

BOOK REVIEW

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The Return from Silence: A Study of Near-Death Experiences, by D. Scott Rogo. Wellingborough, Northhamshire, England: Aquarian Press, 1989, 256 pp., £ 6.99 (Distributed in the United States by Harper and Row, \$10.95)

With the publication of Scott Rogo's miserably entitled but well written book, *The Return from Silence*, the field of near-death studies has finally gained a volume that competently introduces the general reader to the near-death experience (NDE). Though not strictly intended as or written in the style of a textbook, Rogo's work nevertheless beautifully serves this function for the field, and for this all serious students of the NDE will be indebted to him. Prior to Rogo's book, we had only Howard Mickel's self-published introduction to the NDE (Mickel, 1985), which, though not without its merits, was too skimpy and incomplete to fulfill the requirements of a general text on the subject; in addition, not being commercially available, Mickel's book could never reach a wide audience. Of course, we have long had two useful NDE anthologies, Craig Lundahl's (1982) and Bruce Greyson and Charles Flynn's (1984), but these collections are geared to the interests of professionals and not to the general public. Thus, Rogo's contribution to the study of the NDE fills an important niche that has until now been noticeably vacant. As a result, when someone new to the NDE phenomenon asks me what books I would recommend, hence-

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forth I can say: "Start with Raymond Moody's *Life after Life* (1975) and then read Rogo."

Of course, even without knowing more about this book, you can already appreciate that it does suffer from an unfortunate handicap: its insipid title which, in the field of near-death studies, is the worst since Flynn's still unrivaled *After the Beyond* (1986). Not only is Rogo's title completely vapid, but it fails utterly to alert the prospective buyer to the subject matter of the book. Moreover, it is even misleading since in this volume Rogo himself emphasizes what most other writers on the NDE have neglected, viz., the role of *transcendental music* in these experiences.

Before turning my attention to the contents of this book, I would like to insert one more prefatory comment. As an instructor for a university undergraduate course on the NDE, I was astonished at how closely Rogo's presentation of topics and his approach to the NDE in general parallel my own. His book, in fact, represents an excellent summary of the material and point of view I introduce my own students to during the first two-thirds of the course. Ironically, because there was so much overlap between us, I ultimately decided not to adopt Rogo's book as my text; he draws on so many of the same sources I do for my lectures that my professorial *raison d'être* would be vitiated while my best stories would already be told if I were to assign Rogo's book! So I didn't—but to salve my conscience and not deprive Rogo of his just royalties, I adopted another probing book of his on a similar topic, *Life After Death* (1986).

Now, as promised, let me review and comment on the contents of this book.

The first chapter is concerned with defining the NDE and giving some examples of it. What is noteworthy and distinctive about Rogo's approach to the NDE is made clear at the outset of this chapter: he is at pains to define the NDE in a very strict—I would say overly strict—way. Rogo, of course, has long distinguished himself as a deep student of the out-of-body experience (OBE) (Rogo, 1978, 1983) and for him this is an absolutely fundamental component of the NDE. Not only must the individual have been close to or threatened by the prospect of death, but for an NDE to be said to occur: "the person should either experience him/herself out-of-body sometime during the experience or his/her observations should imply he/she is functioning in such a state" (p. 15). Rogo's justification for this "tight" definition of the NDE hinges in part on his dissatisfaction over what he sees as sloppy and imprecise usage of the term and in part on his wish to exclude experiences from NDE status that merely share some features with NDEs (e.g., being

bathed in light) without being triggered by a near-death event. These are, to be sure, reasonable grounds to begin with and certainly as the book progresses, it becomes increasingly obvious why Rogo has insisted upon making the OBE aspect crucial to his definition of NDEs.

Nevertheless, to my mind, whatever its virtues, it also has the drawbacks of a Procrustean solution. What Rogo has done, of course, is to rule out by definitional fiat many experiences that most investigators would unhesitatingly want to call NDEs. Indeed, some of my best NDEr friends would be NDErs no longer by Rogo's criteria—despite their having been close to death, undergoing profound spiritual experiences while in that state, and exhibiting the transformative changes typical of NDErs afterward. To deny such persons NDEr status is of course not merely arbitrary—it is absurd. Rigorous use of Rogo's criteria would also mean that much of Albert Heim's historical NDE research and Russell Noyes's recent work now fall outside the pale, which again is ludicrous.

