

IS THE AFTERLIFE WHAT WE THINK IT IS?
A CHALLENGE FROM NEAR-DEATH STUDIES

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Abstract: Without question, studies of the near-death phenomenon show striking, even startling evidence that life continues after death, that the dead can come back and interact with the living, that secrets no one could possibly know are often revealed and later proven accurate, that even animals appear to live after death, and that what we term “heaven” and “hell” may indeed be part of a far more dynamic arrangement than most of realize. These points will be illustrated by actual cases I will present from my research base of nearly 4,000 adult and child experiencers of near-death states. Yet, a closer examination of such reports, whether from me or from other researchers, reveals a much deeper and thought-provoking challenge: that what we refer to as an “afterlife” may not exist at all.

There are millions of stories now, near-death experiences from around the world; each a snippet, a teaser, of what appears to exist on the other side of death. No other human drama carries quite the power this phenomenon does to unmask traditions of a “grim reaper,” and reveal instead an aliveness that continues after our bodies take their last breath and our brains cease to function. This aliveness we call an “afterlife,” because in most cases, what near-death experiencers describe sounds like or certainly seems to be sparkling luminations of higher, finer aspects to what we know: cities, gardens, forests, landscapes, roads, rivers, busy people quite alive and doing things, schools, hospitals, opportunities of varied types to reassess earthly existence, to forgive, learn, and then advance toward a goal we can only term “spiritual.”

Because the stories that come from experiencers are so compelling, I’d like to share a few from my research base. Surely after hearing them, you will be more than impressed that an afterlife must indeed exist and that life goes on after we die. Once I have shared these accounts, though, I intend to introduce others that will stretch what what we think we know about life after death. The concept of “afterlife” may not be as previously stated or broadly believed.

Arthur E. Yensen died in 1932, at least as near as we can tell he did, from severe injuries in an automobile accident. The vividness of what happened next remained fresh in his memory, not only after he revived, but throughout what later became a long and productive life. As Yensen put it: “Gradually the earth scene faded away, and through it loomed a bright, new, beautiful world – beautiful beyond imagination! For half a minute I could see both worlds at once. Finally, when the earth was all gone, I stood in a glory that could only be heaven.

“In the background were two beautiful, round-topped mountains, similar to Fujiyama in Japan,” Yensen continued. “The tops were snowcapped, and the slopes were adorned with foliage of indescribable beauty. The mountains appeared to be about fifteen

miles away, yet I could see individual flowers growing on their slopes. I estimated my vision to be about one hundred times better than on earth. To the left was a shimmering lake containing a different kind of water – clear, golden, radiant, and alluring. It seemed to be alive. The whole landscape was carpeted with grass so vivid, clear, and green, that it defies description. To the right was a grove of large luxuriant trees, composed of the same clear material that seemed to make up everything.”

Yensen described the people there as young-looking and lively, yet possessing a weightless grace in their movements. Their bodies were somewhat translucent, so was the grass and trees; their clothing minimal. One man told him: “Everything over here is pure. The elements don’t mix or break down as they do on earth. Everything is kept in place by an all-pervading Master Vibration, which prevents aging. That’s why things don’t get dirty, or wear out, and why everything looks so bright and new.” Yensen learned how heaven could be eternal from this man (Atwater, 1994, 53-55).

Muriel E. Kelly, weakened by rheumatic fever and a serious heart murmur, became very ill and passed into another world. “I found myself standing on a cobblestone road with people around me dressed in bright robes – red, blue, pink. Everything was so bright and sunny. Birds were singing. Baby angels were smiling and flying around. I saw all different sizes of angels. The music was hauntingly beautiful.”

Hearing her name called, Muriel turned to see Jesus beside her, dressed in a white-and-red robe. “He knelt down,” she said, “and gave me a hug and I hugged him back. He told me we were going somewhere to talk.” During the course of their time together, Jesus led her to an apartment building with many doors, and told her which door to knock on. A voice inside beckoned her to enter. It was her mother, who had died when Muriel was nine, leaving behind five children. Their reunion was love filled. “I asked Mama where Daddy was, and Cecil, Willie, John, and Paul. Mother told me they weren’t there ‘cause it wasn’t their time. I had no idea what she meant, so she took me to an area where we sat on a cloud and looked over the whole world. My mother located my dad and brothers riding in a car. We could see right through it. Dad was driving, and we heard my brothers and Dad crying, saying, ‘I wish Muriel was still here. We miss her.’” Muriel began to cry for her earthly family and wished to be back with them. She got her wish (Atwater, 1999 and 2003, 106-107).

