

DANCING
PAST
THE DARK:
Distressing
Near-Death Experiences

Nancy Evans Bush

Foreword by

Bruce Greyson, MD

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INTRODUCTION

Over the years since 1975, when the modern world discovered near-death experiences, countless audiences have gathered to hear about these blissful experiences and their rapturous conclusions. Time and again, there has been the hush of a roomful of people bound together in hope and longing that these accounts might be true—that something like heaven may be waiting when we die. And there is a moment when a single person asks a cautious question: “I wonder...Is there ...you know...is there the *other* kind of experience?” And the audience holds its breath.

The answer, we know now, is yes, that although the great majority of near-death experiences are beautiful beyond description, some are not. For almost one in five people coming away from a near-death experience, the memory is not of joy but of profound distress. This book is the first concentrated look at those events and our cultural assumptions about them, which tend to be bleak at best. Perhaps surprisingly, the results of this more careful look are reassuring.

THE PREMISE

We begin with good news. My premise in everything that follows is this: in everything we see, we are able to identify the darkness only in terms of its surrounding light. In other words, even the most frightening near-death experience is not conclusive.

Hubble photographs show that we are part of a universe that is an unceasing flow of radiance and darkness, violence and entropy, wholeness and fragmentation, the glory of dying novae and the implacable pull of black holes that may give birth to baby universes. Our

experiences, all of them, are part of this same universe. Just as darkness is not the only reality in the universe, it is not conclusive in these experiences, either. The surest foundation for understanding and being able to live with the idea (or the memory) of a deeply disturbing near-death experience is to know about the radiant stories.

Those experiences are foundational, filled with light, and loving kindness, and a sense of wondrous, joyful discovery about the universe. There is more out there than what we have experienced, we who have had the distressing NDEs. There is more about the nature of the universe and our own experiences than what we know, just as there is more to nature itself than if we know only the desert of Baha Peninsula of California, the prairie of Protection, Kansas, or the granite of Mount Desert in Maine. They are all nature, yet astonishingly different—the scenes, the life forms, the smells, the life skills needed, all quite different.

In this same universe, we do well to keep in mind that the seeming totality of a glorious or horrifying experience is not, in fact, total; it may still be enriched by other understandings to be gained from a different landscape. One group represents the heights of spiritual experience; the other—the one this book is about—represents the depths. Both lie within the Mystery. This is the one about which the least is known.

That is why this book has been written.

THE BOOK

Information always trumps ignorance, scrubbing away ungrounded fears and rumors. As a first step, then, the opening third of the book, chapters 1-5, deals with the basics of distressing near-death experiences—what they look like, the demographics, who has them, their effects,

how people respond afterwards, common questions about them. The middle section of the book, chapters 6-11, looks at the most common expectations about the experiences—the ideas, beliefs, and fears our culture brings to them and that influence our understanding. The final section, chapters 12-18, clarifies the challenges of understanding such experiences and suggests avenues for approaching them from different directions, deepening the sense of their meaning and purpose. In terms of objectivity, the descriptive first section is the most factual, while the second and third are based in facts and scholarship laced with my own commentary and observations. The Preface tells the story of the earliest years of near-death studies and why they made a difference.

PREFACE: EDEN

It is nearly the end of a movie, and the hero is dying. The scene has been set: a gauze curtain blows gently at the window; outside, rain is spattering a mossy cemetery populated by stone figures—veiled women, mourning cherubs, weeping angels. The camera turns slowly back into the dim room, where a shadowy figure suggests the Grim Reaper. Moviegoers see the hero's hand rise weakly to touch the face of his beloved, and then...a slump, and the hand falls. Camera fade to Reaper. The audience knows the hero has died.

That scene, or one much like it, was the common theatrical deathbed scenario until toward the last decade of the 20th century. Then, abruptly, the imagery shifted. Characters began to die altogether differently. Now when a hero dies, a curtain may still drift gently at the window, but the gloomy cemetery is gone, along with the moss and the Reaper. Now the camera looks not *at* the failing hero but *with his eyes*. In a soft radiance, we rise with the camera and the vision of the leading man until we see his still body below. Coming mysteriously into the room, perhaps as if through mist, is the figure of a much-loved person who has died—the lost love, or a child or cherished army buddy. Behind that presence may be a splendid and welcoming light, or a great, brilliant Being; if the director has religious aspirations, the figure may be wearing a long robe and sandals. Scenes from earlier in the film flash across the screen, clips recognizable as the hero's life, and seeing them resolves unanswered questions. The hero, or what might be his spirit, rises to meet the lover, the child or friend, and together they move away, into the glorious light. The audience understands: the hero has died.

