

## **Why NDEs bring so much comfort to the ill, the terminally ill and, indeed, to anyone interested in this phenomenon**

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### **Description of the near-death experience (NDE)**

The near-death experience is a phenomenon that occurs, in some cases, at the farthest extremity of life, in a state close to that of death. It is an experience that assumes vital importance for those who emerge from it. The fact that it occurs in the interval between life and death places the NDE somewhere between the real and the transcendental.

In the vast majority of cases, NDEs occur in persons who are in a near-death state, and occasionally, in a comatose state. In very rare instances, however, they may also be experienced by perfectly healthy individuals who have been exposed to an intensely frightening event (for example persons who have a fall in the mountain, are convinced that they will die but finally land safely in the snow, without any physical damage) or other highly traumatizing events (for example a rape).

### **The different stages of the near-death experience**

- An NDE typically starts with an *out-of-body experience*, when dying persons view their bodies from an external vantage point, at some distance above. Their rational consciousness continues without interruption. Very often, near-death experiencers (or NDErs), even blind persons, have optical perceptions which can be ascertained; during the out-of-body experience, pain has disappeared; it seems that in this state, NDErs can go and see through matter and read the thoughts of persons who are present.
- The NDEr has the sensation of entering a *dark tunnel* and moving at a very high speed. This stage may be accompanied by a sound, often described as harmonious. Some NDErs felt the presence of welcoming beings, but they couldn't see them. The individuals perceive themselves as either without a body, or with an extremely lightweight one.
- A *brilliant light* beckons at the end of the tunnel, attracting the individual like a magnet.
- The dying person enters the light and experiences infinite *happiness, peace and harmony*.
- Next might come the encounter with the *being of light*, which is described as the vision of a dazzlingly beautiful golden-white light, personifying total love and absolute understanding. The light seems to be infused with powerful symbolic meaning and, when merging with it, the person experiences feelings of absolute blissfulness and seems to have access to universal knowledge. This knowledge is partially or completely lost when returning to the physical body.
- Then a *life review* might occur which is one of the most important elements of the NDE. The NDEr witnesses a three-dimensional and atemporal review of all the events of his/her life, from the most striking to the most ordinary. During this life review, NDErs relive all their thoughts, words, emotions and actions as well as their impact on the involved persons,

- resulting in a highly ethical judgment of all those events, measured by the criterion of love; during this life review, the dying person sees the relived events from his or her own perspective as well as the one of the persons involved, which allows a holistic understanding.
- NDErs often report feeling certain of belonging to a *universal and harmonious whole* and of understanding its purpose and functioning.
  - NDErs describe *magnificent environments*, embellished with gorgeous flowers and illuminated by colors of the most astounding beauty and intensity.
  - Some NDErs have seen a *city of light*.
  - According to numerous NDErs, *guides, guardian angels or deceased loved ones* were waiting for them; they communicate by telepathy, from consciousness to consciousness; often, they let the dying persons know that they cannot stay, that their time hasn't come yet and that they have their lives to live first.
  - More rarely, NDErs see precognitive elements of their own *future* or of the future of humanity or the planet which come true later.
  - Perception of *time* is greatly altered as during the very short time of the near-death experience, (sometimes only a few minutes), an enormous amount of information is delivered to the dying persons.
  - NDErs often report seeing a *limit or boundary*, symbolized in various ways, which, if crossed, would make returning to the physical body impossible. The return to the body, which in the majority of cases seems to take place against their will, happens mostly rather abruptly.

It should be noted that one rarely finds all the above-mentioned features in a single near-death experience.

### **An enduring feeling of self-identity**

During the near-death experience, individuals are certain of being themselves, of having retained their personality, their character, their life experience. Even more than this, they firmly believe they have never before been so entirely, so completely themselves – the concentration, the essence of their deepest and most authentic self. An NDEr puts it like this:

*"... during my NDE, I was not the wife of my husband. I was not the parent of my children. I was not the child of my parents. I was totally and completely me."*

### **The visual perceptions occurring during the near-death experience should not be taken literally**

We have seen that NDErs often see deceased loved ones, cities of light and magnificent landscapes. I often discussed this aspect with NDErs, because it has intrigued me for many years.