Cecil L. Hamilton told of swimming with his brother. “He had a problem. I tried to get him out of the water, but in his panic he pulled me under several times. We both drowned. He died, but I came back.” While Hamilton was in the grips of death, he suddenly found himself stepping into a light-filled world. “I noticed everything – sky, buildings, glass – emitted its *own light*. And everything was much more colorful ... a river meandered around. On the other side was a city, and a road running through it to another city, and another city, and another and another. Right in front of me but across the river were three men. They projected themselves to me. They didn’t walk or fly; they projected over. I didn’t recognize them, yet I knew one was Lynn Bibb.” Hamilton explained, “I was named after him. He died a matter of weeks before I was born.”

Hamilton continued with his story: “I knew these three men were looking out for me, like a welcoming committee to escort me over the river to the first city. I had the feeling that if I went with them, there would be no coming back, so I hesitated. The first

city was like first grade. People stayed there until they were ready to go to the next city – your eternal progression, from city to city. Behind me and to the left was a strong light source, very brilliant and filled with love. I knew it was a person. I called it God for lack of a better term. I could not see it; I felt what seemed like a male presence.” God and Hamilton engaged in a long conversation, the young man asking Him about the universe and reasons for everything. Then God questioned if Hamilton wanted to return to the physical world. “I do want to return,” he said. God asked why. “I said I would help my mother whom my father had left with four children and one on the way. God kind of chuckled and asked for the real reason. I said I would leave the earth a little better than I found it. ‘Then you may return with some of the knowledge of the things you have learned, but the rest will be veiled for a time. Live in such a way that you will not feel bad when you return here again.’ I woke up face down in the mud of the river bottom and was ‘lifted’ to the top” (Atwater, 1991 and 2003, 45-47).

Each of these three accounts describes a particular arrangement of structures, shapes, people, and behaviors that are familiar to us – adding heft to the belief that the afterlife either reflects our earthly life or is an extension of it. The testimonies that follow, however, deviate from what I have just relayed. The focus with them is more fluid with an absence of structured form. I’ll begin with the near-death experience of Ray Kinman that he had as a teenager from an accidental overdose.

“Now this is very difficult to describe,” cautioned Kinman. “Time ceased to exist. Past and future were completely nonexistent. I was traveling in an intense, burning ‘now.’ ‘Now’ was everything. I ceased to be a noun (person, place, or thing) and became a verb (an action). I was Ray-ing, instead of Ray. I was given a huge message. The Being told me, ‘This is Who You Really Are,’ as the Universe opened up to me. I could not tell the difference between myself and the infinite galaxies. I became all-powerful and all-knowing – yet I was still Ray. Then the Being introduced me to another Being of the most Incredible Beauty and Love that anyone could comprehend. It was a Greater Being of intense Light. It was God. The first Being guided me to this Light and let it enfold and swallow me up. I became one with Love times a million, billion, trillion forever and ever. We were made of the same stuff! Every Being that had ever existed in all of Creation was now part of this Greater Whole Being called God. I was one with all of them, and yet I was still Ray – all-powerful, little old me!

“‘This is Who You Really Are,’ thundered the Light. It looked like a galaxy except the points of light were not stars, they were Beings. Every Being there was singing this incredibly beautiful music and praising God. After some indefinite length of Now-ness, I was told that I must go back. I was given another message that was very important. I was told I may return anytime I wished to. Coming back to my body felt like I was stuffed into a vessel of pain and exhaustion.” Kinman was very clear that this was not like any drug experience. This was truth – he was shown the way things really are (Atwater, 2007, 35-36).

