Letters to the Editor

“Vision” in NDEs or Expanded Consciousness?

To the Editor:

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are commonly thought to address the question of the nature of the human soul and whether or not it can leave the physical body at death. One common theory is the “gaseous vapor theory of the soul,” meaning that it drifts out of the body at death and sort of condenses on the ceiling, looking down. A recent Letter to the Editor of this Journal (Ellwood, 1998) presented two well known stories in support of this gaseous vapor theory of the soul: Kim Clark Sharp’s story of seeing the tennis shoe on the ledge, and the NDE of Vicky Umipeg, who has been blind since birth.

Since we do not see anything with our eyes, I have always wondered as to the fascination with these two particular stories. Our eyes are not videocameras. Instead, we process electromagnetic patterns of energy through our visual system, and create a visual image in our brain that in some small way resembles the complex patterns of energy perceived through our retina. I do, however, have personal knowledge of both cases, and would like to contribute my input as to the significance of these stories and their authenticity.

When I first heard Sharp’s story of a patient who told her that during her NDE she saw a tennis shoe on a ledge outside the window, I thought Sharp had crawled out on the ledge to see the shoe. In telling her story, I inadvertently added that detail when I retold it; so it is with human beings when they tell stories.

I have recently read opinions that perhaps this story did not happen at all, that the entire story is an embellishment. This is not true. I have heard virtually the same story Sharp reported about Maria’s NDE from an independent source, the respiratory therapist who attended Maria’s resuscitation. The fact that Maria has been lost to follow-up is not at all unusual at Harborview Hospital. Sharp’s story is, as she tells it, accurate.

The controversy over Umipeg’s near-death experience is more difficult to sort out. Believers in the gaseous vapor theory feel that her experience contains elements that she could have seen only visually,
instead of creating it as a mental image from hearing and touch. My research assistant interviewed Umipeg. She did not describe for my research assistant any uniquely visual elements. I have put a detailed summary of Umipeg’s interview on my website (www.melvinmorse.com) as a download, with her permission. Any person can read it and make his or her own judgment.

Ultimately, in my view, these experiences simply demonstrate the expanded sense of awareness and consciousness that occurs with death. Something more important than simply seeing with the eyes is going on: a communication with a loving, interactive universe.

Reference


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