Incontestably, they are convinced that they saw those beautiful environments, fields, flowers and streams and also uncle John who wore his old suit but who looked much younger, healthier and happier than the day he died.

At first sight, you might think that the other dimension is a sublime replica of life on earth. However, the resemblance shouldn't delude us. To take those images literally would certainly be a mistake. I believe that NDErs find themselves in a dimension which is incomprehensible to the human mind, so it is represented in such a way that they can understand it. I presume that this other world exists, that it is real, but so different from anything that a human being can conceive that it is transposed into images which are familiar. In other words, I assume that this other reality is adapting itself to human understanding.

NDErs tell us that they saw deceased loved ones, a mother, an uncle, sometimes a child...

I think those beings had put on almost earthly appearances without really being so, so that the dying person could recognize them. They are in the other world, but in a form that they wouldn't be able to understand if they hadn't presented themselves in ways that are familiar to NDErs. But perhaps it is only the *telling* of what they perceived which is human, which must be human since the NDErs are here in flesh and blood to talk about it.

In short, I am convinced that this other dimension is by nature fundamentally different from our world, therefore it is presented in a way that would become comprehensible to the dying person. I believe that, what NDErs see, is only part of the truth, the reality is certainly much more complex.

### **The near-death experiencer – a new person !**

The NDE leads to a profound and lasting transformation in those who have experienced it. This personal transformation, which is common to all who have undergone a near-death experience, does not happen immediately following the NDE. It is the result of a long search, filled with questions, introspection, and vain attempts to regain their former selves. NDErs sense that the course of their life has definitely shifted but are left wondering what direction it should now take. Often they resist and try to turn their backs on it, but the urgency and strength behind this need for change are stronger than the fear it engenders.

Once they have found their way, great peace and harmony enter their lives. The main reason for that seems to be the love they have felt in the presence of the being of light and no doubt also the complete absence of fear of death which is one of the main characteristic of NDErs.

The somewhat theoretical values of religious teachings become obvious to them – they are seen as a natural course and a vital need. Although the directions chosen by NDErs may differ, all are based on a desire to be of service to others. They all agree to say that the only thing that counts in life is love!

Those who have had a near-death experience are also characterized by a tremendous thirst for knowledge and understanding. Their vision of the world changes radically, they have a sense of belonging to a whole whose contours they recognize, but whose mechanisms they feel a great need to understand.

Moreover, self-acceptance and self-esteem increase significantly following an NDE. Henry, a former drug addict who had his NDE when he almost died of an overdose, had completely lost his self-esteem after twenty years of drug addiction. He shared his NDE with me and said:

*“What’s different now is that I can unconditionally love myself, because God accepts me just the way I am”.*

Nine months after his NDE, he completely stopped taking drugs.

The NDE is a powerful healing device – like an instant therapy that enables NDErs to accept themselves as they are. Self-acceptance is the key to opening to others, since we cannot turn to our neighbor and help him unless we are at peace with ourselves. This inner peace is one of the gifts NDErs receive.

NDErs are unanimous in expressing a total absence of fear regarding death. They know they will find that state of grace once more when the time comes, and are therefore totally free from the fear of death which is unquestionably the heaviest load that we, as humans, have to bear.

NDErs also are characterized by their great tolerance with regard to religions and beliefs. It does not seem to matter to them what name others give to their God, since it is a question of one and the same truth. Their position on religion may be summed up in one word: they do not *believe*, they *know*!

### **What near-death experiencers mean by the term „love“**

We heard it, NDErs tell us over and over gain that the most important thing in life, even the primacy, is love. But what do they really mean by this term ? This word so over-used means nothing any more – it must find a new meaning and content. It isn’t the kind of sentiment which can be genuine and deeply felt, but which nevertheless is frequently cramped and selfish, which binds us to particular people. Very often people love in a conditional, self-interested sort of way. No, it is something completely

different... a powerful and generous emotion, a holistic altruistic dynamic which goes beyond individual interest. This is what NDErs understood when they were united with the light. They remained themselves, with their personality and their individuality. Nevertheless, they were closely connected to all human beings. All of us, we interact continually, without realizing it, and it is only in an extension of our consciousness, like the one taking place during a near-death experience, that we realize that we are all one. The meeting with the being of light, which is the quintessence of the journey to the other world, is an illustration of this love. That emotion, for which it would be necessary to coin a new word, creates meaning itself, and seems to be the force that binds together all living beings, the ultimate energy which interconnects all the parts that make up the universe.