Tannis Prouten had a severe anxiety attack, that seemed to claim her life. As she explains: “I felt like ducking as the ceiling was only an inch from me, then I was outside, moving through very dark, very vast space.” She saw small, round, glowing spheres around her that she came to realize were lost souls. Before she could react, “Very rapidly I was enveloped within this most divine, living, golden-white light, my HOME. The joy,

bliss, humility, awe were beyond human capability to bear. The LIGHT was an infinite, loving, accepting BEING without form. IT had personality. IT communicated with me telepathically. IT was pure TRUTH.”

As the intensity of her experience increased, she came to realize: “I was the LIGHT and the LIGHT was me. I was still a unique, separate, point of consciousness with the same sense of humor and awareness that I had always had, but the paradox is that I was MORE. I had become homogeneous with the LIGHT. I was all love, wisdom, truth, peace, joy, for all eternity. Human words fail to express this experience. Not only was the message of my true nature conveyed to me telepathically, but I experienced the SPIRIT of the message – I felt IT with every speck of my being. There was absolutely no possibility of hiding, distorting information, or lying in communicating with the LIGHT. I fell madly in love with the SPIRIT OF TRUTH! There was no concept of space or time in the GREATER REALITY. All takes place or exists in the ETERNAL NOW. That is my last conscious memory of the experience” (Atwater, 2007, 26-28).

Many near-death episodes are like these last two, seeming to counter the idea of biblical, religious, medieval, or even mythological traditions of an afterlife that features core imagery basic to the spread of culture and consensus throughout the human family. We have a long history of such commonalities especially in regards to death, the greatest of all mysteries, and what happens to us after we die. Findings in the field of near-death studies, though, are beginning to challenge not only traditional but non-traditional beliefs as well. Maybe there’s more to learn from our shared histories than what we thought.

Scenarios are reported that openly defy the idea of an afterlife as an end point or a dwelling place or a platform for progressive states of learning. Here are some examples of these exceptions and the questions they invite:

How can a future sibling exist concurrent with a present one?

Merla Ianello recalls that as a child she saw a guest in her home who was three or four years old choke to death trying to eat a plastic-wrapped frozen juice treat called an Ice Pop. She insisted on naming them “Death Pops” after that, and one day she asked her mother who the child was. Her mother, staring in disbelief, said, “It was you.” Merla remembers her mother’s screams and how upset her father was, yet couldn’t identify with the distressed child because to her that child must have been really naughty to have caused such a fuss. Even though it took her years to admit that the child was her, one feature of the episode was never in doubt - the presence of her little brother Michael in the kitchen with the rest of the family. She talked a lot about Michael, much to the chagrin of her mother. You see, Michael wasn’t conceived until the following year. No mention had ever been made of a future child nor did the mother even want one. How then could he appear physically and fully present, even holding an Ice Pop, long before he was born? (Atwater, 1999 and 2003, 142-144.)

Does the belief of an “afterlife” apply when incarnations are back-to-back?

Rand Jameson Shields was hit on the head by a man diving into a swimming pool. Dazed, he ventured out into deep water and drowned. “The ceiling of the sky above me rolled back to reveal an infinite light universe, the earth below me

dissolved away, and I intuitively understood my soul's purpose and the nature of the spiritual universe." A woman grabbed for him and he was resuscitated, yet during the following year his soul was pulled away from his body eighty times. "I was made to physically 're-experience' sixty-eight events from previous lives. Thirty-four of these experiences were of my most recent life, including the entire period my soul spent between my last death and my birth in this life." Years later he was able to visit one of the towns involved and uncovered "114 precise pieces of evidence verifying that every one of my thirty-four unique childhood re-experiences occurred to this man who died twenty-eight months prior to my birth, to the day. I have not found one piece of evidence that contradicted any of my past-life memories" (Atwater, 1999 and 2003, 140-141).

What are we to think about continuous lives, one occurring soon the other, rather than an individual taking up residence in some heavenly realm after dying? Or, the full manifestation of a future sibling, even participating in a family event, long before the child was born. Exceptional cases such as these are actually rather commonplace – like missing twins reappearing, aborted fetuses coming back as older or grown children, animals as much a part of "the other worlds" as they are in this one. And, here's another "wrinkle," there are group events that further stretch the time-honored definitions of an afterlife.

