

## BOOK REVIEW

**Near-Death Experiences: The Rest of the Story, by P. M. H. Atwater.**  
Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads, 2011, 288 + xiii pp., \$19.95 pb  
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A long history of anecdotes and more than 30 years of research have established that at times of impending death, some people experience altered states of consciousness now known as near-death experiences (NDEs). By 1976 when I learned of NDEs by reading Raymond Moody's (1975) book *Life after Life*, my interest in such phenomena as astral projection and the occult had already been kindled by reading the works of authors such as Sylvan J. Muldoon, Hereward Carrington, and Oliver Fox. In the years since Moody's book, my studies and personal interests have included NDEs, out-of-body experiences (OBEs), and psychic phenomena and have enabled me to work along with Moody and a host of others, including P. M. H. Atwater, on a planned TV series titled *Proof: Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, scheduled to begin filming this coming summer and intended to scientifically examine evidence of afterlife through topics such as consciousness, NDEs, OBEs, reincarnation, mediumship, psi phenomenon, and numerous other paranormal phenomena. It is from this background and perspective that I was eager to provide this review of Atwater's new book, *Near-Death Experiences: The Rest of the Story*.

In her introductory section, Atwater is forthright about not being a scientist. Rather, she describes herself as an observer. However, in this, her latest book, she goes far beyond simply observing: She connects NDEs with a process she believes humans are hard-wired to experience: an evolution of consciousness.

Atwater's work is well known to most people familiar with the field of near-death studies. She began investigating NDEs and related phenomena without knowledge of Moody's (1975) work and, over the years, has referred to others' research but drawn her own conclusions based solely on her own

investigations. This current book combines her investigations of over 4,000 child and adult near-death experiencers (NDErs) during the past 33 years since her first NDE with her investigations of the transpersonal experiences and transformational processes of nearly 3,000 people in the decade before her own NDEs. However, this new book is more than just a review of what is already known about NDEs accompanied by new case reports; far from it. Rather, Atwater describes an enigmatic process that results from NDEs, one she calls a “transformation of consciousness” (pp. 141, 150– 151). She contends that human brains are hard-wired to interact with consciousness, involving people, like it or not, in a search for a higher power and a higher level of spiritual awareness. Her work points to traces of the pathways to enlightenment illuminated by NDEs.

It is well established in the near-death literature that those who have undergone NDEs often display a pattern of aftereffects that include decreased fear of death, increased spiritual awareness, and conviction regarding the reality of a higher power and an afterlife. Beyond explanations of NDEs as randomly-generated hallucinations ascribed to the death process are theories such as Rick Strassman’s (2001): that the brain’s pineal gland releases DMT (N,N-dimethyltryptamine) into the cerebrospinal fluid that bathes the nearby quadrigeminal plate, a structure intimately involved with sight and sound. Beyond even such theories that enhance understanding of brain chemistry at death are works on the science of NDEs—by authors such as Pim van Lommel (2010); Jeffrey Long and Paul (2010); Chris Carter (2010); Bruce Greyson, Emily Kelly, and Edward Kelly (2009; also Kelly, Greyson, & Kelly, 2007); and Sam Parnia (2006), that challenge skeptics not to continue shrugging off NDEs as products of a dying brain such as hypoxia, hypercarbia, or release of compounds such as epinephrine, norepinephrine, endorphins, and the like. And beyond even these scientific treatises are anecdotes of phenomena such as shared death experiences (SDEs) that Moody and Paul Perry (2010) described and shared NDEs that Atwater mentioned—such as the case involving the cross-corroborated NDEs of 20 forest firefighters (p. 39)—that defy the dying brain theory. With that theory damaged if not disabled, Atwater turns attention to the deeper issue of the transformative process of enlightenment that is intimately connected with many NDEs.

