

# Neglected Near-Death Phenomena

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**ABSTRACT:** There are a number of important near-death phenomena that have not received much research attention in recent times. These include visual and auditory experiences, as well as such physical phenomena as breakage or falling of objects reported to take place around the time someone dies. Furthermore, some bystanders at deathbeds have reported seeing apparitions and a variety of emanations coming from the dying person's body, such as mists, lights, or replicas of the dying person's body. In addition to presenting examples of these phenomena, I suggest several topics for further work in this area. Research needs to be conducted on the prevalence and the psychological characteristics of the experiencer. We also need to explore further interrelationships between the features of the experiences, and between near-death phenomena and other veridical experiences that take place in relation to living persons who are not dying and who are dead. Research could follow a variety of assumptions, including parapsychological and conventional explanations. Studies of near-death phenomena are particularly difficult due to the apparent rarity of some experiences, and the rarity of researchers interested and willing to get involved in this type of research.

**KEY WORDS:** near-death phenomena; deathbed apparitions; deathbed physical phenomena; deathbed emanations; selective perception; collective perception.

Although there have been recent discussions and research on "after-death communication" (Wright, 2002) and near-death experiences (NDEs) (van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, and Elfferich, 2001), there are several other phenomena reported to occur around the moment of

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death that are currently neglected by researchers. I am referring to visions, voices, impressions, and physical phenomena coinciding with someone's death, as well as the experiences of bystanders at deathbeds.

In the past there was more attention to these manifestations, as seen in the publications of William Barrett (1926); Ernesto Bozzano (1923); Camille Flammarion (1921/1922); Edmund Gurney, Frederic W. H. Myers, and Frank Podmore (1886); and others (Sidgwick, Johnson, Myers, Podmore, and Sidgwick, 1894), but there are some modern exceptions (Piccinini and Rinaldi, 1990; Rhine, 1963; Wright, 2002).

My purpose in this paper is not to present a detailed literature review. Instead I will present examples of some of these currently neglected phenomena, and I will outline some possible research topics, with the hope that others will be inspired to study them in a systematic way. Some of what follows has been discussed in this journal from a different perspective by Glennys Howarth and Allan Kellehear (2001).

## **Examples of Near-Death Phenomena**

### *Visions, Voices, and Impressions Around the Moment of Death*

Perhaps the best known phenomena related to dying persons are the experiences perceived around, or coinciding with, the moment of death, a topic explored in detail by members of the Society for Psychical Research during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In an early classic representing some of the best work of the Society, Gurney, Myers, and Podmore's *Phantasms of the Living* (1886), the first author argued that telepathy could provide information about distant individuals, most of whom were passing through a crisis or were close to death. Such information could be expressed by the percipient as apparitional or other visual experiences, as well as through dreams, intuitions, auditory and tactile impressions, and physical and emotional reactions. Death was a major topic of the distant agent's situation. Out of 668 telepathy cases, 399 were death-related "in the sense that the percipient's experience either coincided with or very shortly followed the agent's death" (Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, 1886, Vol. 2, p. 26). Furthermore, 79 out of 149 veridical dreams "represented or suggested death" (Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, 1886, Vol. 1, p. 303). Both in *Phantasms of the Living* and in the later "Census of Hallucinations" (Sidgwick, Johnson, Myers, Podmore, and Sidgwick, 1894), the authors argued on the basis of statistical considerations that the coincidence of such experiences with death could not be the result of chance.

In many visual experiences, it seems as if a person was physically present in the room or in the immediate surroundings of the percipient, as in the following example:

One day while I was shaving Earl stood before me in his army uniform and looked me over for a few minutes and then disappeared ... Several weeks later I found out that he had been killed in action at the time he appeared to me. (Rhine, 1961/1968, p. 84)

In other cases, the person sees what seems to be an image of the dying individual and its surroundings projected from a slide. This was the case of a lady who was attending a concert with her husband when she had an unexpected visual experience. In her words:

... I saw with perfect distinctness, between myself and the orchestra, my uncle ... lying in bed with an appealing look on his face, like one dying ... The appearance was not transparent or filmy, but perfectly solid looking; *and yet I could somehow see the orchestra, not through, but behind it.* (Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, 1886, Vol. 2, p. 37)

She had not heard from the uncle in months and did not know that he had been ill. Soon after, she learned that the uncle had died around the time of her vision.