How can four separate experiences be the same – and – simultaneous?

My very first encounters with the near-death phenomenon happened at St. Alphonsus Hospital in Boise, Idaho. The woman I was visiting had suffered a heart attack yet revived. She was white with fear when I arrived and told me that while clinically dead she had floated out of her body and into a dark tunnel which led toward a bright light. Once in the the light, she saw a landscape of barren, rolling hills filled to overflowing with nude, zombie-like people standing elbow to elbow doing nothing but staring straight at her. This so horrified her that she started screaming and snapped back into her body. She continued to scream until sedated. As I listened to her, two other people entered the room, an elderly man and woman, both using canes. Each had suffered heart failure at the same time in the same hospital, were considered clinically dead, but were resuscitated. None knew each other before being rushed to the hospital, nor did they have the same doctor. They found out about each other thanks to nurses who heard their strange stories – the same as the woman I was visiting – which also matched that of one more person. I was unable to see this man as he was still sedated after screaming uncontrollably. None of these people had the same religion, background, or lifestyle. None had mutual friends or common interests. All had lived long lives of varying degrees of hardship and success; two were still married to their original spouse and had several grown children. The others were divorced. The only common denominator I could find after asking a lot of questions to them or to people who knew them, was that their strange encounter at death strengthened the pain they already felt from deeply-held guilts and fears about how they had lived and what they had done in their lives (Atwater, 1988, 14-16).

Why would 20 people have the same experience at the same time in the same place?

Arvin S. Gibson shared with me a case of his where a 20-person fire-fighting crew called "Hotshots" all succumbed from lack of oxygen while trapped by a

sudden burst of flames near a mountain top. One by one each of the men and women fell to the earth, suffocated. Each of the twenty saw each other leave their bodies and float upwards. One, by the name of Jake, looked down at a fellow crew member who had been born with a defective foot. As the man came out of his body, Jake said, “Look, Jose, your foot is straight.” A light brighter than sun shining on a snowy field appeared. Jake was met by his deceased great-grandfather, who acted as a guide throughout a long and extensive near-death scenario. Jake pleaded to stay, as he did not want to revive in a horribly burned body. He was then told that neither he nor any of his crew who chose to return would suffer ill effects from the fire. “This was done so that God’s power over the elements would be made manifest,” Jake affirmed. After rescue, each crew member confirmed the mutual event. Some claimed to have talked to each other while out-of-body. Separately, each of these claims was verified. All involved had met deceased relatives as part of their scenario, and had to choose whether or not they would return to earth (Atwater, 2000, 165-166).

It is easy to assume that the four people who had matching hellish experiences met in dying what they had repressed during their lives – negative emotions that were still “eating away at them.” Such an assumption would be in keeping with the voluminous writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, an incredible scientist several centuries back who had also mastered the ability to “see” beyond the veil of death. It was his contention that after we died, we entered realms of our own making, based on our attitudes and beliefs (Atwater, 2000, 233-235, 424). We could expand on this idea by inferring that, because the hellish accounts were virtually identical, there could have existed at that hospital a type of energy (perhaps from previous emotional outbursts) that the four of them unconsciously activated in a similar fashion to outpicture their deeply-held beliefs. Possible? Yes, but there is more to consider.

The group experience of twenty hotshot fire-fighters challenges the conclusions of Swedenborg and anyone else, myself included, who tried to tie near-death scenarios solely to the attitudes and beliefs of experiencers – the idea that “you get what you expect.” What appears to be obvious may not necessarily be as true as it seems.

There are lots of shared experiences, such as between a parent and child in the same accident, between friends who die together and similarly revive, between people who never knew each other but found out about their mutual episodes years later once they started asking questions. People on opposite sides of the world can go through the same thing, at the same or different times, yet their separate lives, beliefs, feelings do not match nor did they ever – even though their near-death experiences did. And there are even incidents like what happened to Nadia McCaffrey.