Atwater attempts to explain this phenomenon by connecting information on brain anatomy and function, a bit of quantum physics, and her own observations. One manifestation of this transformation is an ability that Atwater, like many other NDErs, describes: the ability to see energy fields. I

was particularly drawn to this book because as a physicist and neurological surgeon, in addition to studying the science of NDEs, I also have investigated the relationship of energy medicine and energy fields to the process of enlightenment. With her years as a student of transformations of consciousness and a collector of detailed NDE case reports, she has come to the critically important realization that it is human destiny to undergo transformation, be it by NDE or by the probably more common process of slowly and steadily holding the course—and that even members of the latter group may be able to “see” and interact with the various multidimensional worlds of energy if they know where and how to look. She attempts to point out the technique, which comprises one of the answers to her question: What do NDEs teach us?

The first 15 chapters contain material familiar to students of NDEs. However, in chapter 16 Atwater begins a gradual *tour de force* explanation of the process of consciousness transformation. She stresses that such a spiritual awakening is necessary for the evolution of the human species. What struck me as peculiar is that, when I vowed long ago to take the necessary steps to reach enlightenment, in my study of NDEs I tended to attach only a modicum of importance to the spiritual aspects of the phenomenon and to focus primarily on the scientific aspects. Atwater’s explanation of the process of consciousness transformation highlighted the limitations of looking to science for what is beyond science.

Beyond a review of many familiar features of NDEs and their aftereffects, I found several novel and intriguing ideas in this book. For one, Atwater observed that NDEs occur at times of “unrest or inattention” (p. 127). That is, NDEs typically take place at times of reaching a major life juncture when significant decision-making is required. Over half of American adults report situations such as this. In some, such situations lead to NDEs; in others, they result in a firm push on the path to spiritual awakening. Alternatively, Atwater points out that NDEs may occur at times of great dissatisfaction, disappointment, or frustration—triggered by tremendous stress. Atwater describes a “power punch” (p. 142), a force of intense energy that produces a “shift of futures” and is directly proportional to the intensity of the NDE. The NDEr reaches a state of peri-traumatic dissociation and depersonalization in the face of life-threatening danger. The experience has a sense of cessation of time, accompanied by feelings of unreality, hyperarousal, disorientation, and a dream-like sense of peace. The expansion of consciousness may manifest as a sudden surfacing of latent abilities. When consciousness is freed and

rediscovers itself, the NDEr has, according to Atwater, “returned to the mark of our creation” (p. 145), something that is and has been part of each person. This return explains the feeling of being “home.”

Not as much a discovery as a reminder was Atwater’s discussion of an age-old concept: More than just brothers and sisters, humans are all *ONE*, arising from the same source. NDE aftereffects that contribute to this eventual realization include the sudden development of healing abilities, a development of empathetic inner lives, a hunger for knowledge, and a tendency to view life as a waking dream. The transformative NDE serves to eliminate the separation that we humans have been led to believe exists and serves to redirect experiencers back to a realization of oneness.

Another topic I found intriguing was in Chapter 17: Brain Shift. Here Atwater addresses how NDE aftereffects—which she repeatedly asserts throughout the book (and I agree) are the same attributes that develop in anyone who is advancing along the path of enlightenment— may include brain synchronization. Atwater found in NDE cases that 42% of adults and 65% of children may exhibit a brainwave EEG pattern showing “synchronization of the highest and lowest electrical outputs in the brain” (p. 149). She does not explain exactly what this “high/low synchronization” means, but she may be referring to a phenomenon championed by OBEr Robert Monroe in his experiments with bringing both hemispheres of the brain into synchronization by means of audio tones that vary by several Hz. He believed that if, for example, 400 Hz is applied to one ear and 408 to the other, the brain would be driven at an alpha-wave “frequency following response” of 8 Hz—which he believed was associated with enhanced OBE and paranormal abilities (F\, H. Atwater, 2009). P. M. H. Atwater does not state overtly but seems to be suggesting that brain synchronization is part of the transformative process toward enlightenment.