In the space of little more than ten years, the Grim Reaper virtually disappeared as the representative of death, replaced by a Being of Light. What happened to make such a dramatic shift? What happened was that through the work of two physicians the public came to know something startling and unprecedented about dying—that it didn't sound frightening or gloomy at all.

In the early 1970s Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969) was already well known for her work with dying patients and her description of emotional stages many go through as they struggle to accept the reality of their approaching death. She had become, unintentionally, a controversial figure in the medical community for her audacity in insisting that death is not essentially a physician's failure but a natural part of the life cycle.

Thousands of people crowded her public lectures and workshops and heard stories of unexpected events reported around the time of death: dying patients had told Kubler-Ross they could see presences waiting for them; family members spoke of rooms filling with light. Science had no explanation for the accounts, other than to call them hallucinations.

In those same years, a young man with a PhD in philosophy, Raymond A. Moody, Jr., entered medical school. En route, he discovered and began quietly collecting curious accounts of people who had been close to death—some of them declared clinically dead by their physicians—who later told amazing stories of having had powerful, transcendent experiences during that time. Finding no existing term for the events they described, Moody called them *near-death experiences*.

Moody published a small book based on fifty of the accounts he had gathered (1975). The book, *Life After Life*, ran to fewer than 200 pages and was published by

tiny Mockingbird Books of Georgia. No one, certainly not Moody himself or John Egle, his surprised publisher, was prepared for the response. The book took the world by a storm which has sometimes abated but never entirely calmed in the decades since. *Life After Life* became a best-seller, one of the most influential books of the twentieth century.

In an era notorious for its near-pathological avoidance of death, Moody began his book by asking openly, “What is it like to die?” (Moody, 9) His answer to the question, told through the near-death experiences, offered a view quite different from a dismal vision of the Grim Reaper.

The accounts in his collection echoed what Kubler-Ross was telling her audiences, but still, it sounded fantastic. The stories came from different parts of North America, from people who had no contact with each other, but the commonalities were striking. Person after person described hovering outside of their physical body; rocketing through vast distances; finding strangely beautiful landscapes where they joyously encountered the presences of friends or loved ones who had previously died, and sometimes meeting a loving presence which appeared somehow to be surrounded by a radiant light, perhaps even made of light. Some people said it was God; Christians tended to describe the figure as Jesus or a favorite saint; deeply religious Jews said it was perhaps one of the Judges; the uncertain called it simply “a being of light.” Many told of seeing a review of their life in which they felt the effects of their actions; of encountering some kind of barrier or boundary between life and ‘beyond’; of being told that it was not time for them to be there, that they must return to the ordinary world.

For example, a ruptured appendix produced this experience:

“I became very weak and I fell down. I began to feel a sort of drifting, a movement of my real being in and out of my body, and to hear beautiful music. I floated on down the hall and out the door onto the screened-in porch. There, it almost seemed that clouds, a pink mist really, began to gather around me, and then I floated right straight on through the screen, just as though it weren't there, and up into this pure crystal clear light, an illuminating white light. It was beautiful and so bright, so radiant, but it didn't hurt my eyes. It's not any kind of light you can describe on earth. I didn't actually see a person in this light, and yet it has a special identity, it definitely does. It is a light of perfect understanding and perfect love. The thought came to my mind, 'Lovest thou me?' This was not exactly in the form of a question, but I guess the connotation of what the light said was, 'If you do love me, go back and complete what you began in your life.' And all during this time, I felt as though I were surrounded by an overwhelming love and compassion. (p. 59)

From a woman who had lost a lot of blood during childbirth:

The doctor gave me up and told my relatives that I was dying. However, I was quite alert through the whole thing, and even as I heard him saying this I felt myself coming to. As I did, I realized that all these people were there, almost in multitudes it seems, hovering around the ceiling of the room. They . . . had passed on before. I

recognized my grandmother and a girl I had known when I was in school . . . It was a very happy occasion, and I felt that they had come to protect or to guide me. It was almost as if I were coming home, and they were there to greet or to welcome me. (p. 53)

The pattern in the experiences emerging from Moody's and Kubler-Ross's work sounded very much—could it be?—like heaven. *Life After Life* also noted some aftereffects to the experience: People reported losing their fear of death, said they felt differently about themselves, expressed new belief in a continuation of life beyond death; a few noticed a deepening of their intuition.

