regardless of religious belief.
- An openness to the doctrine of reincarnation (and a general sympathy toward Eastern religions).
- A belief in the essential underlying unity of all religions.
- A desire for a universal religion embracing all humanity.  

Ring's conclusion is that NDEers, with qualifications, show the greatest propensity to endorse a universalistically spiritual worldview. Additional quotes from individuals will only reinforce much of what has already been said, though this one from Janis is representative of many: “with the possible exception of a church like the Quakers or Unitarians . . . I don’t think it [i.e., church-based religion] has anything to do with what Jesus was about.”

Ring’s conclusions are not sweeping as far as reincarnation and Eastern religions are concerned. Some individuals are more inclined to lean that way after the NDE and others are more opposed. There is more common agreement regarding the universal nature of religious belief that transcends the historical separations between the religions. This seems to be a high hope of many who have seen the light. The tendency toward inclusiveness doesn’t end at this point. He moves from here to the realms of psychic and paranormal phenomena, continuing to connect the same with the NDE.

Of course, it is hardly necessary to have had an NDE before one begins to experience such psychic phenomena as clairvoyance, telepathy, and precognition. . . Nevertheless, as my interviews continued, I could not help noticing the

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37 Ibid, 146.
38 Ibid, 148.
39 Ibid, 155.
frequency with which psychic events were spontaneously reported by NDEers and how these experiences were said to have occurred following the NDE.\(^{40}\)

In the succeeding paragraphs, Ring continues to enfold meditation, yoga, materialization of objects, and other psychic talents into what is developing as the pathway to spiritual illumination. Not without some chastisement from the masters though, some of whom see the psychic powers as detracting from the true path to enlightenment. In a summary statement Ring continues to propel the discussion towards where he believes the human race is heading.

NDEs, in my view, represent a brief but powerful thrust into a higher state of consciousness. Unlike the meditative disciplines we have alluded to, however, the NDE is not a breakthrough that occurs as a result of a long period of voluntary spiritual training. Rather it is an involuntary and sudden propulsion, usually without warning or preparation, into a realm of profound spiritual illumination. In this respect, the NDE resembles a full-blown mystical experience and—this is the key—the effects of that experience also resemble those that stem from a mystical experience. A journey into higher consciousness, I am saying, has effects that are independent of the way it is attained.\(^{41}\)

Ring advocates that individuals who have developed psychic abilities such as ESP following an NDE, should put them to use in their professional life. NDEers also reported a significantly greater tendency to report phenomena such as psychokinesis, auras and apparitions. He includes a story of a nurse uses her gift in the hospital where she works.

When I’m in the emergency room, serving as a link between a patient who had [been] “coded” and the family, I’m often in tune with the part of the patient who is “over in the corner by the ceiling” during an NDE and telepathically send a message that he or she will have to excuse our need to try and bring them back and that I’m aware of how nice it is “out there.” I also let him or her know that I’m supporting the family.\(^{42}\)

The balance of this chapter in Ring’s book provides multiple examples of premonitions, personal flashforwards where the individual is alerted to imminent danger

\(^{40}\) Ibid, 166.
\(^{41}\) Ibid, 170.
\(^{42}\) Ibid, 179.
and has opportunity to make changes to avoid disaster. Some of these are certainly
dramatic and feature prior knowledge concerning well-known identities such as the attack
on President Reagan.

Ring moves from this topic to the realm of what he calls “prophetic visions.” While
some of Moody’s interviewees had indicated that they had seen prophetic views of events
soon to befall our planet, it was Ring who noticed that they each had essentially the same
vision. At this point he compares these with the “personal flashforwards” of impending
personal disaster which dealt with perceptions gained by ESP or clairvoyance. The
prophetic visions relate to large-scale events of a world-wide nature. While many of the
visions viewed major events to occur in the 1980s and a number of specific references
were tied to 1988, the future was seen as unlikely to extend much into the twenty-first
century. For example:

There is, first of all, a sense of having total knowledge, but specifically one is
aware of seeing the entirety of the earth’s evolution and history, from beginning
to the end of time. The future scenario, however, is usually of short duration,
seldom extending much beyond the beginning of the twenty-first century. The
individuals report that in this decade there will be an increasing incidence of
earthquakes, volcanic activity, and generally massive geophysical changes. There
will be resultant disturbances in weather patterns and food supplies. The world
economic system will collapse, and the possibility of nuclear war or accident is
great (respondents are not agreed on whether a nuclear catastrophe will occur).
All of these events are transitional rather than ultimate, however, and they will be
followed by a new era in human history marked by human brotherhood, universal
love, and world peace. Though many will die, the earth will live. While agreeing
that the dates for these events are not fixed, most individuals feel that they are
likely to take place during the 1980’s.\textsuperscript{43}

Not only is this scenario likely, according to Ring, it is seen as a necessary part of the
evolution of the planet.

Whether the earth is shaken by natural catastrophes, or nuclear warfare, or both,
earth and the life on it does survive. More than that however: A New Age

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 197.
emerges. . . By analogy, just as the individual near-death experiencer may have to endure the pain and suffering associated with the trauma of almost dying before positive personal transformation can take place, so the world may need to undergo a "planetary near-death experience" before it can awaken to a higher, more spiritual, collective consciousness with universal love at its core.

