

WHAT IN THE WORLD?

NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES: 30 YEARS OF RESEARCH

by P. M. H. Atwater, L.H.D.

That first time I spoke in public about my own three near-death experiences was at a college in Middleton, Virginia.

That was also the first moment I began my research. It was mid-November, 1978. Two other experiencers were in the audience and they stayed afterward. We didn't just talk. I studied them, intently, noticing every nuance of expression, every twitch in the body, and, if passersby made any difference in how they spoke or what they said. The session I had with them, the simple open-ended questions I asked and the observations I made, became the model I used for the decades that followed – including sessions with significant others. My goal then and still is to examine the near-death phenomenon, its aftereffects and implications, from 360 degrees. I'm no academic. I'm a fieldworker.

The subject at hand is audiences – the people I have encountered during my many travels - what they think and what they say about near-death experiences. I have traveled millions of miles, by air, by car, and by foot – from the coal fields of West Virginia to the landing fields of a military base in Florida, from busy taxis run by Haitians to the sidewalks surrounding Muslims in prayer. I have been treated like a rock star and personally threatened with lawsuits if I didn't shut up. I have seen the best and the worst in human nature. And I

have made a fool of myself more times than I care to admit. Let me give you a taste of what I have experienced lo these many years.

One time, while speaking to a Grief Group that met in a funeral home in Winona, Minnesota, I lost half my audience. That happened because, mid-way through describing my own three episodes, a Lutheran Pastor, who sat directly across from me in the large room, jumped up, beet-red in the face, and shouted: "You have not been washed in the blood of the lamb." With that declaration, he and his wife stormed out, followed by the alcoholics-annonymous counselor, the local judge, and a goodly number of folk. At first I was heart-broken. The Pastor looked exactly like the Norwegian who had raised me, a man of love and forgiveness. It took me a few minutes to process similarities and differences between the two men, then I shifted back to what had just occurred. To those who remained, I offered this caution: "I don't blame him. Near-death experiences can be difficult to believe. It took me awhile to know that what happened to me was **real**." With that, I continued my talk. A lively discussion ensued, as you can imagine.

During the early years, teenagers were the most rude and insulting. If any attended my talks, invariably a barrage of catcalls and snide remarks would pepper question and answer sessions. Serious attacks from religious groups didn't happen to me until the nineties and into the new millennium. When the attacks came, they were so brutal, so massive and foul of language, that they brought down my website twice, and blocked my e-mail server off and on for months. Hecklers showed up on a few nearby street corners where I had to walk and interrupted several audiences. I smiled each time, waved, and bid them well. That silenced some, but emboldened others.

What concerned me most was not what was happening to me, but what other near-death survivors were encountering in various parts of the country. Too many of them were literally being driven out of town if they spoke about their experience or tried to become active in their communities. One experiencer, for example, who opened a bookstore in Michigan that specialized in books about spirituality, complimentary

and alternative health care, was burned out after having bricks thrown through store windows. A police cruiser had passed by during the incident, yet the lawsuit over the tragedy was thrown out of court for lack of evidence or police testimony.

Local religious leaders said the burning was "God's punishment" against the store owner for "contaminating the minds of the faithful."

The years preceding attacks like this against near-death experiencers were filled with both the relief and the pain of individuals finding out about aftereffects. I spoke about my own episodes only during the first couple of years. After that, my focus switched entirely to my work and my findings - what I was discovering about the near-death phenomenon. I had never heard of Raymond Moody nor his book, *Life After Life*, at that time. My initial knowledge of the phenomenon as a subject of study came from Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and the hour visit we shared at O'Hare Airport outside of Chicago. She never mentioned Dr. Moody, just her own work in the field. Our talk gave me the courage I needed to proceed.

And what I noticed after that with almost every experiencer I met, was a specific pattern of physiological and psychological aftereffects. The issue of love, though, was paramount.

Experiencers would insert the word "love" into almost every sentence, it seemed, emphasizing how great the love was that they encountered on the other side of death, and how important it was for them now to spread that love, to love everyone, and to help the world discover the power of real, unconditional love. One man, a real estate agent in southern California, married, a couple of kids, talked on and on about love and how he loved his wife and children more than he ever thought he could, and how he loved his co-workers and his clients and everyone he saw. I heard from him again about a year or so later and he was desperate. "My children can't stand to be in the same room I am," he groaned. "My wife wants nothing to do with me. My co-workers walk the other way.

Clients ignore me. All I give is love and all I get in return is negativity. I don't understand why." The man quit his job, left his family, and went to drift for awhile. I do not know what happened to him. The conundrum of love. The typical experiencer does indeed come back more loving than before, and without the need for previous conditions or expectations.

