

Letter to the Editor

Review of *Transformed by the Light* and the Progress of Research

To the Editor:

I am honored to have my research and book *Transformed by the Light* reviewed by Robert Kastenbaum (1993). Thoughtful criticism is the lifeblood of good research. Near-death research has the potential to lead to important new understandings of the nature of human consciousness. Insights gained from studying near-death experiences have the potential to explain such seemingly disparate phenomena as telepathy, faith healing, ancient Chinese medical systems based on energy fields, tumor regression, and quantum mechanics. I predict that near-death research will finally result in a comprehensive theory of mind-body interactions.

Our society clearly has a deep craving for the spiritual information contained in near-death experiences. I firmly believe that the message contained within the near-death experience has the power to reduce health care costs nearly 15–20 percent. It is not simply about a warm, fuzzy way to die. The knowledge that dying patients are often conscious and are having spiritual visions may help to reduce irrational and expensive medical procedures rooted in our fear of death. The potential of this field to improve our society's quality of life is enormous.

Of course, excellent criticism is hard to take on a personal level, just as a mother is often protective of her children, no matter how stunted or ugly. Such criticism is, however, essential to scientific progress, and new truths often emerge from the clash of doctrines. My old research advisor Archie Bleyer used to say that good research is born in the scathing fires of peer review. My only response to Robert Kastenbaum's review of *Transformed by the Light* is that my research is hypothesis-generating in nature, and as such, hopefully will raise questions to be answered by more rigorous projects.

One example of the value of such research is seen in the debate concerning people who claim to remember past lives. This debate has unexpectedly led to new understandings of cryptomnesia and human

memory, which in turn has important implications for forensic psychiatry and the recall of repressed memories of sexual abuse. For example, Edward Ryall (1974) published extensive recollections of a past life in seventeenth-century England. Ian Stevenson, who has been described as investigating such cases with legal documentation and rigorous methods (Almeder, 1990), wrote the forward to that book and felt it was not a hoax (Stevenson, 1974). After a lively debate primarily over how closely details of Ryall's story matched our current understanding of seventeenth-century life in England, it became clear that many of his memories were confused with memories obtained in this lifetime (Rogo, 1985).

The value of this case turned out to be not that it provided proof of reincarnation, but proof of a phenomenon known as cryptomnesia, which Stevenson described in a landmark paper (1983). Our memories are not tape recordings of real events, but are often filtered through our preconceptions and state of consciousness. We can even access fragments of memory that seem to have "really happened" to us but in fact are picked up from other sources. Many of the problems of near-death and reincarnation research overlap with problems of memory storage, as, for example, when we try to understand how two children can recall the same past life event or how comatose brains can process complex memories of spiritual visions. My speculation that perhaps memory can be stored outside the human body solves many of these problems.

Cryptomnesia and past life recall play an important role in understanding adults who claim to have been abused as children and have repressed the memories, for decades in some cases. Just as byproducts of scientific explorations of space have resulted in practical inventions used by consumers, spin-offs from reincarnation research turn out to have practical importance in the courtroom. If it turns out to be proven that memories are stored at least partially outside the body, this will in turn lead to other practical applications that Stevenson could not have dreamed of when he first started his investigations.

In fact, "scientific investigation begins with a surprising fact, something that challenges our preconceived notions of what the world should be" (Pearce, 1988). In my book, I tried to present many of those facts, from my own research as well as others, in new patterns to challenge our preconceived notions of what is "real." My work is, by nature, speculative and inspirational. I look forward to a generation of graduate students turning out hundreds of dissertations on near-death studies in the next few years. My greatest dream is to be proven completely wrong, and that the real answer is in fact something unforeseen at this time.

In the past two years, several major studies have replicated or supported my own research. Nurses at Boston Children's Hospital reported a study of near-death experiences in their patients, and found that the most frequent time interval of reporting the experience after resuscitation was 1 to 2 weeks (Levin and Curley, 1990). Cardiologists at the University of Utrecht have found that 15 percent of adult survivors of near-fatal events report near-death experiences. Further review of their data and my own, which reported 80 percent of children having such experiences, supported the idea that the closer we are to death clinically, the more likely a patient is to report an experience (van Wees and van Lommel, 1990).

Arvin Gibson (1992), a Mormon near-death researcher, independently came to the same conclusions as our Seattle study with regard to transformative effects. He studied 45 subjects who reported decreased fear of death, renewed appreciation of life, spontaneous regressions of cancers associated with visions of light, and electromagnetic changes such as watches not working properly. Scientists at the California Institute of Technology have documented that human brains contain tiny magnetic particles of unknown purpose (Kirschvink, Kobayashi-Kirschvink, and Woolford, 1992), which supports my hypothesis that human beings have a secondary electromagnetic nervous system.

I feel that the weight of the scientific evidence, albeit flawed, is towards survival of some sort of human spirit after death. After a hundred years of scientific study of an issue that has not dissolved under serious scrutiny, as N-rays or the Davis-Barnes effect have (Huber, 1991), it is now up to the skeptics to design and implement studies to support their materialistic and reductionistic world view.

This skeptical viewpoint is crumbling under the mass of objective proof that human beings are spiritual beings as well as biological machines. I remember a time when telepathy was dismissed as impossible, even though virtually all married couples can tell some trivial anecdote illustrating it. Researchers had for years documented that when a spouse dies, often a surviving spouse, who is separated at a physical distance, will have a visual hallucination of the dead person at the time of death (Broughton, 1991; Rogo, 1989). For many years, my skeptical friends dismissed such stories as the result of autosuggestion and recall bias. Now that the *Skeptical Inquirer* has accepted that telepathy is a human ability (Frazier, 1993), these same friends dismiss such stories as merely telepathy.

However, in accepting telepathy we must accept that the playing field has changed. The validity of the near-death experience often depends on apparent telepathic communication as an important factor

in producing verifiable details. Telepathy research in the laboratory must be seen as validating a hundred years of anecdotal research on deathbed visions and after-death communications. For too long we have used selective amnesia and recall bias to hide our spiritual side from our rational mind.

I believe that the visions of the near-death experience have the power to transform our society. These experiences are pertinent to the fundamental issues human beings struggle with, the meaning of life and death. Physicists have been telling us for 70 years that we are all beings of light, from a mathematical point of view, so perhaps it should come as no surprise that we see beings of light when we die. As my emotional bias is also reductionistic and materialistic, I must remind myself that clash of doctrines is not disaster, but opportunity. I look forward to our group as well as others taking Kastenbaum's critique of my book and using that to further research in this area. We have taken the first step. It is now up to critics such as Carl Sagan (1977), Richard Restak (1988), Morton Reiser (1984), Douglas Hofstadter (Hofstadter and Dennett, 1981), Daniel Dennett (1991) and William Calvin (1990) to respond with their own data and studies, not speculations, when they present models of human consciousness.

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