

The grace of the near-death experience is there for all of us – we just have to reach out for it

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Abstract

Near-death experiences (NDEs) have been studied for almost 30 years now. A theoretical approach has been established and numerous theories have been elaborated. Prof. Dr. Kenneth Ring and myself have undertaken an attempt to make these precious insights available for persons who have not undergone this transcendental experience and we elaborate in our book *Lessons from the light* how everybody can be transformed at the simple contact with this phenomenon. I expose how NDE knowledge influences our view of death (and life !) and helps us cope with our own mortality (how people react to NDEs and how we can integrate these insights in our own lives ; facing death ; dealing with the grief of bereavement ; the impact of NDE testimony on belief in life after death, etc). In my latest novel *Angel's land or the grace of the near-death experience* I examine how NDE knowledge can be used, at a very concrete level, to prepare a teenager for her imminent death. I expose how the presumable separation of the mind from the body can be explained in simple words.

New look on our mortality

Near-death experiences have been studied for almost 30 years now. Moody disclosed this fascinating phenomenon in 1975 to the world with his bestseller "*Life after life*". Ever since then, many people have studied NDEs and many books and articles have been written. A theoretical approach has been established and numerous theories have been elaborated. As time passed by, experiencers or NDErs (persons who have undergone an NDE), who were relieved that their strange and life-changing experience had finally been widely recognised and named, dared testify and write down the most important event that ever happened to them. The huge commercial success of testimonies like "*Embraced by the light*" by Betty J. Eadie² (number one best seller for over a year in the USA) confirmed the interest of the general public in NDEs. Another autobiographical account by Dannon Brinkley "*Saved by the Light*", has also made the top ten. Although we tend to think on a daily-life basis that we are immortal, the thought of death accompanies us all the way, deeply hidden in our unconscious. Even deaths that are psychologically remote for most of us, such as those of September 11th in the USA, those in Bosnia, Rwanda or Afghanistan, haunt us by their sheer numbers and the unforgettable pictures that have dominated our television screens and news magazines.

Death or the threat of death these days is everywhere around us, having lost forever its formerly taboo status. It can no longer be shunned or shoved out of sight. The skull is seen grinning in at us during the banquet and spoils our meal by forcing us to look at its dreaded image.

No wonder, then, that, being unable to deny the physical side of death, we have found ourselves ineluctably drawn to and irresistibly fascinated with stories of NDEs. For NDEs speak, and speak so eloquently, to the non-physical aspect of death. In a way, they seem almost to *deny* death

¹ Moody, Raymond A. "*Life after Life*", Covington GA : Mockingbird Books, 1975

² Eadie, Betty "*Embraced by the light*", Placerville CA : Gold Leaf Press, 1992.

³ Brinkley, Dannon "*Saved by the Light*", New York : Villard, 1994.

itself by suggesting that the subjective experience of death gives the lie to our materialistic, secular view of death. What death looks like to an external observer is not what it *feels* like to someone in the act of dying. In fact, it is the opposite – the experience of death contravenes the appearance of death and, in one's mind, promises an unutterable consolation.

How NDE knowledge can help us cope with our mortality

Professor Dr. Kenneth Ring, one of the most eminent American NDE researchers, examined exactly this issue and I had the pleasure to collaborate at this research which was published in a book entitled "*Lessons from the light*".⁴ This publication is an attempt to offer the gifts of the NDE to everyone who would wish them and is willing to make the effort to learn from the experiences of others. Thus, readers will be able, not just to be inspired by these inspiring tales, but to use them to battle their own fears about death as well as to live their lives with greater sense of personal fulfilment and joy.

