

## **On the Other Side of Life**

Exploring the Phenomenon of the Near-Death Experience

**By Evelyn Elsaesser-Valarino**

353 pages

1997

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### ***Praise for "On the Other Side of Life"***

*"... A refreshing and stimulating look at a subject that has been trampled by hype and innuendo. The author's probing and insightful questions posed to a multidisciplinary panel of experts unmask the veiled secrets of the NDE as never before."*

Michael B. Sabom, M.D., Author *Recollections of Death: A Medical Investigation*

*"... A uniquely valuable opportunity to encounter and ponder the thinking of a very distinguished and diverse group of scholars and researchers on this phenomenon. The author has given us a giant step in our infinite journey of discovering the ultimate secrets of death – and life."*

From the Foreword by Kenneth Ring, Ph.D. Professor of Psychology, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut

*"The author courageously begins the much-needed dialogue between medicine, physics, philosophy, and spirituality, which so far has been missing from the near-death debate. Anyone who has wanted to sit down and chat with a world-class physicist or professor of medicine about spirituality and consciousness should read this book!"*

Melvin L. Morse, M.D., Associate Professor of Pediatrics, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington

*"...An important contribution to the debates about the meaning and significance of the NDE, and provides a stimulating introduction to the subject for the general reader."*

David Lorimer, Chair, International Association of Near-Death Studies (UK), Middlesex, England

### **Network – Scientific and Medical Network**

December 1998, no 68

**Reviewed by David Lorimer**

#### **The Informing Light**

These books (*Lessons from the Light*, by Kenneth Ring and Evelyn Elsaesser-Valarino and *On the Other Side of Life* by Evelyn Elsaesser-Valarino) mark a new stage of maturity in the field of near-death studies in the breadth of their scope and the significance of their conclusions for the general reader.

Evelyn's book is a philosophical exploration of the phenomenon of the near-death experience that covers a great deal of ground. It also helps fill an important gap for English speaking readers by introducing the thinking of a number of important French speaking researchers. IANDES France has sponsored and supported a good deal of research that has previously been inaccessible in English.

Evelyn's first chapter provides an excellent overview, with case quotations, of the major features of the NDE. She then moves on to two detailed testimonies, one from a doctor, followed by dialogues with a variety of individuals representing psychology, physics, neuroscience, biology, theology and philosophy. The longest interview is with Kenneth Ring, and forms a bridge to his own book. Regis and Brigitte Dutheil introduce their superluminal hypothesis of the NDE, which links it to work done in Belgium on tachyons and proposes that the NDE tunnel represents the passage from a subluminal to a superluminal realm. There is no parallel to this interesting hypothesis among English speaking researches. Paul Chauchard is challenged on his materialistic view but admits that he has no scientific means of providing that everything is destroyed at death. Consciousness, he states, manifests itself materially to science as a cerebral integration, leading him to the Aristotelean view that the soul is the form of the body and to a consideration of the nature of the immanence of the transcendent. Monsignor Jean Vernet presents a lucid account of the Catholic doctrine of life and death, warning of the dangers of confusing eternal life with an altered state of consciousness. He provides a reflective interface with orthodox theology. The reader will find the interviews probing, reflecting as they do many of the questions that would occur to an interested enquirer.

Kenneth Ring's book, in which Evelyn was also closely involved, is the culmination of his twenty years research in this area; readers may well be familiar with his previous work and this book is essentially a sequel to his *Heading Toward Omega* (1984). It is subtitled "what we can learn from the near-death experience" and addresses itself to the most profound implications for our understanding of the nature of human beings and life. In his myth of Er, Plato refers to the river of forgetfulness through which we all pass on coming into the world. It is Ken's conviction, which I share, that the deeper aspects of the NDE can serve as a reminder of what we intrinsically know about life but have forgotten, namely that its most important features are the embodiment or manifestation of love and the pursuit of wisdom.

