

BOOK REVIEW

Joseph Chilton Pearce
Faber, VA

Beyond the Light: What Isn't Being Said About the Near-Death Experience, by P. M. H. Atwater. New York, NY: Birch Lane Press, 1994, 296 + xv pp, \$16.95.

This delightfully readable work is brilliant, provocative, challenging, informative, timely, and, for me, at times exasperating: among the many underlinings of enthusiastic Yeses in my marginal notations lie a sprinkling of frustrated No's. In light of the importance and overall excellence of this seminal work, however, my grumbles are petty and incidental.

Atwater's primary interest, the near-death experience (NDE), is a subject I avoided early on since the issue ballooned into a cultic-religious circus, with objectivity thrown to the winds. Capitalizing on our species' history of angst, NDEs became a hot commodity. Publishers, writers, speakers, healers, channelers, preachers, crystal-gazers—anyone could cash in on this growing "field," which translated as field of financial opportunity. Radio and television vied with each other as to who could present the most improbable, outlandish, and sensational near-death performers until the whole issue was suspect. Atwater has, at least for me, not only redeemed the subject and made it possible to discuss without intellectual embarrassment, but charted new terrain.

Much of the near-death literature seems to have as its primary basis and intent the proving of various religious sentiments, while Atwater's inquiry, though spiritually based, moves us over a broad range, involving many disciplines, studies, observations, and anomalies. She not only gives the near-death phenomenon a deeper per-

Joseph Chilton Pearce is a former humanities teacher and the author of *The Crack in the Cosmic Egg*, *Exploring the Crack in the Cosmic Egg*, *The Magical Child*, *The Bond of Power*, *The Magical Child Matures*, and *Evolution's End*. Reprint requests should be addressed to Mr. Pearce at Route 1, Box 173, Faber, VA 22938.

spective and more universal scope, through her synthesizing and comparative studies, she contributes to the paradigm shift taking place on many levels today, the new definition of humanity emerging worldwide.

That people experiencing a near-death phenomenon claim they "needed" the experience, indeed, that it was even "ordered," gave direction and impetus to Atwater's investigations. She finds implications of a higher order of things seeking to "re-vamp" our self-awareness and worldview, an observation as old and pervasive as is our armored defense to stay as we are. Atwater suggests this transformative thrust awaits its chance to break through to us, catch us unawares or off guard. A close brush with death can provide the very access needed, a "stopping of our world" that temporarily shatters our selective screening and allows something else to form conceptually.

Surely we have a homeostatic "maintenance office" in our neural structure, an ancient survival mechanism that operates defensively and unbeknownst within us, in effect a tight selective screen through which we view our world and keep our cosmic egg intact at all costs. Susanne Langer wrote that our greatest fear was of a "collapse into chaos if ideation fails" (1962/1956, p. 150); she referred to the idea systems we inherited and on which we built our world-perceptions from birth.

Atwater goes deeper into the heart of the matter when, in one of her many powerful observations, she writes, "The greatest fear we have in living out our earth life is not what might happen to us, but what might be expected from us if we recognized who we are" (p. 188).

So any "higher address" generally falls on carefully deafened ears, the light of creation on eyes trained not to see. Even as transcendence tries to open within us we draw back, one level of mind longing to embrace a greater life, a far older and stronger level resisting.

This transformative spirit is hardly limited in its modes of access to us, however, and Atwater explores ways or means other than near death through which such grace can move. She draws splendid parallels between the classical near-death experience and a whole raft of nonordinary, transformative, healing, "death-like" or magnificent psychic upheavals, shifts of viewpoint and awareness that break the shackles of our sociocultural imprinting. Such nonordinary breakthroughs range from the ecstatic to the psychologically devastating. I found parallels here with episodes of the "experience of no-self"

described by Bernadette Roberts (1989, 1991, 1993), one of the more remarkable, if unsung, people of our time.

In this comparative analysis of near-death phenomena and the large body of “anomalies” human experience offers, Atwater’s strength of mind flowers and the vitality and value of her book takes shape. She lifts the near-death phenomenon out of its defined borders and uses it as a lens to give us a new slant on human experience, creativity, brain/mind/body, the universal fields of potential on which all brain/minds draw and to which they contribute. Then she issues a call that the opening offered in this book be followed through with serious, in-depth research—not a bad suggestion.

Atwater emphasizes that not only psychological but physiological changes are often involved in the transformations following a near death, that the phenomenon may, in fact, be a way for accelerated spiritual/emotional/intellectual growth. She speaks of these as “mutations,” the equal of species evolution. I reacted to this extravagance, until I remembered research showing that prolonged anxiety alone can bring mutations in our genetic system previously thought immutable. Thus so violent a disruption of our norm as an NDE could surely offer a broader and more creative opening.