“The reason why I'm not afraid to die, though, is that I know where I'm going when I leave here, because I've been there before.” (p. 91)

“It was a blessing in a way, because before that heart attack I was too busy planning for my children's future, and worrying about yesterday, that I was losing the joys of the present. I have a much different attitude now.” (p. 86)

Moody's book was published at a time when death and care of the dying had moved out of the household and the cycles of family life into the hospital. Dying had been professionalized as a medical condition, sanitized, distanced, and made foreign to the vast majority of people; now death was even more an “undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler returns.” But suddenly travelers were not only returning; they were in books and on talk shows everywhere, the subject of Hollywood movies and featured in favorite television shows. It was almost impossible to avoid them.

The impact was stunning. Audiences turned out by the hundreds of thousands to hear the stories, listening in absolute silence—their attention so focused they forgot to cough, to shift position, almost to breathe—then going out to tell their families and friends about what they had heard. From the miniscule audiences of small Rotary luncheons to the millions hearing Oprah, it seemed that everyone was hearing about near-death experiences. In less than the space of a single generation, it became hard to remember the earlier foreboding sense of death and dying, or the way the entire topic had been taboo in social conversation. The Grim Reaper seemed to be out of a job.

1: THE BEGINNING

[Pages 1-6 are not included in this preview]

IS THE UNIVERSE FRIENDLY?

Albert Einstein is said to have remarked that the most important question facing humankind is this: “Is the

universe a friendly place or not?” (Fox, 1998, 1) The question captures tens of thousands of years of human wonder and exploration—religion, philosophy, science, the substance of civilization. What’s out there? Is it trying to get us? How does it work? Are we safe here?

Over the course of human history (geologically brief but ancient to our minds), the answers have varied. By the late twentieth century there were, at least in the Western mind, two conflicting views. The traditional, religious view was that we are part of a meaning-laden and cherished creation of the Lord of the Universe. On the other hand, after a few hundred years of revolutionary technological discovery, the philosophers of science had largely argued that data showed a mechanistic cosmology, seemingly meaningless history, and wishful thinking as a substitute for deep-rooted faith in a sacred reality. And the home place itself, said science, was merely a flying ember, the accidental cinder of a great explosion that happened so long ago as to be unimaginable.

Can such a universe be considered friendly? It is an irony that Einstein, the most famous scientist of the 20th century, is credited with asking the question, for it is one that science is not designed to answer. The subject will be discussed in more depth later on; for now it is important to note that it is the business of science to deal with *quantity*, not *quality*. By its own choice, science does not ‘do’ values other than those that are numerical. As Huston Smith puts it in *Forgotten Truth*: “A number is a number, and number is the language of science. Objects can be larger or smaller, forces can be stronger or weaker, durations can be longer or shorter, these all being numerically reckonable. But to speak of anything in science as having a different ontological status—as

being better, say, or more real—is to speak nonsense.” (Smith, 1977, 5)

In short, science cannot provide a friendly universe; it can provide only a description of what it observes physically: the planet Earth as a spinning bit of rubble toward the edge of a nondescript galaxy within a seemingly impersonal immensity. When Einstein asked, “Is the universe friendly?” the answer, according to materialism, was a resounding, No!

However, the residents of that bit of rubble are curiously designed to hunger after meaning and purpose, qualities that venture beyond the realm of science. No wonder near-death experiences were greeted like food after famine! For the first time in centuries, here was abundant evidence of something meaningful beyond the sterile materialist model. At last, here were people whose direct experience with that “something” led them to proclaim that, yes, the universe is friendly—not only friendly but loving and welcoming, and it is safe to die.

EXPLORATIONS

After that initial hush of hope came the question: Are these things scientific? Within three years of Moody’s book, a handful of questioners had banded together to create the germ of “an association that would further the scientific study of NDEs and that would also serve as a support group of sorts for experiencers, as well as a clearinghouse of information for the public at large.” The quote is from the earliest organizing document of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), which quickly established a newsletter and peer-reviewed scholarly journal and began building a membership base.

The pace of publications began to pick up. Moody brought out *Reflections on Life After Life* (1977) to help answer some of the questions most frequently asked about the first book. A year later physician George Ritchie related his dramatic wartime near-death experience in *Return from Tomorrow* (1978). Meanwhile, at the University of Connecticut, social psychologist Kenneth Ring was doing research for his book *Life at Death* (1980), the first scientifically-based report about near-death experiences and experiencers.