"*Lessons from the Light*" is a book primarily for those who have *not* had the experience, but who feel that their own lives could be enhanced by incorporating the insights stemming from what many people have come to believe is the ultimate spiritual experience of our time. The NDE is not only a revelation of the most profound and soul-shattering beauty, as abundant research has shown, it is also something that has the power to drastically change and improve the lives of those who survive this kind of direct encounter with death. For example, we now know that the NDE tends to bring about lasting changes in personal values and beliefs – near death experiencers appreciate life more fully, experience increased feelings of self-worth, have a more compassionate regard for others and indeed for all life, develop a heightened ecological sensitivity, and report a decrease in purely materialistic and self-seeking values. Their religious orientation tends to change, too, and becomes more universalistic, inclusive and spiritual in its expression. In most instances, moreover, the fear of death is completely extinguished and a deep-rooted conviction, based on their direct experience, that some form of life after death awaits us becomes unshakable and a source of enormous comfort. In addition, many NDErs say they come to develop powers of higher sense perception, increased psychic ability and intuitive awareness and even the gift of healing. In short, the NDE seems to unleash normally dormant aspects of the human potential for higher consciousness and increases one's capacity to relate more sensitively to other persons and the world at large.

The typical NDEr, then, seems to represent the emergence of something suggestive of the full flowering of human potential that is presumably the birthright of all of us. In a phrase, the NDEr appear to exemplify what a highly developed person would be and act like. NDErs – and others who have undergone similar awakenings by other means – may be the harbingers of human evolution toward higher consciousness. However, even if this is true, it is clearly not enough to wait passively for this evolution to occur. The phenomenon of the NDE is not merely an evolutionary catalyst but a *teaching* about life, love and the human potential that all interested persons could draw upon actively in order to enrich their lives and to hasten their own progress toward enlightenment.

Most NDErs say that they feel it is their mission to serve others by in some way drawing upon or sharing their experience and its fruits with those who are open to it. We already have evidence

⁴ Ring, Kenneth and Elsaesser-Valarino, Evelyn. "*Lessons from the Light : what we can learn from the near-death experience*", Reading, Mass. : Perseus Books, 1998. (Italian translation: *Insegnamenti dalla luce : cosa possiamo imparare dalle esperienze in punto di morte*, Roma : Ed. Mediterranee, 2001)

that merely learning about the NDE has effects similar to those reported by NDErs. This means that the NDE may act like a benign virus, and by exposing yourself to it, you can catch it – that is, you can experience some of the same benefits as do those who actually have the NDE directly. Therefore, as we hear from those who have had NDEs and understand more clearly just what they have gained from their encounter with the Light, we, too, will be able to learn and grow as the NDEr has.

Near-death experiences have a powerful impact on persons who live them for many reasons. Amongst them, they tend to foster the sense of self. Indeed, the effect of an NDE is to stimulate the growth of self-esteem and self-acceptance, and thereby further the individual's courage to pursue a way of life in keeping with his or her authentic self. Therefore, one of the essential consequences of NDEs is that of the importance of self-compassion. Let us try to gaze at the world not in our usual way but as seen through the eyes of an experiencer. People who underwent a near-death experience tend to change their beliefs, attitudes and values. This pattern of psychological aftereffects is in its own way also a *worldview*, a distinctive filter that enables the experiencer to see and experience the ordinary world with heightened sensitivity and appreciation. As a result, self-compassion turned outward turns into compassion for others – and that is exactly what we can learn from experiencers. The insight of NDEs can be transmitted to non-experiencers, all we have to do is to listen to those who have gone through this experience and so willingly propose to share what they learnt. *“It is possible to gain all the knowledge persons learn when they die, without dying”*, says an experiencer, *“You don't have to die to get there”*.

How people react to NDEs and how we can integrate their insight in our own lives

How can we make a start to capture this knowledge and come to adopt an NDEr's way of experiencing the world? There are two distinct ways of learning available to us. The first operates by a principle of contagion, whereas the second involves a deliberate effort to emulate the behavior of NDErs and thus put into practice what one has learned about their manner of being in the world. Information about NDE has been available since the mid-1970s, ever since the groundbreaking work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Raymond Moody and since then, at least the Western World has grown very familiar with the stories near-death survivors tell of their journeys into the light. It is curious, then, that for all the attention that has been given to this phenomenon, only few research projects have been conducted to examine the effects of all this information about NDEs on those who have never had such an experience – obviously, the great preponderance of persons on this planet! A number of surveys of various professional groups, such as physicians, nurses, psychologists, or members of the clergy, in the United States, and of selected communities elsewhere have inquired into their knowledge and acceptance of NDEs. The sociologist Charles Flynn in his book *“After the Beyond”*⁵ described his survey called “The love project”. In his sociology classes at Miami University of Ohio he first lectured about NDEs, emphasizing how such experiences tend to bring about a more loving and compassionate attitude toward other people. Then he asked his students to make a specific semester-long effort “to relate in a loving manner to someone they wouldn't otherwise relate to”.⁶ Altogether, more than 400 students took part in these “Love Projects”. Flynn evaluated the results of his students' activities through a combination of questionnaires and personal journals. His findings showed