Experiences collected by Flammarion (1900) in France show cases in which more than one sensory modality was involved. One woman who had both a visual and an auditory experience said she saw a

figure standing upright, surrounded by a *circle of light* ... I recognized my husband's brother-in-law ... who said: "Warn Adolphe [her husband] – *tell him I am dead.*" (Flammarion, 1900, p. 140)

Another case combined a visual and an intuitive aspect. The percipient was awakened by a light:

I looked up and saw at the foot of my bed ... a shining disk ... Without seeing any figure, without hearing any noise, there came into my mind the persuasion that I had before me one of my cousins ... who was very ill. (Flammarion, 1900, p. 84)

Finally, in the next case we have an example of physical sensations, uncontrolled emotion, and a vision:

I dined quietly at noon, but about two o'clock I felt excruciating pains. I went up to my room and flung myself into an easy-chair, where I burst into tears. I saw my mother *lying on her bed*, wearing a white muslin cap with ruffles, such as I had never seen her wear. (Flammarion, 1900, p. 79)

Other experiences that apparently coincided with deaths occurring at a distance evoke different responses in the percipients. The

following four accounts reported by Sylvia Hart Wright provide examples. One percipient saw the bedroom becoming "dark as if death itself was at the doorstep." Another "saw a black cloud obscure the light shining in the kitchen." Still another felt the person's "presence" and "closeness," and the fourth percipient unexpectedly "broke into sobbing" (Wright, 2002, pp. 21–23).

Sometimes these experiences are collectively perceived, as in the following case in which a mother and daughter saw their father and grandfather, respectively, around the time of his death:

My mother and I were doing the supper dishes. . . . Suddenly at the window we saw my grandfather standing there looking in, with his black overcoat on and a lantern in his hand, smiling. . . . We both ran to the door . . . but when we opened the door there was no one there. (Rhine, 1957, p. 28)

Other cases show selective percipience, in which some people have experiences while others do not. On other occasions, individuals perceive different things. One such case involved two persons in the same house hearing a voice while a member of the family was dying at a distance. They both found themselves in a corridor thinking that the other had uttered a call. But what they heard was different. One of them heard her name called three times, while the other heard the word "uncle" also three times (Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, 1886, Vol. 1, pp. 227–229; for a similar experience, see Sidgwick, Johnson, Myers, Podmore, and Sidgwick, 1894, pp. 318–319). In another case, a man saw a female figure but could not recognize her features. His wife felt a presence and saw a "misty shadow passing through the chamber." That evening the man's mother fell ill and died (Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, 1886, Vol. 2, pp. 236–237).

Louisa Rhine (1957) reported an analysis of 114 veridical death-related hallucinations in which 12 percent were realistic or life-like, 67 percent were lifelike except that the dying person was in an unexpected location (such as the percipient's bedroom), and 21 percent were unrealistic, including cases in which an apparition was beatified or symbolic.

### *Physical Phenomena*

Physical phenomena have been reported to coincide with the death of distant persons (Bozzano, 1923; Flammarion, 1921/1922; Piccinini and Rinaldi, 1990; Rhine, 1963). Table 1 shows the variety of physical effects reported in four case collections. The most commonly reported

**Table 1**  
**Variety of Physical Effects Related to Dying Individuals in**  
**Four Case Collections**

<i>Phenomenon</i>	<i>Flammarion (1921/1922) N = 14</i>	<i>Bozzano (1923) N = 13</i>	<i>Rhine (1963) N = 95</i>	<i>Piccinini and Rinaldi (1990) N = 37</i>
Clocks stopping or starting	14%	23%	39%	24%
Objects falling	14%	54%	32%	43%
Objects rocking or shaking	29%	8%	4%	0%
Objects breaking or exploding	7%	8%	15%	0%
Lights turning on or off	7%	8%	4%	0%
Doors opening, shutting, locking, or unlocking	0%	0%	6%	24%
Objects moved	21%	0%	0%	3%
Wind felt	7%	0%	0%	0%
Plants affected	0%	0%	0%	5%

Note: I calculated the percentages of the four case collections. Rhine (1963) presented actual numbers, while those for the other studies were counted from case descriptions. Following Rhine, I did not include auditory phenomena. Furthermore, I did not include cases that Bozzano quoted from Flammarion.

phenomena are clocks starting or stopping and objects falling. However, we should keep in mind that some of the authors of these collections did not present all the cases at their disposal.

