

BOOK REVIEW

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Lessons from the Light: What We Can Learn from the Near-Death Experience, by Kenneth Ring and Evelyn Elsaesser Valarino. New York, NY: Insight/Plenum, 1998, \$29.95, hb; Portsmouth, NH: Moment Point Press, 2000, \$16.95, pb.

Kenneth Ring is no stranger to the pages of this Journal. As Bruce Greyson notes in his Preface to this capstone book, Ring more than any one person has been responsible for the near-death experience (NDE) growing into “a self-sustaining phenomenon.” Ring’s early work was the first to place the NDE under the spotlight of scientific and scholarly investigation, which evolved into what can only be called a near-death movement of popular and even global proportions.

With these credentials firmly in place, the present work shifts ground and moves us to a new perspective on the near-death phenomenon. While the early work focused on analyzing, modeling, and authenticating the NDE, studying its powerful aftereffects and relationships to other transformative experiences, *Lessons from The Light* takes on its spiritual meaning and soulmaking significance. At the same time, this lucid, friendly book reviews almost a quarter century of near-death research.

Ring’s past publications argue that the NDE and related transformative experiences point to evolutionary potentials of human consciousness. In this book, which continues the early work, he takes a more active stand toward the developmental potential of the near-death experience when he states that “it is clearly not enough to wait passively for this evolution to occur” (p. 4). He tries to enable the reader who has never had a near-death experience to absorb its lessons and use them to catalyze personal growth “simply by reading and reflecting on the

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contents of this book" (p. 5). Ring believes that "we already have evidence that merely learning about the NDE has effects similar to those reported by NDErs." This deep learning from the near-death illumination is likened to catching a "benign virus." In a comparable vein, according to some spiritual traditions, direct transmission of spiritual insight is possible by grace of *darshan* or *charism*. Psychical research speaks of receiving "telepathic impressions" and psychedelic aficionados of the so-called "contact high." Or we might content ourselves with talking of imaginative or empathic or meditative reading. However we care to phrase it, the idea seems reasonable enough: the stunning potentials of the near-death transformation experience are latent within us all. If so, it is plausible that the words, images, and ideas that describe the NDE might serve to evoke and awaken their slumbering unconscious counterparts in our own minds. On the other hand, Ring is not selling a free ride to enlightenment; mere mouthing of ideas will not do the trick. It is only by actively applying the near-death lessons to everyday life that we can hope to taste their magic.

The first step toward real awakening is to remind ourselves of this marvelous experience by recounting fresh examples of it; Ring artfully devotes the first chapter to this task. Each story narrates an extraordinary transformation, an experience that changes the personality of a human being, that alters the gut sense of reality. Ring rightly attaches importance to these narratives: they are, to begin with, wise teachings; they also seem able to transmit a special kind of soul-energizing intensity. For me they are a kind of postmodern scripture that calls for a new art of imaginal reading—"scripture," in the sense of being verbal embodiments of a revelation that comes about through an extraordinary direct experience, an experience that furnishes a new perspective, that allows one to "see" things quite differently.

In my opinion, *Lessons from the Light* is an introduction to a new genre of writing. It shows us how to use these remarkable narratives to trigger our own life-transforming, enlightening experiences. There is an old Biblical prophecy that says one day we shall all see visions and dream great dreams, old and young, all of us, without class distinction; it is a vision of the democratization of higher consciousness. *Lessons from the Light* takes the lead from the prophet Joel who first had the idea.

Chapter 2 deals with the *authenticity* of near-death narratives. Ring provides a series of clear criteria for what he means by this. The first deals with a singular feature of the NDE: the veridical, objective, out-of-body experience (OBE) that sometimes accompanies it. People apparently "leave" their bodies when they come close to death. (Being near

death, of course, is not the sole condition for out-of-body flights of consciousness.) As an expression, “leaving the body” is ambiguous; it could mean “having an *experience* of being out of the body.” In this sense, ordinary dreams are a type of OBE. The second sense relates to the authenticity factor. In this sense, one not only experiences oneself as out-of-body, but is able to demonstrate though verifiable actions or perceptions that one’s conscious center really was located elsewhere than the physical body. This experience, if the real McCoy, is at odds with mainstream science and philosophy. It pries open the concept of death in unexpected ways. Suddenly, the “undiscovered country” changes its gestalt; from a black hole it morphs into a wormhole.