⁵ Flynn, Charles P. *After the beyond : human transformation and the near-death experience*, Englewood Cliffs NJ : Prentice-Hall, 1986.

⁶ Flynn, Charles P, p. 7

strong evidence that these interactions resulted in an increased sense of compassionate concern for others in general (more than 80 percent of his students reported this effect) as well as greater feelings of their own self-worth (indicated by about 65 percent of these students). Furthermore, these effects tended to persist, though with some diminishment, as shown by a follow-up survey a year later.

Kenneth Ring also studied the fact that for people who are open or become interested in NDEs, simple exposure may be sufficient to bring about the same kind of changes – and more – than found by Flynn. In this book *The Omega Project*⁷, the relevant part of this study involved seventy-four NDErs and a control group of fifty-four persons who were known to be interested in NDEs but had never had such an experience themselves. In examining the pattern of belief and values changes, 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. Moreover, Ring found that 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 views typically expressed by NDErs like an increased ecological sensitivity and a greater concern for the welfare of the planet. Furthermore, more than 80 percent of the control group indicated a diminished fear of death, and a like percentage affirmed that their belief in life after death had increased – effects that, again, are typical of those described by NDErs. Ring and myself concluded therefore in *Lessons from the Light* that the overall pattern of his data gives us a strong suggestion that merely acquiring knowledge about NDEs can act rather like a “benign virus”, that is, by exposing yourself to NDE-related information, you can “catch it” because the NDE appears to be contagious.

Another possible indication for the way that exposure to information about NDEs may serve to bring about changes in personal values similar to those typical of NDErs themselves comes from a study by the psychiatrist Bruce Greyson, who for many years has been the editor of the *Journal of Near-Death studies*⁸. In 1983, Greyson published the results of a survey of personal values that was based on a sample of 89 NDErs as well as 175 members of the *International Association for Near-Death studies (LANDS)* who had *not* had NDEs but had, obviously, enough interest in them to join an organization devoted to their study⁹. In his research, Greyson was particularly concerned with four clusters of personal values: self-actualization, altruism, spirituality, and being successful in life. He had all of these respondents rate these factors in terms of their personal importance to them. What is instructive about Greyson’s findings is how *similar* his two groups – NDErs and those interested in NDEs – were in their values profiles. Both groups rated the values of self-actualization, altruism, and spirituality as quite important to them, and, statistically, there was no difference between them. Success in life, however, was downplayed by both groups, though here the NDEr group was statistically somewhat lower on this dimension. Overall,

⁷ Kenneth Ring *The Omega Project*, New York : Morrow, 1992

⁸ Quarterly journal published by Human Sciences press, 233 Spring Street, New York NY 10013-1578

⁹ Bruce Greyson, “Near-death experiences and personal values”, IN: *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 140(5), 1983, pp. 618-620.

however, as with the findings from Ring's *Omega Project*, value profiles of persons interested in NDEs tend to mimic those of persons who have actually had these experiences.

In "*Lessons from the Light*", we included the case history of a retired professor of languages and literature named Donald who had taken the time to study and ponder the literature of NDEs, which brought about, he said "*a major life change*". In this regard, he comments significantly: "*I have found myself identifying so closely with these people that I have been experiencing vicariously much of what they experienced in fact*". He provide a brief itemized list of some of the changes this process had put him through:

- a noticeably reduced fear of death, and with it, the attendant disappearance of all fear of living
- an absolutely positive attitude toward life, toward the world and everyone in it, in conjunction with an unprecedented zest for living and a marked increase in creative activity
- an genuine and seemingly permanent feeling of well-being, one noticeably beyond any expected levels
- a continual desire to get back to some sort of teaching and/or to find ways to go out and help other people
- prior to my research, I characterized myself as an atheist... Now, while my researches have not much improved my attitude toward organized religion, I am firmly convinced that human consciousness survives bodily death.