The following case is illustrative. The phenomenon took place around the time the person in question was accidentally shot and killed:

When the rest of us had chicken pox, my brother Frank was sent down to my grandmother's ... which was about forty miles from where we lived ... Two days after Frank left, Mom and our neighbor were having their morning coffee and talking .... All of a sudden, this cut-glass dish that Frank had given Mother popped and broke right in two. It was just sitting on the sideboard. Mother screamed and said, "My God! Frank has been killed." Everyone tried to quiet Mother, but she said she just knew. (Rhine, 1961/1968, pp. 245–246)

On occasion the physical event takes place in the same room where the dying person is located, as is the following account. The patient was given water with a spoon from a glass placed on a table besides the bed. When he died, three persons who were present heard tinkling sounds: "It came from the glass in which there was only a little water, and before our eyes, the glass split in two parts, a rim about a half

inch from the top breaking from the rest of the glass" (Whitmer, 1924, p. 575).

Other cases suggest that physical phenomena may take place in connection with other manifestations such as apparitions (Piccinini and Rinaldi, 1990, pp. 110–111), and sometimes continue after death. The latter was one of the main features in a case of two friends who had agreed to give evidence of survival of death to the other after their death (Caltagirone, 1911).

### *Bystanders' Perceptions of Deathbed Phenomena*

Bystanders' perceptions of deathbed phenomena include cases in which either another individual shares the experience of a dying person, or others perceive the experiences irrespective of the testimony of the dying individual.

Many fascinating cases of music heard around a dying person have been compiled by Bozzano (1923, 1943/1982) and by Scott Rogo (1970, 1972). In one case, a child named Lilly died on a Tuesday evening. Several members of her family, but not the child herself, heard music, a manifestation starting the previous Saturday and heard both on Sunday and on the day of her death. Her father described the music as "the soft, wild notes of an Æolian harp, which rose and fell distinctively, and increased gradually, until the room was full of sound" (Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, 1886, Vol. 2, p. 222). The music was heard both in the patient's room and in other parts of the house. The servant and a daughter were downstairs and heard the music. Lilly's mother reported that on one occasion:

... my old nurse and aunt came up to see how Lilly was, and were, with my husband, all in the room with the child. I had gone down into the kitchen ... when the same sounds of Æolian music were heard by all three in the room, and I heard the same in the kitchen. (Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, 1886, Vol. 2, p. 222)

In addition to hearing music, some persons other than the dying individual sometimes see apparitions around a deathbed. In one case, two sisters, Emmeline and Susanna, were around the deathbed of their sister Charlotte when they saw the faces of two deceased brothers. One of the sisters wrote:

... I saw a golden light above Charlotte's bed, and within the light were enfolded two cherub's faces gazing intently upon her ... I put my hand across the bed to Susanna, and I *only* said the word: "Susanna, look up!" She did so, and at once her countenance changed,

"Oh, Emmeline," she said, "they are William and John." Then both of us watched on till all faded away like a washed-out picture; and in a few hours Charlotte died. (Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, 1886, Vol. 2, p. 629)

Another interesting case concerned the American poet Horace Traubel (1858–1919), a student and admirer of the work of Walt Whitman (1819–1892) (Prince, 1921). As Traubel was dying he saw and heard Whitman, among other individuals. A Lieutenant Colonel L. Moore Cosgrave, who had been with Traubel the last three nights of his life, shared one of his visions (he was said to have had have similar experiences in the past). He looked at the same place Traubel was staring at and, in his words:

Slowly the point at which we were both looking grew gradually brighter, a light haze appeared, spread until it assumed bodily form, and took the likeness of Walt Whitman, standing upright beside the bed, a rough tweed jacket on, an old felt hat upon his head and his right hand in his pocket ... he was gazing down at Traubel, a kindly, reassuring smile upon his face, he nodded twice as though reassuringly, the features quite distinct for at least a full minute, then gradually faded from sight. (Prince, 1921, p. 119)

Cosgrave also stated that Traubel acknowledged seeing Whitman. He added:

At the same moment, Walt passed apparently through the bed towards me, and appeared to touch my hand, as through in farewell, I distinctly felt it, as though I had touched a low electric charge, he then smiled at Horace, and passed from sight. (Prince, 1921, p. 121)

In another case, two witnesses perceived different things (Hyslop, 1915). A lady was nursing a young woman, and the woman's doctor was also present. At one point the patient showed "adverse" symptoms but they did not call her mother, who was exhausted and resting in an adjoining room. The nurse wrote:

As I looked there passed around from the head of the bed the figure of a woman in white whose face was turned away from me, and who paused for a moment by the girl's side before passing by the doctor and myself, still with averted face, and going out of the door back of me which led into the room in which the mother was sleeping ...

