

BOOK REVIEW

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Transformed by the Light: The Powerful Effect of Near-Death Experiences on People's Lives, by Melvin Morse, M. D., with Paul Perry. New York: Villard Books, 1992, 247pp, \$20.00

The stories keep coming. Much of this book is devoted to reports of near-death experiences (NDEs) that add to the already impressive cache of such experiences that have accumulated since Raymond Moody (1975) showed the way. Perhaps enough time has passed since NDEs first captured attention to raise such related questions as: (a) Do we have anything other than stories?, (b) Do stories provide an adequate basis for establishing the nature and meaning of NDEs?, and (c) Has the desire to use NDEs as a source of inspiration and transformation raced ahead of the desire to study the phenomena in a critical and sophisticated manner?

Melvin Morse is well aware that it is no longer sufficient merely to pass along another batch of NDE reports. He has taken up the challenge of examining the possible effect of NDEs on the survivors' lives. In particular, Morse interested himself in a set of hypotheses that propose that having and surviving an NDE results in lowered death anxiety, greater zest for life, heightened psychic abilities, and a higher level of intelligence. The "*Transformed*" in the title of this book would seem to be well justified if these hypotheses could be confirmed. Morse also attempts to explain the "how" of the transformation – this is where "*The Light*" comes in. The title, then, is more than rhetoric.

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It is also Morse's intention to base his conclusions upon a substantial research effort. At several points he calls attention to the need for systematic research as distinguished from simply collecting anecdotal material. His Transformations Study involved interviews with 100 adults who had reported NDEs, and 50 people in each of 5 comparison groups. Data for all of the participants included a lifestyle profile, medical and psychiatric history, religious and spiritual profile, family bonding and rating scale, and eight psychometric-type scales. (This information is presented in the Appendix.)

Unfortunately, intention and fulfillment soon part company. The author's enjoyment in recounting stories and incidents and his enthusiasm for the upbeat implications of his conclusions pretty much overwhelms the scientific mission. That this book quickly becomes a good news/inspirational tract is not of itself a cause for concern: perhaps some readers will indeed feel better about life and death after an hour or two with *Transformed by the Light*. It is disconcerting, however, when a research intent has been announced, some methodology and statistics introduced, and conclusions offered as though verified. Let me give some examples:

"*In honesty, Dr. Morse, I don't think the experience has changed me at all.*" This is the opening sentence (p. 3). Donna had just finished telling of the night, three years ago, when she had almost died. The interviewer-author did not accept Donna's statement at face value. Why? "Although no one had conducted a study to examine the actual transformations that occur, I was certain from my own experiences that every person who has an NDE is transformed in some way" (p. 6). After further questioning, Donna brought out additional details of her life after the NDE. "So it looks like your near-death experience *has* changed things for you," I said. She laughed and acknowledged that it had. Donna, like all the others, had been transformed" (p. 9).

This opening episode is a microcosm of the book. Morse already knew the answers before he started. He did not really have to test a set of hypotheses about the transforming effects of NDEs; he simply needed to extract supportive information from his interviewees. He is quick to pounce on reports that are consistent with the transformation hypotheses. The interview interactions seem more than friendly to the hypotheses: not neutral, let alone, critical.

Although the author and his assistants went to the trouble of conducting a large number of interviews, many of the cases reported in this book came from casual contacts outside of the research frame. These were good stories that he wanted to pass along. Good stories are

appreciated, but one wonders why the focus was not kept on the interviews that are offered as the data base for his conclusions.

The set of transformation hypotheses seems to be comprised of two subsets. One subset appears to be primarily attitudinal: decreased death anxiety and greater zest for life. It would not much strain one's credibility to learn that death anxiety and zest for life might be influenced by a powerful life experience. The other subset offers a more formidable challenge. We are now dealing with abilities as distinguished from attitudes. There is an enormous literature on the conceptualization, operationalization, and assessment of intellectual functioning. All the problems inherent in measuring "intelligence" are exacerbated by attempts to detect significant changes as the result of a particular experience (such as an educational program, nutritional enrichment, or environment stimulation). Experts in the field often disagree with each other on whether in fact such changes have occurred in sophisticated large-scale studies.