The book begins with a few typical cases, some presented to Ken's undergraduate psychology class at the University of Connecticut. The next two chapters investigate

in some detail veridical out of body experiences and NDEs in the blind (some of this data was presented at the 1997 Cambridge conference), which is the subject of his next book. He then reports on children's experiences and the major aftereffects of the experience. The core of the book is his analysis of the life review, from which he draws the same conclusion as I did in *Whole in One*, that it indicates the true nature and application of the Golden Rule. Because we share an underlying consciousness, what we do to others we are ultimately doing to ourselves. This view grounds ethics in a metaphysics of the oneness of the web of consciousness. If this sounds judgemental, Ken qualifies it by stressing that the greatest lesson of the NDE is the primacy of love: "what kills is judgment; what heals is love. The Light itself is only love, and it never judges; instead it gently nudges you towards your essential self" (p. 198). As love, it becomes clear that the light also heals. Such healing can extend to bereaved people, who can derive comfort from the NDE.

Ken extends his analysis into a consideration of after death communications (ADCs), illustrated with some intriguing cases that indicate genuine communication. The penultimate chapter gathers some of the most far-reaching experiences together and gives the reader a few hints on the ultimate nature of consciousness. From Mellon Thomas Benedict: "We are God's exploration of God through us. People are so busy trying to become God that they ought to realise that we are already God and God is becoming us. We are not everything, but we are that part of it that knows that it is" (p. 289). And Virginia Rivers: "God, a Light, a Beauty emitting from within, infinitely in all directions to touch every atom of being. Gold told me that there were only two things that we could bring back with us when we died... LOVE and KNOWLEDGE... so I was to learn as much about both as possible" (p. 296). *Lessons from the Light* is exactly what it says: it is a remarkable study of the NDE that ties its conclusions in with the perennial wisdom at the heart of our spiritual traditions.

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### ***Journal of Consciousness Studies***

1998

Professor **Thomas W. Draper** Brigham Young University

This book is targeted at those who are willing to consider the possibility that human consciousness can be separated from the classically defined physical body. Throughout its pages the author and most of the interviewees attempt to strengthen the case that near-death experiences (NDEs) are objective phenomena rather than psychological or biological illusions. The first chapter introduces unacquainted readers to some of the special terminology, claims, and demographics of those who report having had a near-death experience. Chapter two outlines more than twenty hallmarks of the typical experience – such things as finding one's consciousness separated from and viewing one's body, approaching a tunnel of light amid a gathering darkness, encountering a beneficent being of light, experiencing a surpassing feeling of peace and well-being, being allowed or instructed to return to the incarnate state, and having a profoundly altered sense of moral purpose following one's return. Chapters three and four offer two detailed personal accounts of

departures and returns from trauma-induced visits to an otherworldly realm. One account is that of a physician whose extra-corporeal journey was induced by an allergic reaction to a bee sting. The final six chapters are dialogues between the author and various individuals with informed opinions about such experiences either through personal exposure, scholarship, or both. The majority of the interviewees have advanced academic degrees (psychology, neurophysiology, medicine, philosophy) and generally all hold one or more positions of social note – professor, physician, academic researcher, monsignor. It is clearly the author's desire to demonstrate that positive consideration of the near-death experience is not limited to the unwashed, the unlearned, or the excessively gullible. Five of the six authorities who take up the discussion of the phenomenon are, on balance, accepting of the objective reality of reported experiences. The one authority who expresses the greatest reservations, the monsignor, does so on the basis of doctrinal variances in the reports. The standard alternate interpretations of the near-death experiences are discussed. Reasons for believing that the phenomenon is something more substantial than hallucination, oxygen deprivation, self- or other hypnosis, and such are offered.

However, even those who maintain a tentative openness – or better – toward elements of consciousness that extend beyond those that are allowed in the standard classical physical account, may have some trouble with parts of this book. In particular, the way some of the arguments for near-death experiences are offered is often disappointing. Assertions are made, and arguments against the phenomenon are dismissed without providing adequate documentation. Time and again I found myself going to the numerous footnotes and fairly long bibliography hoping to find a more detailed account of, or source for, a strong assertion. Time and again I came away disappointed. Stories that strongly resemble urban myth, such as one about an experiencer who just happened to notice a discarded red shoe on the roof of the hospital as his consciousness floated skyward – which shoe was later retrieved by the custodian after the near-death experience was reported – are offered as deserving serious discussion without corroborating information. Unqualified reports of prebirth experiences related by children are offered in the same vein. Mathematical proof of certain claims that are said to be beyond the comprehensibility of most readers are referred to, but no references is given for the benefit of the exceptional reader. As in most works of this genre, numerous appeals to the disruptive claims of quantum theory are made. Too liberal a use of the quantum metaphor runs the danger of blessing all “fuzzy” projects simply because Heisenberg was uncertain.