Immediately after the figure passed the doctor, he started and said sharply:

"Who hit me on the shoulder just then?" (Hyslop, 1915, p. 393)

The patient was still alive and conscious, but she died a day later in her mother's arms. The physician in attendance added that he "can unhesitatingly endorse the above facts" (Hyslop, 1959, p. 393).

More recent reports of bystander perceptions have been presented by Karlis Osis (1961, pp. 75–76) and by Peter Fenwick and Elizabeth Fenwick (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1995/1997, pp. 251–253).

Another type of observation is that in which different sorts of “emanations” have been seen emerging from the bodies of dying persons. Robert Crookall (1967, pp. 37–44) has mentioned many cases of this sort. The well-known medium Eileen Garrett wrote that while attending the death of a friend, “I perceived two small clouds emitted from his body – one from the right side of the torso, at the level of the spleen, the other from the top of his head” (Garrett, 1943, p. 151). While most of these visions are seen by only a single individual, sometimes they are collectively perceived (Monk, 1922; Tweedale, 1921). Dorothy Monk reported how she, and other members of her family, saw the following around her moribund mother:

... I and three sisters all at once noticed a pale blue mauve haze all over her as she lay. We watched it and very gradually it deepened in colour until it became a deep purple, so thick that it almost blotted out her features from view, and spread all in the fold of the bed clothes like a purple fog. Once or twice she feebly moved her arms and the colour travelled with them. (Monk, 1922, p. 182)

There are also cases in which the observer sees a replica of the dying person's body. The following is an example:

I approached the ward as the child drew its final breath. Then I saw mist above the little body. It took the shape of the body which lay on the bed. This was attached by a very fine silver cord. The replica was about three feet from the body on the bed. It rose gradually to above five feet above the body, then gradually lifted itself into an upright position. It then floated away. (Crookall, 1967, p. 40)

## **Further Research with Near-Death Phenomena**

It is my hope that a new generation of researchers will systematically study the experiences discussed here so as to increase our knowledge of these phenomena. In what follows I offer some suggestions for further studies.

### *Issues of Prevalence and Chance Occurrences*

How common are reports of apparitions, physical phenomena, music, and the like? It would be useful to assess the prevalence of



near-death phenomena among randomly selected samples of the general population, following previous surveys of general psychic experiences (Palmer, 1979), apparitions of the dead (Haraldsson, 1988–89), and hallucinations (Ohayon, 2000). Surveys could also target particular groups such as persons known to have reported psychic experiences, and individuals who have been present at deathbeds, such as physicians, nurses, and hospice workers, among others.

Some phenomena may be more rare than others. For example, while Osis (1961) found many cases of visions experienced by the dying, he found very few bystander experiences. I suspect that physical phenomena are also less frequent than other experiences such as apparitions. But more needs to be done to determine these frequencies in a systematic way. Furthermore, it would be worthwhile following up previous attempts to assess statistically the coincidental happening of many apparitional experiences with a distant death (Sidgwick, Johnson, Myers, Podmore, and Sidgwick, 1894).

Chance is a difficult variable to deal with in assessing the incidence of physical phenomena. In real life, many things break and fall in unexplained ways without coinciding with death. My wife and I experienced an event of this sort when we heard a noise in an adjoining room. On investigation, we found that a picture of my mother-in-law had fallen out of the frame, something that struck us at the moment as *very* odd. We did not feel any intuitive feeling or awareness carrying conviction of a death but, knowing about death-related physical phenomena, we worried about my mother-in-law. We phoned her and she was all right; nothing warranting our worry had taken place (nor had anything happened to other family members).

It is likely that cases of this sort are forgotten while the more memorable and meaningful coincidences with death are remembered. Although I do not think this can account for cases such as those collected in Italy by Graziela Piccinini and Gian Marco Rinaldi (1990) or by others before them (Flammerion, 1921/1922; Rhine, 1963), it is a problem to be considered in the scientific study of these occurrences. Perhaps researchers should collect cases of this sort without appealing for death coincidences, but instead asking for strange breakages, falls, movements, and other physical phenomena witnessed by people. This would allow us a more accurate estimation of the number of actual cases that may have a normal explanation, as well as those that seem to correspond to a death, regardless of the causal agency.