At the end of this general period of transition, mankind was to be "born anew . . ." [Christ] will come back and there will also be the Christ-like features in other people. Yes, this is true, He is coming.

It's like a renaissance. I feel really good in 2005. 

Ring concludes this chapter with discussion of aspects of Einstein's Theory of General Relativity, quantum mechanics and four-dimensional space-time, quoting Zohar, who states: "Such a picture implies that everything that ever "will be" now "is," i.e., that the future is already written and is as fixed as the past." In the following chapter Ring takes a surprising change of direction by admitting his belief that the transformational experience associated with the NDE has nothing inherently to do with death or transition into death. He tells the story of Nancy Clark, who experienced an extensive and classic transformation of the kind mentioned in this paper. The only difference was that Nancy did not have a NDE. None of the normally associated trauma were involved at this time. Ring asks the question: "Are there more Nancy's out there? . . . Of course there are—lots of them." His theory is that NDEs are triggered by biological crises, but this is not the only way to receive them.

Such convergences serve to buttress a point that is often overlooked in discussion of NDEs but this is crucial to any attempt to explain them: What occurs during an NDE has nothing inherently to do with death or with the transition into death. In my opinion this point cannot be emphasized too strongly, and the failure to do so has led to a serious distortion in our understanding of the NDE. What happens to an individual during an NDE is not unique to the moment of apparent imminent

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44 Ibid, 204.
46 Ibid, 225.
death. It is just that coming close to death is one of the very reliable triggers that sets off this kind of experience. 47

From here the discussion moves deep into Eastern mysticism and psychic experience, tying the links with yoga, psychic healing, charkas, ESP, clairvoyance, telepathy, precognition, channeling and the like. The summit is achieved at what is known as the kundalini hypothesis. A few selected quotations will chart the direction of the argument.

I propose that all these phenomena may be the outcome of a biological transformation of the human organism that is induced by the release of an energy long known to adepts but only recently studied by scientists interested in transcendental experience. This energy is still called by its Sanskrit name, Kundalini. 48

Thus kundalini theorists (who usually have had profound kundalini awakenings themselves) argue that the activation of this energy is responsible for genius, psychic abilities of various kinds, and ultimately, the varieties of mystical and religious experience that have been reported throughout the ages. The idea that this energy, which is held to be both divine and divinizing, is responsible for humanity’s evolution toward higher consciousness is called the kundalini hypothesis. 49

The aftereffects of these deep kundalini awakenings seem to lead to individual transformations and personal world views essentially indistinguishable from those found in NDEers. 50

[Scientist Hiroshi] Motoyama was introduced to spiritual disciplines at an early age and became an ardent student and practitioner of yoga. Yoga, of course, is designed to arouse kundalini deliberately through a combination of postures (called asanas), breath control (called pranayama), and meditations upon the charkas... Not long afterward, Motoyama reports that he began to have prophetic dreams and involuntary ESP experiences such as telepathy. His ESP abilities, he says, continued to develop as he felt his higher charkas beginning to awaken. With the opening of his (so-called) heart chakra—in yogic theory, the fourth of the seven major chakras—his experience reaches a new plateau... 51

48 Ibid, 230.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid, 231.
51 Ibid, 232.
A final quotation from this chapter in Ring’s summary of the foregoing discussion draws an interesting parallel with a biblical metaphor.

When properly raised . . . kundalini can result in a figurative death, and ego-death, involving transformation of the nervous system and the experience of divinity. In this experience, the “old Adam” dies, to use St. Paul’s phrase, and a new person is born, reborn, as a child of the cosmos, no longer self-centered or even earth-centered but rather universally centered and cosmically conscious.52

Where does all this end? The title of Ring’s book, Heading Toward Omega, suggests there is an overall concept in his mind. We are now at that point. The near-death experience is only the initiation of one of the pathways toward an evolutionary global movement and global transformation that has been in process for some time. According to Ring, this has universal implications.

In this sense Omega stands for the aim of human evolution, the ultimate destination toward which humanity is inexorably bound.

Omega, in this latter sense, is of course associated with a great visionary writer, Pierre [sic] Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest and paleontologist whose celebrated book The Phenomenon of Man is one of the twentieth century’s landmark contributions to evolutionary thought. In this work, Père Teilhard spoke of the various levels of evolution—matter, life, and consciousness—and argued that human evolution was headed toward a transhuman state he called “noogenesis,” the birth of a unified planetary mind aware of its essential divinity. This convergent end state, the culmination of human evolution on earth, Père Teilhard called “The Omega Point.”53

Ring is quick to point out that this is not something that will happen one day, it is happening now and has been for some time. He recalls that George Gallup’s research had pointed out that by 1982 some eight million people had already had a NDE and now many more years have elapsed. He reminds the reader that the NDE is just one of a number of transcendental experiences that are driving humanity towards its final goal.

52 Ibid, 251.
53 Ibid, 252.
This growth, according to Ring, is rising exponentially. The assertions become bolder as he describes his theory.