### **Incidence of the phenomenon**

About 20% of persons close to death live a near-death experience.

Many millions have experienced an NDE. Recent statistics provide the following figures:

15 millions of Americans or 5% of the population

3,3 Millions of Germans or 4,3 % of the population

2 Millions of French people

NDE reports from many countries all over the world are available and have been studied. Since all of the studies conducted have unequivocally shown the NDE to be universal, not linked to a specific geographical area or culture, but rather to the general human condition, we can assume that an equivalent percentage of NDEs may be found in other countries around the world.

### **The profil of the near-death experiencer**

For many years, researchers thought that this figure of 20% was consistent, regardless of specificities of the concerned individuals.

A more recent study by the Dutch cardiologist Pim van Lommel provides new data. This prospective study was conducted between 1988 and 1996 in the resuscitation units of 10 Dutch hospitals and included 344 patients. All of them suffered a heart attack.

The results of this study were published in *The Lancet*. In connection with the profile of the NDEr, Pim van Lommel came to the following conclusion:

- NDEs happen more often under the age of 60
- Women have more often a core experience than men (a core experience means going through several or many stages of the NDE)
- significantly more patients who had an NDE, especially a core experience, died within 30 days of the cardiac arrest compared to those with a cardiac arrest without an NDE
- physiological, neurological, socio-cultural, psychological and pharmaceutical factors showed not be relevant

### **Psychological portrait of the NDEr**

The near-death experiencer undergoes a wide range of emotions. The beginning of the experience, which coincides with the OBE, is sometimes described as slightly disorienting. As the experience progresses, the emotional impressions become increasingly positive, culminating in a state of indescribable joy and ecstasy, particularly during the encounter with the being of light.

The individuals go through an accelerated and powerful emotional process. It is important to stress that NDErs feel they have full control over their fate. Many have said that, at a given point, it was they who made the decision to return to their bodies and to life.

An NDEr tells us:

*“It was wonderful over there on the other side, and I kind of wanted to stay. But knowing that I had something good to do on earth was just as wonderful in a way. So, I was thinking, ‘Yes, I must go back and live’ and I got back into my physical body”.*

### Negative or distressing NDEs (nNDEs)

Near-death experiences are intense spiritual experiences, with profoundly positive emotions such as peace, happiness, beatitude and unconditional love. Yet there exist, though rarely, negative or distressing NDEs, dominated by frightening, emotionally painful feelings like fear, terror, anger, loneliness, isolation and guilt.

I have published an article on this theme entitled „The distressing NDE – the other side of the coin or the hidden face of a beautiful experience”.

I don't have time here to go into more details, but I would nevertheless like to provide some statistics.

As a matter of fact, no commonly accepted data is available for this matter, but researchers assume that 1% to 15% of all NDEs are negative.

Often, the NDE literature mentions the estimations of Professor Kenneth Ring (5%) and of Professor Peter Fenwick (4%).

Nevertheless, in the four prospective studies conducted between 1984 and 2001 involving a total of 130 NDErs, none reported distressing experiences

Let me read a short excerpt of a distressing NDE which happened during a suicide attempt:

A carpenter without religious up-bringing tried to hang himself behind his shed because he had just lost his driving license as well as all the holiday savings for having driven his car under the influence of alcohol. He explains what happened:

*“I jumped from the roof of the shed into the backyard. Fortunately, I had forgotten about the broken chair which stand next to the shed. My feet hit the chair, otherwise my spine would have been broken. I hang in the rope and was suffocating. I was outside my physical body. I saw my body hanging on the rope, it looked horrible. I could see and hear, and yet, it was different, really strange. I was surrounded by demons, I could hear them, but I couldn't see them. They were squawking like black birds. It was as if they knew that they got me and that they had the whole eternity at their disposal to drag me into hell and torture me. It would be the worst kind of hell, and I would be hopelessly caught between two worlds, lost and confused, roaming for ever and ever.*

