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THE NEAR-DEATH PHENOMENON

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A 1992 Gallup Poll survey estimates that thirteen million people in the United States have had at least one near-death experience. That equates to about a third of those adults who are resuscitated from the throes of death in a clinic or hospital environment. The figure for children, however, is over seventy-five percent, as established by Melvin Morse, M.D. and his associates, in a landmark study done of child near death experiences chronicled in his first book "CLOSER TO THE LIGHT" [1].

It has been established medically that the closer an individual is to actual physical death the more apt he or she is to have not only a near death experience, but one with a broader range of details and sensations. The sequential patterning of the phenomenon is universally reported, irrespective of culture, age, or personal philosophy. This pattern, as originally revealed by Raymond A. Moody, Jr. in his global best seller "LIFE AFTER LIFE" [2], covers hearing the news of death, floating out of the body, feeling peaceful, traveling through a tunnel towards a bright light, feeling "at home" as if in heaven, meeting others including a being of light, overwhelmed with sensations of love and acceptance, having a life review, told or knowing that a return to life is necessary, personality and behavior changes indicative of a spiritual transformation after being revived.

Children's near-death experiences are similar to those reported by adults, except for the absence of life reviews and lengthy or transcendent elements. Their descriptive style is quite brief when compared to adults, as older individuals tend to color their stories with personal or religious connotations - or versions of unpleasantness and/or hell-like scenarios.

Cardiologist Maurice Rawlings, when interviewing patients immediately after resuscitation and again weeks later, discovered that eighteen percent initially spoke of hellish rather than heavenly environments, then subconsciously suppressed the memory of anything hell-like afterward. This so startled him that he converted to Christianity and wrote three popular books on the subject, beginning in 1978 with "BEYOND DEATH'S DOOR" [3].

Rawlings' research dovetails my own, for I, too, found hundreds of hell-like cases - one out of seven in my research base (contained in "BEYOND THE LIGHT" [4]). Although the universal pattern of the near-death phenomenon remains the same regardless of what type of experience is involved, I have noticed the

following variations in hellish episodes: a dread of separation from the physical body, lengthy periods of darkness, meeting demons or "black ones" in the tunnel, a light that quickly dulls or dims when passing through it, scenes of a threatening void or stark limbo or hellish purgatory or violent storms (even "hauntings" from one's own past), sinister or indifferent beings that elicit a defensive posture or the need to fight for survival. Often hellish versions turn into heavenly ones, especially if the individual calls upon "divine" intercession. More typically, though, hell-like scenarios end abruptly without resolution. Of my interviews, the only people who described hell as hot and fiery were those who were strongly influenced by fundamentalistic religious teachings. The rest spoke of how cold, icy, hard, or empty it was.

Even considering unpleasant or hellish experiences, the vast majority of near-death events are pleasant and involve realms of heavenly light, resplendent meadows, and sparkling cities. Whether deceased loved ones (people or animals), angels, light beings or religious authorities, greet the experiencer, they are embraced as loving emissaries of deity. This is also true in cases of the near-death-like experience.

In 1992, the International Association For Near-Death Studies [5] queried its membership to determine how many were actually close to physical death when the near-death phenomenon occurred. Of the two hundred and twenty-nine who replied, twenty-three percent were clinically dead, forty percent nearly so, but thirty-seven percent had theirs in a setting unrelated to anything which could be construed as life-threatening. Since this finding is so new, researchers have just begun to explore what it might mean. (I devote an entire chapter to this in "BEYOND THE LIGHT.")

Even though reportings go back to the time of Plato, near-death studies as a field of legitimate research is barely twenty years old. Detractors are numerous. The most cogent arguments center around: transient depersonalization, a dissociative state that can happen when one is involved in an accident or concentrating intensely - unusual clarity of thought, a sense of peace and calm, time slows to a standstill (no transcendental elements); intensive care unit psychosis, commonly experienced by patients soon after a medical crisis or surgery - fragmented spiritual imagery, distortions of reality that are later forgotten or have little meaning (coherence and clarity missing).

