

Letters to the Editor

Response to Review of *The Big Book of Near-Death Experiences*

To the Editor:

My latest book, *The Big Book of Near-Death Experiences*, was reviewed in this *Journal* by Jeffrey Mishlove, Ph.D (2009). He did a fair and balanced job, and for that I am grateful.

However, he brought up a subject that I feel needs some explanation: that of the book's title. The primary title fits; the secondary title of *The Ultimate Guide to What Happens When We Die* does not. I have been uncomfortable with that secondary title from the beginning and complained about it to my publishers, but to no avail. In the book's section on amazon.com you will notice several such complaints; I get them myself via e-mails and at talks I give. To me, that "extra" title is a falsehood.

Why does the book have that title? Blame the marketing departments of large chain bookstores, not my publisher nor me. These experts in marketing chose the cover and both the primary and secondary titles. And they chose them according to what their research said would sell. No other reason.

In case you didn't already know this, bookstore marketing folk now decide and control the books purchased from publishers. Because books are in danger of becoming an "endangered species," what gets on the shelf today must pass the "what-buyers-are-buying" test, or bookstores won't touch them. Exceptions are famous people, authors with an impressive track record, or the ultra sensational. Anything else: Nada. This is why so many authors, especially in our field of near-death studies and near-death experiences, are being forced to self-publish or to seek out small presses that don't pay anything.

Please keep this in mind when assessing anyone's book title. Chances are, the author had no control over what it is.

Thank you.

References

Mishlove, J. (2009). Book review: *The Big Book of Near-Death Experiences: The Ultimate Guide to What Happens When We Die*, by P. M. H. Atwater. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 27, 189–193.

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Response to “Did Emanuel Swedenborg Have Near-Death Experiences?”

To the Editor:

This letter is in response to the article, “Did Emanuel Swedenborg Have Near-Death Experiences? Envisioning a Developmental Account of NDEs,” by Jones and Fernyhough, which appeared in the spring 2009 issue of the *Journal*. I would like to respond to this article in two parts: In the first part of the article (pp. 157–171), the authors compared Swedenborg’s experiences with NDEs reported in modern times, and in the second part (pp. 171–184), they discussed “Mechanism’s Underlying Swedenborg’s Experiences and NDEs.”

In the first part, the authors used Greyson’s NDE Scale to evaluate Swedenborg’s experiences. In this section, I consider the authors to have been on firm ground because they were able to compare Swedenborg’s descriptions of his experiences in his own writings to Greyson’s scale. Some readers might quibble about the numerical ratings the authors assigned to Swedenborg’s experiences, but I consider the methodology to be sound. For example, to Greyson’s item, “Were your thoughts speeded up?” the authors cited several references in Swedenborg’s writing referring to rapid thought transfers (pp. 162–163). In this first part of the article, the authors concluded that Swedenborg’s experiences have a number of similarities to NDEs but significant differences as well (p. 171).

The second part of the article seems more problematic, primarily focusing on the authors’ second question: “If significant parallels are found, what common mechanisms may underlie Swedenborg’s experiences and NDEs?” (p. 160). The problems in this section perhaps come

about because of the breadth of the question. Also, it is difficult to make comparisons between two areas: NDEs, in which solid information is unclear, and Swedenborg's case, in which information is fairly lacking. Because of these difficulties, I find some of the authors' conclusions are not adequately supported, and some important statements seem contradictory. In addition, I propose that an alternative cause for Swedenborg's experiences should be included in the discussion. In the interest of brevity, the following comments focus on the authors' main point about Swedenborg in the article's conclusion: "In line with this reasoning, we would argue that Swedenborg's experiences are best understood as being an idiosyncratic response to an intense psychospiritual crisis that took the form it did due to his prior hypoxic developmental experiences in conjunction with a predisposition to temporal lobe seizures" (p. 183).

The assumptions about Swedenborg in this statement include: (a) He had hypoxia, (b) he was predisposed to seizures, (c) he had a psychospiritual crisis, and (d) his experiences were "idiosyncratic." In my view, all four of these assumptions seem unduly speculative.