Nadia was a participant in the original research I conducted with child experiencers of near-death states (Atwater, 1999 and 2003, 86-88). Years later, while caring for a woman who was dying, she nearly died herself following severe seizures. Several days afterward, still in pain, she called me and we exchanged stories. The upshot was that Nadia’s seizures had begun at the same moment our granddaughter Myriam’s seizures had. When Nadia died, so had Myriam (from bacterial meningitis). The two met each other in spirit as they died. Myriam enabled Nadia to have another near-death experience, this time one that clarified and detailed her life’s mission. Myriam had

always been unique in this regard, for she had the ability to force, push, or aid a person in accessing their own inner truth. Nadia's first near-death experience had left her with many questions, especially about her purpose for being alive. Her second one, thanks to Myriam, filled in the missing pieces and helped her launch a new type of hospice (Atwater, 2004, 122-123).

How can this incident be explained? Or any of those I've shared? Do our moments at the edge of death or while clinically dead really unveil an afterlife? Or, is there something else going on that we miss in our great hurry or even greater desire to accommodate what is before us and name it what our traditions claim it to be?

Two clues, present in almost every case I have worked on, caused me to toss the notion of "afterlife." I no longer consider it relevant. To help you understand why I say this, a presentation of the clues and my observations follow.

Clue #1 – almost to a person near-death experiencers say "I got what I needed."

To an extent, Swedenborg was right. What he missed is what people really meant when they spoke such words, and the broader perspective necessary to interpret what people experienced and what he himself actually witnessed. Being literal isn't always productive. It's like trying to see an aura. Aim your gaze a little past what is in front of you and suddenly you begin to see things you never recognized before. Do this with the phrase, "I got what I needed," and you'll notice as I did that the near-death experience unfolds in patterning that mimics an accelerated "growth event." Life insists on growth and change. If we block these urges, something will happen to unblock them. That something is what I call a "growth event."

A growth event is any kind of sudden, unexpected twist in life that twirls you around and changes your attitudes and stretches your mind. Growth events, all of them, give us an opportunity to face our inner selves and be honest about what we find, to glimpse higher, more spiritual realities, to expand beyond limiting ideas, to discover the impossible and experience the "paranormal," to become in some way transformed.

I believe the near-death experience is a growth event, perhaps one of those that seems as if "reserved" for people who need a "good shove" in making life changes. Here is a brief synopsis of what I found that underscores this –

- Most near-death episodes happen during major junctures or times of unusual stress in the individual's life, when guidance or direction would be most helpful.
- With young children, relatives and caregivers can be affected as well – to the degree that it is almost as if the child had the experience for them. Yet the extent to which the episode transformed the youngster becomes more apparent as he or she matures, and can be a quiet but powerful directive in the life path chosen.
- Causes and conditions of death can reflect, at least symbolically, the experiencer's past or current state of psychological growth..

- Greeters on death's threshold always match (accommodate to) whatever is necessary to alert or calm the experiencer.
- As the episode deepens, the scenario's message parallels almost exactly the subconscious needs of the individual at that moment in time.
- Life reviews and "lecture" sessions cover material either omitted, ignored, or not yet learned in life by the individual involved. Life previews alert to what might be the future – for good or ill.
- Afterward, the experiencer's behavior tends to shift to whatever has been undeveloped or partially developed – *physically* in the sense of brain function/-nerve sensitivity, and *psychologically* in the sense of personal growth/maturity – as if whatever traits are missing in the individual's maturing process are now being "filled in" (Atwater, 2007, 244).

Whatever the truth of this, and it may never be proved one way or the other, the need factor is plainly obvious as to the timing, storyline, and outcome of near-death states – not in the sense of predetermination, rewards/punishment, or wish fulfillment, but rather, in terms of a subconscious "agenda" of a higher order.

Clue #2 – the most oft-repeated phrase near-death experiencers say after their episode is "Always there is life."

This fact struck me. If it is true, and I believe it is, then how can there be an afterlife? Or a before life? Or anything else but life? Implied here is that in some form, somewhere, somehow, eternal and forever, life exists as an ongoing extension of itself, acting upon and interacting within itself, ever conscious, intelligent, and aware...life unending. Indicated as well is that we are that life, existent within the existence of a forever that can be counted on. These four words sum up and explain all else. They take us beyond attitudes, dictums, dogmas, preferences, traditions, even what we can imagine. These four words are as if a prayer answered.