Additional arguments are: that it is a drug-induced hallucination (even though most experiencers were drug-free when the episode occurred); caused by oxygen deprivation (regardless of the fact that recall of the episode remains sharp, clear, and intact over time); a temporal lobe seizure (yet the depth and range of details impossible for the person to know in advance are later verified as accurate).

Aftereffects, stories of transformed lives because of the event, are among the most compelling reasons why the near-death phenomenon is believed to be a unique, real-time event that cannot be medically or scientifically discounted as a mere "trick of the mind."

Psychological aftereffects include loss of the fear of death, less worries and concerns, more generous and charitable, an expansive concept of love as unconditionally accepting and open, rejection of previous limitations and boundaries, a disregard for time, heightened sensations of taste-touch-texture-smell, increased psychic ability, sensitive to life's subtleties, child-like joy and a sense of wonder, an appreciation for beauty, handle stress easier, a spiritual outlook.

Physiological aftereffects include an increase in curiosity and in intelligence, substantially more energy and improved health, unusual sensitivity to light and sound, consume more fruits and vegetables, changes in metabolism and blood pressure, younger in appearance, exhibit electrical sensitivity (difficulty wearing a wrist watch, personal energy field interferes with electronic equipment and anything electrical), often will forego pharmaceutical medications for more natural approaches to healing, latent talents surface, frequent displays of synesthesia (multiple sensing), thinking processes alter as if brain structure has been affected (a tendency to "cluster" or "shake together" information rather than "select among;" an increased tolerance for

ambiguity).

These aftereffects can be as negative as positive, depending on the climate of adjustment afterward and on supportive family and friends. It is not unusual for near-death survivors to go through long periods of inner turmoil and depression. Many are not believed, or feel that they are going crazy. Unresolved life issues tend to exaggerate; communication can become strained. High divorce rates coupled with a sense of "mission" can compel an experiencer to cast aside any semblance of a practical or constructive lifestyle. Typically, it takes many years before near-death survivors are able to successfully integrate their experience. The idea that experiencers become enlightened, selfless, and unmaterialistic afterward exists as potential - not as a guarantee.

If the phenomenon and the aftereffects it engenders are successfully integrated, not only can experiencers become positive role models in society; their stories, even their very presence, can uplift and heal others and ease the burden of grief for those who have lost a loved one. Although large scale clinical research has yet to be done, the near-death phenomenon is quickly becoming a global mythos of epic proportions.

1. Melvin Morse, M.D. - "CLOSER TO THE LIGHT," Villard Books, New York, NY, 1990.
"TRANSFORMED BY THE LIGHT," Villard Books, New York, NY, 1992.

2. Raymond A. Moody, Jr., M.D. - "LIFE AFTER LIFE," Mockingbird Books, Covington, GA, 1975.
"REFLECTIONS ON LIFE AFTER LIFE," Bantam, New York, NY, 1977. "THE LIGHT BEYOND,"
Bantam, New York, NY, 1988.

3. Maurice Rawlings, M.D. - "BEYOND DEATH'S DOOR," Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, TN, 1978.
"BEFORE DEATH COMES," Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, TN, 1980. "TO HELL AND BACK,"
Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, TN, 1993.

4. P.M.H. Atwater, L.H.D., Ph.D. (Hon.) - "COMING BACK TO LIFE," Dodd, Mead & Co., New York, NY,
1988. "BEYOND THE LIGHT," Birch Lane Press, New York, NY, 1994. "FUTURE MEMORY," Birch
Lane Press, New York, NY, 1996.

5. International Association For Near-Death Studies, 2741 Campus Walk Avenue, #500 Durham, NC 27705-
8878 (919) 383-7940 voice/fax. A membership organization for experiencers, researchers, and the general
public.

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