

BOOK REVIEW

**The Near-Death Experience:
Problems, Prospects, Perspectives**
edited by Bruce Greyson and Charles P. Flynn
Charles C. Thomas, 1984, 289 + xiii pp., \$29.75

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The editors of this anthology have both had long-term and intimate contact with the growing field of near-death studies that gives them the necessary experience to produce this collection of articles representing the scholarly state of the art in near-death studies. Bruce Greyson, now Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Connecticut Health Center (Farmington), has contributed numerous articles to the field and is Vice-President of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS). Charles Flynn, Associate Professor of Sociology at Miami University (Ohio), is Secretary of IANDS and is involved in a long-range research project on the after-effects of near-death experiences (NDEs).

What the editors have done is collect 21 articles that, in general, represent the best and most recent contributions covering the major issues in near-death studies. All of the articles but two have appeared in professional journals or books prior to their inclusion in *The Near-Death Experience*. The articles date from 1977 to 1983.

While the collection contains articles by scholars from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, philosophy, and religion, the majority of the contributions are by medical researchers, which reflects the dominant focus of the field. Because of this long-awaited contribution designed for the medical community, *The Near-Death Experience* will in many respects replace Craig Lundahl's *A Collection of Near-Death Research Readings* (1982) as the scholarly benchmark for the field.

The Near-Death Experience is divided into five parts. Part I, "Intro-

*Anabiosis – The Journal for Near-Death
Studies*, Spring 1985, Vol. 5, No.1
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duction to Near-Death Studies,” contains social psychologist Kenneth Ring’s “Near-Death Studies: An Overview,” which presents an excellent review of the developmental history of near-death studies and the implications of NDEs for death education, suicide prevention, and world peace. The article will give the scholar interested in the field a basic introduction to the research issues and literature. The only omission in this otherwise excellent chapter is that there is no reference to negative or “hellish” experiences, which though rare are, in my experience, of deep interest and concern to many medical personnel and laypersons.

Part II, “Dimensions of the Near-Death Experience,” focuses in chronological order on the models and analyses of the near-death experience that researchers have developed in the brief history of near-death studies. This section will be of interest to the researcher who wishes to look closely at the scientific base that is developing in near-death studies. In chapter 2, psychiatrist Russell Noyes, Jr. and Donald Slymen present a factor analysis of a sample of persons reporting life-threatening danger. This analysis yielded three distinct factors: (1) depersonalization, (2) hyperalertness, and (3) mystical consciousness. In chapter 3, Ring delineates the ordered temporal sequence of a prototypical NDE based on a sample of 102 persons on the verge of death. Next, Ring describes in chapter 4 his Weighted Core Experience Index, which attempts to distinguish moderate from deep NDEs. Finally, Greyson, in “The Near-Death Experience Scale,” presents what he feels is a reliable, valid, and easily administered instrument for clinical and research purposes. This part of the book gives evidence of the growing methodological sophistication in the field.

The third part of *The Near-Death Experience* deals with “Theories of the Near-Death Experience.” This section clearly is not a collection of cozy, party-line contributions. Rather, the editors have arranged the chapters in a dialectical fashion in which the thesis of one chapter is immediately and vigorously challenged by the next chapter, with no clear synthesis on the distant horizon. For example, on the basis of his personal NDE and his work as a neurologist, Ernst Rodin, in chapter 6, argues that the NDE is a “subjective reality” resulting from a toxic psychosis. In the next chapter (7) cardiologist Michael Sabom reviews the discrepancies between a typical NDE report and the characteristics of toxic psychosis.

The next dialogue begins in chapter 9, where psychopharmacologist Ronald Siegel presents a neurophysiological interpretation of the NDE in the longest chapter in the book (43 pages), supported by

the most extensive list of references (177). Siegel interprets the NDE as a dissociative hallucinatory activity of the brain. Chapter 9, "The Near-Death Experience: Balancing Siegel's View," by psychologist John Gibbs, raises questions Gibbs feels cannot be answered by Siegel's model. Another dialogue begins in chapter 11, where astronomer Carl Sagan, in "The Amniotic Universe," views the NDE as a derivative of the experiencer's recollections of his or her birth experience. In the very next chapter (12) philosopher Carl Becker challenges this thesis in "Why Birth Models Cannot Explain Near-Death Phenomena" by reviewing empirical studies that make Sagan's thesis seem unlikely. And so the multidisciplinary dialogue goes on. The challenging intellectual dialectic, involving substantive issues, gives the reader the impression we are on the frontier of a vigorous, new field of study that will have increasing academic, scientific, and practical relevance in the United States.

In chapter 13 Greyson presents a psychodynamic understanding of the NDE and responds to several objections. Greyson takes pains to indicate that the psychological interpretation of the NDE does not rule out other interpretations from a variety of disciplines. Since his paper closes with "Clinical Application," this chapter might well serve to close Part III rather than Michael Grosso's article (chapter 14), since it would provide a transition to Part IV: "Clinical Aspects of the Near-Death Experience."

