

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

# Did Dostoevsky Have a Near-Death Experience?

To the Editor:

I write to you as a recent student of near-death experiences (NDEs). Over the past few years, I have become greatly interested by the features that experiencers (NDErs) commonly report, including out-of-body experiences, travels through space and time, life reviews, witnessing historic human events, immersion into an enveloping extraordinary love, and trees, grass, and animals all communicating and connected with such love. The logical thinker would surmise that a pattern of these similarities taking place during varied episodes through thousands of different individuals can't be random hallucination or fading brain activity but, rather, constitutes an organic step from earthly to non-earthly existence. But that's not for me to say. Regardless, one day it dawned on me that this all sounded so familiar.

Upon random recollection, I finally identified a short story I had read years ago, by perhaps humanity's greatest writer, Fyodor Dostoevsky. The mere 20-page tale was entitled *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* ([https://gustavus.edu/threecrowns/files/The Dream of a Ridiculous Man, Fyodor Dostoevsky.pdf](https://gustavus.edu/threecrowns/files/The%20Dream%20of%20a%20Ridiculous%20Man,%20Fyodor%20Dostoevsky.pdf)). It was published in 1877—near the end of his life but long before any real documented suggestion of NDEs. The plot, essentially, is that the main character is a distraught man contemplating suicide from his small Russian flat. He “falls asleep” with a gun on the table and proceeds to have a “dream”—allowing the reader to consider whether or not the “dream” is real. In it, he finds himself in a grave only to be greeted by a strange guide who accompanies him as he leaves his body behind. They travel together through space, time, and the stars only to arrive at a new, pristine place ripe with pure inhabitants, no judgments, and profound love. One thing leads to another, and the main character observes how these beings evolve with emotions such as jealousy, pride, and cruelty. They experience religion and laws and war and science. In a twist dissimilar to the sentiment of most NDEs, and in my belief, Dostoevsky imposing his darker, guilt-ridden creative license, he *corrupts* the pure inhabitants before his return to Earth. Fast forward, and he ends up back in his living room, awakened without much time lost despite the deeply

involved endeavor, and he is a changed man, dedicated to loving others. In his concluding paragraph, he declared,

For I have seen the truth; I have seen and I know that people can be beautiful and happy without losing the power of living on earth. I will not and cannot believe that evil is the normal condition of mankind . . . The chief thing is to love others like yourself, that's the chief thing, and that's everything; nothing else is wanted—you will find out at once how to arrange it all. And yet it's an old truth which has been told and retold a billion times—but it has not formed part of our lives!

For readers of this *Journal*, such conclusions are likely to sound familiar. A quick Google search revealed that Dostoevsky lived through chronic epilepsy and was prone to violent seizures. In one telling anecdote, Gamble (2023) related, “For instance, Major Ermakov in a Russian army report of December 1857 said, ‘Ensign Dostoevsky experienced an epileptic seizure with a sudden scream, loss of consciousness, convulsions of face and extremities, frothing at the lips, and respiratory rales.’” That condition certainly seems to me to be fertile ground for one or more NDEs, and I suspect that Dostoevsky, being an autobiographical scribe, may have spun this short story based on certain aspects of such experiences.

I suggest that readers interested in NDEs, or even fantastic writing, read the tale and draw their own conclusion. But to me, having arguably one of the world's greatest writers about the human condition, and a man whom many great thinkers, including Einstein, Freud, and Nietzsche, consider to be one of the greatest thinkers of modern times, craft a tale eerily similar to many available modern NDEs, only adds credence to these experiences. His creation may even suggest an answer to the question that all of humanity seeks and that Dostoevsky himself surmised in his so-called dream: “And so there is life beyond the grave.”

## References

- Gamble, J. G. (2023). Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and epilepsy. *Cureus*, 15(5), e38602. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.38602>

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