But that's not what families and friends want. They want back the same individual they lost, not some revised model. To them, being so openly accepting and loving is tantamount to being flirtatious and disloyal, and perhaps grounds for a divorce or accusations of mental illness. A clash of motives and behaviors often results, with few really hearing or understanding the other's concerns. I had several people pass out when I talked about this initially, the strain had been so great in their marriage. Most often, though, experiencers **and their families** would crowd the stage when I finished speaking, some sobbing about the problems they were having with each other – the experiencer totally confused, members of the family feeling bereft or betrayed. What made the biggest difference to these people was when I told them it was **normal** for experiencers to love differently afterward, to embrace others as equals and equally important. That didn't make them unloving, it enabled them to be more loving and universal in how deeply they cared. Nonetheless, by the early nineties, I found the divorce rate amongst near-death experiencers to be between 76 to 78% - much higher than the national average.

The very first near-death experiencers I ever encountered were back in the middle sixties in Boise, Idaho. Four were patients in a local hospital. Each had had a hellish episode with similar scenarios, although none of the people had ever met before. Three I was permitted to interview. The fourth was still screaming and I was not allowed to see him. This really rattled me. I did not have the experience then, nor the skill, to handle the situation. All I could do was listen respectively, ask a few questions, and leave. Shortly after, I met Arthur Yensen. We became lifelong friends. He fascinated me with his story of what happened to him when he died during an auto accident as a young man. His book, *I Saw Heaven*, became a guiding light for me during the challenges I faced as a young mother. What I never realized at the time was that these five people were giving me a template I could use in the work I would later do. (Arthur's book is still available thanks to his son.)

Perhaps this background explains why I was so open to what people shared with me from the start - and, perhaps, why I encountered so many frightening, even hellish episodes,

during my long career as a near-death researcher. And encounter them I did. One summer in the mid-eighties I came across maybe five experiencers of inspiring and uplifting episodes. All the rest, hundreds of them, had quite the opposite tale to tell. (I declared 105 in my work; sessions more in depth.)

For instance, while hurrying along an airport corridor to catch my flight, a nurse scurrying in the other direction hollered: "You're P. M. H. Atwater aren't you. I recognize you from the Geraldo show. Keep speaking out. Lots of our patients have near-death experiences and almost all of them are scary. Seldom do we have one from a patient who went to heaven." I stopped in my tracks and yelled back, "What's your name? Where's your hospital located?" In a second she was gone and there was no way I could catch her.

A month later I was signing books at a Las Vegas bookstore, in "the old mall," when a crowd gathered, all of them experiencers – of hell not heaven. Among the comments they made: "You tell 'em, Atwater, there's a hell and people go there." "All you hear on TV is folks talking them fancy stories about angels and bright lights and going to heaven when they died. Well, it's not like that. No sireee." One man, a scruffy looking miner from the high deserts, pointed at me and started shaking as if having a fit. "You're blessed. You know the truth and you speak truth." When I could finally get a word in edgewise, I asked the group, why me? Why aren't you telling your stories to the other researchers? The answer they offered was unanimous: "We trust you." I noticed over the years that it really didn't matter whether an individual had an uplifting or a fearsome experience. What really mattered was how the individual felt about what had happened to him or her.

Example: after speaking to a large crowd at a community center, I asked for volunteers to come forward and share their story. Two came. A young man spoke of finding himself in a realm so beautiful he could hardly describe it and all the love he felt being there. There was hardly a dry eye in the place when he finished. Then he shocked everyone by saying this was the worst thing that had ever happened to him. It had complicated his life and made him miserable. A middle-aged woman was next. She described being trapped by horrendous winds that nearly tore her apart with their high-pitched shriek.

The sky was dark. She fell into a terrible whirlpool and had to fight its spin to swim back to shore and save herself. Glowing with excitement, she told of how blessed she felt to have had such an experience, how it proved to her that we all get another chance to correct our mistakes - we can right any wrong.

There it was. Confirmation. Truly, it wasn't the experience that mattered as much as the aftermath. The experiencer's belief made the difference, and only the experiencer could validate what had happened, and what it meant to him or her.

This event came right on the heels of my meeting two people at separate events who were mentioned in Dr. Moody's first book. Both were shy about speaking to me, and were dealing with depression. And both said basically the same thing when I asked what the problem was: ***They were ashamed!*** I couldn't believe my ears. Ashamed? The explanation I got was, they did not feel as perfect as the others Moody wrote about. They didn't feel they measured up to his claims of what happened to experiencers afterward. The guilt they felt for being so "phony" brought on their depression, years of it. They were surprised when I said: "None of us come back perfect. We still have troubles. We still get angry. We still mess up. It's just that life gets easier to deal with afterward and we have a better sense of what really matters." To see their tears turn to smiles made my day.