From this perspective we are now finally able to discern the larger meaning of NDEs. May it be that NDEers—and others who have similar awakenings—collectively represent an evolutionary thrust toward higher consciousness for humanity at large? Could it be that the NDE itself is an evolutionary mechanism that has the effect of jump-stepping individuals into the next stage of human development by unlocking spiritual potentials previously dormant? Indeed, are we seeing in such people—as they mutate from their pre-NDE personalities into more loving and compassionate individuals—the prototype of a new, more advanced strain of the human species striving to come into manifestation? No longer Homo sapiens perhaps, but tending toward what John White has called Homo noeticus? Could NDEers be, then, an evolutionary bridge to the next step in our destiny as a species, a “missing link” in our midst?54

I want to leave Kenneth Ring and his Omega hypothesis at this point as its development has reached its peak. In the balance of the chapters there are several references indicating the urgency of the situation and the shortage of time. He conceives of mass upheavals in society before the final stages are implemented. Nancy Clark, previously mentioned, will have the privilege of making the final statement, in which she quotes the exact words given to her by the Light. After that I want to review one concept that has been best expressed by pediatrician and author of Transformed by the Light, Dr. Melvin Morse.

With the gift you have now received, go forth and tell the masses of people that life after death exists; that you shall all experience my PROFOUND LOVE! LOVE is the key to the universe; you must all learn to live in peace and harmony with one another on earth while you have a chance. This will be a very difficult task for you, my child, a huge undertaking, but you shall do it. You are loved.55

Melvin Morse has accumulated considerable evidence from another perspective and uses this to present his general hypothesis concerning the biological components of the near-death experience. From his research he has gleaning that more than one-fourth of

54 Ibid, 255.
55 Ibid, 265-266.
adults who survived NDEs as children said they could not wear watches. The watches simply would not keep running.\textsuperscript{56}

After scientifically studying hundreds of these experiences I am convinced that the NDE itself subtly changes the electromagnetic forces that surround our bodies and each and every cell in it. This change is so profound that it affects such things as personality, anxiety response, ability to have psychic experiences, and even the ability in some to wear a watch.\textsuperscript{57}

As light is categorically the most significant aspect of the core NDE it is understandable that Morse has pursued a line of enquiry to make connections between NDE and the human body. Morse meanders through amazing discussions, such as the influence of overhead power lines, children in Australia experiencing spontaneous regeneration of severed fingers, cancer cures, and salamanders losing their ability to regenerate limbs; all accredited to the presence or absence of electromagnetic forces. Referring to the views of astrophysicist Stephen Hawking, Morse makes the following observation:

As physicists have split the atom into smaller and smaller particles, they have discovered to their surprise that there is no final “tiniest part” of nature. Rather, there are forces best described as wavelengths of electromagnetism, or light. These pieces of light serve as the fundamental building blocks for everything. What this theory tells us is that everything we consider real actually breaks down into simple light, in all of its various wavelengths. This is the same message that came from many NDEers in the study. As one patient said: “I could see the light in all of my cells and in the universe. I could see the light was God.”\textsuperscript{58}

Without delving too deeply into the extended discussion and technicalities involved, Morse’s basic argument is that the right temporal lobe of the human brain is the physical point of origin for many of the NDE-like phenomena. As organisms die they emit increased amounts of electromagnetic energy due to the unfolding of the genetic material.

\textsuperscript{56} Morse, 132.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, 133.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 135.
On rare occasions a certain radiance has been observed, even by those who were not emotionally attached to the dying person. This “light shout” as Morse terms it, affects the entire body, including the right temporal lobe of the brain. At this point Morse “connects the dots” by stating that, “The right temporal lobe is the circuit board of mysticism.”

Here he links with the work of Wilder Penfield mentioned earlier in relation to the potential physical causes of the NDE.

This is the area responsible for complex language, self-consciousness, long-term planning, daydreams, and soulful thought. It is also our link to consciousness, our link to the divine. It has been called “the man inside the man,” by famed neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield, who seemed to be working hard in some of his writings to avoid the word soul.

No doubt Morse has received criticism from some for seemingly detracting from the other world origin of the NDE. I want to give Morse the opportunity to make the final statement in this chapter in a way that closes the loop opened by Kenneth Ring. Ring’s belief is that the NDE is but one of several ways that transformative experience is initiated in an individual. Morse’s concept helps to bring into the fold those who are convinced that there is a biological, medical, or pharmacological explanation to the NDE. Both Ring and Morse conceive that the NDE is triggered by a range of events or situations; though each is convinced that the peak experience of the light cannot be duplicated by drugs, etc. The experience with the light is the supreme moment of transformation that changes the person forever. There is no return to the former way of life without an overwhelming sense of loss. Now, Melvin Morse:

It is this loving white light that is the essence of the near-death experience. The other indicators of the near-death experience can be recreated by short-circuiting the right temporal lobe. This has been done by Wilder Penfield, the Canadian

59 Ibid, 144-145.
60 Ibid, 145.
neurosurgeon, who used electric prods to touch this area of the brain during surgery, thereby producing out-of-body states in patients.

These circuit boards have also been activated by the use of anesthetic drugs such as Ketamine, in which patients on the operating table say they are leaving their body. LSD, peyote, and other psychedelic drugs can also trigger some of this circuitry, leading to out-of-body sensations, tunnels experiences, and the like. Yes, I even believe this area of the brain works its magic during periods of intense fear, when a person needs to disassociate from something that is going on or even to slow down time, possibly to avoid an accident.

These building blocks of the spiritual journey can be activated many ways, since they are part of the basic circuitry of our brains.