How the NDE knowledge can be used, on a very practical level, to help someone to die

The conclusion we draw in "*Lessons from the Light*" encouraged me to go on trying to establish a link between NDE knowledge and the practical help people need when confronted with their imminent death or the one of a beloved one.

Therefore, after over 15 years of scientific research of the NDE and after having published two theoretical books dealing with this subject¹⁰, I decided to write a novel, entitled "*Angel's land or the grace of the near-death experience*"¹¹, telling the story of a teen-ager suffering from leukaemia. (I didn't give her a name or an age in order to allow everybody to identify more easily with her). During one year, in nightly conversations, the girl's doll named *Angel* explains her all the aspects and implications of the near-death experience. The girl undergoes a deep transformation and genuine preparation for death thanks to *Angel* who answers all her questions, not only about NDEs, but also about the most difficult and challenging issue we all will have to face one day: our forthcoming death. In the hospital where she is taken care of, the girl meets a boy, *Stan*, who just had an NDE and tells her his fascinating experience. Slowly, painfully but steadily, the girl finds the answers to her questions which relieve her fear of death, but there is one big problem still unsolved until the very end of her illness: the incapacity of her parents to face her death and let her go. *Stan* then narrates his NDE with so much authenticity and conviction that the girl's parents are overwhelmed by this testimony and finally are able to apprehend that, maybe, there is

¹⁰ « Lessons from the Light » and

"*On the Other Side of Life: exploring the phenomenon of the near-death experience*", New York, Plenum Press (Insight books) and Perseus, 1997.

¹¹ Not yet published

something wonderful waiting for us at the brink of death. The genuine hope anchored in the NDE testimony allows the parents to accept their child's death, to let her go and she dies peacefully, surrounded by her parents, *Stan* and *Angel*.

There is a clear discrepancy between the grim days the girl lives, conditioned by medical investigations, chemotherapy and the deep anguish of her possible forthcoming death, and the profound appeasement and consolation she receives during her nightly conversations with *Angel*. NDE knowledge provides immense hope and a possible perspective beyond death. This information must be provided when people need it most.

I wrote a long dialogue concerning the mind/body relation and the difficulty to understand that consciousness might, indeed *seems* to survive bodily death.

(Extract of "*Angel's land or the grace of the near-death experience*")

The Girl: "How does a near-death experience begin?"

Angel: "It's very simple, you just leave your body and fly away."

The Girl: "What do you mean by *you leave your body*? I don't understand."

Angel: "It sounds unusual, I agree, and, yet, it's very simple. You leave your body, you with your personality, your identity, your characteristics, your life-history and your emotions. You simply leave your body behind, like old cloths which you don't need anymore."

The Girl, intrigued: "I still don't understand. I am one with my body, I am in my body, I am my body. Without my body, I am nothing, I don't exist anymore."

Angel: "Not sure, not sure at all. This is the first impression we get, of course, but if we go deeper into this issue, if we explore it, and, above all, if we listen to experiencers, then everything changes. What you say seems logical but it is certainly too simplistic. Experiencers tell us an all together different story. They say that, during their NDE, their "self" had left their body which they saw from the outside, from a certain distance. They looked at their bodies and some of them didn't even recognize it straight away. One of them said that he never realized that he looked "like that". Another one pointed out that he didn't understand how he could be, at the same moment, dead and yet alive, although without a body... I agree with you, it's difficult to understand, and yet it's so simple."

The Girl: "How could it be difficult and simple at the same time?"

Angel: "There is where resides the complexity of understanding NDEs. If we could look at them in a different way, if we could consider them from another point of view, their truth would impose itself with simplicity. But we are conditioned by our one and single way of looking at things, just as we are imprisoned inside our bodies. Thus, experiencers say they remained during their NDE the way they have always been, perfectly identical, just without a body. Once adapted to this new and incongruous condition, it became natural to them and gave them the ineffaceable certitude that they indeed did go on existing, without their bodies, in another dimension".