So what have I learned from the people I've met? Well, I learned that I cannot give the same talk about near-death experiences in Tennessee that I can in Chicago, or in Michigan that I can in California, or in Arkansas that I can in Oregon. Languaging styles are different wherever I go – even in our own country – and local belief systems vary broadly. Catholic nuns love to hear from me; priests don't. And Lutherans are very picky. You almost have to sign a disclaimer before you can be on their radio shows or speak in their meetings. Most Muslims are not interested in the topic, neither are the Chinese – that is to say before Eunice Brock invited Moody to China this year. In a number of churches across our land, even today, a minister can be fired if he or she bases a sermon on the subject of near-death experiences and their implications. Several Catholic websites carry warnings that the angels seen by experiencers are really agents of the devil in disguise.

These websites target children's cases the most. In fact, I've found that the more conservative and rigid a given church doctrine, the more likely that congregation is to condemn child experiencers of near-death states. I have met child experiencers and their parents who described being visited weekly, for months on end, by emissaries from their church demanding that the child recant his or her story lest the child burn in hell for lying. The last one I found was near San Antonio, Texas. *And every single child I met who was targeted by such hate*, smiled and said it was okay. God was using these incidents to teach forgiveness. One boy told me, "These people are just asleep. Someday they'll wake up and love like I do."

If we have failed in near-death research, it is with distressing episodes and with the children. In the past, researchers looked at children through the eyes of an adult, compared them to adults, and used adult models to base their findings. I caught on to this years ago when, after finishing a stint about children's cases for NBC television, I was left with the moms and their kids. What they discussed contradicted claims made by a physician on the show. That took me aback, and I launched a side-project just on kids. I wanted to experience what they did, their way. When you're working with kids, your eyes cannot be higher than theirs. That meant with little ones, I was on my belly on the floor. Through their drawings, through their body language, through their expressions – I gained a whole new view of the near-death phenomenon and wrote the book *The New Children and Near-Death Experiences* – one of the most important books I have written. After the book came out I was flooded with child experiencers, who had grown. Again and again they shared the same story: "I didn't know it was normal for me to see spirits afterward. I was always so smart in school and I knew things, but no one would believe me. I didn't fit in with the other kids. I've spent my whole life trying to find out why I am so different. No one told me anything." It nearly broke my heart to hear some of their stories. Yes, many kids adjust just fine, but even these stand apart from their agemates throughout their growing years. Among my findings, I discovered that it was typical for the parent/child bond to break after a near-death experience. What parent, no matter how loving can compare to the bright ones on the other side of

death? This bond can be mended – steps to do so are not difficult – suggestions are in my book or through IANDS (International Association For Near-Death Studies). Even though my finding that it takes a minimum of seven years for adults to integrate their experience was verified in the clinical, prospective study conducted by Dr. Pim van Lommel and Associates, considering what I found with child experiencers, I would say that it takes at least twenty years for them to do the same, maybe longer. By and large, children do not integrate, they compensate. And they have no way to "connect the dots" between their episode and resultant behaviors. A child's job is to survive and thrive. If what happened to them, especially as an infant or a toddler, is not readily usable, they tend to toss the incident aside or re-press it. I recommend that child experiencers, no matter how old they are, make their book.

Creating a book of some type or style where they can write their story, draw pictures or write poems, tape in newspaper clippings about their episode if there are any, is **THE** most healing and most effective exercise they can do. Aafke Holm-Oosterhof in Holland did this, and she claimed just making her book changed her life! She made the connections, and understood.

Speaking of Holland, the near-death groups over there are ahead of the ones here in addressing and working with child experiencers. I was amazed when I visited the country to present a talk and workshop at just how far ahead of us they really are. As a child or even grown, these experiencers are encouraged to use art to express themselves and tell their story. The result is incredible.

In Oslo, Norway, I gave several talks in open bookstores about the near-death phenomenon and attracted large crowds. The people were very interested – but not the least bit in forming an IANDS group. They found such groups to be boring and said so. My talk in Bergen, however, netted an unusual turnout – of shamans from Arctic regions far north. It seems the near-death experience, although not called that, is part of their heritage. These people told me that near-death and episodes like it were necessary for an individual to undergo in order to become a trusted shaman and healer.

Germany was quiet, with physicians and researchers

working almost nondescript in their efforts to investigate the phenomenon and create meetings where experiencers could feel safe sharing their story. Compared with the openness and lively activity I found in Holland and Norway, Germany seemed to be a place of quite whispers and carefully chosen associations, one person at a time. I have been told things are better there now and experiencers are finally coming forward. Even the media there is cooperating.

What can I say about Seoul, South Korea? The paper I presented at a conference and the workshops I held there were more than swamped. People came in by the bus load for miles around to attend the conference, some rose in the wee hours of morning so they would not miss their bus. I planted myself on the steps outside to witness the miracle. Hundreds came – enough to fill a great hall. And **every person** clutched note paper, pens, recording devices, and lunches. These people meant business and they were hungry, starved for information about near-death experiences, the new sciences, and alternative methods of healing. I swear even their eyes were aglow, they were so excited. I spoke with as many as I could.

