BOOK REVIEW

Hank Wesselman, Ph.D.
Granite Bay, CA


P. M. H. Atwater's *We Live Forever* is an engaging personal narrative about her near-death experiences that joins the swelling ranks of other popular works that have followed on the heels of the pioneering work of Edgar Cayce, and more recently, Raymond Moody. Atwater leads off with the following observations:

My personal experiences have taught me that a partnership exists between life and death, and that death, as a shape-shifter, shepherds the time we have in this world to express our selves and because of that expression, to grow.

Any veil that appears to separate life from death is actually self-created by those who are afraid to recognize and accept the power of their true identity as divine beings of a Higher Order.

Another agenda holds sway to life's beginnings and endings – the will of the soul. (p. vii)

These statements determine the course of this book, and the chapters that follow include foci on the inner self-helper, the will of the soul, heaven and hell, the breath of God, healing helpers, the power of prayer, and so forth, all of which will be familiar ground for those interested in near-death studies. In this sense, Atwater's book appears to be oriented toward the general reading public with little, if any, background knowledge, and as such, it is an easy read. Yet, while Atwater's conversational, folksy style of writing may engage some, it will irritate many others.

Hank Wesselman, Ph.D., is a research paleoanthropologist associated with the Departments of Anthropology at Sierra College in Rocklin, CA, and American River College in Sacramento, CA. He is the author of the *Spiritwalker* trilogy, *The Journey to the Sacred Garden*, and *Spirit Medicine*. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Wesselman at P.O. Box 2059, Granite Bay, CA 95746; e-mail: hw@sharedwisdom.com.
For example, on page 30, she writes: "I floated as a spirit straight up through the ceiling, observing each molecule of matter... This was enormously fun!" Those who have been through this experience report many varied emotions and reactions, but "fun"?

In addition, her narrative suffers from her tendency to indulge in self-importance and overly inform the reader about personal aspects of her life of no interest to anyone but her immediate circle of family and friends. In this sense, I found the first four chapters largely irrelevant, and the book really began for me with chapter 5, titled "When I Died," providing the reader with a direct account of the transition experience. Yet once again, her writing is colored by her personal religious overlay which may appeal to those who are psychologically Christian, yet turn off those readers genuinely in search of a more objective perspective.

For example: on page 29, part of Atwater's account of her arrival in the afterlife state includes: "... and I saw Jesus. Words are insufficient for me to describe the happiness I felt being back with my Elder Brother, hugging Him, dancing with Him, laughing with Him." Likewise, on page 134, she proclaims that "earth is God's gift to us," and on page 136, "God does not prevent us from being who we really are." This leads me to wonder if Atwater is unaware of the new profile of divinity emerging from the awakened perspective of the secular humanists of our time.

To her credit, Atwater's chapter on her own near-death research presents the reader with a summary of some interesting findings, yet the narrative is almost entirely anecdotal compared, for example, to Michael Newton's seminal books, *Journey of Souls* (1994) and *Destiny of Souls* (2000), in which he provides the reader with relevant case studies, woven into the fabric of a narrative that is nothing short of riveting.

Atwater, like many well-intentioned writers in the transformational community, also succumbs to the compulsion to proclaim truth, risking a repeated literary descent into pompousness. Such is the case with her chapter titled "The Real Truth about Death." This includes much interesting information, again entirely anecdotal, followed in chapter 14, titled "Shared Crossover," by excerpts from her previous book *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Near-Death Experiences* (Atwater and Morgan, 2000) which is unarguably useful, yet flawed by her own culturally-determined perspective. As the French writer Anais Nin was said to have observed: "We do not see things as they are. We see them as we are."

The challenge for true researchers is to recognize this and step back, allowing them to find the universal within the personal, providing us
with an enlightened perspective of the subject under investigation. From such a place of discipline and neutrality, our personal opinions and interpretations become irrelevant.

As the Zen Master Robert Aitken Roshi once observed (personal communication, October, 1987), “Our job is not to clear up the mystery. It is to make the mystery clear.” Yet Atwater has made a worthy attempt.

References