Moody and Kubler-Ross provided the initial stories, but Ring offered quantitative measures. First, he developed the “Weighted Core Experience Index” (1980, p. 32), a scale by which to measure the experiences. Individuals who reported greater detail and/or depth of experience scored higher and were considered “core experiencers.” From his first sample of 49 core experiencers, Ring developed a list of the ten most common descriptions of an NDE: peaceful, painless, no fear, relaxed, pleasant, calm; happy, joyful, quiet, warm (p. 43). Statistics! And percentages! Here was the language of quantification, giving the reports a measure of scientific credibility.

Alongside Ring’s statistics, the theme of wonder continued in the words of his study participants: “. . . I remember the feeling. I just remember this absolute beautiful feeling. Of peace . . . and happy! Oh! So happy! . . . The peace . . . the release . . . It was just absolutely beautiful.” (p. 43) Ring was able to conclude that “there is a consistent and dramatically positive emotional response to apparent near-death by experiencers.” (45)

He examined the aftereffects of near-death experience (NDE) in greater detail than Moody and discovered among his 49 respondents “a heightened inner religious

feeling.” Comparing their responses to those of 38 non-experiencers, he found 80% of the NDErs to have a lessened or lost fear of death, whereas 71% of the non-experiencers reported an increase or no change in their fear level (1980, Chapter 9).

The strongest response came in answer to questions about belief in life after death. Although the experiencers reported themselves as having been less inclined to believe in life after death before their NDE, they were significantly more inclined than the non-experiencers to believe in it afterward ($p < .01$).

About the aftereffects altogether, Ring concluded:

“The typical near-death survivor emerges from his experience with a heightened sense of appreciation for life, determined to live life to the fullest. He has a sense of being reborn and a renewed sense of individual purpose in living, even though he cannot articulate just what this purpose is . . . The things that he values are love and service to others; material comforts are no longer so important. He becomes more compassionate toward others, more able to accept them unconditionally. He has achieved a sense of what is important in life and strives to live in accordance with his understanding of what matters.” (157)

Life at Death would catapult Ring into the media ring. Within a year of the book’s publication, the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) was headquartered at the University of Connecticut, where Ring was inaugurating its journal, soon under the editorship of psychiatrist Bruce Greyson at the University of Michigan.

Barely a year later, support for the observations of Moody and Ring came from a carefully crafted study by cardiologist Michael Sabom and social worker Sarah Kreuziger (1982). *Recollections of Death: A Medical Investigation* was as readable as it was thoughtful and received widespread favorable attention, especially for its discussion of verifiable (“veridical”) out-of-body experiences. Its publication coincided with another data treasury, *Adventures in Immortality*, by George Gallup, Jr. (1982), which included the stunning news that in the adult United States population alone, “about eight million have experienced some sort of mystical encounter along with the death event” (6).

Whereas *Life After Life* and *Return from Tomorrow* were based entirely on anecdotal information, the Ring, Sabom, and Gallup studies offered preliminary statistics to support a more systematic approach to NDEs. By now it was relatively well accepted, at least within the field, that of people who come close to death, or who have been in a situation of extreme physical or emotional stress, 35-47% may later report a near-death experience. (Later hospital-based studies based only on reports following actual cardiac arrest show rates as low as 8-10%.) (Zingrone & Alvarado, 2009) However, no pointers indicated who was or was not likely to have a near-death experience. The demographic variables—age, nationality, race, religious background, education, sexual preference, marital status—suggested not a clue about which people might be expected to report one. True, it seemed at first that women were more likely than men to have an experience; but closer investigation determined that they were simply more apt to talk about it.

The circumstances of coming close to death were likewise inconclusive. Experiences were reported after

all manner of vehicle accident, near-drowning, surgery and post-surgery, childbirth, allergic reaction, falling out of an airplane, electrocution, heart attack, high fever, combat, rape and other criminal attack. Disconcertingly to a fair number of people, religious beliefs—or the total lack of any religious belief whatsoever—seemed to have no impact on the likelihood of having an experience, and suicide attempts were said to have produced some exceptionally radiant NDEs.

What had begun as great news with Moody was getting even better, so far as the media were concerned. A crush of requests for public appearances had already forced Moody to drop out of his residency in psychiatry; it would be ten years before he could complete it. Then came Ring's *Life at Death*; and shortly after its appearance, his phone began to ring. When Michael Sabom's *Recollections of Death* came out not long afterward, he, too, became a focus of media attention, and then George Gallup, Jr., with *Adventures in Immortality* and P.M.H. Atwater with *Coming Back* (1988), and Melvin Morse and *Closer to the Light* (1990)—and eventually *Transformed by the Light* (Morse, 1992 and Sutherland, 1992), *Embraced by the Light* (Eadie, 1992), *Beyond the Light* (Atwater, 1994), *Saved by the Light* (Brinkley, 1994), *After the Light* (Sharp, 1995)—everywhere, the Light!