And I was impressed during the ten days I spent in the City, that I could stop anyone on the street, or in an alley, or in a shop, or at a restaurant, at night or in the daytime, and to a person they were knowledgeable about my field of study and craved more information about it, and spirituality, and life after death, and God. I have never seen anything like this in my life. South Korea is a nation of people who take spirituality seriously.

I ran into a snag right away, though. Four groups of people who wanted to conduct their own study of near-death states among Koreans approached me and wanted to know how to begin, what were the specifications, how do they write up their findings, where do they send their papers, who do they report to? I had no real answer except to refer them to Dr. Bruce Greyson. How many actually contacted him I do not know. But I do know this. IANDS needs to create a set of instructions that answers what the Koreans wanted to know and distribute it widely. We cannot assume that people in other countries know what to do or how to do it. We cannot assume even, that the various universities abroad find the

subject of interest. I, for one, would like to tote research instructions along with me when I travel, so I can be at the ready when questions are asked. We need research done in other cultures, and it doesn't have to be done by scientists or physicians, nurses or educators. Any dedicated individual or group can do it, and use whatever protocol fits best in their part of the world that will still net objective results that can be analyzed and studied. I hope IANDS takes this on as a project.

Istanbul, Turkey, was another surprise. Although the conference crowd was maybe 250, far less than in Seoul, the enthusiasm throughout the entire City and Turkey itself was unbelievable. The media turned out in hoards – my photo made every major newspaper in the country, day after day, including the Turkish version of CNN television news. I was not allowed to walk freely there because of a rash of thefts, but where I could poke my nose and speak with the populace, I did. Same treatment: I was a hero to them and they nearly worshipped me. I've been spit at, slapped around, threatened with bodily harm, cursed, and damned to hell in the United States – yet in Turkey the praise was thick and non-stop. I was privileged while there to be part of a delegation that visited a major university with the idea that within a certain timeframe, they would build a wing devoted to the paranormal and near-death research. Whether this actually transpires or not, just the thought that people of note are moving in this direction was exciting to me. I consider it a sign that science and spirituality are finally beginning to realize that one supports the other – they are both saying the same thing only in different ways.

I have tried to get into Latino and Black communities in the U.S. and thought I had last year, when all my engagements were suddenly cancelled. No reason given. Eunice tried to send me to China but the government said no; they were afraid I might say something about an afterlife. Thank goodness they opened their doors to Moody. Belgium, France, and Italy only want physicians as speakers in their country, yet wherever I've gone, audiences are most interested in the stories experiencers tell, and about the aftereffects.

That's indicative of a sea change happening now. The general population here and in many other countries of the

world are truly interested in hearing about near-death experiences. And the nurses, bless them, are right there, front and center, turning on their best listening skills and doing what they can to assist anyone who may have had such an experience. It wasn't that long ago when the phenomenon was considered a silly fluke or nothing more than the hallucination of a dying brain. IANDS especially has turned the world around to a more educated view of the subject, and is slowly moving minds past myths – like that stuff about tunnels, when few people actually report them. Professionals are at last realizing that the phenomenon is a complex dynamic that cannot be easily defined, or explained away. The near-death experience is quickly becoming a major aid in helping people deal with loss, hospice care, and especially the death of children. And it is finally touching religious values in areas of justice and forgiveness, love and understanding, and the power of having a personal relationship with The Source of All Being. We can pat ourselves on the back for how far we've come. But there are still disappointments.

Last spring, for instance, a large seminar was planned for nurses in the Phoenix area, funded by several bankers. The topic was near-death states and the development of the intuitive sense of knowing. At the last moment the seminar was cancelled by the bankers because they believed it to be "the work of the devil." Just this year I encountered fellow experiencers who are still discriminating against those who were not hospitalized when their episode occurred. And they are tagging people who attend IANDS meetings as "experiencer" or "non-experiencer," as if being an experiencer were something special. We're getting a little too commercialized in how we define who is and who isn't, what is and what isn't, and in who goes to heaven and who doesn't. Experiencers are now making declarative statements about life and death in the name of IANDS, as if there were an official line, instead of admitting that all they can share is their own opinion about what happened to them. I have found that those who often speak the loudest about no judgment on the other side of death are usually the sharpest critics of their fellow experiencers. The slapping around I once received was from another near-death experiencer who didn't like me correcting an erroneous claim that the individual's case was a record setter.

As far as I am concerned, we have just begun to explore what can be learned from the near-death phenomenon: the experience, the aftereffects, and the implications. Let's not rest on our laurels. There's much yet to do.

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I Saw Heaven, by Arthur E. Yensen is still available from his son Eric.

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