In spite of these criticisms the book may still be of interest to students of consciousness. The interviews with Louis-Marie Vincent, Régis Dutheil and Paul Chauchard, that comprise chapters six, seven and eight, move away from the tight discussion of the near-death experience and take up the broader issues of life, awareness and consciousness. These chapters contain much to stimulate the imagination and can serve as a quick primer for those interested in the foundational claims of the less indigent side of the new-age movement. Concepts inherent in claims about tachyonic and morphic fields, psi collapse, life as holography – a take off on Plato's *Analogy of the Cave* – empty waves, negentropy, and such are briefly outlined and clearly explained. At present such concepts may be little more than the stuff of science fiction. But in a domain of study where the frayed edges of what was once taken as a stable bastion of inquiry are beginning to show, those with a good imagination who can make their accounts intelligible to others have a role to play in

starting discussions. As such, the present work deserves a reading by those who find aggregated similarities in first-hand accounts of unusual experiences stimulating.

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### ***Vital Signs***

Vol. 16, nr. 3, 1998

This book is fast becoming a major contribution to the field of near death studies. It is a very probing examination of the near-death experience, that will influence people's attitudes toward life and death. Its subtitle is "exploring the phenomenon of the near-death experience" and its author is Swiss-born and head of the Law Library at the University of Geneva in Switzerland. The book is the result of a rigorous five-year program of research where she has sought to understand near-death experience accounts within the context of different disciplines. Prior to this five-year program, she spent many years in search of existentialist answers, studying scientific as well as philosophical works.

The author, in the first 84 pages of the book, presents the NDE phenomenon in an analytic and systematic way. The material deals with the description, research and future research on the NDE, questions raised by the experiencer, their profile and psychological profile, and implications for the reader and researcher. This is followed with an excellent analysis of the NDE and its successive stages which are illustrated for the reader by experiencer accounts. She lists 31 components and/or stages to the NDE and then discusses each of them with documented accounts from the near-death literature.

There are in this first part of the book two interviews conducted by the author, which she calls testimonies. One is with the late Jean-Pierre Girard, an MD in Geneva who had an NDE when he suffered a heart attack as a result of a bee sting. When he came back to consciousness after some thirty minutes, he said to his wife and the town doctor, "How simple it is to die".

In response to her question regarding an existence after death, he says, "Personally, I am convinced that certain forms of energy emanating from man, live on after death, joining up with cosmic energy in some way or another." (p. 63)

The second testimony interview is with a person known as Henry H. who had an experience from an overdose of cocaine and heroine who turned his life around and today works with young people who are on drugs.

The remainder of the book is devoted to dialogues she conducted with distinguished investigators and scholars in the fields of psychology, biology, physics, neurophysiology, theology and philosophy.

The first of these dialogues is with Kenneth Ring, PhD. It is a very extensive interview which covers some 75 pages. The dialogue ends with the question of the direction in which NDE research is heading. Ring agrees with Elsaesser-Valarino that research should now focus on the physiological aspects, i.e. further studies of the neurological and the biological aspects, specifically concentrating on brain functioning as one of the areas of exploration (p. 159-160)

The second dialogue is with Louis-Marie Vincent, PhD, in the field of biology and chemistry who is a former professor at the University of Paris. He ends his dialogue by saying "... the fact that the data concerning NDEs are consistent with the different

ideas or hypotheses of quantum physics or of information, causes me to consider as probable the interpretation of NDEs as testimonies of the afterlife (p. 192).

The third dialogue is with the late Régis Dutheil, MD, who was Professor of physics and biophysics at Poitiers School of Medicine and Brigitte Dutheil, Professor of Classical literature. The late Dr. Dutheil developed a hypothesis based on superluminal consciousness and Elsaesser-Valarino asked him what this mysterious adjective meant. He answered “my hypothesis is based on a model in which consciousness is a field of tachyonic or superluminal matter belonging to the true fundamental universe, of what our world is merely a subliminal holographic projection (p. 193).