The '80s were a time of public appearances. 'Experts' (the authors and researchers, now numbering at most a dozen) and a few telegenic near-death experiencers were in demand. At one end of the appearance scale were the local Rotary, Lions, and Kiwanis clubs, with an occasional PTA or church group. Speakers on near-death experiences populated professional conferences and retreat centers like California's Esalen, New York's Open Center and Omega Institute, and Boston's

Interface. Prospecting authors wanted interviews with experiencers so they could write a book. And then there were the electronic media . . .

From the perspective of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), media attention became a series of tsunamis—mountainous waves of requests bearing down and sweeping away everyone in their path. The important thing was to let people know the good news that they could be less fearful of death; so no one wanted to refuse any request; and if books were simultaneously promoted, that was a pleasant benefit. And so began a seemingly endless stream of radio talk shows across the United States and Canada, the task easy enough because calls could be patched to a home or office, with no need to travel.

Television, on the other hand, required presence in a studio, which meant travel and a multiplication of the hours involved in an appearance. Contrary to public belief, guests do not make money from appearances on informational shows. The larger programs take care of expenses but do not pay guests for their time and expertise; local shows often do not even reimburse expenses. What is more, there is no guarantee, especially with network shows, that an interview will actually air, no matter how much of a guest's time has been taken up. The amount of public service time and out-of-pocket money contributed by a handful of NDE researchers and experiencers has been astronomical.

The first national level shows to feature NDEs were out of network news departments—Good Morning, America; Today; CBS Morning News; then CNN, ABC's 20/20 and CBS's PM Magazine, and Unsolved Mysteries, The Other Side, Dateline, In Search Of, and others. Near-death experiences were a natural for

television talk shows: Phil Donahue, Oprah Winfrey, Larry King, Sally Jessy Raphael, Geraldo Rivera, Rolanda. The calls went out from associate producers to authors directly and to the IANDS office—usually urgent calls pleading that a show needed immediate assistance with the recruitment of what came to be thought of as “a boxed set”—one or more experts, at least one articulate and photogenic experiencer, a skeptic (preferably an MD). Almost never was there a request for clergy.

Take a map of North America and mark every city large enough to have a television station—say, a population of 50,000 or more. Now, assume that every one of the local news anchors and talk show hosts at those stations wants to locate and schedule a guest or two to talk about near-death experiences. It adds up. From the US and Canada, Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, Japan, Australia, Brazil—the requests kept coming. Researchers and experiencers flew from coast to coast. Television crews invaded homes and offices—good-looking, brisk, often charming young people who arrived with a great deal of expensive (and very large) technical equipment and sometimes less praiseworthy questions. An entire eight-person Japanese television crew, only one of whom spoke English (broken), once spent two days filming in my living room—gracious, courteous, friendly young people who were delighted to discover American food. It was not the only such visit, though it was one of the most fun.

Where near-death books went, media attention followed, until the mid-1990s, when a positive frenzy over Betty Eadie’s autobiographical *Embraced by the Light* and Dannion Brinkley’s *Saved by the Light* appeared to wear everyone out, at least for a time.

A few of the programs were excellent; some were dreadful; all were over-simplified. The longer shows generally fared better, provided the host's ambition did not lean to sensationalizing. (The producers of one hour-long New England show assured prospective guests that their objective was a balanced, thoughtful presentation—but aired the show at Halloween, with sepulchral music, clouds of spookily swirling fog, and horror film super-star Vincent Price as host.)

Whatever their quality, the shows accomplished what the tiny handful of researchers wanted, which was to implant awareness of near-death experiences squarely into public consciousness. In the early 1980s, a speaker could ask an audience, “How many of you know something about near-death experiences?” and a hand or two would go up; by the end of the decade, the question could be reversed: “Does anyone here *not* know something about near-death experiences?”—and in audience after audience, not a hand was raised. The Grim Reaper seemed to be out of a job.

If news of near-death experiences was a banquet, it was the authors who prepared it, the media who served it—and audiences who couldn't get enough. More than one speaker during the first decade or so found their audiences so hungry for information, for reassurance, for *anything* to suggest that life may hold meaning and promise, that the sheer sense of need was nearly overwhelming. The unanticipated danger was that a great many people, experiencer and non-experiencer alike, overfull of a materialist, secular worldview and naive to the point of ignorance about the range of religion or spirituality, had no vocabulary for such encounters, no adequate way of processing or understanding what they took in.