### *Features of Near-Death Phenomena*

Future research should explore further the different ways the features manifest, such as different sensory modalities of the experience, and collective and selective percipience. Researchers might investigate the development of telepathic hallucinations, including various forms ranging from incomplete to complete apparitions, following the early work reported in *Phantasms of the Living* (Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, 1886, Vol. 1, chapter 12). This classic work documented the presence of a variety of features accompanying veridical death- and crisis-related experiences, such as occasional observations of luminous manifestations and mist. Myers described the importance of careful classification and study of features such as these:

Just as, in trying to trace the causes, say, of a paralytic seizure, we feel it needful to note all smaller symptoms which precede, accompany, or follow the principal shock, so also in tracking the genesis of a veridical hallucination we are bound to note all such minor hallucinatory percepts as have grouped themselves about the central phantasm. These subsidiary hallucinations cannot be meaningless, cannot be arbitrary; they must in some way indicate the mode in which the unknown energy is operating to produce the main result. (Myers, 1890, p. 331)

Such work may also teach us about differential patterns of features clustering in near-death phenomena. This work could follow analyses such as Bruce Greyson's (1985) study of clusters of NDE features and work comparing the features of out-of-body experiences (OBEs) reported to take place in what the experiencers believed to be near-death or non-near-death conditions (Alvarado, 2001).

Furthermore, other features deserve more attention. In some rare cases, different experiences are reported in different locations around the time of the same death. For example, on the death of the reporter's grandmother in Alsace, a clock stopped near her. Around the same time, the woman's son, living in the United States, saw his mother by his bed (Flammarion, 1921/1922, p. 307). In another case, the effects were reported in three locations. While someone was dying in Spain, sounds like a clock were heard in Buenos Aires, a silhouette was seen on a wall in a city in the interior of Argentina, and dogs were heard howling in Spain (Flammarion, 1921/1922, pp. 139–140). Cases of this sort need to be studied in more detail.

Our research should not be limited to documenting the occurrence and variety of experience features themselves. It could also explore the interrelationship of features, their clustering, or their relationship to

other variables, following work on deathbed visions (Osis, 1961; Osis and Haraldsson, 1977), and NDEs and OBEs (Alvarado and Zingrone, 1997; Greyson, 1985; Ring, 1980). Are the experiences more frequent in some conditions or circumstances than in others? Perhaps the experiences taking place in relation to violent death are different in some ways from those that are related to non-violent deaths.

Another possibility for the study of interactions among features is a replication of Émile Laurent's (1907) observations with auditory cases from Flammarion's (1900) collection. Laurent noticed that in some cases the sound ceased when the percipient recognized they were related to death, whereas it continued to be heard (at least once more), if such recognition was not achieved. Can that pattern be replicated in other case collections?

Researchers could study the interactions of features statistically, as Sybo Schouten did (1979, 1981, 1982) with three case collections of extrasensory perception (ESP) from different countries, some of which were related to death. In his three studies, Schouten found that death-related veridical cases, such as apparitions or impressions, had fewer details as part of the experience than cases related to less serious events, such as illness and accidents.

Regarding physical effects, we need to be aware that some of them are accompanied by the feeling or realization that someone, or a particular individual, has died. Is this an inference derived from experiencing an anomalous physical event, as Laurent (1907) suggested in the case of sounds, or is it a veridical aspect of the experience? The latter is suggested in those cases in which there was no reason to expect the person was going to die. In fact, Rhine (1963, 1981) has proposed that psychokinesis (PK), like dreams, intuitions, and hallucinations, may be one of the ways the subconscious mind uses expresses ESP-acquired information. The only difference is that spontaneous PK is much rarer than other means of expressing ESP. Rhine further speculated that the person around whom PK takes place may express the ESP knowledge when "the information is blocked at the level of consciousness" (Rhine, 1981, p. 204). In her view, PK represented "side effects, fragments, signs of repressed information" (p. 204). This idea, which assumes living agency, deserves to be tested in future work.