Once I recognized the import of this, all the experiencer narratives I had ever encountered or heard from other researchers made sense. If you allow yourself to step back from all the minutiae - who said what where and under what conditions - a different picture emerges that transcends the individual storylines from both adults and children. That "different picture" describes a vastness to the creation we are a part of, while focusing in on the souls that we are, as we participate in a journey of awakening to our real identity and purpose...what reality really is.

Tens of thousands of reported cases, not only in the Western world, but throughout Africa, China, India, the Pacific Rim, Russia, Israel, Thailand, Korea, Turkey, from jungle dwellers to desert clans, from the backs of buffalo riders to the canyons of Wall Street, this, the near-death phenomenon, if viewed as it occurs at the time that it does, offers a picture of the other side of death that mirrors what quantum physics seeks to uncover and explain...that all is consciousness...and everything else is illusion. With experiencer estimates running between four to five percent of the general population worldwide, umpteen million are involved. The phenomenon is that widespread.

It is no small thing, then, for us to take a second look at what has been reported. The concept of heaven and hell changes when we do this.

Near-death states show that once you leave your body in death, regardless of whatever comes next, you eventually find yourself moving to or present within an energy frequency you resonate with. What you find there corresponds for the most part to what you are capable of responding to, i.e., beings, shapes, forms, activities. These frequency realms resemble a “layer cake” of many levels, each separated from the other by degrees of lighter or heavier vibrations. The heavier more dense vibrations hold what most people call “hell” in that they consist of negative or lower forms of thought that reside in close proximity to the earthplane. Apparently you stay within this range of vibration for as long as best serves your development as a soul. You do not leave until you have changed your attitudes, thoughts, and feelings, and are ready for another opportunity to improve and advance. The faster, higher, more subtle vibrations are what most people term “heaven” and they also are in close proximity to the earthplane. There is a sense of benefit here, as if one has found one’s true home. You leave whatever level of this positive, supportive domain you are in once you have further advanced as an awakened soul and are more unified in spirit. I have counted from experiencer descriptions what appears to be the existence of twelve heavens and twelve hells. Yet, this “layer cake” of energy frequencies (layered thoughtform realms) seems to be open at both ends. I have found nothing to indicate otherwise. Claims of souls forever and eternally trapped or condemned in the heavier levels, or basking in the glory of ascension in the finer, lighter ones, do not hold up. When you really study the import of what people encounter on the other side of death, you come to realize that unlimited possibilities are available because of the power unleashed from awakenings. To whatever degree a soul awakens, consciousness expands – individually and universally.

Yes, “detours” are reported, to places like borderlands or shadow areas where individuals in spirit form may tarry. It seems that in some cases where the ego personality refuses to merge with its soul, spirit can remain “apart” somehow, as if lost, disconnected, confused, or determined to fulfill a vow or promise before moving on. Spirits like this are often seen as “ghosts” by those who are still embodied. The idea, then, of “way stations” is upheld in near-death accounts, places where spirits reside until helped in some fashion. These “catch-all” places appear to be necessary diversions so that one can “shake” free of that which initially hinders. What matters most throughout this entire arrangement of heaven/hell/borderlands, though, is the resonance factor, i.e., “like attracts like.” Our religions insist that it is deeds done or not done that is the final determinate of where we wind up once dead, yet nothing from experiencer cases fully validates this. Their testimony indicates something else - that self-acceptance or self-rejection is what creates our energetic “signal.”

The concept of time and space also changes when we take that second look.

Near-death experiencers are adamant in stating that neither time nor space exist. They claim that everything on the other side of death resides in a kind of “NOW” moment devoid of boundaries, limits, or definitions other than that of the relationship between perception and perceivers. Time and space are seen as purposeful, however. From the bulk of near-death accounts, time is experienced by individuals as a type of

“doorway” space moves through in sparkling waveforms of potential. That sparkle comes from light in the process of becoming dense enough within the “cradle” of space to take on the shapes and forms of what is termed matter. What becomes apparent from experiencer testimony, however, is that, in a way few can understand or explain, time not only enables but protects the manifestation of existence that space allows, so thought can reproduce itself. It’s consciousness. It’s as if all of life, every tiny speck of it, all of what we encounter on the other side of death, every vibratory “wiggle” of it, exists as it does within *a giant brain processing thought*. . . and we are projections of that thought, and so are planets, asteroids, solar systems, and so forth.