The fourth dialogue is with Paul Chauchard, Professor of Neurophysiology in Paris, In answer to the question of whether the brain is the seat of consciousness or only a mechanism to decode it, he replies : “I do indeed agree that consciousness is spiritual, but it manifests itself materially to science as a cerebral integration. The soul is the form of the body. We keep coming back to the immanence of the transcendent” (p. 239)

The fifth dialogue is with Monsignor Jean Vernet, writer and advisor to the Vatican. Elsaesser-Valarino asks: “Monsignor, do you think the testimonies of near-death experiencers can provide us with an insight into life after death ?” He answers: “... in my opinion, an account of what is experienced during a coma cannot be taken as a description of the hereafter” (p. 259-260).

The sixth dialogue is with Michel Lefeuvre, a Professor of Philosophy of Science at the University of Dakar. Elsaesser-Valarino says to Lefeuvre: “I am beginning to understand that you want to place NDEs within a very large framework”. He answers: “Exactly, to my mind it is a matter of giving them an ontological status – a status of truth – within a general theory of consciousness”.

This book has an excellent bibliography and the format promises to be used as a springboard for more literature of this nature to emerge. It was first published in Europe and has made its way to us, for which we are grateful.

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### ***British Journal of Educational Psychology***

Summer 1998

Professor **Terence Copley**, School of Education, University of Exeter

Elsaesser-Valarino attempts an in-depth analysis of near-death experiences (NDEs) in the light of social and natural sciences (p. 17). This is a notoriously difficult field to research. Only out of body experiences lend themselves to empirical verification. NDEs require multidisciplinary windows. Professors of biology, physics, psychology, medicine, neurophysiology, the philosophy of science, classical history and an adviser of the Vatican on sects and new religious phenomena, are all voices in Elsaesser-Valarino’s pages. Her methodology is the expert interview. Her own presuppositions are made clear: “since nature is constantly evolving towards higher complexity... it would seem absurd... for a being as sophisticated as man, with his highly evolved consciousness, to be destined to total annihilation at death” (p. 9). Most of the text consists of selections from the interview transcripts.

Elsaesser-Valarino conducts us through careful definitions of NDEs, drawing on the established though not unchallenged writers in the field, especially Moody Jnr (1975), Morse & Perry (1990, 1992) and Ring (1980, 1984, 1992). The interviews follow. The longest and most significant is with Ring, Professor of Psychology at the University of Connecticut. He notes a recent development in NDE research: the increasing reporting of frightening or extremely distressing NDEs, unlike the being of light/city of light/beneficent life review experiences of many NDE claimants in the earlier literature. Ring sees these terrifying NDEs as evidence against the wish-fulfilment theory : what subjects would desire these unnerving experiences ? He also rejects the hypoxia explanation of NDEs which accounts for them as a state of delirium caused by lack of oxygen to the brain: monitoring of NDE subjects shows that while some experience hypoxia, others do not. The NDE is the constant, the hypoxia the variant. It is disappointing that Girard, another interview subject and a professor of medicine, does not analyse possible alternative medical explanations. An NDE subject himself after a near fatal heart attack caused by a bee sting, Girard's testimony is fascinating but anecdotal. The biologist, Vincent, notes with interest that smell, taste and touch – not features of NDEs – are conveyed by molecules, while light and sound – universal features of NDEs – are conveyed by waves. Chauchard, the neurophysiologist admits the opaqueness of neurophysiological evidence on NDEs but attacks the view that associating NDEs with cerebral hallucinations somehow discredits them. A cerebral hallucination “simply means... an image in the brain... If the subject is not mentally ill, there is no reason to say that his or her hallucination is pathological”. Ring sees the life review function of many NDEs, in which the subject is conducted through a rapid review of their life to that point, as “ a very accelerated psychotherapy session... a very, very powerful healing”.

The interview with Régis and Brigitte Dutheil (physics and classical literature respectively) opens up the most fascinating hypothesis for NDEs, derived from Plato's world view and modern physics: belief in tachyons, hypothetical particles proposed in the 1960s by Feinberg, a US physicist. NDEs in the Dutheil view are “superluminal” experiences. The universe we experience is a holographic projection of the fundamental universe through the cortex, which filters and arranges the information. In the fundamental universe, particles travel faster than light. An NDE subject can experience the fundamental universe and by travelling at tachyon speed “see” future events, since in the fundamental universe all events are instantaneous. In “remembering” past lives or life events, consciousness has a momentary access to superluminary knowledge.

