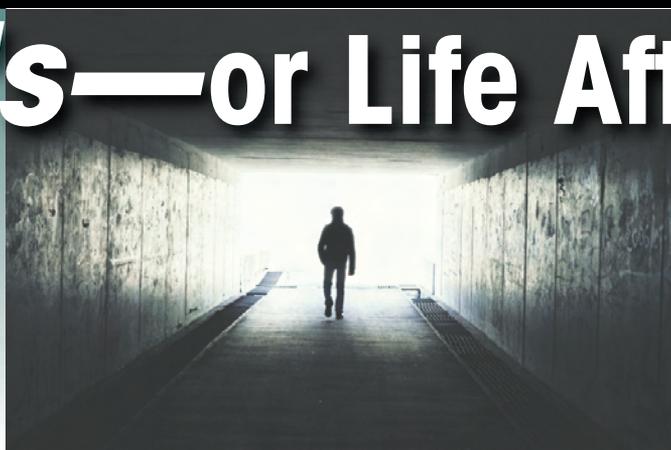


NDE's—or Life After Life



There I stood, shaking hands with a smiling man who had been pretty much brain dead for seven days, and come back to life to talk about it. It was at a conference, where I had presented on family constellations, and he was a keynote speaker. The claim he made, in his bestselling book *Proof of Heaven*, was that his particular “near death experience,” in which he traveled from darkness to a realm of absolute, loving light, was somehow different. It was an odd experience, meeting someone “back from the dead,” and he radiated a particularly earnest, yet also peaceful sort of energy.

So what does “different” mean, in the realm of those who venture hours or days into the realm of death, yet still return? Well, first of all, it’s a pretty large group. A Gallup poll says around eight million Americans claim to have had one. By “one” here, I mean what has been dubbed a “near death experience”, or NDE. In 1975, Raymond Moody wrote a book called *Life After Life*. He was (and still is) an MD psychologist with a background in philosophy. His book was translated again and again and has sold over 13 million copies.

Although I have found no way to isolate and count them, Amazon now lists certainly tens, and probably hundreds of books now on this subject. There’s one on gay NDE experiences, and another on animals’ “journeys beyond death;” even a *Complete Idiot’s Guide to Near Death Experiences*. Clever or straightforward titles like “One with the Light,” “The Science of NDE’s,” and “Dying to be Me” fill the search lists.

What Moody did that was new was to study a number of cases and recognize that they all had many characteristics in common. Why should that be? If different people, even when from profoundly different cultural backgrounds, all experienced most of the same feelings, passages, and events—did that mean there really was a heaven? Or for that matter also, some rather hellish states as well? This sparked not only major public interest, but also considerable scientific debate about the origin of these commonalities—not to mention the fact that people’s whose bodies and even brains seemed to be shut down revived and reported vivid experiences.

Among the common features noted by Moody, and expanded upon now by considerable research, are: out of body experience; some form of passage, like moving through a tunnel; emergence into a realm of living, unconditionally loving light; greetings from guides, often ancestors or religious figures; profound understandings of the universe and one’s current or former lives; a decision by oneself or others to return; a jolting reconnection with the body; and a changed experience of this life afterwards.

Were these the hallucinations the last spasms of a dying brain? Or was the brain rather more to be

understood as a kind of narrow band radio receiver for some form of vastly larger consciousness that was never really generated there? One of the hardest things for the hallucination theorists to explain is that NDE experiencers often report accurately things that medical personnel were doing while they were dead. They were hovering, it seems, up in the corner of the room—watching.

With all this present in our culture, what caused Eben Alexander’s particular experience to be featured on the cover of *Newsweek*, no less, with the headline “*Heaven is Real*”? To begin with, he was a hard line, scientifically minded neurosurgeon from places like Harvard Medical School. But, beyond that, his neocortex (the part of the brain needed for hallucinations) was devastated by a virulent form of bacterial meningitis. And upon his really astounding return after 7 days in a deteriorating coma, he collected and studied every possible physical explanation for his NDE and decided his case refuted them all.

Eben Alexander has become a tireless crusader, not for the denigration of science, but rather an opening to increasingly empirical evidence, on many fronts, that the physical world materialistic science confines itself to is simply not the whole picture. And perhaps NDE’s may prove the chink in that narrow-minded kind of science’s armor. ▲