Unrecognized at first, the stage was set for what author and experiencer P.M.H. Atwater would later call “the myth of the near-death experience.” (1994, 258) That myth is the expectation—even the insistence—that all NDEs are happy and peaceful, and that those who have them are effortlessly transformed, if not to saints then at least to paragons of enlightenment. Eventually, of course, the other shoe had to fall.

2

THE END OF EDEN

Almost always, in the question period after a talk about NDEs, one brave person would venture the question, “All these experiences are so beautiful. Are there ever...you know. . .does anyone ever mention...well, the other kind?” And the auditorium would become utterly still. It was always difficult to know how to answer without bursting the bubble of hopefulness.

Raymond Moody (1997, 169) had been quite explicit: “[It] remains true that in the mass of material I have collected no one has ever described to me a state like the archetypal hell.”

Kenneth Ring (1980, 45), like Moody, was firm: “Significantly, *no* person in our sample—including, of course, all our suicide attempt cases—recounted an experience that could be regarded as a ‘journey to hell.’ ...Although some death experiences did include frightening aspects or moments of confusion and uncertainty, none was characterized by predominantly unpleasant feelings or imagery.”

In Sabom’s study (1982, 20), “In each case in which unpleasant emotions...were encountered...they were perceived to be but a momentary impression in an otherwise pleasant NDE. It is conceivable that this overall assessment might have been different (i.e., unenjoyable) if the experience had abruptly ended at the point at which the unpleasant emotion was perceived.”

Indeed, of the 354 near-death experiences in eight major studies between the years 1975 and 2005, including the largest in-hospital investigations, there were no unpleasant reports (Bush, 2009, 65).

THE DARK CLOUD

In the heady rush of euphoria over blissful near-death experiences—the yearning of countless audiences to hear the good news, the intellectual excitement of new discovery, the seductiveness of television cameras, the wash of spiritual hope—no one wanted to hear that some experiences might point in a very different direction. But then...”In 1978,” Kenneth Ring would write years later, “a dark cloud of chilling testimony began to penetrate into the previously luminous sky of reports of near-death experiences” (1994, 5)

The “dark cloud” was a startling book published by Chattanooga cardiologist Maurice Rawlings (1978). In *Beyond Death’s Door*, Rawlings described in grim detail another kind of near-death experience for some of his patients being resuscitated from cardiac arrest. “Doc! Doc! Don’t let me go under again—I’m in hell!” A chill went through just about everyone who read the book. An ancient and most unfriendly aspect of the universe had surfaced anew.

Beyond Death’s Door made a deep impression in evangelical Christian circles, but nothing like the reception given *Life After Life*. Perhaps most obviously, the subject was unwelcome to readers who were happy to read about wonderful, heaven-like experiences but not about cosmic terror and a vengeful God. Many, especially those who felt harmed by organized religion, considered the Rawlings conclusions distasteful, even assaultive, while mainstream Christians tended to think of them as gauche.

From the research perspective, there were other problems. Most experiences in *Beyond Death’s Door* were presented, not in the experiencers’ own words, but

as Rawlings's recollections of what patients had told him, sometimes years before. Further, too many reported "facts" were shaky, if not downright in error: names were wrong, researchers' institutional affiliations were misstated, other research findings were inaccurately quoted. If such easily verifiable facts were wrong, what could be trusted in the rest of his work?

Most damaging of all, Rawlings was clearly less interested in objective reporting than in his conviction as a Christian fundamentalist that hell is waiting for anyone who does not live by conservative Christian theological doctrine. From that perspective, he was writing to save souls. While this position enhanced his reputation within the conservative Christian community, it was not well received elsewhere and strengthened the suspicion that terrifying near-death experiences were most probably associated entirely with hell-fire-and-brimstone religious beliefs.

In 1995, Dr. Rawlings was invited to present a session at the IANDS North American conference. It was clear even to those who were horrified by his lurid presentation that his attitude of great caring stemmed from a desire to save people he believed to be destined for a dreadful fate; nonetheless, his sympathetic attitude did not deter several people from walking out of the lecture. Overall, what Rawlings called hellish experiences were considered by the mainstream of near-death studies to be "negative experiences," a fringe matter.

However, Rawlings was not alone. Despite the optimistic findings of the major studies that reported only pleasant experiences, there were hints, even in the early publications, that some experiences were not entirely blissful.