In the discussion of hypoxia – a decreased oxygen supply to the brain – in relation to NDEs, the authors concluded that "although other factors are likely to be involved in many cases of NDEs, there is evidence that hypoxia may play a contributory role in some such cases" (p. 175). In other words, the evidence for hypoxia as a direct cause of NDEs is somewhat weak.

In the section, "Hypoxia as a proximal cause of Swedenborg's experiences" (p. 175), Jones and Fernyhough took up the issue of Swedenborg's occasionally reduced respiration rate. What is clearly supported is that Swedenborg did have occasional irregular breathing patterns (p. 175). The discussion of Zen and Yoga practices are interesting modern parallels in which breathing is consciously slowed. Common experience shows that intense concentration often affects breathing patterns, and Swedenborg appears to have had incredible powers of concentration. However, neither the cause of changes to his breathing patterns nor whether his slowed breathing led to hypoxia can be determined from historical records. Consequently, it cannot be known whether Swedenborg's slowed breathing patterns caused his anomalous experiences.

If Swedenborg's experiences are somewhat similar to NDEs, and because the evidence for hypoxia as a cause for NDEs is not very

strong, it's difficult to accept the conclusion that "it seems plausible that hypoxia may have been a proximal cause of Swedenborg's experiences" (p. 176). It may be just as likely that Swedenborg's unusual breathing patterns were a result of his powers of intense concentration and that they did not lead to hypoxia.

Regarding Swedenborg's predisposition to seizures, the authors prefaced the discussion with the following: "Although little evidence exists for this hypothesis..." (p. 178). Nevertheless, the authors stated that "our proposal is that a predisposition to temporal lobe seizures, in conjunction with neural changes due to long-term hypoventilation since childhood, led to his experiences" (p. 178).

The authors' discussion of Swedenborg's psycho-spiritual crisis was introduced in the concluding section: "However, we want to emphasize that we do not mean to claim that an account of Swedenborg's experiences at the physiological level is a sufficient or complete explanation of them. Attention must be paid to the context of his experiences, occurring as they did in a profound spiritual crisis" (p. 182). Perhaps Swedenborg had such a crisis, but unfortunately, the only documentation in this article is the citation of a biography by Toksvig written in 1948 (p. 182), which another Swedenborg biographer, Wilson Van Dusen (1974), characterized as "a strangely unsympathetic work" (p. 233).

Lastly, I wish to focus on the term "idiosyncratic" which is defined at Dictionary.com as indicating a "structural or behavioral characteristic peculiar to an individual or group" (Idiosyncratic, 2009). By using this term, the authors suggested that Swedenborg's experiences applied only to himself, which, if those experiences were created by a personal crisis and personal physiological conditions, would be the natural assumption. However, Jones and Fernyhough contradicted this assumption when they suggested, "Perhaps Swedenborg's legacy may not be what he tells us about a Divine Being but his illustration of the richness of what may lie within us all" (pp. 183-184). If Swedenborg's experiences were "idiosyncratic," by definition they cannot "lie within us all."

The authors seem to want to have it both ways: "We would argue that the potential role for biological processes in Swedenborg's experiences in no way detracts from the novelty, insight, aliveness, and moral revelations that may characterize such experiences" (p. 183). Again, in my view, the authors' earlier use of the word "idiosyncratic" in regard to Swedenborg's experiences contradicts such an assertion.

Years ago I came across Van Dusen's (1974) biography of Swedenborg, *The Presence of Other Worlds: The Findings of Emanuel Swedenborg*. In it, Swedenborg appeared not as a person beset by physiological abnormalities and personal crisis but as a brilliant scientist who "may have been one of the most gifted men to have ever lived" (p. 1). Van Dusen described a man who "had exhausted all the known sciences after founding several of them" (p. 2). He was a practical man who was appointed by the king to be in charge of Sweden's mining interests (p. 4). "He became fluent in nine languages" (p. 5).

Perhaps Jones and Fernyhough overlooked the most obvious cause of Swedenborg's spiritual experiences and accomplishments: Swedenborg set out consciously to explore his own mind. These experiences did not fall upon him uninvited. Van Dusen stated, "He [Swedenborg] himself mastered all the sciences of his day...When he finished all the known outer world, he started to work on the mind" (p. xiii). Van Dusen further stated:

What Swedenborg began as an intense, intellectual form of meditation opened out into an exploration of the hypnogogic [*sic*] state, dreams, and later, trances. This is a usual series of discoveries as one goes inward...Swedenborg seems far less strange to those who bother to look at the same area of human experience. (p. 23).

