BOOK REVIEW

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In the spring of 2008, I decided to take a closer look, together with my colleague Anny Dirven, at published cases of near-death experiences (NDEs) with veridical perceptions that seem to have occurred while the patient had insufficient brain activity to explain the presence of consciousness (Cook, Greyson, & Stevenson, 1998; Greyson, Kelly, & Kelly, 2009; Holden, 2009; Ring & Valarino, 2000; Sabom, 1998; Sartori, 2008). Our interest increased as we were participating in a follow-up on the celebrated Dutch dentures case (Rivas, 2008; Smit, 2009; van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, & Elfferich, 2001). As proponents of the so-called transmission or interactionist theory of the relationship between brain and mind, we believe the brain facilitates, albeit sometimes very faultily, but does not produce consciousness – the conscious, subjective or ‘phenomenal’ life of a self, experient, or subject. The transmission theory is one of the two main answers to the mind-body – or, more precisely, mind-brain – problem. The other main answer is the production theory: that brain produces mind. Well-documented cases of veridical perception would not only strongly corroborate the transmission theory but would also point to the plausibility of survival of individual conscious existence after brain death (Rivas & Dirven, 2009). In my view, this matter has enormous implications for humanity’s understanding of itself.

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For our project, I contacted a wide range of investigators, including Bruce Greyson, who alerted me to the publication of a relevant new book by neurosurgeon Allan Hamilton, entitled *The Scalpel and the Soul*. Hamilton works at the Arizona Health Sciences Center as a professor of neurosurgery and a clinical professor in the departments of Radiation Oncology and Psychology.

I found some interesting online items, including a video, about this publication. Based on this information, it appeared to me that *The Scalpel and the Soul* described an important new case of a veridical NDE that occurred during a documented flat-line EEG. Before I got hold of the book, I did some additional research on the internet and discovered a weblog by author Michael Tymn (2008). Tymn described a case from Hamilton's book in which a patient named Sarah Gideon had striking veridical perceptions during the time a surgical team had intentionally brought her brain activity to a standstill for medical reasons – comparable to the case of Pam Reynolds (Sabom, 1998). Hamilton reportedly carried out an investigation of the Gideon account so thorough that it seemed to match, if not surpass, the most rigorous previous research efforts regarding such cases.

As Tymn (2008) revealed in an addendum, he had contacted Hamilton to get more details about the Gideon case. In Hamilton's response, he acknowledged that the case was really one of several "amalgams, or blended stories" of the features of more than one experience rather than an authentic single case. Although I already knew Tymn as a trustworthy author, I decided to contact Hamilton myself. He sent me a short but revealing reply: "The addendum is accurate as reported. The case is, at best, illustrative. Nothing more" (A. Hamilton, personal communication, April, 2008).

In the meantime, I read the book, and I must say that I cannot understand Hamilton's motives for creating this fictionalized case. Although he claimed that he meant this story, described in Chapter 16, to be "illustrative" of real life NDEs, in fact it is not, because Sarah Gideon's episode would be even more spectacular than Sabom's (1998) report of the case of Pam Reynolds. Rather than drawing attention to authentic evidence for the ultimate independence of consciousness from the brain, the author, in my view, irresponsibly mixed truth with fantasy. This matter is all the more serious because it concerns such an important and already-controversial subject.

Based on close reading of the book's Introduction, it might be claimed that Hamilton forewarned readers that his work was not
completely factual: “I have changed little, and where I did it was mostly where it was required to protect someone’s privacy ... Sometimes I’ve combined two or more characters” (p. xi). However, it seems clear this condition does not exactly cover all the ‘changes’ in the case of Sarah Gideon, who certainly did not consist of a mixture of several of Hamilton’s own patients. Also, neither the online video nor the Foreword by Andrew Weil, M.D., would give the unsuspecting reader any reason to doubt – as Weil said it – the “veracity” (2008, p. x) of Hamilton’s stories. I believe an author could be justified in presenting a fictional story resembling the NDE of Pam Reynolds as realistic, but I do not think it justified to present it in a way that could be interpreted as a carefully reported, actual case.

And what of the other stories in Hamilton’s book? In my view, most of them consist of a rather unbalanced combination of reports of various personal experiences of the author, for instance with African magic, his own ability to predict when someone is going to die, and more generally the power of the mind to heal and overcome illness. For me, the problem was that I did not know what to make of these stories because I could not tell how much of them were fact versus fiction. In addition, although I did find that The Scalpel and the Soul was a very easy read and even quite entertaining, Hamilton seemed almost completely unaware of the serious evidence for psychic, parapsychological, or even spiritual phenomena. In light of that omission, I thought that he overrated the value of his personal anecdotes. I often found his reflections on life, love, healing, and suffering, as well as his “Twenty Rules to Live By” that comprised the book’s Appendix, to lack depth and, sometimes, interest. Some of his insights even struck me as downright dubious, such as that the majority of patients with a tumor “possess an almost otherworldly, saintly quality” (p. 131) and his apparent ease in justifying invasive experiments on animals (pp. 5–6).

Perhaps the oddest notion Hamilton mentioned in the book was “that [Sarah Gideon’s] brain – and the conscious mind it produced – went somewhere else, beyond its own physical and physiological confines. Out into the cosmos” (p. 196). To my knowledge, even the most staunch supporter of the hypothesis that consciousness can function independently of the brain has never claimed that the brain itself has left the physical body during purported episodes of independent mental functioning.

Because I believe that an answer to the question of the relationship between mind and brain is central to humans’ understanding of
ourselves, I also believe authors who tread into the domain of publication on the subject should do so with the utmost care. In my view, Hamilton did not take that care. He may be a good neurosurgeon and an entertaining writer, and some readers may even particularly like his personal views, but for serious data on veridical cases that inform on the subject of the mind-brain question, I recommend that readers look elsewhere than this book.

Despite my mostly negative impression of *The Scalpel and the Soul*, I still want to say two things in the author’s favor. First, it seems rather obvious that Hamilton did not simply wish to take advantage of the popular interest in spiritual matters or, more particularly, in veridical NDEs. He strikes me as an author with a sincere spiritual agenda and, in this sense, his Sarah Gideon case might be compared to a similar fictitious case presented by Larry Dossey (1998) of a veridical NDE in a blind person (Ring & Valarino, 2000, pp. 73 & 307). Dossey reportedly never intended to misinform his readers, either; he simply wanted to familiarize them with a type of case of which he had often heard. Similarly, Hamilton appears to have been motivated by the urge to inform his readers about the existence of veridical NDEs during a flattened EEG. Second, Hamilton was very honest with both Michael Tymn and me, showing that he did not try to cover up his Sarah Gideon amalgam and affirming his integrity.

References