The experience of light cannot be activated artificially. It is activated only at the point of death or during some very special spiritual visions. This spiritual vision of the loving light results in the personality transformations that we saw in our study group. The most powerful and lasting transformations were seen in people who saw the light.61

61 Ibid, 196-197.
Now that the arguments have been documented and the evidence presented, how should we view the near-death experience phenomena and its relationship to the Christian gospel? Have the issues we had at the outset been sufficiently resolved in order to state the case at this time? I think so. Before beginning that process, I want to digress momentarily to explore a concept that occurred to me while reading Kenneth Ring’s book. At what point does a phenomena or a significant movement of thought reach a critical mass and begin to assume a new sense of identity? We are used to seeing this in the church growth context when a sect makes the transition to a church, and I think we are seeing this kind of development in the near-death studies as well.

Don Browning wrote a book titled, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, in which he explored a hypothesis that the psychologies had developed way beyond their original scientific and clinical goals. In fact, he argues, they had encroached in tangible ways upon the prerogatives of religion, striving in a significant manner for a place of recognition as the guide to life. This didn’t manifest overnight and likely psychologists did not set out to attain the status now enjoyed; but Browning builds a credible argument to support his case that psychological theory in many ways rivals religion as an ultimate guide to the way life works and how to live it. I have another observation in mind, but Browning has an interesting insight to offer.

Do Freud’s various understandings of our basic psychobiological tendencies and needs function in his thought not only as psychological propositions but also as metaphors of Ultimacy—that is, as metaphors that tell us the nature of the ultimate context of experience and something about our origins, destiny, and the basic value of life? Freud’s theory of our basic tendencies and needs does double as a system of metaphors of Ultimacy and, indeed, as a veritable cosmology. In
addition, these metaphors of Ultimacy and their associated cosmology also influence Freud’s implicit theory of moral obligation, that is, his ethic.¹

Not only do these forces constitute Freud’s mythology, they constitute a metaphysics, or at least a cosmology. Hence, as Lee Yearley has recently pointed out, Freud the destroyer of all faiths and all religious cosmologies creates a new one to undergird and support his psychoanalysis.²

As we have seen by exploring the near-death experience phenomena, what began as the simple recording of interesting and unusual accounts of seemingly other-world journeys, has taken on a much more comprehensive outlook. Researchers and writers have systematized the findings and extrapolated the understandings until quite sophisticated models, and a cosmology are emerging to both interpret and predict past, present, and future life on this planet. The metaphors and models used are borrowed from traditional expressions of religion, and function in ways analogous to the established theological traditions. These are significant developments. Now to the issues involved.

In the days when Raymond Moody was writing and lecturing, considerable polarity existed concerning the origin of the phenomena. Theories abounded, and included medical, physical, pharmacological, and even Satanic explanations. Near-death researchers took the criticisms seriously and began to conduct extensive and systematic research, utilizing the very best scientific methods to ensure adequate controls provided the necessary credibility to their work. Several long-term studies were initiated that spanned up to two decades since their NDE’s, many of which occurred in childhood. Comparisons were done between the stories then and now. Dr. Melvin Morse began extensive work, specializing in children’s NDEs. The perception was that children would less likely be influenced by the culture and biases that adults accumulate over time.

² Ibid, 43.
Comparisons were again done and the results assessed. The net result is that there are now quite sophisticated, long-term, published studies providing meaningful data.

However, it is the researchers such as Ring and Morse, whom we have looked at more closely, who have brought us the closest to some kind of understanding of the origin for the NDE. Morse provides the biological connection with his “circuit board of mysticism,” that seems to account for the greatest number of proposed causes that have been raised. Ring draws the connections between contemporary religious and philosophical systems and the NDE. At this point my best assessment regarding origin and basis is that there is a biological gateway in our brains, the right temporal lobe, that allows mystical experiences of great variety to have access to our consciousness. The following statement by Christian writer Ellen White, penned in the context of a paragraph on self-abuse, may take on a new depth of meaning and lend support to the concept that Morse is attempting to outline.

The brain nerves which communicate with the entire system are the only medium through which Heaven can communicate to man, and affect his inmost life. Whatever disturbs the circulation of the electric currents in the nervous system, lessens the strength of the vital powers, and the result is a deadening of the sensibilities of the mind.\(^3\)

When I consider the New Testament expression of the grace of God that resulted in the incarnation, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the yet future general resurrection and parousia, I see a few obvious parallels with the NDE. Love and acceptance by God, forgiveness fully available to everyone, lives transformed by the message of the gospel, long-term commitments made and an extensive sense of mission on the part of those who receive God’s call seem to identify the most obvious parallels. But, would the teachings of Jesus and the writings of Paul comport comfortably with

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\(^3\) Ellen White, *Counsels on Health* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1923), 616.
what we know of NDE? So far in my reading I have discovered no reference to the
redemption event so central to the New Testament. There is no mention of the cross and
the resurrection of Jesus. Because there is such a marked difference in the look and feel
of the two settings, one would likely question whether God has made a significant
restatement of his plan for the redemption of humanity. Hence the self-confessed
responses by some of those returning from the NDE that religion is quite different on the
other side than what we have here on earth.