A conceptualization I found useful is Atwater’s “Four Levels of Near-Death and Other World Imagery” (p. 175):

- (1) Personal (images from one’s own life)
- (2) Mass Mind (collective images that reflect the human condition)
- (3) Memory Fields (archetypes/universal symbols)
- (4) Truth Imagery (a sudden knowing/sense of higher knowledge)

These levels introduce the concept of the otherworldly journeys that often occur within NDEs, including encounters with supernatural beings who

seem, according to a reference Atwater made to the work of Strassman, to inhabit areas of the electromagnetic spectrum that humans cannot normally perceive except with the use of certain chemical substances or electronic devices. NDErs describe such energy fields as consisting of layers and layers of horizontal folds with vertical connecting channels.

Another intriguing phenomenon Atwater discussed was the “invisible dark,” a place where NDErs tune in to information contained within a “sea of darkness”—what child NDErs sometimes describe as “the darkness that knows.” Atwater attempts to link this portion of the NDE with the 96% of the known universe that humans normally cannot detect: dark matter and dark energy. Perhaps it is this dead zone (my choice of words) that the deceased inhabit, and perhaps interacting with such an energy force during the transformative process leads to the “second birth” and, if you will, a “higher mind” in NDErs.

Continuing on her discussion of transformation, Atwater notes that she has observed an inverse relationship between the intensity of an NDE and the NDEr’s subsequent desire for alcohol, tobacco, drugs, sugar, and meat. Why? She believes that somehow the NDE brain shift involves structural/chemical/electrical changes. She acknowledges that much research needs to be done in this area of inquiry. Again, I believe that such changes are seen in the process of enlightenment, which gives more credence to the link between NDEs and the corresponding process of spiritual awakening.

In Chapter 24, Atwater uses her analysis of the transformative NDE changes to outline ways that those of us who have not yet obtained a glimpse of the higher levels of consciousness may step onto the path of transformation. These “Template Basics” (p. 227) are worth listing here as useful reminders:

- (1) Know thyself—be self-actualizing.
- (2) Open your mind to broader insights.
- (3) Welcome the change that allows growth.
- (4) Learn from opposition (things that we dislike).
- (5) Pray often using that great power within.
- (6) Breathe in gratitude.
- (7) Treat others as you wish to be treated.
- (8) Acknowledge the fact that everything is interconnected.
- (9) Communicate respectfully.
- (10) Accept stress as well as tragedy.

(11) Bless what you achieve.

(12) Forgive all hurts and allow passion to be egoless.

I found it interesting that this template not only arose from her lifelong study of NDEs but also was augmented by her own three NDEs. It is a template to which great thinkers and contributors to society have alluded since time immemorial. I have wondered if they experienced NDEs that expanded them to almost beyond-human levels.

In summary, Atwater's message is that there exists a biological imperative that is indicated by events surrounding the NDE, and it is time for humanity to study the NDE-generated transformative states that demonstrate this evolutionary plan, or imperative, at work. Just as many individuals may have made their brilliant contributions to humanity subsequent to NDEs, such as Einstein, Mozart, Churchill, and Lincoln, Atwater sees an awakening of humanity that she likens to a global near-death experience. After Atwater's last publication, *The Big Book of Near-Death Experiences*, which I thought at the time covered everything of possible relevance to NDEs, Atwater now tells the rest of the story, one of "a biological imperative for the advancement and evolution of the human species" (p. 202). She believes it is through this process that humanity will fulfill its destiny. After multiple NDEs of her own, Atwater not only knows of what she speaks; she also is able to see things in a light that people who have not experienced an NDE can barely comprehend.

And speaking of light, Atwater discusses the "light" that NDErs perceived as a sort of unconditional light of love. She does not specify how this experience occurs via brain mechanisms, and notably, she dismisses temporal lobe stimulation experiments—direct cortical stimulation as done by Wilder Penfield or indirectly by electromagnetic fields as in the work of Michael Persinger—as not in any way explaining NDEs. The light that NDErs describe is, to me, connected with the process of enlightenment, and it is that light that humans seek when advancing along the path of spiritual awakening.

To examine the spiritual—not religious—aspect of NDEs and to read more about the biological imperative that leads to the process of transformation of consciousness, I highly recommend this book.

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