Psychologist Charles A. Garfield reported as early as 1979 that of 36 people interviewed, eight described vivid demonic or nightmarish visions, while another four reported alternating blissful and terrifying features (1979, 5-7).

Not long after, three researchers from Washington State defined a negative NDE as “one that contains extreme fear, panic, or anger. It may also contain visions of demonic creatures that threaten or taunt the subject.” (Lindley et al, 1981, 113) That study reported finding eleven out of 55 NDEs “partially negative or hellish.” They noted that “Most negative experiences begin with a rush of fear and panic or with a vision of wrathful or fearful creatures,” but are “usually transformed, at some point, into a positive experience in which all negativity vanishes and the first stage of death [peacefulness] is achieved” (113).

Michael Sabom (1982, 20) had observed that “Momentary fright or bewilderment sometimes accompanied the initial passage into darkness,” and quoted two of his patients as saying:

“There was total blackness around me . . . all you see is blackness around you. If you move very fast, you can feel the sides moving in on you. . . . I felt lonely and a little frightened.”

“The next thing I remember, I was in complete total darkness. . . . It was a very dark place and I didn’t know where I was, what I was doing there or what was happening, and I started getting scared.”

With George Gallup’s *Adventures in Immortality* came an entire chapter entitled “Descent into the Abyss” (Chapter 6). In it, he reported, “[O]ur major national poll of those who had a close brush with death showed that

only one percent said that they ‘had a sense of hell or torment’” (76). Other investigators quickly adopted that one percent figure as the total percentage of distressing near-death experiences, neatly overlooking the conclusion of Gallup’s paragraph: “But ... the picture is more complex than that ... [I]t does seem clear that many of these people...were reluctant to interpret their experience in positive terms.”

Said a 30-year-old, “I felt I was being tricked into death. In my mind, I was fighting with faces unknown to me, and I felt I had to have all my wits about me, to keep from dying.” (Gallup, 78)

A middle-aged Illinois housewife: “I would [see] huge things coming toward me, like animals with baseball bats. Then, I’d be in this blue-green water, and out in front of me was this huge white, marblelike rock. At the top of the rock was this bright light, and as I got closer to the rock, I saw an image of a person standing on top of it in white clothing—like a robe. But I couldn’t tell if it was male or female—I couldn’t see the face at all.” (Gallup, 79)

A pre-law student in his twenties told of his experience in an automobile accident: “My first thought was, ‘I must be dead. This is what death must be.’ But it certainly wasn’t blissful. Just nothingness. I felt like a piece of protoplasm floating out on the sea. I thought, ‘Maybe I’m lost, maybe I’m not going to heaven.’” (Gallup, 80)

“... [T]he negative near-death experiences in our study,” Gallup summarized, “include some of the following features: featureless, sometimes forbidding faces; beings who are often merely present, but aren’t at all comforting; a sense of discomfort—especially emotional or mental unrest; feelings of confusion about

the experience; a sense of being tricked or duped into ultimate destruction; and fear about what the finality of death may involve.” (Gallup, 83)

From Charles P. Flynn (1986, 82), a sociologist at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, came the account of a woman who reported having seen “a realm of ‘troubled spirits’:

“It’s a dusky, dark, dreary area, and you realize that the area is filled with a lot of lost souls, or beings that could go the same way I’m going [to the Light] if they would just look up. The feeling I got was that they were all looking downward, and they were kind of shuffling, and there was a kind of moaning. There were hundreds of them, looking very dejected. The amount of confusion I felt coming off of it was tremendous. When I went through this, I felt there was a lot of pain, a lot of confusion, a lot of fear, all meshed into one. It was a very heavy feeling. . .”

The Greyson/Bush study

Despite these occasional observations, by 1987 there was so little public evidence of contemporary unpleasant NDEs that in *Otherworld Journeys*, comparing medieval and modern near-death experiences, Carol Zaleski could make the often-quoted observation (1987, 7), “Gone are the bad deaths, harsh judgment scenes, purgatorial torments, and infernal terrors of medieval visions; by comparison, the modern otherworld is a congenial place, a democracy, a school for continuing education, and a garden of unearthly delights.”

The infrequency of alarming NDEs in the materials then available to her is, in retrospect, not because distress does not exist in the modern near-death repertoire but

because experiencers were not ready to come forward with them. However slowly, that was about to change

While heavenly near-death experiences were flooding publishing houses and other media, at the University of Connecticut offices of IANDS, an occasional letter or phone call hinted at fear or unpleasantness during an experience—almost never an outright statement, but a hint. I knew from my own experience that the picture of NDEs as exclusively blissful was incomplete; so it was easy enough to begin inviting the hinters to say more. Further, psychiatrist Bruce Greyson had joined Kenneth Ring on the UConn faculty; head of the research division of IANDS and editor of the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, he had professional reasons for wanting more information and had also begun a small collection of these anomalous NDEs. From our shared interest came the first study of frightening near-death experiences.