Future research should also go beyond impressionistic estimates of differences between veridical and nonveridical hallucinations (West, 1960) and include systematic comparisons of specific features. Such analysis would yield empirical data that could show different or similar features between the experiences in question. For example, a

survey of hallucinations among the general population sample in Iceland found that 22 percent had experienced an hallucination (Líndal, Stefánsson and Stefánsson, 1994). The most commonly reported visions were those of strangers (59 percent), which does not seem to be the case with collections of veridical hallucinations (Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, 1886; Piccinini and Rinaldi, 1990). But more specific comparisons could be made. The researchers of this general population survey also found that out of those reporting hallucinations, 7 percent experienced perceptions of such undefined features as lights and silhouettes in mist. Once again, more precise comparisons could be made with death-related veridical experiences.

In the next two sections I will discuss further topics of research with the features of near-death phenomena.

### *The Experiences of the Dying and of the Dead: Dimensional or Categorical Perspectives?*

Some writers have postulated that similarities of features between experiences related to the dying and to the dead imply a common source. That is, they assumed that experiences related to the dying are of the same nature as the experiences of the dead. British spiritualist William Harrison, commenting on apparitions of the dying and those perceived after death, said that "there is no break of continuity in the phenomena of apparitions in consequence of the death of the body" (1879, p. vii). Such a continuity model of apparitional experiences has been defended by others who suggested such experiences indicate survival of bodily death (Bozzano, 1923; Myers, 1903). "We gradually discovered," wrote Myers, "that the accounts of apparitions at the moment of death . . . lead without perceptible break to apparitions occurring after the death of the person seen" (Myers, 1903, Vol. 1, p. 8). A few years later, another student of apparitions affirmed the existence of a "perfect resemblance between the extra-sensory manifestations of the soul during life, and after death. A phantom of the dead is identical to a phantom of the living" (Delanne, 1909, p. 12).

In a classic trilogy of books, Flammarion (1920/1922, 1921/1922, 1922/1923) grouped a variety of phenomena according to the time at which they took place: whether before, during, or after death. He described what appeared to be similar features among the three groups of cases. In his view, phenomena happening around death "will bring us gradually to a knowledge of what exists after death" (Flammarion, 1921/1922, p. 83).

Many features of apparitions of the living also appear in apparitions of the dead. The collective and selective percipience mentioned above, for example, also appears in manifestations of persons who have been dead for hours or days, as seen in a fairly recent compilation of cases (Guggenheim and Guggenheim, 1995/1997, chapter 21).

Several studies have suggested a similarity between the two groups of cases. Among these were studies of veridical hallucinations (Sidgwick, Johnson, Myers, Podmore, and Sidgwick, 1894; Rhine, 1957), physical effects (Rhine, 1963), and the hearing of music (Bozzano, 1943/1982; Rogo, 1970, 1972). In all these studies, cases that occurred in near-death circumstances were compared to those that occurred in relation to living persons who were not close to death, as well as to those that occurred after the death of the individual represented by the manifestation.

As valuable as the previous observations have been, their support for the idea of continuity of features is somewhat fuzzy and non-specific, being based on general case descriptions. We need to study these issues empirically in more systematic ways and with large numbers of cases, quantifying the comparisons so as to get precise indications as to the specific similarities of differences in case features. Hornell Hart's work (Hart and Collaborators, 1956) was an important and generally forgotten attempt to do so. He reported that there were few differences between the features of apparitions of the living and of the dead. Hart analyzed published cases and coded them for specific features such as collective percipience, and whether the apparition was seen as a full figure, performed normal movements, spoke, was luminous, disappeared suddenly, moved objects, or was seen repeatedly, among many other features.

In some analyses, Hart found differences between the specific features or aspects of one type of apparition and those of a combination of other types. For example, apparitions of the dead perceived more than 12 hours after death showed significantly higher frequencies of instances of being seen repeatedly, and of having an emotional bond to the location where they were seen, than the combined apparitional cases of dead persons seen less than 12 hours after death, persons near-death, living persons without memory of being seen as apparitions, and living persons with awareness of having been seen at a distant location. While I believe that Hart's combining diverse types of apparitions complicated the interpretation of the results, his work provides an example of what may be done in future research.