*I had to go back to my body. My God, I needed help ! I ran to the house, through the door, without opening it, and I called for my wife, but she couldn't hear me. That's why I went **straight into her body**. I could see with her eyes and hear with her ears. Then I **established the contact with her** and I heard her say: “Oh my God !”*

*She caught a knife laying on the kitchen table and run behind the shed, where I hang in the rope, climbed on the old chair and cut me from the rope. She couldn't find my pulse, she is a nurse. When the emergency team arrived, my heart had stopped beating, I didn't breath anymore either.”*

It is particularly interesting that the carpenter „went straight into“ the body of his wife, in order to catch her attention. When he “*established the contact*”, she got the necessary information which allowed her to catch a knife and run outside behind the shed and cut her husband from the rope. That is how she understood – or was „told“ about – the situation although she couldn't see her husband hanging in a rope behind the she, and that is what allowed her to save him.

### **How does the near-death experience reflect on individuals who never had one themselves ?**

#### ***The benign virus of the NDE***

Ganga Stone says it in plain language in her book „*Start the Conversation*“:

*“Are you beginning to be convinced that survival is real? If you need to build your certainty about this (which you probably do), your best bet is to read as much firsthand accounts of near-death experiences as you can”.*

In this context I would like to present „*The Omega Project*“ of Kenneth Ring. The relevant part of that study involved 74 NDErs and a control group of 54 persons, who were known to be interested in NDEs but never had such an experience themselves. In examining the pattern of belief and values changes, Kenneth Ring found that the control group showed many of the same effects as NDErs *since becoming interested in NDEs*, though, not surprisingly, the magnitude of these changes was usually somewhat less than for the NDErs themselves.

Nevertheless, the results showed clearly that members of the control group felt they had also become more appreciative of life, more self-accepting, more compassionately concerned for others, more spiritual, less materialistic, and so on – in short, they reflected the same kind of values profile as actual NDErs, presumably just as a result of finding themselves drawn to the world of these experiences.

Further analysis revealed that the shifts in values and outlook reported by the control group tended to persist and did not fade with the passage of time. In some cases, these persons were describing changes that had already lasted almost two decades.

There were still other enduring shifts in beliefs and values for the control group that showed them to have moved to positions virtually indistinguishable from the view typically expressed by NDErs. For example, like NDErs, the great majority of the controls now also evinced an increased ecological sensitivity and a greater concern for the welfare of the planet following their exposure to NDE materials.

#### **The case of the students**

Kenneth Ring offered an undergraduate course on NDEs at the University of Connecticut from 1985 to 1994. In 28 class periods, he gave an overview of the NDE itself and then spent a couple of class periods showing some videos of persons narrating their NDEs. This was followed by three NDErs coming to class to share their own experience directly with the students.

The students were assigned to read Raymond Moody's book „*Life after Life*“ and Kenneth Ring's book „*Life at death*“.

Kenneth Ring also spoke about related fields like

- deathbed visions
- out of body experiences
- Mystical experiences

In the Spring semester of 1993, Kenneth Ring asked his students to fill out a little questionnaire at the very end of the course which gave the following results:

- a) 96% of the students said they were now more convinced of the authenticity of NDEs

- b) 61 % felt as a result of taking the course that they were now more spiritually oriented individuals
- c) 68% were more convinced that their own lives had a purpose
- d) 71% said that their ideas about God had altered or strengthened as a result of the course

90% of the students reported that they had a much more positive attitude to death and 70% declared that their fear of death had declined.

Some typical quotes were:

„I have less fear of death ... and am more spiritual“

“The course has reinforced my beliefs about the unimportance of wealth and material objects“

„I feel more compassion for all people“

„I have more open-mindedness to learn as much as I can, while I still can“

„I have found my spirituality which has been hiding within myself“

Despite the small, self-selected nature of the samples, what they suggest is certainly in accord with the benign virus hypothesis: it appears as if some of the benefits of the NDE can be transmitted vicariously, simply by presenting relevant information on the subject to individuals who are or become interested in NDEs. It shows that if someone is open for NDEs, they can internalized its essential insights and make them their own.