The book is a fascinating collection, irritating by not being integrated into a holistic text but pleasing in allowing the interview subjects to be heard in their own words. The sample is limited to those who are at the very least sympathetic to NDEs as pointing to a consciousness state beyond death. The sceptical voice of Susan Blackmore and others is not presented. At the same time the interviewees are open to rational explanations and provide a critique of some of them. The great strength of the text is its multidisciplinary nature, which is in the end the only appropriate research approach to this complex field. The last word on NDEs must go to Ring (p. 129) answering the question whether the interpretation of NDEs will always remain subjective: “It is always a mystery. It is always susceptible to multiple interpretations.” Some interpretations require a willingness to question current scientific paradigms. Not all researchers will agree the necessity of that in order to account for the phenomena.

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### **Choice**

December 1997

Prof. **M.M. Slusser**, Wilkes University

Elsaesser-Valarino presents a serious first step in looking at the near-death experience (NDE) in an empirical manner. The first two chapters are designed to acquaint the reader with the definition and characteristics of the NDE as revealed by collected anecdotal accounts. Here the author shares a detailed, sequential breakdown of the NDE that resulted from her analysis of accounts of experiences gathered through the natural and social sciences. Using what seems to be qualitative research methodology, Elsaesser-Valarino identifies and presents 31 components of the NDE, further described and illustrated with excerpts from the transcripts of NDE experiencers to help insure understanding. For readers desiring to delve further into the issues surrounding NDE, there are eight in-depth and skilfully conducted interviews conducted by the author with NDE experiencers, researchers and scholars. The resulting data, drawn from the fields of psychology, philosophy, biology, physics, neurophysiology, and religion, are thought-provoking and will pose many questions for future researchers. Food for thought. General readers: upper-division undergraduates through professionals.

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### **Fate**

October 1997

**Karol Ann Barnett**

During her lifelong search for the secrets of the soul, the Swiss scholar Evelyn Elsaesser-Valarino happened upon the near-death experience (NDE). The stories she heard compelled her to research the subject. Her findings make up the better part of this comprehensive book. Any questions that a reader may have regarding near-death experiences are more than likely answered here.

Elsaesser-Valarino engaged six experts in a forum on near-death experiences, including renowned psychologist and author of *The Omega Project*, Dr. Kenneth Ring.

The other scholars bring their knowledge from fields of study such as philosophy, physics, neurobiology, and theology. The result is a new take on the phenomenon – an interdisciplinary analysis of the experience that adds more depth to the field and greater understanding of the NDE.

Elsaesser-Valarino's findings are significant. Drawing from the works of noted researchers like Ring and Raymond Moody, and from the experiencers themselves. She estimates that eight million people have undergone a NDE which can comprise as many as 31 stages. Though not all will experience each stage, most relate incredibly similar stories.

Some of the stages are:

- out of body experience
- a tunnel



- encounter with spirit guides or angels
- feeling of infinite understanding and happiness
- magnificent environments
- a city of light
- access to universal knowledge
- a hunger for learning
- heightened intellectual abilities

The experiencers also report enhancement of their senses during and after the event, and most reportedly embarked upon a significantly positive life change.

What we're learning about the NDE is that death is not necessarily the end of life, but rather the means of transition from the physical plane to non-physicality. Further, the reports reveal that we have spiritual guidance throughout our experience. What is also clear is that death is not a random event, but a kind of graduation that signals the end of one phase of our multi-dimensional life and learning and delivers us to the next level.

If ever there was a subject that heralded everlasting hope for humanity, it is the near-death experience. And by reading *On the Other Side of Life*, we can learn why.

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**Spiritnetwork.com**

November 2001

Approaching the near-death experience from the standpoint of an objective observer reporting quantifiable experiences, Evelyn Elsaesser-Valarino endows *On the Other Side of Life* with credibility that is missing from many books on this subject. Elsaesser-Valarino's interviews provide access to the insights of scientists, doctors, and everyday people that both researchers and general readers will find valuable. At the same time, these dialogues with such a diverse group of reputable scholars serve as a foundation for bridging the gap between science and spirituality.

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