In Table 2, I examine Rhine's (1957) data to show the possible relevance to the continuity model. I found a significant difference in

**Table 2**  
**Rhine's (1957) Cases of Visual and Auditory**  
**Veridical Hallucinations Related to the**  
**Living, the Dying, and the Dead**

<i>Sensory Modality</i>	<i>Living</i> ( <i>N</i> = 414)	<i>Dying</i> ( <i>N</i> = 244)	<i>Dead</i> ( <i>N</i> = 88)
Visual	16%	48%	56%
Auditory	84%	52%	44%

$\chi^2 = 100.22$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .0001$ .

the number of cases of visual and auditory impressions related to living, dying, and deceased individuals. Further analyses showed that the significance focused on the contrast between the cases of the living and each of the other two groups. With the living, visual cases were less frequent and auditory experiences were more frequent than each of the other groups. The meaning of this trend is unclear, and it certainly needs to be replicated with other samples before it can be taken too seriously.

The topic needs to be explored in different ways that might test assumptions other than the idea of survival of bodily death. For example, approaches in the psychiatric and psychological literatures suggest more statistically sophisticated studies of the dimensional or categorical aspects of the features of near-death phenomena (Serper, Dill, Chang, Kot, and Elliot, 2005; Waller, Putnam and Carlson, 1996). In one recent study, researchers reported that the factorial structure of a hallucination scale based on specific experience features was similar among three samples consisting of undergraduate students, schizophrenics with current hallucinations, and schizophrenics without current hallucinations (Serper, Dill, Chang, Kot, and Elliot, 2005). These researchers concluded that their findings supported the "notion of the continuity of hallucinatory expression across nonclinical and psychiatric samples" (Serper, Dill, Chang, Kot, and Elliot, 2005, p. 271). Researchers could follow a similar strategy in exploring the features of near-death phenomena: after coding cases for many features, such as the ones tabulated by Hart and his collaborators (1956) among others, they could compare the phenomenological structure of specific experiences referring to the living, the dying, and the dead.

A possible analysis following the above-mentioned approach could be done following the observations of Myers (1890), who suggested that there is a continuity in the forms of near-death phenomena. Myers noted that experiences occurring around death, postmortem cases, and non-death-related phenomena such as spontaneous telepathy all seemed to share: "(1) hallucinations of the senses; (2) emotional and motor impulses; [and] (3) definite intellectual messages" (1890, p. 334). The latter consisted of words and imagery. Such phenomena, which Myers thought were the means by which the subconscious mind communicated to the conscious, could be explored using the same approach of the above-mentioned hallucination study (Serper, Dill, Chang, Kot, and Elliot, 2005).

We also need to consider the possibility of a categorical model in which there may be differences in the features to the point of suggesting different types of experiences. Perhaps we may find that there is some continuity (or similarity of features), but that this continuity breaks down at a certain point. In fact, this was reported in the above-mentioned hallucination study, whose authors stated that there was evidence in their study to support the idea that "hallucinatory behavior becomes discontinuous after a certain critical severity threshold is surpassed" (Serper, Dill, Chang, Kot, and Elliot, 2005, p. 271). With near-death phenomena, we are not dealing with severity of pathology, but it may be possible that phenomenological continuity is limited, or that there are exceptions with certain features. My analysis in Table 2 may be suggestive of categorical phenomenological patterns. But, of course, this needs to be investigated more systematically. Qualitative and quantitative approaches ideally should complement each other in the study of this issue.

### *Characteristics of Experiencers*

Do persons experiencing these near-death phenomena have a propensity to experience other phenomena? Survey work on a variety of parapsychological experiences such as waking and dream ESP, OBEs, auras, and psychokinesis have shown statistically significant interrelationships between the experiences (Kohr, 1980; Palmer, 1979). I have found in more than one study that those having OBEs report more claims of ESP and other phenomena than a nonOBE group (Alvarado and Zingrone, 1999; Alvarado, Zingrone and Dalton, 1998–99). Work with NDEs has shown that some experiencers report a variety of apparent parapsychological experiences (Sutherland,

1989) and auditory hallucinations (Greyson and Liester, 2004) after the NDE. There are indications that other near-death phenomena are also related to a variety of experiences. For example, nurse Joy Snell (1918/1959) reported her many visions of spirits leaving the body at the moment of death and apparitions around dying persons. She also experienced apparitions of the dead in other circumstances, music, smells, lights, and travels to other dimensions. She represents that type of person who is particularly open to repeated experiences and whom we need to study more systematically.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was speculated that there was a "special susceptibility on the percipient's part" behind the perception of telepathic hallucinations, including those taking place at or around the moment of a distant death (Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, 1886, Vol. 2, p. 171). More recently, positive significant relations have been found between different psychic experiences and psychological constructs, such as openness to experience (Alvarado, Zingrone and Dalton, 1998–1999), absorption (Irwin, 1985), dissociation (Richards, 1991), and fantasy proneness (Wilson and Barber, 1983). Some research also suggests significant positive interrelationships between psychic experiences and dream recall and lucid dreams (Kohr, 1980; Palmer, 1979). Are the near-death phenomena discussed in this paper related to these variables?