Philosopher Grosso approaches the meaning of the near-death experience from a Jungian perspective in "Jung, Parapsychology, and the Near-Death Experience: Toward a Transpersonal Paradigm." In a sense, Grosso involves himself in a dialogue with all of the scholars in this collection rather than a single one, for he challenges them in their research on the NDE to do what parapsychologists have been doing for over a century: investigate the problem of human survival. Grosso sees the NDE as a Jungian archetype of death and enlightenment and finds traces of this archetype in mystical experiences, mythology, mystery religions, and psychedelics; in fact, in the spiritual traditions of humankind. The issue of the NDE is of immense importance, Grosso maintains, for if the NDE is simply a subjective hallucination, then the spiritual traditions of humankind are a vital lie, an illusion. Grosso's own view is that from a Jungian perspective the NDE suggests the continuation and even the expansion of consciousness after death.

Part IV, "Clinical Aspects of the Near-Death Experience," may prove to be the most valuable section of this collection because it

fulfills a long-awaited need: it presents in brief compass four articles by care-givers who have had extensive experience in working with patients who report NDEs. In chapter 15, psychiatrist Raymond Moody, Jr. addresses the need for physicians to respect the patient's experience and to avoid countertherapeutic labeling based on ignorance. Emergency care nurse Annalee Oakes in Chapter 16 provides specific nursing intervention methods to ease the recent near-death experimenter's readjustment to a normal life. Anthony Lee, managing editor of *RN Magazine*, in Chapter 17 draws upon his own experience of cardiac arrest in developing a nursing care plan for reducing stress during near-death events and providing support for post-resuscitation patients. Critical care social worker Kimberly Clark draws from her rather considerable experience in working with more than 100 near-death experiencers and outlines specific social work interventions with patients and their families during and after an NDE. Incidentally, Clark reports one of the most fascinating accounts of an out-of-body experience during an NDE I have ever read. One of Clark's patients reported being out of the body while being driven to the hospital and seeing a tennis shoe on the ledge of the third floor of the hospital. At the patient's urging, Clark went through the patients' rooms on the third floor and found the shoe on the ledge that matched details the patient had earlier reported.

Part V, "Consequences of Near-Death Experiences," presents three chapters on the aftereffects of the NDE, one of the new and promising areas of NDE research. Greyson, in Chapter 19, notes the paradoxical finding that though the NDE would seem to "romanticize" death and make it more attractive for the person who attempts suicide, research indicates that having an NDE greatly reduces the risk that the person will try suicide again. Psychiatrist Noyes, in Chapter 20, approaches the question of "The Human Experience of Death or, What Can We Learn From Near-Death Experiences?" Noyes summarizes the changed attitudes toward death on the part of near-death experiencers. One of the most interesting is a sense of "aliveness," as contrasted with "deadness," that comes as a result of the ego-death/rebirth experience accompanying some near-death experiences. Cautiously bracketing the religious implications, Noyes reflects on how the sense of "aliveness" found in the mystical experience and the NDE might be made available for therapeutic purposes. This suggestion of Noyes has always seemed filled with insight and potentiality, and I am glad that the editors are making this suggestion available to

the variety of researchers that will read *The Near-Death Experience*. In Chapter 21, Flynn reviews the literature and presents his own data on the attitudinal, personality, and belief changes that commonly follow NDEs. Based on the findings that NDEs tend to increase caring and compassion for others and a sense of transcendent reality, and to decrease materialism, Flynn assesses the possibility that the NDE might have an impact in helping to create a more humane world.

In any collection of articles that is intended to present the best and the most representative academic research in a field, it is inevitable that some articles are included and others, for a variety of reasons, are excluded. If I had the opportunity to nominate one additional chapter for Part III, "Theories of the Near-Death Experience," it would be a selection from the work of British psychologist/parapsychologist Susan Blackmore. Blackmore has critically analyzed the literature of spontaneous out-of-body experiences, the occult literature, the experimental research on out-of-body experiences, and the NDE literature as well. She presents a psychological interpretation of the out-of-body experience (and by implication the NDE) and offers testable hypotheses that might confirm her interpretation (Blackmore, 1983).

The Near-Death Experience is a well-bound 289-page book. There is no index.

In the foreword to this volume, Sabom, a cardiologist, tells us that in 1976 he read Moody's *Life After Life* (1975). Moody said he was convinced that the NDE had great significance for the medical community and other fields. Sabom had never heard of the NDE before, nor could he find a physician young or old who was aware of the experience from his or her patients' own reports. There have been many changes since 1976. One of the most positive is the publication of *The Near-Death Experience*. Here we find a solid collection of articles that represents the state of the art in near-death studies with a valuable section of clinical application. This collection promises to be an indispensable resource for medical centers, schools of nursing, social work programs, theological seminaries, and other programs that deal with death and dying. I especially recommend the book to faculty who teach death and dying courses. This collection appears to be now, and perhaps for several years into the future, the major scholarly resource for near-death studies.

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