There can be little room to dispute the observation that there are multiple links and
significant affinities between the NDE phenomenon as proponents present it, and the
realm of Eastern religion and Eastern mysticism. In fact there is no reserve demonstrated
on the part of advocates that this is the case. The East is known for its ability to embrace
individuals seeking insight in a wide variety of spiritual disciplines. Words such as
enlightenment, knowledge and consciousness have a familiar ring within that context.
The authors I have consulted admit that there are numerous pathways or gateways to
enlightenment; from the relative serenity of yoga and meditation on the one hand to
facing death in dramatic and unexpected ways as in a NDE. Only the most prescient
among NDEers are able to resist the siren-like lure of an experience so profound and
unlike anything else that came before it, which seems to offer everything a person could
hope to achieve in a lifetime; unconditional love, acceptance, forgiveness where needed,
knowledge, assurance of life beyond death, and the emotional release of personal
transcendence.

One other point in this context is worth further consideration. The early NDEs were
seen largely as individual experiences; unusual and perplexing to most, but still
beginning and ending with one person. As time has elapsed, and research has progressed, patterns and trends are emerging that connect the events to a much larger and more encompassing understanding. As we have seen, authors such as Kenneth Ring have developed world-views that seek to universalize all religion into a common and unified whole. While individuals may be awed by an out-of-body experience, are they likely to be more susceptible to related spiritual and philosophical opportunities that exist close by and can be availed by associating with other NDEers on forums widely accessible, on the Internet, for example? This is certainly another question for further research.

Moody, Morse, and Ring each admit the likelihood that individuals faced with a NDE will perceive religious, spiritual and philosophical insights, even beings, during the experience, in harmony with their own culture, religion, and background. This is not invariable, but more likely. Much has been made by Christian writers such as Ankerberg and Groothuis that Betty Eadie’s book, *Embraced by the Light*, reflected to a large degree her Mormon or Latter Day Saints theology. The following quotation from author Lee Bailey while discussing the near-death experiences of a Native American medicine man named Black Elk, from the Lakota Sioux nation make this observation:

Of course Black Elk’s collective worldview shaped his vision. Unlike most twentieth-century near-death survivors, Black Elk was helped along the path of developing his awakening experience into a spiritual practice by a medicine man who understood his experience. He was led to ritualize his vision, keep it alive in consciousness, and serve his people with the powers he gained. As a Christian might see Christ or a Hindu see Vishnu, Black Elk saw six grandfathers, old like hills, old like stars, representing the traditional six directions of the Sioux world picture. Black Elk saw not European cities of light, but familiar horses, migrating geese, spotted eagles and the peace pipe. Near-death experiences integrate local cultural symbols such as these with worldwide images such as light, mandalas, and rainbows. This is a collective language of seeing in a sacred manner.4

4 Bailey and Yates, 85.
This is obviously an important statement, confirming what is implicit in much of the literature available on this topic. Many questions remain, and undoubtedly will continue to inspire those who value the teachings of Jesus and writings of Paul for deeper insights into the mind and plan of God. It is our opportunity and privilege to continue to dialogue with individuals and groups such as those impacted by NDE. Approaching them or the topic through fear or with belligerence serves no useful purpose. We would do well to open conversations in much the same manner as Jesus did with the woman at the well. If indeed we have made secure our own reconciliation with God and live in the transforming power of the gospel, there is little to be insecure about. In the process of dialogue, some new insights into the reason for our faith may ensue.
CHAPTER 9
CONCLUSION

The near-death experience of coming to the edge of death and being confronted with unanticipated and startling aspects of what purports to be the life beyond at first defies rational explanation. Because it differs experientially from the typical dream or nightmare the tendency has been to give the NDE a much higher rating of authenticity. The authority of religion and science is subverted to the NDE as the experiencer adopts a post-modernistic attitude toward the objective stance of once trusted spiritual and moral guideposts.

Historically, the Bible has functioned as the final arbiter in matters of faith and practice in the Judeo-Christian religion. The prophets and apostles alike consistently caution followers not to depart from the counsel delivered to them under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Bible’s consistent seriousness about its message from God to humanity and the Protestant tradition which recognizes the Bible alone as the final authority requires a critical investigation of the claims by NDEers that God is now speaking in a fundamentally different manner and conveying a message that is at odds with His previously revealed proclamation. A closer look at the implications of this divergence is necessary before forming final opinions.

The near-death experience appeals to our idea of what we wish death would be like—a peaceful transition from this life to whatever lies beyond. However, the Bible, the Christian tradition and common beliefs as expressed in cartoons, for example, anticipate some form of assessment or judgment as a consequence of either accepting or rejecting Jesus (John 3:18-21). Those returning from a NDE downplay this basic assumption
almost to the point of non-relevance, indicating that the “being of light” encouraged them to go back and make something of their lives. Appealing as this concept may be, a review of NDE anecdotes reveals no criteria for an individual’s selection to receive a second chance. And what about those who do not have a NDE, or do not recall any significant part of the one they had? In such situations the biblical opportunity of accepting the gift of God’s grace and pardon and the assurance it brings in the here and now becomes very appealing.