Van Dusen, who himself had experience with various internal states brought about by meditation, considered Swedenborg's early experiences to be the normal results of Swedenborg's intentional exploration of his own mind.

Van Dusen, a clinical psychologist "with religious leanings" (p. xii), presented a sympathetic picture of Swedenborg as a genius who explored the spiritual realms and provided a detailed report of his findings. His journey followed the "usual series of discoveries," but Swedenborg, like Christopher Columbus, went further than any of his contemporaries. Unlike those who followed Columbus into the new world, even today, perhaps no Westerners have ventured as far into the spiritual realms as did Swedenborg.

The examination of physiological processes in relation to spiritual phenomena is a necessary field of exploration. However, the danger is that seeing these processes as the prime causes of spiritual experiences may lead to those experiences being devalued, discounted, and marginalized as merely idiosyncratic events caused by physiological or psychological abnormalities.

In the end, Jones and Fernyhough may have set out to do too much. The first section of their article, in which they compared Swedenborg's experiences to modern NDEs using Greyson's NDE Scale, is well reasoned and supported, and the article might have ended there. However, I find the second part of the article, in which the authors attempted to identify physiological and psychological causes for Swedenborg's experiences and NDEs, to be disjointed and unconvincing.

References

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U.S. Release of *Farther Shores*

To the Editor:

I am writing to inform your readers about the new, first U.S. publication of my book *Farther Shores: Exploring how Near-Death, Kundalini and Mystical Experiences Can Transform Ordinary Lives* (2008, iUniverse).

My life was changed by a dramatic near-death experience (NDE) in a plane crash in 1979. It launched me on a quest as a medical doctor to research spiritual experiences and to specialize in counseling patients who had near-death and other mystical experiences.

Farther Shores is a synthesis of 25 years of my research, my personal insights as a multiple near-death experimenter, and the

experiences of thousands of patients. Written from a multi-faith perspective, the book draws deeply from yoga and Christian mystical traditions, along with modern medicine, psychiatry, and psychology. Topics include:

- Mystical experiences – a multi-faith perspective
- Near-death experiences
- NDE-like experiences: Facing-Death, Deathbed, and Death-Watch Experiences
- Kundalini awakening / spiritual energy episodes / yogic model of consciousness
- Psychic awakenings, including past-life recall
- Spiritual emergencies and psychosis
- Long-term spiritual transformation of consciousness: physical, psychological, and spiritual symptoms
- Promoting a balanced Spiritual Transformation / Self-realization / God-realization

Farther Shores is an updated and expanded revision of the Canadian bestseller, *A Farther Shore* (1994). New sections include: the Death-Watch Experience (NDE-like experiences that occur to someone not dying around the time of the death of someone physically and/or emotionally close), cross-cultural perspectives on spiritual energy, Kundalini and alcoholic recovery, and an entire chapter on psycho-spiritual housecleaning.

The earlier edition of *Farther Shores* (2000) received excellent reviews from several prominent IANDS researchers:

- Bruce Greyson, M.D.: "... an exceptionally readable and useful book on near-death and other spiritually transformative experiences careful enough about its science to be palatable as well to physicians and scholars" (Kason, 2000, 2008, p. i).
- Janice Holden, Ed.D.: "... the single best existing book for anyone wanting to learn about near-death and other transpersonal experiences ... " (Holden, 1998).
- Kenneth Ring, Ph.D.: "Kason is a wise and knowledgeable guide in these realms, and I can recommend her book with the greatest enthusiasm" (Kason, 2000, 2008, back cover).

Interested readers can listen to my recent podcast interview on www.Skeptiko.com or learn more about the book at www.farthershores.com. A review of *Farther Shores* is scheduled for

publication in the International Association for Near-Death Studies quarterly newsletter, *Vital Signs*.

Farther Shores is both practical and inspirational – a tool for counselors and health care professionals and a practical guide for persons having spiritual experiences of all types as well as for their family and friends. Thank you for the opportunity to inform the *Journal's* readers of the U.S. release of *Farther Shores*.

References

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