Another criterion for authenticity is introduced in Chapter 3, where Ring narrates the results of his investigation of *blind* people’s NDEs. Rumors had been circulating for some years that blind persons, even those born blind, were suddenly *seeing* things: Blind people having visual experiences during near-death and out-of-body experiences? Ring, with the help of his research assistant Sharon Cooper, decided to track down the rumors. The result is an article in this Journal (Ring and Cooper, 1997) and a remarkable monograph (Ring and Cooper, 1999) on the blind vision of NDErs, which is summed up in a chapter of the present book—another “lesson” we are invited to assimilate. In a nutshell, Ring seems to have demonstrated the existence of William Blake’s hyperphysical visionary capacity; it was Blake who said that we see *through*, not *with*, our eyes. Perhaps the most challenging lesson of assimilation is to activate, to awaken this superior, hyperphysical faculty of vision.

Stories of sight revealed for the first time in someone born blind well might irritate dogmatic materialists. Ring, of course, states his conclusions cautiously; he does, however, make a case for the reality of an extraordinary fact: that people who from birth have been blind, and people who became blind or nearly blind at some stage of their lives, suddenly acquire, or seem to possess, the capacity for visual experience during NDEs and OBEs. They report seeing colors, forms, light, being normally entirely destitute of such experiences. Other reported NDEs indicate this trend toward this hyperphysical modality of perceptual consciousness; people claim heightened and more subtle perceptive capacities during NDEs, such as the lucid awareness of every minute particle of lint on a light fixture observed from an out-of-body location near the ceiling.

The next chapter reviews another authentic mark of NDEs: children have NDEs. As pediatrician Melvin Morse has made it his business to show, children, often very young indeed, have the classic NDE, and

seem to zero in on what Morse and Ring agree is the essence of the experience: the light. Children's testimony is especially valuable; in a sense, it is purer, less likely to be deformed by acculturation. The raw basic experience pours through, with pristine intensity and beauty.

Ring applies the pragmatic principle of judging things by their fruits to authenticate near-death experiences. Chapter 5 looks at the after-effects of this remarkable experience. It is hard to regard as anything less than robustly authentic an experience that wipes out the fear of death, reveals the reality and central importance of unconditional love, awakens new empathic and perceptual sensitivities, sets into motion healing energies, acts like a catalyst for physiological development, and—maybe most important—sparks what Friedrich Nietzsche called a “transvaluation of values” or radical change of outlook.

The next chapters move from authenticity to Ring's central concern, which is to show how the reader can learn to assimilate the life-enhancing experiences of the near-death experience. Most of us, I suppose, are familiar with Charles Dickens' tale of soulful renewal, *A Christmas Carol* (Dickens, 1983/1843). Dickens was a student of psychological research. Now Scrooge, as we all know, was transformed from, well, being Scrooge the great grinch to a bubbly man who was “merry as a boy” and “light as a feather.” Scrooge pulled it off with the help of certain spirits who let him witness and review different stages of his own past life. In particular, he was forced to contemplate the effects of the cruelty he had heaped on others. To make matters worse, he had a vision of the darker possibilities of his own future, the karmic terrors that up until then he had been sowing for himself. Modeled after the authentic NDE, Ring suggests that we learn to recreate in ourselves this life-revising self-review. By mentally practicing the lessons of self-recollection, we can learn to see the effects we have on others, how unconsciously driven we often are as we stomp our way through life, all too often weaving the hell of our own existence. In passing I note that something similar was practiced by Pythagoras, who recommended that before retiring we summon up the events of the day before the mind's eye and observe and relive them on the plane of recollection.

This leads to the next lesson. I think it interesting that Ring, in Chapter 8, singled out *self-acceptance* as one of the key lessons to absorb into the bloodstream of our consciousness. So many are hobbled by life and are forced to nurse a low sense of self-esteem. The NDE helps us get over this. It puts us in touch with a richer, worthier sense of who we are and how we might see and treat others. Several thoughts occur to me. The first is Carl Jung's reminder that only by acknowledging our

weakness can we know our greatest strengths. It seems part of our constricted mode of existence that we shy away from our nullity and insignificance. We rebel against this—against, in a word, death. The NDE teaches the profound lesson of the acceptance of death—and hence of all our imperfections.

Self-acceptance becomes possible in a new way. For if we can accept our weakness in the face of death, we might accept the unknown strength that may be waiting for us. Perhaps the near-death experience, which rips open possibilities we might prefer not to think about, is meant to get us to accept the full girth of who we really are. It seems to be asking, “What is this little thing we cling to, compared to the immensity of our true identity?”