Thus, in his well-intended effort to trim the somewhat unruly locks of the NDE, Rogo has inadvertently lopped off its nose and ears and in doing so, has simply made a mess of what he meant to clean up. Though I happen to agree with Rogo that the NDE is best conceived as a *type* of OBE, the way he wields his scissors is more dangerous than useful. Fortunately, I don't imagine most students of the NDE—to say nothing of NDErs themselves—are likely to endorse this "purified" definition of the NDE. Rejecting it, however, in no way prevents one from making use of the many valuable insights about NDEs that Rogo will offer throughout the remainder of his book.

Chapters two and three deal with historical studies of NDEs and related phenomena. The first of these chapters is largely given over to a summary of Carol Zaleski's brilliant study of NDEs and similar visions associated with medieval Christianity. The next chapter is an extended discussion of what Rogo calls "secular reports" where he is mainly concerned to parade the important contributions made to the study of death related phenomena (e.g., deathbed visions) by psychical researchers. These studies set the table for modern NDE research and Rogo deservedly gives them a prominent place in his book. His argument here also makes it evident that NDEs must be understood as having undeniable conceptual links with other death-related phenomena and that any general model offered to "explain" NDEs must subsume these factors as well—a point with which I fully concur.

Chapter four brings us to the contemporary period of NDE research and features a review of the work of Moody, Kenneth Ring, Michael Sabom and Margot Grey. The general findings of these investigators

will be known to most readers of this Journal, so I will only note that Rogo's treatment of his material is handled in his usual lucid manner.

Beginning with chapter five and extending through the next four chapters, the form of the book changes. In effect, in dealing with selected aspects of NDEs, Rogo stages a debate of sorts between the critics of NDE research and its proponents. Rogo soon shows that he will side with its defenders, but he strives—and I think he succeeds—to let the critics and skeptics get their hacks in. Indeed, one of the strengths of Rogo's book is its thoughtful consideration of various conventional alternative explanations of the NDE and criticisms of NDE research. Throughout, Rogo displays an admirable willingness to entertain many divergent points of view about this phenomenon even when his own sympathies are evident.

In this spirit, then, chapter five presents a topic of widespread current interest in the field—childhood NDEs. Here, Melvin Morse's early work (but not his more recent contributions) is considered, along with a few case histories reported by Glen Gabbard and Stuart Twemlow. In addition, the pioneering research by former IANDS executive director Nancy Evans Bush is discussed at some length.

Chapter six explores the question of whether psychedelic drugs can induce NDE-like experiences (yes) and if so, what does that mean (take your choice). Interestingly, most of this chapter is devoted to the effects of a particular dissociative anaesthetic, ketamine. This substance, when used at sub-anaesthetic levels, brings about a very distinctive state of consciousness that some researchers have characterized as *thanatomimetic*—and therefore possibly similar to what is experienced during an NDE. But before you badger your local anaesthesiologist for an injection, let me advise you that personally, I am not so persuaded as is Rogo (whose overture to experience the effects of this drug himself was neatly squelched by one of Ronald Siegel's *bon mots*) about its comparability to NDEs. Several years ago, I had the opportunity to judge this matter for myself when I was a subject in a pilot project then being conducted by a Californian oncologist. At that time, he was working with terminally ill cancer and AIDS patients and wished to explore the possible value of ketamine in affording such patients a "rehearsal for death." His reasoning, following the approach of Stanislav Grof and Joan Halifax (1977), was that if an NDE-like state could be induced by these means, it might significantly reduce his patient's death anxiety and thereby increase the chances of an easeful passage into death.

For what it's worth, my own experience and those of others with whom I've since had a chance to compare notes incline me to emphasize

ketamine's qualitative dissimilarities to NDEs. A better and more stringent test, of course, would be for an NDEr to take ketamine himself and speak to the comparability of these experiences. For me, though, the jury's still out on this one.

One final note on this chapter. Oddly enough, Rogo scarcely mentions, except in passing, the effects of (high dose) LSD sessions which, on occasion, can certainly bring about full-blown NDE-type states of transcendence. But since I have discussed this matter elsewhere (Ring, 1988), I'll digress no further here.

Chapter seven turns our attention to the thorny and persistent problem of negative NDEs—an issue that Rogo thinks NDE research has unfairly neglected. His own review of these experiences is based chiefly on the tendentious and disputed work of Maurice Rawlings and secondarily on four case histories and a conceptualization of negative NDEs contributed by Grey. Nevertheless, there seems little doubt that negative NDEs do occur and that they merit more attention than they have yet received. Rogo has done us a service by suggesting that we might well deepen our knowledge of NDEs through the study of what, figuratively speaking, is their shadow side.

