

BOOK REVIEW

John Wren-Lewis
University of Sydney

Transformed by the Light: Life After Near-Death Experiences, by Cherie Sutherland. Sydney, Australia: Bantam, 1992, 287pp, A\$17.95

In accordance with Murphy's Law—that whatever can go wrong will—two important authors on near-death research have chosen the same book title, *Transformed by the Light*, at the same time on opposite sides of the world. It is to be hoped that this won't prevent either work from getting the full international recognition it deserves. Certainly Cherie Sutherland, whose name will already be familiar to readers of this Journal from her three major papers in recent years (Sutherland, 1989, 1990a, 1990b), has written something of an international landmark work in the field, in at least four respects.

In the first place, this work is quite a landmark in academic recognition of near-death studies. Of course, individual academics of high authority have been active in near-death studies right from the early days when Raymond Moody (1975) coined the term "near-death experience," or "NDE." But those have been peaks on a vast plane of scholarly indifference, with relatively few mounds of interest elsewhere.

It is another matter altogether when a university not previously associated with the field is prepared to award a scientific Ph.D. for near-death research, and perhaps especially so in Australia, where scientific noses tend to be harder than almost anywhere else in the world. The University of New South Wales, in particular, has an

John Wren-Lewis, a retired mathematical physicist and industrial research executive, is Honorary Associate in the School of Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney in Sydney, Australia. Reprint requests should be addressed to Prof. Wren-Lewis at 1/2 Cliffbrook Parade, Clovelly, New South Wales 2031, Australia.

unashamedly technological interest almost built into its constitution, so its grant of a doctorate in social science for the work on which this book is based is testimony not only to the author's considerable scholarly ability, but also to the fact that times are indeed changing as far as mainstream acknowledgement of near-death studies is concerned.

In fact, with this act, the university has shown itself somewhat ahead of general public and media attitudes in Australia, for until this book came out there was a widespread impression here that NDEs were byproducts of American religious credulity, occasionally used to titillate the readers of "women's magazines," but mainly phenomena of the American television talk shows, which are popular afternoon viewing here. Serious books on the subject haven't been readily available in Australia since Moody's *Life After Life* (1975), because our publishers and booksellers have until quite recently been hamstrung by our former imperial ties to Britain. The appearance of a home-grown Australian book drawing on hundreds of Australian NDEs and written by a faculty member of one of our most prestigious universities is therefore a doubly welcome event here, simultaneously bringing a much-needed update on the scientific studies of the past decade and rooting them firmly in Australian soil with Australian (in some cases quite unmistakably Australian) case histories.

And this is the second way in which this book is an international landmark, for there are still all too few systematic research studies aimed at replicating in other regions of the world the pioneer findings of American researchers. While Australia has much in common with the United States besides its use of the English language, there are also considerable cultural differences, so it is of real interest to discover that on this continent, too, NDEs not only happen but produce major changes in experiencers' lives that cannot be dismissed simply as results of going through a close brush with death.

One cultural difference between Australia and America that emerged right at the start of Sutherland's research was that NDErs Down Under seem extremely reticent about any kind of publicity, irrespective of their socioeconomic or racial backgrounds. "In general the interviewees tended to be highly sensitive to the reception of their information," Sutherland writes (p. 52), and I can believe it, for when some of us tried to start an Australian chapter of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) in the late 1980s, we met with considerable suspicion that our aim was in some way to exploit experiencers, either for media sensationalism or for religious propaganda. In fact, Sutherland was able to get "AUSTRALIANDS" off the

ground in 1989 only by starting with people whose trust she'd won personally in her interviewing work, and then making membership contingent upon the signing of a pledge not to use information obtained from other members for any commercial or propaganda purpose without specific permission. No doubt some American, British, and European NDErs have the same reticence, but the attitude seems particularly strong here.

Yet when Sutherland's interviewees *did* open up about their experiences, they overwhelmingly reported life changes and attitude changes (of course, in varying degrees) very similar to those found by Kenneth Ring (1984) in America and Margot Grey (1985) in Britain: complete loss of fear of death, less attachment to materialistic values both in life and thought, a heightened sense of spiritual meaning in life, and in many cases, new practical life directions resulting from increased self-esteem combined with a wish to serve the general human good—including, in most cases, a new level of concern about human relationships with the rest of nature.

Having traveled over 10,000 kilometers to establish this general picture, Sutherland went on to study these changes in more detail, selecting for that purpose 50 experiencers whose preliminary interviews indicated a rating of between 6 and 24 on Kenneth Ring's (1980) Weighted Core Experience Index, to ensure comparability with his and other studies done elsewhere. The main body of this book is based on her analysis of indepth interviews with these 50 NDErs, including before-and-after assessments of attitudes to death and dying; religious and spiritual affiliations; psychic sensitivities; and views about self, relationships, work, and life interests; and present lifestyle priorities and attitudes toward contemporary social issues. Her presentation of this analysis shows a real gift, in the same class as Ring's, for bringing statistics to life by well-chosen quotations from the experiencers themselves, making fascinating and very easy reading.

The third and most important way in which *Transformed by the Light* is a landmark is that the perspective from which Sutherland analyses her findings is sociological rather than medical or psychological. As Ring is quick to recognize in his Foreword to this book, this perspective gives added weight and often new depth of insight to her confirmations of his own and others' findings. For example, Sutherland confirms Ring's observation that while NDEs tend to increase experiencers' spiritual interests, often dramatically so, they almost never strengthen attachment to a specific religious dogma or institution, and usually loosen or even abolish such attachment—which is no doubt one reason

why mainstream religions have been slow to take an interest in NDEs, and have on some occasions even regarded them as devices of the devil. But in Sutherland's analysis this is seen as just one instance of NDErs' devaluing social conformity based on fear or lack of self-esteem; attitude changes leading to socially meaningful rather than financially secure jobs, which many of her subjects also reported, are another symptom of the same basic psychosocial phenomenon.