Atwater’s research revealed a large segment of negative (“hellish”) near-death experiences, which provided a springboard into some of her most telling observations: that an individual’s pattern of living enters as a determinant in his or her pattern of dying; that how one has lived influences how the phenomenon of passage “arranges itself.” Such an issue may prove contentious to the true believer, rather as the academic scientific community resists evidence that the scientist’s own subjective state enters into his or her findings, that the observer is also an active participant, even co-creator.

There is no solopsism intended; a basic, shared matrix underlies all experience, be it scientific, or, as Atwater clearly shows, the near-death phenomenon. But over that fundamental given, individual differences weave wondrously varied patterns.

In setting up an experiment *for* observation, we determine to an indeterminable extent that which is then seen. We then take to be purely objective a discovery or observance that is at least our quasi-creative act, wherein lie the horns of a universal dilemma, one Atwater faces in her sincere attempt toward objectivity, and one that keeps us *Homo sapiens* on the edge of ambiguity. To claim that a scientist’s attitude and intent prompting his research—much less the disruptive interventions in the natural order necessary to carry out

that research—colors or even gives shape to that which is then discovered, is rightfully resisted.

Science as known would perforce be changed should such be accepted. This “subjective imperative” paradoxically threatens the very “true believing” attitude or faith currently necessary to *do* such research in the first place. Our defensive selectivity of brain/mind operates on both ancient survival levels and learned intellectual ones. We defend our educated mindset as consciously and vigorously as our nature defends our biological “homeostatic” one beneath the surface. I made this claim some twenty five years ago in my first book, *The Crack in the Cosmic Egg* (Pearce, 1988/1970), and have watched that fact slowly dawn in the general academic mind-at-large.

In this respect Atwater’s research is as objective as is possible, but, as is true for all of us, what she observes is nevertheless colored by her personal history—a shadowing from which there is no escape, and which she recognizes. Even as she points out a commonality among NDEs that shows a truly universal foundation, as with any and all experience, she notes that: “The issue of ego domination or ego desire directly impinges upon how a near-death survivor interprets his or her experience” (p. 72). Even though our higher function succeeds in breaking through to us, using whatever metaphoric-symbolic imagery is both apropos and available, we must still carry the ball, an issue expressed in the Biblical parable of the sower’s seed falling on rocky, brier-filled, or fertile soil (Matthew 13:3).

Ego, Atwater notes, in common with spiritual disciplines in general, “can waylay even the most sincere” (p. 72)—though this leaves in abeyance the thorny issue of what *is* ego. “‘Heavenly’ guidance,” Atwater notes, “leads to self-deception if one’s ego is not redirected from self-satisfaction to service, from self-righteousness to renewal” (p. 72). This is hardly a new concept, but Atwater uses such observations to throw new light on our assumptions about the NDE and life itself.

The chapters on transcendent experience, enlightenment, and the aftereffects of the near-death phenomenon are rich, rewarding, and revealing; but I have difficulty accepting that the brief encounter of an NDE can equate, point by point, and give an equivalent result of, the attainment of years of soul-wrestling struggles undergone by the saint, realized yogi or Sufi, or master of aikido or Zen. Exemplars of these two categories—saint and NDE recipient—show dramatic differences. Some truly “great beings,” who, though rare, are always among us, seem lifted above the ordinary human state into some-

thing akin to "divine," certainly above the affective/emotional reward systems that drive our species.

The emotional states of ecstasy, joy, luminous radiance, infectious warmth, and so on that Atwater attests as a hallmark among near-death experiencers are still aspects of that very affective system we hold in common with all mammals, if in superior form. And every aspect of our affective system, even its highest expressions of joy, love, or ecstasy, is subject to the polar negatives contained within the same system and indeed displayed all too often by NDE recipients themselves: ecstasy today, despair tomorrow. Being happy carries its shadow side of possible unhappiness. There just may be, as great beings demonstrate, a state beyond the polarities of love/hate, joy/sorrow, ecstasy/despair, and so on, a state beyond emotions as we know them.

Decades ago James Olds and Peter Milner (1954) discovered a reward or "pleasure center" deep in the ancient limbic structure of our brain that could be activated by an electrode. They reported that rats with an electrode buried in this center will cross an electric grid, something rats will not do for survival itself, to activate the electrode by pressing a bar. Rats will not only forego mating, but refuse food and water to the point of death in favor of pressing that bar and getting that psychic fix. Other researchers have found a comparable "pleasure center" in the limbic region of the human brain. And so Atwater is on strong grounds in placing a "superconscious" or higher state within the realm of the limbic system, the second of our triadic neural structures. But the edge of ambiguity appears as we note those rare but highly evolved people who are not functioning from any such emotional reward system at all, who speak of a state at a radical discontinuity from the polar contrasts by which we gauge events.