This brings us to another way of considering soul.

Near-death states illuminate the reality of soul, our soul, everybody’s soul, and establish soul as a power source without form or gender. Some call it our Higher Self or our Greater Self, and that we as a soul are immortal, an extension of The Divine. Soul is experienced as having its own will, and an agenda above and beyond anything we might relate to from the personality level of our egos. What emerges from this discovery is the realization that souls go through learning cycles similar in purpose to people on earth, and that souls can and often do incarnate in groups to accomplish specific things of a larger nature. The soul-level of our being is recognized as possessing perfect memory and an almost unbelievable grasp of Creation’s Story and our place in its overall scheme. On this level, which most experiencers consider a higher level of being, the goal of continued incarnations in human or other forms, appears to be a furtherance of what can be experienced creatively as we seek to expand our roles as Co-Creators with the Creator. Winding our way through the peaks and valleys of humanness appears to aid in this process. You get a real sense that life and death and the forms we take on fulfill an even Higher Will for an even Greater Purpose.

With that said, we can approach the topic of God or Deity.

The greatest discovery the vast majority of near-death experiencers make after realizing there is life on the other side of death, is that an intelligence beyond what we can fathom exists – there is a Deity. And that Deity or God is so massive, so powerful, so encompassing, that it is often described by experiencers as more brilliant and mighty than a million suns, existent as a Presence without need of name, identity, or definition. The biblical injunction to call It “I AM THAT I AM” suffices as a reference. All that exists is seen to exist within this allness, this oneness. It is as if there is only One Mind, yet many thinkers. This, the One Mind, is often described as spreading out from a webbing or matrix field of Its Own Consciousness, embracing what exists from the stirring of Its Own Thought. Changeless as the Supreme Consciousness it is, The One appears ever changing once projections of Its Thought take on free will and the endless variation possible in that freedom. Life is God made visible. The awesomeness of this tends to dissolve any ideas or previous beliefs anyone ever had about religious dictums or mythological characterizations. A favorite phrase experiencers come to use is: We are one with The One.

When reconsidering near-death cases, realize as you do that four patterns to the phenomenon exist, not just one. The spread that follows results if you also factor in deviations in experiencer behavior and beliefs before and after their episode –

Initial Experience (very few elements): An introduction for the individual to other ways of perceiving reality. . . stimulus.

Unpleasant or Hellish Experience (frightening scenarios): A confrontation with distortions in one's own attitudes and beliefs. . . healing.

Pleasant or Heavenly Experience (uplifting scenarios): A realization of how important life is and how every effort that one makes counts. . . validation.

Transcendent Experience (limitless expanses): An encounter with Oneness and the collective whole of humankind. . . enlightenment (Atwater, 1999, 133).

If you are objective about this spread, what you see here is a fascinating panorama, not about the existence of an afterlife and the do's and don'ts of living, but of what very well could be the movement of our consciousness as it evolves through the human condition via stages of awakening. These stages of awakening extend from the first realization of something greater, an initial awareness, to confrontations with the bias of perception followed by opportunities to cleanse and start anew. This leads to the bliss and the ecstasy of self-validation and the discovery of one's worth, until at last the moment comes when unlimited realms of truth and wisdom are embraced.

It's all about consciousness, moving in and through our story and larger types of stories, as the One Mind experiences Itself through variations in Its Thought. Still, there is more to note here. Present in experiencer accounts is a deeper sense seldom vocalized that consciousness itself, by itself, as itself, is also awakening and expanding. To give this meaning, let me quote St. Teresa of Avila, the great Spanish mystic and reformer, who, near the end of her life, said: "The feeling remains that God is on the journey, too." The invitation here is for us to move past defining concepts and ideas of an afterlife that are birth-to-death centered, and embrace instead a new vision of life as an emanation of spirit evolving in its capacity to handle the power from its Source. Why limit ourselves; experiencers don't.

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