### **The case of the senior citizen centers in Connecticut**

Kenneth Ring and his students developed an educational program based on the NDE for senior citizens, which was presented at selected senior citizens centers in Connecticut. The program was offered over three successive days and consisted of the following segments:

- 1) an introductory lecture on NDEs
- 2) a presentation of videotapes featuring NDEs
- 3) a personal account of an NDE by a senior citizen followed by questions and answers

Questionnaires given both before and after these presentations revealed the following effects:

- a decrease in fear of death
- an increase in belief that the moment of death will be peaceful
- an increase in belief in life after death
- a decrease in belief that life after death will be unpleasant
- an increase in belief that one will be reunited with deceased loved ones
- an increased belief in God

There was a very strong qualitative response to these programs, with many of the attendees expressing appreciation for the information and a desire to learn more about NDEs.

### **Aids-Patients and NDE reports**

There seems to be a special place for NDE accounts for persons who are facing death from AIDS. An example of this comes from the work of Ganga Stone, who for many years in New York ran an organization called *God's Love We Deliver*, which ministered to the need of such persons. Ganga Stone managed to cadge food for her clients from some of New York City's finest restaurants, and she and her volunteers would then deliver it, along with God's Love – *and* the NDE ! In short, Ganga Stone would make a point of bringing information about the NDE to her clients and she couldn't say enough about how much these accounts meant to the persons she was working with. Indeed, she was so inspired by the use of this kind of information with her patients that she eventually wrote a book *Start the Conversation*, that is concerned in large part with the uses of the NDE in enabling others

come to terms with death. Ganga Stone's book is based on a six-week course she taught for New Yorkers, many of them suffering from AIDS. She helped them confront and overcome the fear of death and the need for grief by teaching them to see that "*There is no death*" and that "*You are not your body*" – and for all this, the research on the NDE played a pivotal role in her argument. Ganga Stone is a good example of someone who has used NDE stories as an antidote to fear of death in persons who were facing imminent death.

### **Attitude towards death**

There is little doubt that in the Western World, at least from the time of the devastating plagues that caused the death of millions of Europeans in the thirteenth century, the dominant symbol of death has been „the grim reaper“, that hooded and faceless figure who comes to take us away, we know not when, we know not where. This forbidding specter, who haunted Europe for centuries and has long been a part of our collective psyche, and its image is still powerful enough to conjure up in us feelings of dread concerning the inexorability of our own deaths.

And yet, in just the last quarter of the last century, ever since the advent of modern research into the NDE, this frightening “grim reaper” has finally begun to be eclipsed by another image – the Light of the NDE itself.

In one of his books, Joseph Campbell says "*that, seen from afar, death is an horrific specter, but seen up close, it has the face of the beloved*".

Those who have had this experience have indeed seen the face of death „up close“ and their narratives serve to assure us that Campbell was right on target here.

As we move from the external perspective of death to an internal one, where we *experience* the moment of death itself, all fear dissolves and we know a love that is as overwhelming and welcoming as it is without equal.

This utter absence of fear of death is the hallmark of the near-death experiencer. It is such a profound distinction, though an invisible one, that it truly marks the near-death survivor as radically different from the rest of us.

When we first hear NDE testimonies, we begin by marveling at them, but after a while, we find that they have silently entered into our psyche and have caused us to have a view of death that no longer has any place for the grim reaper.

And this allows us to present a new face of death to those who are terminally ill or facing the death of a beloved one.

### **A new understanding of death in the light of the near-death experience**

Thanks to the NDE research, death reveals itself in its true light – the Light itself. Where once we had seen death as a final, terrible, and irrevocable separation, we now understand that it only represents the continuity of life in realms that are normally, but not always, closed to our ordinary sense perception. There seems to be a kind of commerce between these realms, between the living-here and the living-elsewhere, and nowhere is there death as we have known and believed it to be. In the light of the NDE, death is nothing more than *the illusion of separateness and finality*, and those who can believe in this vision of death, like NDErs themselves, lose all fear of it, for how can you fear that which does not exist ?

This new understanding of death is healing. NDErs who are facing death do not fear it, they know the light awaits them. Those who grieve are comforted and sometimes even transformed by the



testimonies of NDErs. And those blessed with a vision of a loved one who has left them know with certitude that their beloved still lives and that the connection has not been broken.

