BOOK REVIEW

Ken R. Vincent, Ed.D.

Houston, Texas


This book reviewed research into near-death experiences (NDEs) that has transpired since the 1975 publication of Raymond Moody’s classic book Life After Life. The Handbook’s editors based its contents on material presented at the 2006 International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) Conference at The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas. The editors were Jan Holden, Ed.D., professor of counseling and Chair of the Department of Counseling and Higher Education at the University of North Texas, an expert in research conducted on NDEs since 1877; Bruce Greyson, M.D., professor of psychiatry and Director of the University of Virginia Medical School’s Division of Perceptual Studies, the premiere center for scientific research into life after death; and Debbie James, M.S.N, R.N., Senior Instructor of Nursing at The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center’s Nursing Education Department, who has orchestrated almost all of the IANDS conferences ever held.

Normally an edited book that is based on a conference is simply a collection of the papers presented. However, The Handbook is a much more cohesive and coherent product due to the extensive editing and consolidation of the presented topics. The editors have suc-
cessfully presented the exhaustive data in a logical and smooth, readable style.

Chapter 1 by Holden, Greyson, and James, entitled, “The Field of Near-Death Studies: Past, Present, and Future,” covers the development of scientific research on NDEs and related phenomena for the past 150 years. Since Raymond Moody coined the term “near-death experience” in 1975, NDE has become a household acronym, and NDE researchers have produced over 600 scholarly articles on the topic.

In Chapter 2, Nancy L. Zingrone and Carlos S. Alvarado focused on the most common type of NDE, “Pleasurable Western Adult Near-Death Experiences: Features, Circumstances, and Incidence.” The authors analyzed several studies of NDEs in which researchers had used Ken Ring’s Weighted Core Experience Index and Bruce Greyson’s NDE Scale to assess the contents of NDEs. Additionally, the authors examined the incidences of NDEs in various studies.

In Chapter 3, Russell Noyes, Jr., Peter Fenwick, Holden, and Sandra Rozan Christian looked at the “Aftereffects of Pleasurable Western Adult Near-Death Experiences.” Major findings include that deeper NDEs—those richer in components and particularly in experiences of trans-material entities and domains—produce greater change and that a consistent pattern of aftereffects has emerged. Changes in NDErs include increased spirituality, compassion, appreciation for life, and paranormal phenomena.

Chapter 4 by Nancy Evans Bush, entitled, “Distressing Western Near-Death Experiences: Finding a Way through the Abyss,” is, to me, one of the most important in the book. Bush is the world’s foremost expert on the “dark side” of NDE, and she has data! In her analysis of 21 studies (N = 1,828), nine of the studies had no distressing NDEs, but the other 12 had an average 23% rate of distressing NDEs. One of her blockbuster findings was: Not just “evil” people, but anyone can face a “time of trial.” In this sense, distressing NDEs mimic the ordeals mentioned in afterlife accounts and mystical experiences of the world’s religions.

Chapter 5 by Cherie Sutherland is entitled, “Trailing Clouds of Glory: The Near-Death Experiences of Western Children and Teens.” Major findings include that children of all ages are capable of having and remembering NDEs that are highly similar to those of adults. One distinction of childhood NDEs is that children are almost always accompanied into the light by a being of light.

In Chapter 6, “Characteristics of Western Near-Death Experienc-
ers,” Holden, Jeffrey Long, and B. Jason MacLurg, presented socio-demographic variables of NDErs and found that a lack of difference among them is the norm. For example, studies of mental health have shown that NDErs are indistinguishable from other comparison groups regarding incidences of mental illness. Also, people of every religious affiliation and no religious affiliation have reported NDEs with similar content.

In Chapter 7, “Census of Non-Western Near-Death Experiences to 2005: Observations and Critical Reflections,” Allan Kellehear argued that the “tunnel” sensation and “life review” are not universal. What he found universal is that NDErs do encounter deceased and/or supernatural beings. The main problem I found with Kellehear’s material is that, with the exception of data from China and India that do include a “life review,” the numbers for hunter-gatherer societies are miniscule, and, in some instances, whole cultures are represented by a single case study.

Chapter 8 by Farnaz Masumian, “World Religions and Near-Death Experiences,” is a treasure. Masumian compared the NDE with seven of the world’s religions and quotes chapter and verse from the Holy Books of these religions to show their similarity and, occasionally, minor differences regarding afterlife beliefs and NDEs.

In Chapter 9, “Veridical Perception in Near-Death Experiences,” Holden reviewed the modern literature on apparently non-physical veridical perception (AVP)—those cases in which NDErs report perceiving things that should have been unperceivable considering the location and/or condition of the NDEr’s physical body. She noted that attempts to place targets in hospitals for NDErs to see during their out-of-body experiences have, to date, been unsuccessful; however, the sheer volume of AVP anecdotes that a number of authors over the last 150 years have described suggests that AVP is real.

Chapter 10 by Greyson, Emily Williams Kelly, and Edward F. Kelly, “Explanatory Models for Near-Death Experiences,” offers a mountain of data to counter the claims of skeptics who explain NDEs in reductionist terms that deny the subjective reality NDErs report. The chapter authors also pointed out that, in many cases, the skeptics have “explanations” but no data. Simply put, an “explanation” is not “proof,” and the history of NDE research is littered with wild claims made by skeptics that these authors have carefully countered with facts.

Ryan D. Foster, James, and Holden wrote the book’s final Chapter
In summary, this book is an outstanding overview of research to date on NDEs. I consider it a “must-read” for NDE researchers, healthcare professionals, and serious students of NDEs.