It is argued that NDEs provide confirmation that the immortal soul leaves the body at death. Countless persons tell how they perceived themselves leaving their body and floating upward to the ceiling. From that vantage point they were able to see medical staff working on their now lifeless bodies in a vain effort to revive them. Some when resuscitated are able to give detailed accounts of events that had taken place during the time they were declared to be comatose. These recollections, which are often quite vivid, are told from the perspective afforded by someone hovering at ceiling height. Some accounts include information that would seem impossible to know if the person was confined to the bed while the experience took place. Such accounts are difficult if not impossible to address unless a more comprehensive theological framework is utilized. According to the Bible, person is the result of the combination of the physical body and the breath of God (Gen. 2:7), and there is no independent existence of a soul outside of this union. Man does not have a soul but becomes a living soul or being by the animating breath of God. The Bible consistently assumes this understanding. Death entered as the consequence of noncompliance with God and is introduced in Genesis as the death of the whole person and a reversal of the original formation of man.
Often in the accounts of NDEs the person will voice a loathing for the body and its restrictions. Not so with scripture. While we may have difficulty discerning the exact nature of the resurrection body in Paul’s account (1 Cor. 15), we do know that the person is resurrected in recognizable form and the body is like that of Christ’s risen body which is no longer subject to decay (1Cor. 15:49; Phil. 3:20-21). In Jesus’ transformed resurrection body he was able to suddenly appear in a locked room and yet was substantial enough to be touched, held, and to consume food (Lk. 24:36-42; Jn. 20:19-20). In the Bible the resurrection is the hope of the believer, not a supposed immortality of the soul.

As a corollary to the above discussion, the bible consistently attributes immortality only to God and never to humanity, except as a gift of God to be granted when Jesus returns at the end of the age. The phenomenon of NDEs appear to confirm the popular and prevailing view of many Christians that Hell and perhaps Purgatory, or Limbo, and the paradisiacal Heaven for the saved exists concurrently with life as we know it. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and many NDEers go as far as denying the biblical view of death, saying that “death does not exist.” My work as a chaplain has taken me to many funeral services, where phrases such as, “[the deceased] is not really dead, but is more alive now than he [she] has ever been,” are commonly used. These words have an uncanny resemblance to those spoken in Genesis by the serpent to Eve as she was about to eat the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:4-5). One NDE account on the Internet advocated, “Death is the most beautiful thing in the world! I’d go through it every day of the week if I could.” But, while NDEers may feel there is cause to celebrate death, the Bible portrays quite a different perspective. In a chapter discussing the resurrection of the dead, the apostle Paul
still recognizes death as an enemy yet to be destroyed. Oscar Cullmann, in his controversial Ingersoll lecture, “The Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?” compares and contrasts the death of Socrates with the death of Jesus. Socrates’ seeming complete peace and composure is contrasted with Jesus’ pain, anguish, and dread. The view that immortality is not innate but conditional upon faith in Christ and given only at the resurrection necessitates drawing different conclusions than NDEers do from the collected data on near-death experiences.

Kenneth Ring and Raymond Moody observe that many NDEers experience a shift in life orientation from religious to spiritual. These terms defy precise definition but in general religious seems to be more associated with the shape and outward form of one’s beliefs while spiritual tends to relate to one’s life attitudes and personal devotional habits. NDEers are more likely to create distance between themselves and established forms of religion. Many NDEers envision themselves merging with “the light” and basking in the comfort of unconditional love forever as the pinnacle of religious and spiritual life.

Aside from the conviction that life follows immediately upon death, a position contrary to the biblical message, there is a near universal belief among NDEers that this life is granted irrespective of whether a person has faith or not or what faith they have. This applies in principle not only among those who have had a NDE. Terminally ill patients and their families, after inquiring about my church affiliation, most commonly express, “I don’t believe it is important what church we belong to; we all worship the same God.” Statements such as this reveal a surprising lack of interest in doctrinal and theological tenets which once created enough concern for denominations to sponsor spirited public debates. What is noticeable in the NDE accounts is the fact that the Bible,
which once sustained religious beliefs and practices is now valued more for its devotional content than as a source for learning about how to live life here and prepare for the life to come. While this paper’s primary focus is not upon doctrinal issues per se, many statements occur in the NDE literature which reveal an increasing divergence between Christian truth and NDE theology.

The concept of Reincarnation and the views of New Age and Eastern religions, once anathema to Christianity, are being embraced and celebrated by NDEers as part of their newfound enlightenment. Despite the incompatibilities between these and Christianity, there is a longing for a universal religion that embraces all humanity. Driving this desire is the belief that there is an essential unity between all religions and that by reinterpreting or eliminating controversial elements, a greater good will be realized. This will end much of the world’s suffering and the violence brought about by religious intolerance.

Some evangelical and conservative Christian writers such as Ankerberg¹ and Groothuis² are raising serious questions about the validity and integrity of the messages purportedly coming from Jesus or God when they clearly are at variance with the biblical proclamation known as the gospel. The apostle Paul writing to the Galatian believers warns them not to tolerate attempts to retool the gospel (Gal. 1:6-9). In the main, NDEs omit Jesus’ earthly life, death, burial, resurrection and return in glory at the end of the age as being relevant to acceptance with God. Admittedly, it does engender a certain amount of hope in people now living when reports from NDEers consistently claim that God acts benevolently toward everyone regardless of profession of Jesus as their Savior, the life they are now living, or lack of remorse for wrong done. But what if this is a deception,

¹ [Ankerberg, 17-22.
² Groothuis, 37-40.
and the biblical message that invites all people to experience full forgiveness and acceptance with God through acknowledging Jesus as savior and Lord is authoritative?

