

BOOK REVIEW

A Collection of Near-Death Research Readings *compiled by Craig R. Lundahl – Nelson-Hall, \$19.95*

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Despite continuing public interest in near-death experiences (NDEs), a literary gap has, until now, existed between scholarly research publications and popular compilations of anecdotal reports. Craig Lundahl's anthology has taken a significant step toward alleviating this problem, through offering the reader a selection of some of the best articles in the field. Of the thirteen inclusions the majority are reprints from journals such as *Omega*, *Psychiatry*, and the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*. Lundahl chose the articles for their recency, relevance to NDE research, and scientific orientation; as a whole, they are fairly representative of what is being done in the field.

The stated purposes of the book are to disseminate near-death research information to the public and scientists, and to encourage further research and thought on death and dying. The general reader will find it a good introduction to the subject of NDEs, while the researcher will value it as a convenient reference source.

In the first article, "Near-death experiences and the unscientific scientist," Harold Widdison¹ discusses the prejudiced resistance of many scientists to near-death research. Widdison reiterates what the field of parapsychology has known for some time: regardless of the scientific quality of the question and research procedures, should the phenomenon fall outside the "approved" areas, all efforts at investigation will be rejected. The loss of colleagues' support, as well as official and unofficial pressure to abandon such unorthodox research, can be enlightening for anyone still convinced of the pristine objectivity of scientific enquiry. I believe a well-maintained position of neutrality in NDE research may avoid such professional pressures and could lessen the embarrassment apparently felt by some researchers when their subject matter is associated with parapsychology and philosophy. Although Widdison argues for the legitimacy of scientific NDE investigation, the reader is left with the impression that the only "acceptable" research finding for many biased scientists

would be the reduction of all near-death phenomena to recognized social and physical causes.

John Audette's article, "Historical perspectives on near-death episodes and experiences," follows with an informative presentation of historical examples of NDEs. The article is considerably weakened, however, by the lack of reference to the near-death studies of early parapsychologists such as William Barrett (1926) and James Hyslop (1908). This exclusion is very probably due to the curious distinction drawn by some writers between "deathbed visions" and NDEs. Barrett and his contemporaries concerned themselves with obtaining veridical content in near-death experiences (e.g., peak-in-Darien evidence), and considered purely phenomenological material of little use in their search for proofs of post-mortem survival (Rogo, 1978). The deathbed visions collected tended to focus on reports of the dying and those attending them, which described apparitions and paranormally gained knowledge. Deathbed visions are NDEs, and the artificial distinction being made has no basis other than terminology and the obvious fact that the manner in which an NDE is reported and collected depends on the cultural context and personal concerns of those involved.

It certainly would have been useful to the reader to know that many of the questions being asked by NDE researchers today had already been raised by investigators more than eighty years ago. Discussion of the contributions of early parapsychologists would have produced a far more accurate and well-balanced historical perspective.

The next section of the book contains actual studies of NDE reports, beginning with one of the first known published medical case histories of a near-death experience, "Cardiac arrest remembered," as reported in 1971 by R.L. MacMillan and K.W.G. Brown in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. In their report, the authors make the interesting observation that patients usually experience amnesia concerning the events surrounding their cardiac arrest.

Systematic studies of NDE reports follow, starting with Russell Noyes, Jr., and Roy Kletti's "Depersonalization in the face of life-threatening danger: a description," which is a descriptive analysis of 114 accounts. The researchers suggest that subjective phenomena commonly reported in these experiences are forms of depersonalization developed as normal reactions to suddenly presented life-threatening danger.

The next selection is the impressive cross-cultural study, by Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson, of deathbed observations of doctors

and nurses in the United States and India. This research owes its inspiration to the work of early parapsychological workers such as Barrett. In addition to commonly reported feelings of serenity, peace, and elation, the study found that four-fifths of the apparitions “seen” were “survival related”; that is, they portrayed deceased persons and religious figures. Osis and Haraldsson’s finding that medical, psychological, and cultural factors had little or no influence on these death-bed visions poses some exciting implications while weakening the reductionistic position. Osis and Haraldsson take the issue of hallucinations seriously in their research, and base some of their most important conclusions on what little is currently understood about the causes and forms of hallucinatory phenomena. There are many unanswered questions about the relationships between NDEs and hallucinations, and a pressing need exists for well-designed studies of the incidence and forms of hallucinatory phenomena in normal populations.