The Girl: " You say, just without their bodies, but this is precisely what I don't understand."

Angel: "A Swiss doctor who lives in the United States, named Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, imagined a nice parable. She says that people are like caterpillars and, when they die, they transform themselves into butterflies and fly towards their new destiny. Does this help to understand the separation of the mind- or of the soul if you prefer this term - and the body ? "

The Girl: "I understand if for the butterfly, but not for me. It's natural for a butterfly to fly, but I couldn't, I have no wings."

Angel: "It's a picture, a metaphor, a representation of a truth which cannot be explained in simple terms because it is completely different from all we know on earth. Thus, doctor Kübler-Ross talks about a butterfly that flies away but in fact she means that **you** fly away, you without your body, you as a unique and immortal being."

The Girl: "But what is it that quits the body ?"

Angel: "The Consciousness, the soul, the spirit, the "self"... there are different terms which can be used. What do these concepts mean ? The problem resides in the fact that we have difficulties imagining ourselves without a body. We suppose that our thoughts take form in our brain, that our memories are anchored in this same brain, that our emotions are located into our hearts as well as the love we feel. But nothing proves that it really happens this way. Maybe these phenomena are only located temporarily in our bodies, maybe the brain is only an interface which decodes this information which can exist and live on without a material support. Don't ever forget that you are not your body, you

are in your body during your earthly life, but you are not your body, you are more than your body, you can exist without your body."

"You are not your body" is certainly an exclamation of hope.

NDEs change completely the attitude toward death

The persons who change their attitude toward death in the most radical and permanent way are, of course, those who have gone through a near-death experience themselves. Let us first listen to some NDErs who describe their total lack of fear of death after their experience:

"The most profound thing which has happened to me is that I no longer fear death. This is probably the most common result of having an NDE. I had a great fear before. Pain, severe pain, used to trigger the response of "this is my entrance to Hell". The pain which I experienced a few hours before I had my NDE gave me that impression very clearly. I was going down and I probably was not going to come up again. Since the NDE I do not fear it at all. I have been there, I know what to look for, I have felt it, and I actually find myself looking forward to it. When the time is right for my physical body to die, I will go on to something so absolutely out of this world that it defies comparison".¹²

Another experiencer puts it this way:

"As a result of going through this experience.... I knew that as ordinarily perceived, what is called death is only experienced by the survivors... There is no such thing as death per se. Death in our three dimensional space/time view of things is simply a biological event that has nothing to do with consciousness, which is continuous both before what we call birth and after death".¹³

Experiencers feel a great need to share what they learned during their NDE:

"I decided I had to tell what I had learned about this magnificent domain. At the time, I had not heard of anyone who had gone beyond death. Millions upon millions feared death. Wouldn't they be glad to know that only the body dies, but

¹² « *Lessons from the Light* », p. 249

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 250

not their inner person ? I wanted to shout what I'd learned from the housetops, share it with all people in the world".¹⁴

NDErs tell us that, 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 incomparable. This is what the collective testimony of NDErs has to tell us about what awaits us at the moment of death, and because their testimony is so consistent and compelling, and because literally thousands of persons who have approached the threshold of death and returned have similar stories to tell, those of us who listen to such tales cannot help but be affected by them. Thus, we who have only heard these NDE stories begin perhaps by marveling at them, but after a while, we find that they have silently entered into our psyches and have caused us to have a view of death that no longer has any place for the grim reaper. Instead, when we think of death, images of a loving light pervade. Now, we know that this kind of testimony, as it has been fanned through the media throughout the past twenty years, and most recently, of course, over the Internet, is indeed beginning to have an impact on people's thinking about the nature of death. Unfortunately, in the absence of any large-scale and systematic surveys on this point, we are forced to rely mainly on promising but clearly preliminary investigations.

Facing death

As I have said, there is little doubt that the testimony of NDErs has had an effect on how people think about their own prospective deaths, even when they are not imminent. I made an interview with a woman called Béatrice which furnishes a good example of how these NDE stories can strengthen one's belief in the possibility of survival of bodily death. At the same time, it is apparent in her case that her convictions are still a bit theoretical, since her life circumstances have not yet tested her NDE-based beliefs.