Atwater's claim that the NDE has as its impetus, and actually brings, transformation is questionable in the broad generic way she implies; but she rightly uses the term, since she means literally a sudden change of major proportion. "Transcendence" indicates a rising above or going beyond, which involves growth and development; "transformation," as she uses it, implies a radical, even sudden, change of one's nature itself, or mutation. Atwater points out, however, that seven-some years are generally needed to "integrate" the transformative near-death experience into daily life, a point which, if true, clarifies the issue, has great significance, and needs to be understood by all concerned. Thus, if she is correct, the saint spends

decades of discipline preparing for entry into a new life, while the NDE throws one willy-nilly into a new state to which one then must, as best he or she can, sink or swim—learn to adapt to as well as adopt this new awareness to life in the world at large. (Perhaps our spirit simply gets impatient.)

The adult stages of human development, seriously truncated in nearly all of us, should lead to states that transcend the lower animal structures of our brain/mind and the behaviors carried within them. Though we thwart adult development at every hand, our spirit bides her time and moves on behalf of her agenda, given the opportunity.

I am delighted that Atwater embraces research into our “triune nature of brain and behavior” as delineated through the lifetime work of Paul McLean (1990), a leading brain researcher at the National Institute of Mental Health. Anything growing out of our ancient “mammalian-based” affective system proves dual, and indeed this realm of the “lower heart” is considered a stumbling block to the highest states by all spiritual systems. The transcendence toward which evolution has groped goes beyond and so achieves *freedom from* the very affective system generating our emotional/relational life in this all too mammalian body, a modality both sparking and plaguing our species.

That the near-death experiencer’s ego-interpretation can distort and even thwart the grace given, brings into question whether transcendence of human to divine is the same as that considered “transformative” in popular usage. “Transformation,” as it is used in most popular literature, generally refers to that which make us whole persons, that which heals or brings to unity our seriously split three-fold brain/mind structure and its respective “selves” or behavioral systems.

But the sort of wholeness of self in current usage should be but our first stage of maturation, designed by nature to be complete by late adolescence. Since our development is seldom complete, we are left fragmented and spend a lifetime longing to be “healed,” made into one centered, intact person. A veritable army of therapists cashes in on that need, which virtually none can fill since therapy can at best only make us whole in a social sense, that is, whole enough to be functional according to society’s criteria, which means able to support and maintain that society and our place in it. In this pursuit our deep intuitive desire for real healing is untouched.

We long for wholeness because only a whole human can be transformed into the divine. And a whole person in *this* sense might be

seriously *dysfunctional* in a social-supportive sense. Wise men have noted that it is better to be blind or crippled and *in* that kingdom than whole (physically/mentally functional) and outside it. We transcend our triune nature not only to go beyond all biological constraints, but to be moved into a different modality altogether—the real goal and purpose of our adult development and of life itself.

Atwater's cognizance of the role our triune brain structure plays is significant, as well as her inclusions of field theories. Time and again her creative inquiry encompasses issues that might well escape, or be dismissed by, more conventional thinkers. She recognizes the similarity between the rising incidence of near-death experiences and the periodic epidemics of collective imaginative creations that plague us: beliefs, manias, captivations of mind that, right or wrong, seize public attention. A surge of such attention dramatically increases the phenomenon so attended, which illusion may thereby be catapulted into a universal field of influence impinging on all of us. It may be that flying saucers, alien abductions, the current surge of suddenly remembered child abuse, and like phenomena may be shared field effects.

By pointing out a resemblance between shared public fantasies and the near-death movement itself, Atwater shows that through such psychic mechanisms we can color and lose the true significance of what is given. Her examples of shared or almost identical near-death experiences brought about by close proximity of the individuals involved fits Charles Tart's (1972) early studies in mutual-hypnotic states, the phenomenon of shared lucid dreaming, shared altered states through drugs, and so on. Such striking research may not enamor Atwater to the more strident religious voices within the near-death movement, but only as we face this shadow-side of ourselves and go beyond it, as Atwater invites, will we discover an even more awesome level of our being toward which the near-death phenomenon points.