Raymond Moody follows with a discussion of the eleven elements common to 150 NDE reports he has collected and analyzed. He concludes by raising the question of whether evidence for the reality of NDEs might not be acquired by examining verifiable descriptions of physical events “witnessed” while out of the body. Michael Grosso states this question succinctly in a later article in the book: “If one aspect of the NDE is verifiable while at the same time providing testimony for an extraphysical factor, then it seems less plausible to ascribe ultimately verifiable reality to the rest of the experience.” A few researchers such as Michael Sabom have undertaken to verify such “factual” descriptions, and it is probable that such studies will eventually provide the most decisive data for determining the nature of the NDE.

Moody’s *Life After Life* (1975) promoted many replicative studies, and three of the best are included in the subsequent section. Kenneth Ring summarizes his study of 102 NDEs in “Frequency and stages of the prototypic near-death experience,” and provides a statistical and descriptive rendering of his influential *core experience* concept, which involves a five-stage sequential model for the NDE.

Sabom and Sarah Kreutziger briefly summarize their study of 61 NDEs in “Physicians evaluate the near-death experience” and devote the second part of their article to a short concise review of the more prominent explanations proposed for NDE phenomena.

Based on his analysis of the reports of cancer patients and intensive-care or coronary patients he has interviewed, Charles Garfield reports in his “The dying patient’s concern with life after death”

that some patients reported Moody-like elements such as lights, music, and tunnels. However, he cautions that others experienced negative visions and that dying is not always blissful and accepting.

Lundahl then presents his own fascinating study of the "Near-death experiences of Mormons," which spans eleven reports between 1838 and 1976.

In "Do suicide survivors report near-death experiences?" Ring and Stephen Franklin's study of 17 suicide-induced NDEs concludes that the experiences are much the same as non-suicide-related NDEs. The data offered no support to the claims of some researchers that suicide-induced NDEs are unpleasant. The article describes three distinct patterns found in these suicide-induced NDEs and the after-effects of these experiences.

Grosso's "Toward an explanation of near-death phenomena" is an excellent evaluation of NDE phenomena and some of the explanations that have been proposed. Grosso argues that three components of NDEs have to be explained: (1) their consistency and universality, (2) their paranormal (psi) aspects, and (3) their power to modify attitudes and behavior. This article, which appeared in *Anabiosis* (1981, 1, 3-26) is the most informed and thought-provoking discussion of NDE concepts and theory of which I am aware, and its position in the book helps to bring together the information and ideas presented in the preceding articles.

The concluding article presents Lundahl's discussion of "Directions in near-death research." Verification of NDE observations, systematic analyses of NDE variables, and clinical applications of NDE research are presented as promising areas for future scientific endeavors in the subject.

I have few reservations about recommending this book for a university course, especially if it appears in paperback. No specialized knowledge is assumed for the reader, and all tables and graphs are easy to read. The majority of the articles provide references, although a modest bibliography would have been of immense value to the more ambitious reader. Lundahl continually refers to the field of NDE research as "circumthanatology," which could confuse the reader and give an idiosyncratic air to the book if this term fails to catch on among other writers.

There is no doubt that this anthology is destined to be a classic in the field, and there is little likelihood that it will have any serious contenders for several years to come.

NOTE

1. Widdison's article (as well as those by Audette and Ring) was previously unpublished. The original dates of publication for the other articles (in the order they appear in the book) were MacMillan and Brown, 1971; Noyes and Kletti, 1976; Osis and Haraldsson, 1977; Moody, 1975; Sabom and Kreuziger, 1978; Garfield, 1979; Lundahl, 1979; Ring and Franklin, 1981-1982; Grosso, 1981; and Lundahl, 1981.

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