In the face of all of this, the grim reaper skulks away, exposed as the fraud he always was.

And this view of death is not confined only to those interested in NDEs or involved in death and dying movements. No, more and more persons who are part of the mainstream culture have begun to take note of it. This work and perspective have already begun to permeate the hospice movement in the United States and are even influencing the treatment of the dying and care for the bereaved in more traditional institutions. Let's hope the same phenomenon will soon happen in Europe.

### **Deathbed visions**

Deathbed visions are a well-known and largely widespread phenomenon. They can be assimilated to NDEs and those two phenomena explain each other, even if they present themselves in different ways. During deathbed visions, dying persons see deceased loved ones who help them move from this world to the next, in order to help them die.

This state of consciousness can be seen as if it were a double vision, since both worlds seem to be there for the dying person simultaneously and it is hard for them to know which is which, who is in which world. If family members panic in response, they will either cause fear or simply make the dying refuse to talk about what they are experiencing.

Marilyn Webbs puts it this way:

*"The language of the dying is symbolic. If you listen they tell you what the other world is like because they are a window into that other world".*

Psychologists Karlis Osis and Elendur Haraldsson have collected the observations of 640 doctors and nurses of what occurred as some 35'540 of their patients died, then they have collected a second set of responses from more than 1'000 health-care workers reporting on some 50'000 patient deaths.

They reported in their book *"At the Hour of Death"* that some 84% had visions of dead relatives who had a close relationship to the patient; 23% said it was their mother, 18% said it was a spouse, the rest reported apparitions of various kinds.

Most of these patients said that this vision was "coming to take them away" or "they want to help me to get from one world to the other".

Callanan and Kelley, nurses and authors of *"Final Gifts"*, coined the term "near-death awareness", observing that their patients lived in two different worlds at the same time. They seemed to get ready to travel from this world to another, and they seemed to be communicating two kinds of messages:

One, it seemed as if they could choose (within a certain time frame) when it was that they would actually die.

And two, they let their family members know, sometimes through the metaphors of travel, that deceased loved ones were waiting to take them into the other world.

As far as the visions are concerned, the authors say:

*"Get into the metaphor with them (the dying patients), but be honest. If someone says: 'Do you see the angel sitting at the foot of my bed?' say: 'No, to be truthful, I don't, but I can see that you do, and that it brings you great joy, so I'm very glad for you.' How do you help the dying? Open your hearts to the possibility that they are true prophets".*

### **Dealing with the grief of bereavement**

Bereavement is a strange mixture of compassion for the deceased person (*"The poor man, he was so young when he passed away"*), of the pain of being separated for ever from the beloved person and of the fear which death spontaneously inspires.

A professor of medicine of Geneva, Jean-Pierre Girard, had an NDE. He discussed his experience and its after-effects with me. This interview is included in my book *“On the Other Side of Life”*. I asked him:

„Could we say that death is only sad for those who remain behind, not for those who die ?“

I got the following answer:

*„Undoubtedly, for those who die, death can be – on the contrary – a release and a joy. For those of us who stay behind, it’s normal to be sad when someone we love passes away. But, what doesn’t seem normal to me is that this sadness should throw certain persons into the depths of despair, sometimes lasting an infinite amount of time. That doesn’t seem right to me“.*

Another experiencer told me:

*“I miss my mother deeply, nothing can replace her. But I’m perfectly okay about where she is right now. I’m not worrying about her. I’m just worrying about how I can get on with my life with that essential person missing“.*

NDE researchers receive many letters attesting how much comfort and hope NDE accounts have brought to bereaved persons, especially those who have had to cope with the death of a child

### **Palliative care**

The first hospices were established in 1974 in the USA. The modern hospice movement was set up by the British medical doctor Cicely Saunders. She started her career as a nurse. Her main concerns were to control pain and to help people die with dignity through a psychological and spiritual support.

Many investigators talk about the ubiquity of NDEs in hospice settings. For example, critical care nurse Linda Barnet found that in a sample of sixty hospice nurses, 63% had worked with at least one NDEr patient. Similarly, the hospice physician Dr. Pamela Kircher conducted a survey at a meeting of the National Hospice Organization that revealed that 73% of her sample of hospice-based health care professionals had heard descriptions of NDEs from their terminally ill patients.