Methodology

The plan seemed simple enough. The unfunded study would be carried out as information became available. Its methodology was necessarily rudimentary. We would use only first-person accounts. As either of us sensed an unpleasant experience account, we would contact the person, sound out their situation, describe our interest in developing helpful information about these experiences, and invite the person to take part in a study. A coding system would guarantee anonymity. Participants would agree to write or tape-record the account of their NDE in as much detail as possible. They would sign a consent form permitting the anonymous use of the material and fill out a brief questionnaire asking for demographic information and the circumstances under which the NDE

had occurred. For additional information, we would contact the experiencer. The result would be the first descriptive study of these hidden experiences. Easier said than done.

Medical social worker Kimberly Clark Sharp was the first to observe that this is a population that vanishes (Sharp, 1984). For many people with a painful NDE, simply admitting they have had such an experience is as much as they can do; describing it can seem impossible. Or they break through their fear just long enough to give an abbreviated account, and promptly disappear. We found her observation to be frustratingly true.

A person would hang far back after a program, sidle up to the speaker when the rest of the audience was out of earshot, and stammer, "I...I had an experience, but it was ... I can't say. How come everybody else gets heaven and I got . . . that?" Was the person willing to say more about "that"? No.

A letter-writer wrote, "My experience was, I went to hell. Why don't you tell people the truth?" Would the person discuss it on the phone or write more in another letter? No.

Buried in an otherwise radiant NDE description one could sometimes find a terse comment: "One part of my experience was too frightening to talk about. I prayed to God, and it turned out all right." Would the person elaborate? No.

It took nine years to find fifty people who could give enough detail to create a coherent sense of such experiences. Despite our being able to draw on all the resources of IANDS, and despite contacts with several thousand experiencers overall, the "closeting" was so intense that even when our respondents could bring

themselves to write their accounts, few were willing or able to complete the questionnaire, answer questions, or agree to an interview. (One participant, at the urging of her psychotherapist, eventually agreed to contact one of the investigators [NEB] for an interview *nine years after the study*.)

To say the response was a slow trickle is to suggest substantially more speed than was the case. Follow-up produced consent forms but not much else. Demographic information about the participants is therefore extremely limited. What is known is that their age at the time of the experience ranged from nine years old upwards; their levels of education are from high school dropout to completion of graduate work. They include laborers, professionals, unemployed, and students, Christian, Jewish, without religious preference, and secular. Other studies have shown near-death experiencers to represent a broad cross-section of the population at large (Ring, Sabom, Gallup, van Lommel), and there is no demonstrable reason to believe this sample to be otherwise. As a whole, experiencers appear no more likely than any random segment of the population to have emotional or psychological problems or outright mental illness. (Greyson, 2000 and Holden, 2009) From what we know about these fifty individuals, they are a representative group of ordinary people who have had an extraordinary experience.

The basic finding of the study was quickly apparent: there is no universal “distressing experience.” In fact, there was greater variety of phenomena within these accounts than among those of pleasurable experiences. Overall, they tend to follow the basic pattern of NDEs as described by Ring (1980, 32-36) and Greyson (1983), provided the wording is broadened to accommodate more than specifically pleasant emotions.

Ring's "Weighted Core Experience Index" includes, as measures of pleasant NDEs: a subjective sense of being dead; intense feeling of peace, painlessness, etc. (the core affective cluster); sense of bodily separation; sense of entering a dark region; encountering a presence or hearing a voice; taking stock of one's life; seeing or being enveloped in light; seeing beautiful colors; entering into the light; and encountering visible 'spirits.' When worded neutrally, the Index applies as well to frightening experiences: for example, defining the core affective cluster as "intense emotions" rather than "feeling of peace, etc." and "vivid sense impressions" in place of "seeing beautiful colors."

Patterns

Within the fifty accounts, three distinct types of experience emerged. In the most common, the elements of the classic pleasurable NDE were experienced as terrifying. The second type was an experience of nothingness, of being without sensation and/or of existing in a limitless, featureless void. The third type, with the fewest accounts, corresponds more closely to the hell of the popular imagination. The study findings, first published in the journal *Psychiatry* (Greyson and Bush, 1993), form the basis of the next chapter.

[This ends the preview.]