

Perceptions of Beyond the Near Death Experience and at the End of Life

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In 1987, I was involved in making one of the first television programmes about the near-death experience. Afterwards I received about 2000 letters; from these we devised a questionnaire so as to standardise the data and sent this out to 500 of the people who had written to us. 412 questionnaires were returned, which enabled us to draw conclusions about the circumstances, causes and characteristics of these experiences. We found that these experiences were not psychotic, not drug induced and there seemed to be no unitary brain pathology. Neither did they necessarily occur when the subject was, in actual fact, close to death. Extreme fear could induce them, while some occurred during relaxation and some were clearly mystical experiences. Most occurred during illness (23%) or an operation (21%), and 15% during childbirth. But from the point of view of scientific research, the most interesting were the 9% that occurred when the patient was being resuscitated after a heart attack, at a time when the patient was unconscious and should therefore have been quite unaware of their surroundings. And yet in a few cases the patient reported having 'seen' what was happening to them and was able to recount verifiable facts about their situation.

Of the phenomena reported by our sample, the most frequently experienced were a sense of peace and calm (82%), light (72%) and the vision of a pastoral landscape (76%). 66% had an out of body experience, 49% went through a tunnel, and 33% encountered a Being of Light. 24% and making a decision to return, and 72% said they felt themselves to be transformed by the experience. Hellish experiences were very rarely reported (4%). Why so few hellish experiences? Probably because they are much less common than the positive experiences and because this was a letter study and very few people would want to write in to say they had just visited hell!

End of Life Experiences (ELEs)

There are so many common features between near-death experiences and end-of-life experiences that one can only conclude that the former are giving us a glimpse of another, different reality, one which we can hope to experience when we do actually die. For example the dying often talk about a strong spiritual light which draws them towards it, very similar to the light at the end of the tunnel seen in an NDE.

The feeling of peace, including awareness of the presence of dead friends, relatives or spiritual beings, also seem to be common features in both experiences. In the NDE, visions of a paradise-like place, a beautiful pastoral landscape are common, and evoke the same feelings reported by the dying who seem, in their final hours or days, to go in and out of 'another reality' – one that is full of light, love and compassion, and which is so beautiful and so peaceful that they are drawn towards it.

The following excerpt, sent to me by an Italian woman who was caring for her father in his final days, demonstrates these similarities very clearly.

The gauze over his face moved. I ran to him. 'Adriana my dear, your mother (who had died 3 years before) is helping me to break out of this disgusting body. There is so much light here, so much peace'.

The ELE which the dying most often describe in the days or hours before death are the visitors who often come into their room and will stand around or sit on the deathbed in the room. Occasionally unknown people wait at a distance and come closer as death approaches. These deathbed visitors appear to be in real space as even if the dying person cannot speak, they can often indicate their presence by becoming more animated, or directing attention to a particular part of the room. Usually the visitors make it quite clear that they have come to take the dying person away, and they may be quite specific about the departure date ('I'll be back on Tuesday...') but they can be negotiated with and the time of death delayed for a short while for a good reason – if a dearly loved friend or relative is on their way to say goodbye for example. Usually the visions are seen only by the dying person, but occasionally others in the room, especially children, may do so, and very rarely, hospice or hospital staff may see them too.

The impact of these visions, which are extremely common and reportedly experienced by 90% of those who die consciously, is always the same – that they are deeply comforting and reassuring. The dying person seems to feel as though they are setting off on a journey, but a journey on which they will be accompanied and taken care of. They may start to use 'journeying language' such as 'when I go, when he comes back for me'.

Cultural differences

It is interesting that although both NDEs and ELEs are universal human experiences, they show some cultural differences in the imagery they evoke. In all cultures, for example, in the near-death experience there is a symbolic divide, a border to be crossed which forms a point of no return. However, in Chinese experiences it may take the form of a river while in the West it is more likely to be a door or gateway. Encounters with dead relatives or friends and sometimes with spiritual beings are common to both the NDE and the ELE. Our own studies of end-of-life experiences in the UK suggest that dead relatives, most often parents or spouses, are the most usual deathbed visitors (70%) while angels (3%) are rarely seen, whereas angels often appear beside the deathbed in the more evangelical America's Deep South. Osis and Haraldsson, comparing the deathbed visitors reported in American and Indian experiences, found that although the Americans had the same proportion of dead relatives visiting the deathbed as the UK (70%), they had more religious figures (13%). In the Indian population they found a much higher proportion of religious figures (50%) and fewer dead relatives (29%), which reflects the strong cultural belief in collection by the Messenger of Death.

I'd like to end by telling you about the experience of an old friend of mine, the violinist Paul Robertson, who was leader of the Medici Quartet. About six years ago Paul had an aortic aneurysm. During a half-hour operation to repair a tear in his aorta, Paul was under general

anaesthetic and unconscious. His heart was stopped and his head cooled to prepare his brain for a period of brain oxygen starvation. In his subsequent book, 'Soundscapes, A Musician's Journey through Life and Death,' Paul describes very clearly what he experienced while in this deeply unconscious state, between life and death.

He writes that he was fully aware that he was dying, moving from this state to experience of the potential unification of his consciousness with that of the universe. '*As I lay there waiting, I felt myself die – beautifully, ecstatically, transcendently. I saw Eternity and shed the whole of myself joyfully in order to become unified with it.*'

Why in these circumstances did Paul come back? Because the family pulled him back, sitting by his bedside, telling him how much they loved him, reassuring him that he was going to be OK.

Paul recovered, and despite all medical predictions that he would be badly damaged and would certainly never play the violin again, he did eventually manage this too. He lived another five years and during this time we talked a great deal about death and dying. His description of what it felt like to die was, I thought, beautiful and void of fear. When he did actually die, in 2016, his wife and family were with him and his wife told me what happened shortly before he died. 'Paul woke up (slightly) from a deep 'sleep' and told me I *must* let Peter Fenwick know that 'there is nothing new - we've all been there before!'

So what is my final conclusion? Are these experiences, so widely reported and with so many features in common, hallucinations? They are so widespread and similar that we need to go beyond our reductionist materialistic science to find an explanation. What can we say about the consciousness that seems to transcend and go beyond human life? Only that it appears to be a multi-dimensional space, full of energy, positive emotion and information.

∞ The End (or possibly not!) ∞

Short bibliography

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