With "psychic abilities" we enter a far more difficult realm. Hardly anybody doubts that people do have intellectual abilities, although there are differing approaches to conceptualization and measurement. After more than a century of research, however, opinions are sharply divided regarding the existence of psychic abilities. As of today, believers in psychic abilities remain hard pressed to answer C. E. M. Hansel (1989) and other severe critics. The point here is not the actual existence or non-existence of psychic or paranormal abilities. It is, rather, the undeniable fact that it has been difficult to establish the existence of these abilities to the satisfaction of the general scientific community even when much care and ingenuity has been invested in research efforts.

Morse offers a few anecdotes, but no data that bear directly on the hypotheses that intelligence and psychic abilities increase as the result of NDEs. This glossing-over of the difficulties involved in assessing intellectual and psychic abilities—and their possible enhancement as attributed to a specific cause—does not strengthen the book's credibility.

Cause-and-effect relationships are asserted where no such relationships can be confirmed by the data. For example, "The significance of these results is that visions of light or near-death experiences result in lowered death anxiety" (p. 224). Actually, his data do not show that anything resulted in anything else. Morse presents the mean scores on the Templer Death Anxiety Scale for each of his study groups. There are no before-after (NDE) data for any group, so one cannot actually

speak of change. Furthermore, the means by themselves do not provide adequate information (no standard deviations or other measures of variance are provided, and no statistical tests of possible group differences). Even had the research design been more appropriate to causal inference, there would still be no data demonstrating that the experience of light was the operative event. The actual findings (or nonfindings) here are not the most important thing. What is of prime concern is the willingness to offer a cause-and-effect conclusion from a data base that is inappropriate to the purpose. Am I being "picky"? That depends on whether or not one is inclined to take seriously this book's claim to have proven scientifically a set of significant changes as a result of NDEs (and to then use this as a foundation for a set of explanations).

The NDE transformation is explained through a theory whose major components include phenomena said to occur in the right temporal lobe and changes thought to take place in the individual's electromagnetic field. These transforming or healing actions are said to be accompanied by a sensation of vivid and intense light. According to Morse, this experience of light is distinctive and perhaps unique in that it does not originate or have its physiological basis in the right temporal lobe, nor in any other region of the brain. And what is this light? Essentially it is "The Glow of God" (as one chapter is entitled). And it is this light that transforms.

Here is certainly an enticing theory. The problem is that it is presented not as creative speculation, but as proven through the author's research. The author states that he has documented right temporal lobe involvement in all of the NDE phenomena with the exception of the light. None of his temporal lobe studies are reported or referenced in this book. I did have on hand his article in this Journal in which a neurophysiological explanatory model is offered for NDEs (Morse, Venecia, and Milstein, 1989). This is a fascinating paper that I enjoyed having the occasion to re-read. He does not report any data of his own in this paper, however, and the two references to his work are to papers dealing with NDE reports and correlates, not temporal lobe function. It is difficult to understand how such a challenging and complex theory could be presented in such a casual and unsupported manner in a book intended to provide a scientific basis for the understanding of NDE effects.

Dedicated NDErs will want to read this book for themselves. Most of the book consists of stories from which the author draws conclusions that are favorable to the transformation hypothesis and his theory.

Morse's ideas are interesting, and any number of them could be on target to significant discoveries—or they could just be charming fantasies. One cannot tell from the material presented here. The inferential process is neither well disciplined nor well linked with the available data. Generalizations come all too easy, and methodological problems are glossed over. Furthermore, no attempt is made to relate his findings with the earlier work of Kenneth Ring (1984), who pursued much the same hypotheses and reported his method and data in more detail.

So the stories keep coming. Will the once promising realm of NDE research end up as fodder for campfire stories, or will there be investigators willing and able to take the long, slow, often frustrating road toward verified knowledge?

References

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