And Dr. Marilyn Webb, the author of a highly regarded book on dying and death in America *„The Good Death“* has stated that in the 1990s, a working knowledge of NDEs has been *„officially incorporated into hospice work, into hospice philosophy, and into work with the dying even in mainstream medical institutions“*. And she added: *„These stories are bringing a new kind of hope to the terminally ill“*.

During these years, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a Swiss medical doctor, had begun what would become her famous *Death and Dying Seminars* at the University of Colorado’s medical school. She would ask dying patients to come to a meeting with her medical students to describe what they were experiencing emotionally and to talk about what physicians might do to improve medical treatment and care for the dying. In 1969, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s book *“On Death and Dying”* catapulted the previously taboo subject of death into modern public debate.

### **NDErs help patients cross over**

NDE research shows that quite a few NDErs themselves are drawn to work in hospices, usually as volunteers, because they have come to feel such an affinity with the dying and know they can help such persons more easily make their transitions and with less fear. Although you might think that NDErs might naturally be tempted to share their own near-death encounters with the dying patients they care for, this is not necessarily the case. In *„Lessons from the Light“*, we included the case of a nurse named Pat who had her own NDE nineteen years earlier and since then had worked almost continuously in caring for the dying. When Kenneth Ring asked her if she had made use of her experience in her work, she surprisingly said that she could only recall mentioning it on four occasions. So what NDErs share with the dying is not always their personal stories – though, of

course, they often do – but just their being itself, which in some tacit but undeniable way helps to communicate their own lack of fear about death to their patients. What NDEs have become, not necessarily what they have gone through, is the final gift they have to offer those who are about to die.

### **„Talking with Angel about illness, death and survival“**

I have been studying NDEs for over twenty years. I wrote *„Talking with Angel about illness, death and survival“* with the aim that the theoretical knowledge about NDEs nowadays available should immediately and concretely help people who are facing difficult life situations and, more generally, enrich anyone who is reflecting on this most essential aspect of life.

The book tells the story of a young girl battling leukemia who eventually realizes she is going to die. She receives hope and comfort through nightly conversations with her favorite doll, Angel, who helps her to embrace a new perspective on dying, and the possibility that consciousness could survive after death. Her fear of death is ultimately lifted by her new-found spiritual wisdom and by the account of a near-death experience told to her by a young companion.

### **My personal conclusion**

The NDE clearly does not fit into the same category as any other topic of research. The invention of the wheel or the discovery of the laws of gravity were undoubtedly of great importance to the evolution of mankind, but they did not lend meaning to man's existence. Exploration into NDEs is of a distinct nature, for it deals with humankind's essence, destiny, and progress beyond known limits. The near-death experience represents at once an immense hope and a formidable challenge. The fascination it holds for us derives from the fact that it will probably never be fully explained.

NDE researchers owe much, if not everything, to the near-death experiencers. They share their luminous experience with us with honesty, generosity and modesty.

My work in the field of NDEs has changed me in a radical and lasting way, although I never had an NDE myself. Therefore I am myself one of the persons who have caught the benign virus and I never want to be cured of it!

For many years, I have been deeply convinced that information about NDEs should be brought to as many persons as possible. Beyond the intellectual challenge, the knowledge we have today of the phenomenology and of the after-effects of NDEs should allow those who are interested to reflect about the limits of the human condition.

The new perspective which the near-death experience opens, the milder image of death it suggests, the hope it settles beyond known limits, should be available, if they so wish, for the ill, the terminally ill, and the mourning and, more generally, for all those who wish to reflect about the essential issues of life.

I am convinced of the usefulness, even the necessity, of spreading information about NDEs, and yet, I am also sure that there are no “directions for use” given to help people face the tests of life. We can and should inform about near-death experiences, but every person must draw his or her personal conclusions. Each person must follow the path that leads to their own truth, to their own solution, even if this path is sometimes difficult. This will lead them to their innermost convictions, their deepest beliefs, their unique and true personality which will spring forth as a result of their efforts. Everyone must trace their own path towards their truth, that is the price of freedom, the price that must be paid for their choices which, alone, will hold in the face of the final step which we all must take alone.