Evelyn: "How did your knowledge about the NDE phenomenon influence your attitude toward death ?"

Béatrice: "I had always secretly wished that consciousness would survive after bodily death. I wanted it to be true, but maybe my faith was not strong enough to make this true for me. Through the near-death experiences, I now have empirical corroboration of this - but I don't go so far as to call it proof. The question is, will this be strong enough to withstand panic if, say, tomorrow, I learn that I am terminally ill ? I don't know. Will this console me if I lose a person I love ? I think - I even believe - it will, but I can't be sure since it hasn't happened to me yet. But I am convinced that we should think about these issues before something sad happens to us, before we confront death or mourning, in order to be prepared as much as possible".¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 250

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 251

Here Béatrice can only wonder what she will think and feel when the times comes for her to face death firsthand.

Kenneth Ring decided to consider a target group that invites special consideration – the elderly – that category of persons that, while not exactly facing imminent death, nevertheless have to confront the prospect that their own deaths may not be that far off. Kenneth Ring and some of his students of the University of Connecticut developed an educational program based on the NDE for senior citizens, which they were then able to present at selected senior citizen centers in Connecticut. The program itself 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; and (3) a personal account of an NDE by a senior citizen, followed by questions and answers.

The findings are only preliminary and the sample too small to support any firm generalizations, but questionnaires given both before and after these presentations revealed the following effects:

- 1) a decrease in fear of death
- 2) an increase in belief that the moment of death will be peaceful
- 3) an increase in belief in life after death
- 4) a decrease in belief that life after death will be unpleasant
- 5) an increase in belief that one will be reunited with deceased loved ones
- 6) an increased belief in God

Now, I would like to talk about a woman who not only considered her death in a more or less theoretical way but who's illness forced her to face death in a very concrete way. We have included this moving story in *“Lessons from the Light”*. In 1991, Deborah Drumm, a nurse living in Nashville, Tennessee, learned that she had developed breast cancer. Her condition was serious and she was understandably very frightened. Within a relatively short time, a friend of hers had called her attention to some articles and books about NDEs (which, previously, she had never taken seriously), and she began to read them – with increasing avidity. She soon had exhausted the materials she had been given and then sought out additional references and even contacted some experiencers directly. As she indicated, she found all this information tremendously reassuring, and her fear of death began to recede. After some months of treatment, she was doing well physically. Unfortunately, she relapsed later on and subsequent tests showed that her malignancy had spread and become incurable and that, as a result, death was now staring her in the eye as quite possibly an imminent event and she wrote these final moving words:

“I am writing to tell you that my previous statement does hold true... The most important factor in my psychological recovery, once again, has been the regular reading of near-death experiences... I keep these books by my bed. For the six weeks after news of my recurrence, not a single day went by that I did not read or re-read some of the accounts (of near-death experiences). Still, when I begin to feel fear or sink into depression, reviewing these accounts is my first line of defense... In short, I believe that the content of NDEs has kept me functional. It has allowed me to feel that there is purpose in everything, including my illness, and that I can somehow find and profit from the meaning in that illness. After all, if NDEs are to be believed, there is value to every experience and a loving God or Presence watches and guides us through every experience.

I wish that all seriously ill persons could have the chance to study NDEs. For various reasons, some might not want to continue their study very long. But I am convinced that many would be greatly comforted".¹⁶

Dealing with the grief of bereavement

NDE researchers often receive 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. The Australian NDE researcher Cherie Sutherland reproduced a compelling example in her book *"Children of the Light"*¹⁷ which shows how healing it can be to parents who lost a child when they learn about the NDEs of children. Her book begins with one very touching account of this kind of discovery. A mother named Maria had lost her five-year-old son in a tragic drowning incident, and was in despair over it. In addition to all her natural grief, she was tormented by questions concerning whether her son had been frightened as he was drowning, or whether he had cried out desperately and in vain for his parents to save him. As she testifies, she was obsessed with the question "Was it terrible to die?"