If Ring is right, the NDE is a deeply spiritual experience. Chapter 9 details the way our values, fundamental beliefs, and behaviors may be modified by ideals revealed in these experiences: how profound self-knowledge and self-acceptance lead to love, service, and reverence for life. Ring discusses the “benign virus” hypothesis, that “merely acquiring knowledge about NDEs can act rather like a ‘benign virus’; that is, by exposing yourself to NDE-related information, you can ‘catch it,’ because the NDE appears to be ‘contagious’” (p. 203). To support this view he describes his work teaching college students about NDEs, how they had been deeply moved and changed by exposure to these contagious near-death data. Remember, the emphasis of this book is to help non-experiencers, and so examples are stressed of people who have been changed merely by reading about NDEs. Ring is careful to point out that we cannot be sure how long-lasting these effects may be (p. 208); he thinks the depth of the change most likely depends on the degree of active effort one invests in internalizing the information. The same, I suppose, could be said about the impact of reading the world’s great spiritual and inspirational literature, such as the Tao Te Ching, the Dhammapada, or the Gospels.

Chapter 10 zeros in on the healing gifts that reportedly result from NDEs. According to one study, which supports the idea touchingly illustrated in the movie *Resurrection* (Petrie, 1980), a significant percentage of NDErs develop “healing hands.” Healing capacity assumes a variety of forms, in some cases, related to a distinct healing force that emanates from the NDEr’s body, and that may be related to the “electrical sensitivities” (p. 222) often associated with near-death aftereffects. On the other hand, the newborn healing capacity may depend on a more subtle, charismatic change in the personality of the NDEr; in such cases the healing agency “mends lives” (p. 227), for example, by lifting a victim

from the depths of despair. According to Ring, "it is the Light itself that heals, and . . . the near-death experiencer who has received a direct transmission of this light is someone who in turn can mediate this healing force" (p. 223). This confirms the view of Morse: There is a light that people sometimes "see" on the threshold of death that heals the body and banishes despair and the fear of death.

These are extraordinary claims. All at once, we are catapulted from the realm of medical psychology to the heart of the world's spiritual traditions. This is important: the NDE is a piece of wild traffic crisscrossing between science and religion. The claim would seem less incredible once we suppose that in these near-death episodes ordinary people are experiencing something of the archetypal light repeatedly described in mystical and shamanic experience the world over. The pages of the literature of transcendence are splattered with images of an all-liberating, all-healing luminosity. If one looks at the effects of the light, it produces a consistent syndrome, across time, gender, and culture. Speaking for myself, I find this convergence of spirituality and medical science very exciting.

We come now to a crucial two chapters, 11 and 12, which address the question of death and dying. The lessons here are profound. Essentially, they change our image of death, our whole sense of what death may be; we move from the terror and vacuity of materialist death to a spiritual vision of death as the gateway to an across-the-board fullness of life. It is as if the near-death experience were invented by our unconscious evolutionary genius to help us cope with a situation that seemed to be getting out of hand, a poisonous view of life that threatens to kill the spirit.

Our *lightmeister* addresses a controversial question: What do NDEs tell us about our fate *after* death? The message is positive for *before* death; but what of the great after? Once again, Ring gives us a push in a heartening direction. On several grounds, near-death research advances the case for life after death—an idea that seems an outsider in an age of cloning. However, those verifiable OBEs and the evidence for "eyeless vision" at first blush speak to the independence of consciousness from the body, steps toward making the case for something *after* death. Of course, other important facts add to the picture: the powerful conviction of NDErs that they "know" there is life after death because, they say, they were there. Of course, they were not; not quite, anyway. At best, we can say they *may* have had a peek of what is coming.

Needless to say, as far as the therapeutic, life-enhancing effects of the NDE, the scruples of logic carry little weight. Still, as a matter of

logic, the intensity of belief in itself lends nothing to a belief's veracity; if it did, fanatics would have a monopoly on truth. In the long run, the attempt to answer the question of life after death takes us in other directions, and Ring points toward one of these, referring to recent studies of apparitions of the dead. In fact, there is an extensive, old, and international literature on verifiable OBEs, deathbed visions (different but related to NDEs), ghosts, hauntings, all sorts of apparitions, mediumship, possession, poltergeists, psychic photography, and electronic voice phenomena. There is also an array of paranormal physical phenomena, which figure in the general picture of human potential, and therefore in the question of life after death.

Above and beyond the important question of rational evidence, the NDE offers something else to anyone curious about the great *after*. It offers models of states of consciousness we might emulate and recreate that could give us direct glimpses of the world beyond. The concluding chapters of this book take us deeper into vivid narratives of people who have been embraced and transformed by the light.

Ring's concluding message is that we ought not to waste the gift of the near-death experience—which, above all, is the gift of spiritual light. The good news is that we have a new paradigm of death—which, in effect, means a map of new possibilities. We have a weapon to strike back against soul-sucking materialism. The real challenge, concludes our gracious author, is "putting into practice what we have learned" (p. 304). It is possible to get closer to the light; there is a way to do it. This book will show you how.

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