Perhaps this research may be used to explain some of these phenomena in terms of purely imaginal constructions of the mind. This may apply, for example, to some single-percipient cases, such as Colonel Cosgrave's experience at Traubel's deathbed presented above. In these cases, a high capacity for hallucination, perhaps related to high absorption, hypnotic susceptibility, or fantasy proneness, may interact with beliefs (such as the action of the spirit without the body or communication with the dead) or with the context (such as grief or an emotional death scene) to produce some experiences (see also Houran and Lange, 1997). Following Podmore (1890), veridical experiences such as Cosgrave's would be explained through telepathy from the living. In his view, the dying person may be the telepathic agent for the hallucinations of the bystanders.

Such speculations about individuals' tendency to hallucinate fail in cases in which the person had a veridical experience without previous knowledge or expectation of the death, as well as in collective percipience cases, such as the musical sounds heard by the family of the dying girl Lilly mentioned above. Although selective percipience may be consistent with varying abilities to experience hallucinations,



it may also be a manifestation of a varying ability to perceive psychic events. In this view, apparitional experiences should take “various forms according to the projector’s idiosyncrasies” (Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, 1886, Vol. 2, p. 171). That is, we should expect different percepts or sensory modalities in those having *veridical* experiences, “one of them embodying it in sound, and another . . . in visible shape; or one of them embodying it in sound or shape, and another conscious of it as an inward idea; and so on” (Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, 1886, Vol. 2, p. 172).

Unfortunately, these ideas have not been followed up empirically. One way to do so is to conduct new studies such as the one reported by Harvey Irwin (1979). He studied the relationship between cognitive coding preferences (verbal and visual styles) and the modality of spontaneous ESP experiences (intuitive and visual experiences). In addition to personality and cognitive variables, we may focus on other aspects related to the experiencers, such as their early developmental histories. Early experiences such as trauma have been suggested as risk factors for NDEs (Ring, 1992) and other death-related experiences (Wright, 2002). It is likely that we may find that many variables interact to create a susceptibility, proneness, or openness to near-death phenomena.

## Concluding Remarks

As I have argued, there is much to explore regarding near-death phenomena, including both the features of the experience and the characteristics of the experiencers. In addition, we need to study other near-death phenomena not mentioned in this paper, such as apparitions of persons who died hours or days after their apparitions were seen, death-related precognitive experiences, and the ESP experiences of dying persons.

Furthermore, several explanatory concepts can be tested, if we remain open to different assumptions, something that can only augment our knowledge of these phenomena. Among these possible hypotheses may be those guided by conventional explanations, such as James Houran and Rense Lange’s ideas about deathbed visions (Houran and Lange, 1997) and Schouten’s (1979, 1981, 1982) approach to ESP experiences. But it is also important to consider ideas that require an extension of such concepts as chance, hallucinations, and the like. While some cases may be explained in this way, others seem to indicate that

information is acquired from some source outside of the individual's mind. Research based on the concept of ESP and designed to test the idea of survival of death deserve more systematic exploration.

The challenge may be particularly difficult due to the rarity of some of these cases and the rarity of researchers interested in these topics. In terms of the latter, it is unfortunate that some parapsychologists shun spontaneous phenomena and the survival question, because they feel such topics tarnish the scientific nature of research on parapsychological experiences. These arguments by some parapsychologists mirror those of their critics (Alvarado, 2003). Just as some critics find the idea of psychic phenomena absurd and detrimental to science and to the education of the general public, some parapsychologists would like to separate their endeavors from the study of near-death phenomena and from any ideas that imply survival of death or involve spirituality. Having been attacked by those outside the field, some parapsychologists display similar attitudes within the field, and thus hinder the efforts of the very few colleagues who do this work. The number of those who investigate psychic phenomena is small enough, without intolerance within the field making the task at hand even more difficult.

Nonetheless, it is my hope that these considerations will not hinder those in a position to conduct empirical studies, so that these manifestations will be more widely and more scientifically studied in the future.

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