This insight is a personal as well as a professional one for Sutherland, inasmuch as she herself was changed by an NDE, during the birth of her son in 1971, from a conventional housewife with few spiritual concerns and no academic interests, to a social worker, and then into the sociologist she is today. And that is the fourth aspect in which this book is a landmark: it is an example of what is at present a very rare phenomenon in near-death research, a study carried out by a qualified professional who is also a firsthand experimenter.

Perhaps it was just as well that Moody, Ring, and the other pioneers in this field weren't themselves experiencers, for in those early days medical and scientific prejudice was such that anyone who'd actually had an NDE might well have been regarded as suspect, incapable of objectivity and perhaps even mentally unbalanced. But as P. M. H. Atwater proclaimed some years ago (1988), there comes a point where lack of firsthand experience in a subject like this must limit understanding. Now that the credibility of NDEs and near-death research has begun to be recognized, qualified researchers who've themselves "been there" may open up a whole new phase of research.

One specific challenge Atwater threw down was that the pioneer researchers, in their anxiety to establish that the NDE could not be dismissed as evidence of mental instability, concentrated on experiencers' own accounts of positive life changes, ignoring the fact that families and acquaintances often found that NDErs' new nonattachment to financial security and conventional beliefs very disturbing. Sutherland's sociological approach enables her to grasp this nettle: many of her interviewees were quite frank in reporting social tensions and even marital breakups resulting from their new (and by their own account, definitely positive) spiritual and social attitudes. While not unsympathetic towards the families who have to suffer such disruptions (thanks perhaps to her background in social work), she is nevertheless convinced that the changes induced by the NDE really are positive, not just for the experiencers as individuals but for society too; for without some radical break with our civilization's materialism and rigid competitive belief and value systems, there seems little hope for humanity's survival on this planet.

Sutherland also, in the concluding chapters of this book, exposes the other face of this sociological coin, by showing from her interviews how NDErs need the sympathetic understanding of others and access to a supportive social and intellectual environment, in order to realize fully the benefits of the experience in their own individual lives. While these chapters require more concentration than the earlier ones, they represent real frontier research, as she analyzes the various kinds of "trajectory" that experiencers can follow in bringing their initial revelations into their subsequent everyday lives. Communication and understanding are the key factors, and without them even a profound NDE can sometimes fade into a mere memory. By contrast, the recent growth of general public recognition and understanding of NDEs and what they are about has enabled many people to revive the memory of an almost forgotten NDE and turn it, many years later, into a truly transformative event. This is vital groundwork material for IANDS in both its supportive and its educational roles, as well as for future research.

So Sutherland's *Transformed by the Light* is a real landmark book that deserves a world audience as soon as possible. If I venture a couple of criticisms, they are not so much faults I find in the book itself as questions it raises in my mind that require further research. First, Sutherland follows most other recent writers in this field in quoting the now-famous Gallup Poll (Gallup and Proctor, 1982) that estimated that 5 percent of the adult population have had NDEs, at least in Western countries where the latest resuscitation technology is readily available. She concludes that if even only a portion of those have been "transformed by the light" the way her subject were, there are now a large number of such "Aquarian conspirators" around to leaven society's materialistic lump (Ferguson, 1980).

I profoundly hope she's right, and have indeed recently expressed just this hope in print (1993), but I can't help wondering why, if there really are so many NDErs out there, there haven't been many more joining IANDS, which is still a small-membership organization globally. Reticence may be part of the explanation here in Australia, but surely not everywhere, and surely it can't explain such a huge discrepancy. Perhaps Sutherland's book may stir our Australian pollsters to check out the Gallup findings, and maybe that will provoke some much needed further confirmations elsewhere. A figure smaller than 5 percent of the population wouldn't detract from Sutherland's findings or from their prophetic character, but it might prevent false optimism.

Finally, I am both personally and scientifically bothered by what might be described as a "New Age" bias in the kind of spiritual awakening Sutherland finds amongst her 50 chosen NDErs. Most of them

see their loss of fear of death, their new sense of loving purpose in life, and their detachment from materialism as directly linked with psychic powers and belief in reincarnation. But the latter, in classical Eastern traditions, are not regarded a spiritual at all: the whole object of mystical enlightenment in Hinduism and Buddhism is to get off the wheel of endless rebirths, and psychic abilities are regarded as potentially inimical to such awakening.

Now I'm all for valuing experience above tradition, but it so happens that my own NDE in 1983 was a major spiritual awakening and transformation, yet it has in fact left me much *less* inclined than I was before to be interested in either reincarnation or psychic powers (Wren-Lewis, 1985). Accordingly, I can't help wondering whether Sutherland's findings in these particular respects might be artifacts of her use of Ring's Weighted Core Experience Index in choosing her sample, since that instrument favors dramatic visionary NDEs (which mine was not), and is by Ring's own account correlated with the psychological tendency known as dissociation, which is also known to be correlated with belief in psychic powers and previous lives (Ring, 1992).

The scientific point here is not that there is anything "wrong" with the NDEs of Sutherland's chosen sample, but that if we want to uncover the really essential psychospiritual core of the near-death phenomenon—and that in my view should be the main priority of future near-death research (Wren-Lewis, 1992)—then we could be in danger of being misled by nonessential factors and of neglecting important data if we take Ring's index as a paradigm of the NDE instead of as the limited research tool that he himself holds it to be. In other words, future research should cast its net more widely, to take in other kinds of NDE, and may also make *separate* examinations of the spiritual and psychic consequences of NDEs. In the meanwhile, Sutherland's book is required reading.

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