The uncritical acceptance of what appears to be a self-evident truth is part of almost every NDE account. But should not some element of concern be raised in the minds of those who are aware of Jesus’ teaching and the apostle Paul’s counsel? The revelation of a personal God is almost unknown outside of the biblical revelation. What is it about the near-death experience that would lead individuals to accept answers to life’s questions from this source which is assumed to be of God, but which diminishes the significance of what God has consistently proclaimed in the Bible? If the apostle Paul’s cautions (Gal. 1:6-9) are taken seriously, NDEers willingness to accept a radically different understanding of salvation themes may represent the greatest coup yet by the “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Eph.6:12).” Christian concern, however, is not exhausted by this point.

Many NDEers today exhibit considerable desire to recount their story in oral or written form. The phenomenon has become accepted to the extent now that the reluctance to share it that characterized most NDEers when Moody first wrote has almost dissipated. This is thanks to the literary efforts of Betty Eadie, Kenneth Ring, George Ritche and the thousands who use the Internet as a public forum. NDEers talk of their sense of mission to resolve issues in their own lives and to promote new understandings gained from the experience which they believe will help others shed the fear of death and judgment that shadows them. Many do go on to reorient their lives and priorities in positive ways, but what drives them to do so? The sense of mission held by many NDEers appears to lend focus to the reorientation, but the total reason is often hard to comprehend, even by some
NDEers. The latter portion of this sixteen-year-old’s story captures the confusion that can accompany a NDE regarding the mission:

“All of a sudden I was traveling somewhere and then I was with a Being that radiated [sic] unmeasurable love. I felt comfortable and very glad to be with him. I thought about my young life and all the physical problems I’d had and said: ‘I’m glad to be done with that one.’ He didn’t agree. ‘You didn’t do much,’ he said patiently.

“Immediately I was filled with a sense of having a mission that was left undone. I said: ‘Oh you’re right, maybe I should go back. ‘And like that I was back in my body, full of pain. I felt so heavy and restricted inside a body. I was full of anger. I said ‘maybe’ I should go back. I didn’t say I wanted to go back.

“I calmed down quickly. Since then I have always had a sense of a mission unfulfilled. I feel I am supposed to be doing something for mankind. I became a nurse but have not gotten over that feeling that I have yet to discover exactly what it is I am supposed to do.”

While the directive that comes to the NDEer is conveyed to them in numerous ways, the exact task or tasks are often not specified. It is left up to the individual to figure out how to implement the instruction. Sometimes it is as vague as “we have plans for you,” or, more specifically, they are to raise the children or to tell others that death does not exist. This can be frustrating, as in the case above. Somehow though, this sense of mission is woven into the NDEers reorientation to life and can prolong the transformation that takes place in them.

But why do NDEers and individuals they influence expend effort as a response to their experience to reform their lives and feel compelled to evangelize others? Is the message they have to convey that “God” will be benevolent to people no matter what they do? Why the mission to the world if God is all-accepting? The message from NDE advocates is that your life, however noble or depraved, will be accepted by the being of light, and any restorative work on your character or person will be accomplished at the time of arrival on the other side of death. Neither is there any rationale given for the

3 Morse, 57.
continuing existence of this world, given that knowledge and wisdom are so readily attainable upon transition to the other side. But, the Bible presents a very different picture. God’s message to us maximizes the importance of the life we live and the decisions we make because our destiny is determined before we die (John 3:17-21). The New Testament is clear that our world as we know it continues to exist only as a mercy to those who have yet to make reconciliation with God (2 Pet. 3:1-18). In contrast to this NDE theology, as espoused for example by Kenneth Ring, envisions that the world will be reformed through the exponential increase in the number of transformations occurring, until a critical mass of this new species of humans has populated the earth. The transformations have a purpose: they are the prototypes of the New Age to come where enlightenment, knowledge and unconditional love will restore the broken spirit of mankind and peace will pervade society.

But would Jesus or Paul find accord with these messages? In an age when the words “freedom” and “rights” and “first amendment” are used almost without reservation, the time-honored counsels of the Bible appear for many as outmoded restrictions of a bygone era and are resented by a more enlightened generation. However, Jesus emphasizes the primacy of the written record as the repository of God’s will for mankind. Jesus’ words reiterate the Bible’s own consistent claims to exclusivity in all matters of faith and practice for the believer in the One True God. The NDEers message and mission is in conflict with the most direct statements of Jesus outlining the responsibilities of his disciples to teach everyone what he had taught them and to baptize. John Ankerberg refers to two NDE accounts that illustrate the disdain some have for historic Christianity:

But many NDEs convey a message that rejects this. As one NDE’r commented, ‘A lot of people I know are going to be surprised when they find out that the Lord
isn’t interested in theology’ (2:49). After her NDE, a devout and ‘doctrine abiding Lutheran’ concluded that God “didn’t care about church doctrine at all (2:88).4

These are strong statements which reflect a prevailing sentiment among NDEers, even if allowance is made for the fact that denominations are sometimes overzealous in multiplying what appears to be annoying and arbitrary rules. In reading large numbers of accounts of NDEs there is no way to avoid the conclusion that the gospel and cardinal Christian doctrines such as the parousia, judgment, and the resurrection of the body are ignored, downplayed, or rejected altogether.

