

Letter to the Editor

Out-of-Body Vision in Darkness

To the Editor:

According to psychologist Celia Green (1968), out-of-body vision in darkness may take one of two forms. While some of her survey subjects simply said that they were able to see clearly, others reported that their surroundings were illuminated as though with a night light and they were thus able to see. No source of light was seen in either form. Green noted that the latter type was more common among her subjects than the first. Many investigators regard the sense of illumination as a psychological construct—in other words, a hallucination.

I would like to draw attention to an instance of the experience of a sourceless light that seems to cast doubt on the above view. It was cited in a study of the experiences of two survivors of a mining accident (Comer, Madow, and Dixon, 1967). The miners, hereafter called Mr. A and Mr. B as in the original paper, were trapped in a chamber more than 300 feet underground when their mine caved in. They were unhurt and conscious. They were in the chamber for five days without any conscious contact with the outside world. During this period they experienced a variety of visual phenomena, but these ceased on the sixth day when surface rescue workers made contact with them. The miners do not seem to have had an out-of-body experience (OBE).

Mr. A's visual experiences included the following. Right from the beginning of his entombment he could see his hands and his companion's face, and he also could tell the time by his watch. Three days after the accident it appeared to him that the cavern was illuminated by a bluish light that had no visible source. It seemed to him that the strength of the light fluctuated according to his need to see; it was brightest when he wanted to work with things such as timbers for shoring up places in the chamber.

Mr. B spoke of seeing "lights" instead of the pervasive illumination reported by Mr. A. However, he could see well enough to work along with Mr. A, and like his companion he also felt variation in the

strength of the lights. According to him, the lights came on as they wanted to work and faded when they stopped working in order to rest.

The miners' statement that they worked with timbers is significant. It suggests that they could actually see them as well as the places in the walls and/or the roof of the chamber that needed strengthening. Also, it could mean that Mr. A might not have been imagining that he could see his hands, his watch, and his companion's face. In short, the miners' feeling of illumination in the dark chamber cannot be dismissed as hallucination, or some other kind of mental fabrication.

What can be the explanation? I would suggest considering that the feeling of illumination resulted from a reduction of the visual threshold. The absolute threshold of vision is not constant, but continually fluctuates under the influence of various factors. Among these factors are adaptation of the eyes to darkness and the need or motivation to see. Both factors would have played a role in the case of the miners, as they were in the underground chamber for several days and they needed to see the timbers in order to work with them. It is possible that the second factor was largely responsible for the miners' impression of an increase in the strength of the illumination as they wanted to work and its decrease as they rested. There could be a third factor as well, conducing to lower the threshold. It has been found that sensory deprivation may decrease the threshold for the specifically affected system (Zuckerman, 1969). Since the visual system was, of course, one of the affected systems, this could also have contributed to a fall in the visual threshold.

It seems to me that a decrease in the perceptual threshold could also be the explanation for the out-of-body experiencer's sensation of a sourceless light. I have pointed out that sensory deprivation, in the sense of reduced input of patterned information to the brain, is a common denominator in all contexts in which the OBE is known to occur, and out-of-body vision may well be one of the ways in which the brain attempts to compensate for the reduced input (Krishnan, 1985). It is then reasonable to expect that there may be a reduction in the sensitivity threshold of whatever receptors come into play in out-of-body sight.

Apart from the sourceless illumination, the miners also perceived visions similar to those reported by near-death experiencers. Some of these visions made them feel certain that they would be rescued. These included Pope John (who was seen several times), a big garden with beautiful men and women that Mr. B felt he was not yet ready

to enter, a person holding a tablet with a record on it, a man on either side of Mr. B, and a cross. I have suggested, adducing reasons, that such images seen by near-death experiencers could be indicators of recovery and they could have been generated by the experiencers' subconscious knowledge of their state of health (Krishnan, 1985).

In the case of these miners a similar explanation would seem to apply; that is, the images could have been engendered by subliminal perception of ground tremors and/or sounds caused by surface rescue operations. There are good reasons for my making this suggestion. One is the view that, like certain animals, human beings may also be able to sense even extremely weak geophysical phenomena such as crustal vibrations that precede earthquakes by several days or months (Bigu, 1979). Another reason is Mr. A's statement that he heard it raining overground and he feared that the underground chamber might be flooded. If he could have heard rain falling, it is not unlikely that he was also subliminally sensitive to sounds of rescue work.

I should point out that there is no independent corroboration for some of the statements of the miners, and I have assumed that they are likely to be correct. For example, the investigators did not seem to have physically verified whether the miners actually worked with timbers and confirmed that they did not hallucinate such activity. As is known, hallucination of movement and other activity can occur (Green and McCreery, 1975). Similarly, Mr. A's statement that he heard rain overground has also not been checked to find out whether or not he was having an auditory hallucination. In future research into effects of isolation and/or sensory deprivation an effort must be made to verify the claims of the subjects.

There is yet another aspect of the miners' NDE-like visions that may be worth looking into. The miners claimed that some of the visions they saw at the same time were similar. These shared visions included Pope John in papal dress; a doorway leading to a flight of stairs, up and down which people were walking; a cross; and two men in mining clothes and hat, working side by side with a light. Shared or collective visions (or hallucinations) are not uncommon in situations of sensory deprivation or isolation, as accounts of experiences of shipwrecks, for example, have shown (Anderson, 1942). One of the explanations is the power of oral suggestion. That is, if one of the percipients happens to speak about his or her vision, some of the listeners may also see it.

This view may perhaps be adequate for those shared visions about which the two miners spoke to each other as they were witnessing them, but not for those they did not talk about. For example, Mr. B did not speak to his companion about the vision of two men working with a light, when he first saw it. In fact, he came to know that Mr. A was also seeing it only when the latter suggested to him that he might ask the workers (visionary figures) for a light. How did they come to see the same vision at the same time? If there had been no communication between them at a conscious level, by word or gesture, then a possibility we might consider is whether they were in contact subliminally.

Some investigators have suggested that it might be useful to look in the field of bioradiations for a solution (Bigu, 1979; Smith and Best, 1989). The rationale behind their suggestion is this: just as sunlight contains a great deal of information about the processes and elements that produce it, so also the electromagnetic radiations from the human body are likely to hold information about their origin. The problem at present is that, bioradiations being a comparatively new field of inquiry, methods of decoding any information they may contain have not been fully developed. However, there have been some successes. For example, Harold Saxton Burr (1972) found that every living being is surrounded by what he called an electrodynamic field, or life-field, which is measurable and which reflects various processes like, in the case of human beings, ovulation and internal disease states.

Another more recent finding that has relevance to the issue of subliminal interaction between the two miners is that every subjective (mental) event (emotions, thoughts, imagery, and the like) appears to be accompanied by a characteristic brainwave pattern that is similar in virtually all normal people (Hutchison, 1991). Said another way, mental activity is encoded in brainwaves. Whether it is encoded in any other form of bioradiation is at present not clearly known. Anyhow, studies in biocommunication suggest that subliminal contact taking place as in the case of the two miners could be the result of the information-carrying radiation field of one person modulating the field of another.

What I particularly want to emphasize is that we are more likely to find a satisfactory explanation for phenomena like the shared visions of the miners by assuming that a physical process might be underlying them than by invoking nonphysical entities or mechanisms that are not amenable to any empirical method of study. It

seems that nonphysicalist explanations are attempted because it is believed that the kind of phenomenon cited here is unconstrained by space and time. But that belief is questionable. Only experiments involving astronomical distances can decide the issue, and they have not been done so far.

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