Again a personal exception to one of Rogo's statements here: He asserts (p. 135) that only Sabom among mainstream NDE researchers has acknowledged Rawlings's work. This is not so. In *Life at Death*, I devote four full pages to a critique of Rawlings's research (Ring, 1980, p. 192–196), by which I still stand.

In chapter eight, Rogo directly confronts the skeptics in considering and attempting to rebut a long list of counter-arguments to the notion that the NDE represents an objectively real phenomenon. The result of this interchange is not merely (at least in the author's eyes) Rogo's victory, but an enhanced appreciation for the complexity of this perhaps ever-elusive experience.

The next chapter affords an opportunity for Rogo to dwell on various paranormal features of NDEs. He begins by reconsidering Sabom's important research on apparent paranormal OBE-based veridical perceptions in operating room settings in the light of a possible artifact—sensory cuing—and finds it insufficient to account for all of Sabom's results. Most of the remainder of this chapter consists of a straightforward discussion of a variety of paranormal effects that other researchers have reported in connection with or in the aftermath of NDEs. Rogo concludes with an intriguing interpretation of his own for the apparent increase in psychic sensitivities following NDEs.

The stage is now—finally!—set for Rogo's own general interpretation of NDEs, which he sets forth in his last two chapters. Here he distin-

guishes between what he calls simple and eschatological NDEs. Simple NDEs are essentially simple OBEs, which, after reviewing principally the OBE research carried out in the mid-seventies at the Psychological Research Foundation in North Carolina, Rogo concludes represent genuine (i.e., literal) separations of consciousness from the body. The OBE, then, is the real experiential foundation of the NDE—and so we see why it was necessary—if perhaps ultimately circular—for Rogo to define NDEs as he did in the beginning of his book.

The OBE makes possible, however, a second visionary component that gives rise to the eschatological NDE, or what Zaleski has, with a disdain for unnecessary jargon, simply called “the otherworld journey.” This more transcendental aspect of the NDE is a mixture of both objective *and* subjective elements and is overlaid with symbolic meaning. In Rogo’s view, the eschatological NDE signals the existence of a spiritual Beyond and implies survival of bodily death. As such it is a realm that has of course been apprehended in many other ways than through an NDE—as the world’s treasury of spiritual and religious literature discloses.

On these matters, Rogo’s thinking is very close to my own; accordingly, it will not surprise you to learn that I find his interpretive commentary not merely cogent but compelling and a fitting conclusion to his inquiry into the nature of the NDE.

So this, then, is the gist of what you will find in Rogo’s rewarding book.

What will you *not* find?

Well, you won’t find much about much about the transformative effects of NDEs and you will find nothing at all on their possible evolutionary implications. These are major themes in the work of NDE authors such as Flynn, Grey, Michael Grosso, and Ring, but Rogo’s own concern with the NDE is tightly focused on what it *is* and its implications for survival—not what it does or may mean in the larger worldly scheme of things.

Similarly, you won’t find any material describing NDErs’ difficulties in coming to terms with these experiences afterward or with the personal and interpersonal dislocations they set into motion. These “applied” issues are likewise far from Rogo’s sphere of interest in NDEs.

Finally, I don’t think you will sense from this book that Rogo himself, despite his evident and wide-ranging knowledge of NDEs, has a good “feel” for NDErs themselves. My impression is that he has relied more on second-hand written accounts of these experiences than first-hand contact with NDErs. This is a book that, at least to me, reflects an

effort at intellectual rather than empathetic understanding of the NDE. On its own terms, it is very successful and most worthwhile; but its own terms can offer the basis only for a partial understanding of the phenomenon Rogo seeks to elucidate. It is for this reason that I would recommend coupling this volume with Moody's first book for anyone just getting acquainted with the NDE.

I've saved my most niggling criticism for last. Unfortunately, Rogo's book betrays signs both of highly selective reading in near-death studies and of carelessness (or haste) in composition. For example, he spells Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's first name incorrectly (with a z); he gets David Bohm's last name wrong; he has Craig Lundahl at Eastern (instead of Western) New Mexico University; he botches the name of *The American Journal of Diseases of Children*; and so on. Only a pedant would care, of course, but we professors love to brandish our red pencils whenever we get the chance. One hopes these and other errors will be corrected in a re-titled American edition.

My final comment, however, would be to ask you to value my praise more than my cavils. For all its minor flaws, questionable statements and regrettable omissions—not to mention (again!) its inept title—this most welcome book is unquestionably a major contribution to the field. We should feel darn happy to have it and lucky that Scott Rogo took the trouble to write it. Frankly, I don't know of anyone who could have done it better.

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