This paper represents a selection of the points of discussion that are encountered when the topic of near-death experiences is raised. To date, no universally accepted explanation has surfaced to account for all of the experiences NDEers claim to have had while in a near death state. Challenges remain regarding how best to classify and interpret the growing body of anecdotes already in print. What constitutes evidence and proof? Does the mere fact of commonality in the accounts suggest authenticity? These and other questions multiply as the evidence is sifted and weighed by those desiring definitive conclusions. Of greatest concern is the message that is emanating from the NDE movement that calls for a significant reappraisal not only of the understanding of death and what lies afterward, but of long held teachings of the bible. The two cannot be reconciled without significant compromise in the biblical world-view.

From psychological and philosophical standpoints, wisdom does not lie in lowering the natural human aversion to death. Ankerberg, in addressing this concept, excerpts these admissions from Melvin Morse:

In Transformed by the Light, Melvin Morse, M.D., writes that the NDE has “profound implications for those of us who work with death and dying” and also

4 Ankerberg and Weldon, 18.
for the “right to die” movement (4:220, 232). Indeed. But what seems to be lost upon some researchers is that by their very nature, most NDEs cause a loss of the fear of death. But isn’t the fear of death precisely what keeps most people from committing suicide? Dr. Morse agrees it should be recognized “that near-death experiences may make death more attractive to those considering suicide.” (4:236)5

If the world beyond death is portrayed in such an attractive light, troubled individuals may have even less reservation about ending the pain of their existence here. Ongoing research is exploring the implications of NDEs not only in regard to suicide but in controversial areas such as euthanasia, end of life care, and abortion.

Of great interest is the fact that the Bible has been so readily disregarded by many returning from a NDE, even by those who had formerly been staunch supporters of its message. Attempts to harmonize the Bible and the NDE remain unconvincing at best. The NDEer, faced with the choice to decide between their experience and the biblical injunctions, will almost invariably choose the experience as being more relevant than the biblical message. Theologians and students of the Bible recognize that God often raises up prophets to prepare his people for pending crises or to provide needed spiritual redirection. Never, however, has he overturned his consistent proclamation that sin is the root cause of humanity’s turmoil and that the only antidote is provided through the gospel. While it may be argued by the advocates of NDE that God is now offering something more, this is based upon a fundamental assumption that the “being” or “the light” that people encounter represents God or is God. To my knowledge, of the hundreds of thousands of anecdotes that exist, only one person has stated that the being identified himself as Jesus. This person is a Mormon, and Latter Day Saints theology sees divinity

5 Ibid, 15.
in a distinctly different way to the majority of other Christians. In their understanding God was once like us and we in time will become like God.

During his earthly ministry Jesus was afforded numerous opportunities to introduce new understandings regarding death but the Biblical record is silent in this regard. And neither Paul (when Eutychus was restored to life) nor any of the other apostles indicated that God would introduce an alternate rite of passage to the Paradise of God, other than that called for in the biblical gospel.

Sufficient concern exists to warrant caution before rendering uncritical endorsement of the NDE phenomena as representing the best answer to our questions about the relationship between life and death. In fact, to the well informed person the NDE phenomenon raises more questions than answers. My best judgment from surveying the evidence so far is that there is no warrant to surrender trust in bible as the authentic guide to life here and in the beyond.

Final Thoughts and Recommendations for Further Research

In 1975 when Raymond Moody’s book Life After Life was published I dismissed the near-death phenomenon as being of only passing interest to Christians. My research on this topic has revealed, however, that the NDE phenomenon has not only met with a positive response from many Christian communions, but has permeated society at large with its message of life after death. I also had been unaware of how much research has been conducted to provide a basis for understanding NDE and how substantially the world-view of NDE has evolved in the last three decades. Nor was I aware of how the assumption that the phenomenon came from God was allowing Eastern religion, psychic phenomena, and New Age thought to acquire unjustifiable respectability among
Christians. Finally, my reading uncovered what seems to be a compulsion among NDEers to spread the message that there is no death and that the way religion is viewed “on the other side” is quite different from the way it is understood in this world.

In the process of my research I was not able to satisfactorily resolve the origin of the phenomenon. None of the current explanations provide an unequivocal answer. If it originates, as some say, from physical, medical or pharmacological conditions present at the time of near-death, then why do not all who meet those conditions experience a NDE? Given what we understand from the biology of a dying organism, how can science explain spontaneous resuscitation more than three hours after the person is declared dead by all known criteria? What explanation can be provided to account for the fact that persons during a NDE are able to “visit” remote locations and report independently verifiable facts that it would seem to be impossible for them to know in their comatose state? A few conservative Christian writers say that the phenomenon has a demonic or Satanic origin. But if this is the case, how are the positive transformations to be viewed? Of course, many believe it is of God. If we use this rationale, then how are we to reconcile the message of the gospel, which is God’s best and final answer to the existential problems humanity faces (Heb. 1:1, 2; 2:1-4), with the disregard of it by so many returning from a near-death experience?

Further research is warranted in a number of areas. First, exploration is needed to see how closely the NDE harmonizes with the person’s already held philosophical and theological world-view. Initial reports indicate that the NDE conforms in ways correspondent to the person’s previous understanding. Secondly, it must be ascertained whether the related phenomenon of Deathbed Visions exhibits any characteristics in
common with the NDE that may suggest a common origin. Lastly, the issue of possible Satanic connections deserves a much fuller exploration. Any one of these topics is worthy of extended treatment, and such will further enhance our understanding of the true nature of the near-death experience.
Bibliography