In time, and quite unexpectedly, she came across a story of a childhood NDE based on a near-drowning incident that had much in common with the actual drowning of her son. Reading it was a revelation and immediately provided a powerful anodyne that relieved years of protracted suffering, guilt, and doubt. In Maria's own words:

"I felt exhilarated after I had finished. I was so astonished by the almost identical conditions at the two scenes of accident, and the two little boys of virtually the same age, that I had no trouble believing that this "coincidence" was, indeed, the answer I had been searching for. From that day on, my thirst for more and more information about the NDE was unquenchable. I read everything I could find about it, and with each new account, the bottomless, black despair I had felt for so long receded, and a wonderful new hope was born somewhere deep within me".¹⁸

Now, through the instrumentality of Sutherland's book, Maria's own experience of healing can itself be a source of solace and hope for bereaved parents and others who have suffered a similar loss. And from reading stories like Maria's and the many moving accounts of childhood NDEs that Sutherland provides in her book, there are even more benefits to be derived, as Maria's own narrative suggests:

"Not long afterwards... I realized that the devastating grief and suffering I had been through had produced after-effects similar to those following a near-death experience: I was no longer afraid of death; I felt more genuine compassion for others; I wanted to help others; I was more aware of others'

¹⁶ Drumm, Deborah "Near-death experiences as therapy: part II", IN: Journal of near-death Studies, 11(3), 1993, pp. 189-190.

¹⁷ Sutherland Cherie « *Children of the Light : near-death experiences of children* », New York : Bantam, 1995

¹⁸ Sutherland Cherie « *Children of the Light* », p. 6

pain. In a sense, I too had died and been brought back to life... And I now believe that death is truly a transition from our limited existence into a splendid new life, an adventure beyond our wildest dreams".¹⁹

The impact of NDE testimony on belief in life after death

Anyone who becomes familiar with NDEs must, of course, inevitably think about life after death. No matter how much sceptics may contend against drawing premature conclusions about the *afterdeath* from reports of near-death experiences, the implied promise of the NDE continues to exert a persuasive and powerful appeal. Indeed, everyone, critics included, understands that many moderns have become fascinated with NDEs not simply because they suggest that the moment of death is one of stupendous splendor and joy beyond reckoning. No – it is rather the unmistakable implication that this kind of experience *continues*, that there really is a life after death and that, furthermore, it will be wonderful. Surely, this is one potent reason why the NDE, as soon as it was publicized through the work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Raymond Moody nearly a quarter of a century ago, stirred the public imagination throughout the Western World and why the NDE has *persisted* as a topic of widespread interest to the present day. It is precisely the picture of imminent death and what seems to lie beyond, provided by NDErs, that has proved as irresistible as it is glorious. Clearly, despite the prevalence and currency of postmodern scepticism, there is still something in most of us that yearns for this vision of the afterlife to be true and that thrills at the possibility that NDEs finally provide some creditable evidence that it is.

To this day, we unfortunately do not have any large-scale survey data that would allow us to demonstrate that people who become either familiar with or interested in NDEs increase in their belief in life after death. But we do have many testimonies of NDErs and this might help to give us some more precise ideas on this matter. It seems logical that the individual's journey after death must eventually depart from the common story line we know so well from NDE narratives. That story begins with the encounter with the Being of light and then, presumably after the life review and other standard features of the NDE, might well devolve into the further particularities of each person's own afterdeath journey, which the NDE alone is insufficient to predict. It is important to keep in mind, as so many NDE reports testify, that the *essence* of these experiences transcends all linguistic or imagistic representation that might be available to us in states of ordinary waking consciousness. Therefore, in trying to conceive of the afterdeath state too finely, we court the danger of transforming an experience full of symbolic shadings and redolent with flashes of higher consciousness into something that is too literal, banal, or otherwise full of conventional stereotyped imagery. Surely, despite our knowledge of NDEs, our own afterdeath journey will be like what J.S. Haldane said about the universe. To paraphrase his famous *bon mot* : *Our death will not only be stranger than we suppose, it will also be stranger than we can suppose.*

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¹⁹ Ibid p, 6-7

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