

BOOK REVIEW

John M. McDonagh, Ph.D.
Huntington, NY

After the Beyond: Human Transformation and the Near-Death Experience, by Charles P. Flynn. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986, 190 pp. + xv, \$8.95(pb)

At the outset, I would like to say that I am very grateful to Chuck Flynn for having written this book. He left us a veritable treasure trove of gems to admire, enjoy, and ponder. Those gems are the people he allowed to speak through his book, and their words of wisdom that flow gently through these pages. Flynn's manner of drawing together a wealth of near-death accounts resembled more that of an editor and facilitator than that of an author.

I believe this approach enhanced his work significantly because we read the eyewitness accounts with all the nuances and idiosyncrasies of the principals involved. On one level, the varied near-death experience (NDE) accounts and their aftereffects might appear somewhat disorganized, but that is only at first glance. On a deeper level, there is a unifying theme, which is that of *agape* or altruistic love. One of the great virtues of this book is that it makes it possible for us to listen directly to the people he summoned to share their experiences and even their very souls.

Flynn introduced us to a cast of characters who could be ourselves or the people next door, struggling with questions about the meaning of life and trying to express these profound questions in plain language. In nontechnical, ordinary American idiom, the people in this book

Dr. McDonagh is a psychologist in private practice. Requests for reprints should be sent to Dr. McDonagh at 2 Carnegie Avenue, Huntington, NY 11743.

grappled with the gut issues: What do our lives mean? What are our priorities, and why? What is the afterlife like? Does my behavior in this life matter? Does any of this make sense?

I must confess that my enthusiasm in reading Flynn's book stems in part from the fact that I identify with many of the people he allowed us to listen to. This is especially true of those people who have not undergone an NDE, but whose lives were deeply changed by learning about the NDEs of others. When I first heard about NDEs, I dropped everything and voraciously read all I could on the subject of the afterlife. For many years prior to that, I had completely rejected the notion of an afterlife.

Psychologists are trained in skepticism, and many of us were skeptics before we decided to enter the profession. So talking with a skeptical, agnostic psychologist about that afterlife is difficult. It is possible that the professional identities of many psychologists are fused to a philosophical materialism. However, the more I read of the NDE, the more I became persuaded that it was a phenomenon of metascientific proportions. It was therefore important to my profession and to myself as a human being. It became necessary to reexamine the way I practiced psychology, while reexamining myself.

Flynn grasped the metascientific significance of the NDE as well as its potential for inducing individual and social change. He witnessed this change in his and others' research, and as a professor of sociology, fostered change himself. His ingenious invention, which he called "The Love Project," engaged people in caring about others and in keeping a journal about this process of caring and loving. What emerged was not just a chronicle of events, but a diary of personal transformation. The results are gratifying. People reported becoming more alive, and reported helping others to become more alive. As I read it, I felt invited to join in these happy goings-on and to become more alive myself. Is this where the NDE is leading, to help us become more alive? I think so.

Besides this enthusiastic rejoicing in life and the value of altruistic love, there is a sober side to the book. Perhaps we could call it "the NDE and reality." Flynn was mindful that the NDE can be a heady experience, and cautioned against misusing psychic gifts that may accompany or follow one.

Flynn also grappled with the question of the negative NDE, its frequency and meaning. He presented the findings of Kimberly Clark as most enlightening in this regard. According to those findings, one can attempt to understand the negative NDE by first considering that everything present in the full positive NDE (overwhelming, ineffable love, warmth, peace, beauty) is just ripped away from you. Once you

experience what I call the Awesome Presence, its absence becomes even more deadly. When I read Clark's account, I thought immediately of a traditional Christian teaching about hell: that it is the total absence of God and of God's love. What could burn one up more than that, to get a glimpse of the Ultimate Goodness and Love of the Universe, and then, to know that you would be utterly separated from Him?

Some readers who tend to a literal interpretation of Scripture may object that this account is not in the Bible, or at least not exactly in those terms. My credentials are not those of a Biblical scholar, but Scriptural references are made to separation from God as the ultimate punishment ("Depart from Me!"), and the description of Hades experienced by the rich man in Luke 16:19-24 is at least consistent with the idea of separation. It should also be added that Clark referred to accounts of negative NDEs that sound hellish, fiery, and ghastly, in the writings of Maurice Rawlings. So the literature on the negative NDE is not necessarily at variance with Scripture.

This book introduced us to the "Divine milieu," just as much as Teilhard de Chardin's book of that title did. That we are touching on something that is beyond the human is evidenced by Nancy Clark's description of love in Flynn's book (p. 111):

It is this love, that is not human, that I carry with me. It is this love that needs to find an outlet that can be channeled to other human beings, not because of my desire. . . . We must simply yield and let go and allow His energy to flow through us, and thereby emerge as the total human beings we were created to be.

To that, I can only add, "Amen."