In this way Atwater rightfully opens near-death study to Rupert Sheldrake's (1981) "morphogenetic field theory," Howard Gardner's (1993) theory of independent "multiple intelligences," and related issues to which I devoted the first section of my recent book, *Evolution's End* (Pearce, 1992). She points toward a primary fact of our life, that the notions we entertain in our brain/minds determine, to an indeterminable extent, the reality we experience. I would add that those notions are seldom matters of choice, but the fate and destiny of the society in which we are born, to which "body of universals"

we must respond from birth, unbeknownst. The stakes in Atwater's observation are high. Evolution itself, the thrust of eternal being in its becoming, is involved. Our survival as a species—currently rather in doubt—is at stake as well.

In regard to God, that unknowable and unknown that lies at the horizon never reached, Atwater falters in her objectivity. As with so many undergoing a transformative experience, she tends to concretize God, and makes of that unknown an object among objects. Even a sphere of blinding light is an objectification. I challenge equating God with light or anything else. As John Donne said of God: "He brought light out of darknesse, not out of a lesser light" (1963/1624, p. 182). He, It, or whatever, is not that which is made. As endemic with the West, Atwater unwittingly falls into idolatry with such extravagant exclamations as: "The near-death phenomenon frees an individual to walk and talk with God without reservation or restriction" (p. 144), a statement fraught with problems, and indicating the common fallacy of projection onto a mythical or mental image that which cannot be imaged, for which there is no target of projection, and which always lies beyond our knowing. As Roberts (1989, 1991, 1993) pointed out, no one ever sees or "knows" God, we but journey *into* God. Likewise we do not become God; at best we are to become Christs, the manifestation, expression, or objectification if you like, of God.

In spite of implying that the near-death experience gives what rare members of our species, our saints, have struggled mightily to attain over millenia, Atwater realizes that many near-death experiencers have serious difficulty coping with their experience. Even the seven-some years needed to fully integrate the brain-shift is adequate only if the recipient devotes those years *to* such an integrative discipline. For discipline it would take, and indeed, seven years would be cheap. The spiritual seeking that leads to the great saint is invariably long and difficult, not because a price is extracted by some heavenly bargaining agent, nor that the seeking eventually "finds" or even creates that which is sought—as it does in the Eureka! phenomenon of science and art.

Rather, through that intensity of discipline and training the brain/mind/body is prepared to handle, process, and respond to a radically discontinuous perceptual/conceptual system having nothing in common with what came before, and which opens one to the unknown, or God beyond God. Roberts wrote of our journey *into* God as an eternal process, since God is and always will be the unknown.

God the known, the created, is our matrix, our foundation, our given; and to stop at that is—as in nature-worship or projections onto historical figures—idolatry, making of God an object among objects. This fixes or freezes into that previously created the fluid creation of being, which seeks itself through becoming—a turning backward, a devolutionary move leading to stasis and death.

Unresolved, perhaps unrecognized, in Atwater's book, is the difference between "immortality" and eternal life, an issue cropping up in the above paragraphs. Immortality would lock our current mortal condition into an endless timeline, a projection of a fixed past onto an indefinite future, rather as the pharaoh taking his slaves with him into the next life. Eternal life, on the other hand, is a state that one enters only now, instant by instant, or not at all. Eternity has no content or definition of itself, but is the position from which one views content, time, and events. "Eternity is in love with the productions of time," William Blake wrote (1966/1790-93, p. 151).

On the other hand there is that enigmatic realm toward which Johannes Eckhart pointed saying, "nothing known or named can be carried into that cloud of unknowing"—God beyond God. Personhood, ego, self, structures of knowledge, language, identifications—all must be left outside. Notions of reincarnations, happy hunting grounds, realms of light, sweetness and divine joy, and so on, arise from, and may be but, intensifications of our physical, named experience on this good earth, and the realm of concepts in which we have been born, our cosmic egg that constrains us even as it entertains us. Perhaps the gateway to the journey into God is a flood of this intensified human experience, but the journey into God itself has no points of correspondence with anything that comes before. A radical discontinuity separates the two states: God as that created and God as creation, or the uncreated—a void if you like, which our brilliant brain/mind with all its untapped potentials will never, of its own making, bridge. Only grace—again an abused and ruined term couching a vast unknown—can construct that bridge.

Atwater's book draws a thoughtful reader into many related issues extending to the whole web of life itself. In writing this review, I've had to throw away page after page of my own extravaganzas triggered by key issues she brings into the picture. And time and again I've had to call to question smug academic assumptions of mine exposed by Atwater's insights. This is the mark of a worthwhile book: that I put it down not pleased that my prejudices had been confirmed, but disturbed that they had been upturned, leaving me open

in areas of mind previously closed. I trust readers in general will read *Beyond the Light* and like myself be stretched, refreshed, even renewed.

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