

Guest Editorial

Is There a Hell? Surprising Observations About the Near-Death Experience

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ABSTRACT: The percentage of hell-like near-death experiences (NDEs) is probably much larger than has been previously claimed. In this article, I discuss current research into what are now termed "distressing" or "unpleasant" NDEs, and my own findings from interviews of over a hundred such cases. I compare this information with earlier reports from Maurice Rawlings (1978, 1980), mythological traditions about the concept of hell, and renderings from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Evans-Wentz, 1957). Finally, I detail four types of NDEs—initial, hell-like, heaven-like, and transcendental—and what seems to be an attitudinal profile characteristic of each type.

My plane was late. That meant I had to run lengthy corridors at Dulles International Airport near Washington, D.C., to catch my next flight. As I ran, another woman scurrying in the opposite direction yelled, "I know who you are; you're the woman I just saw on television. You're the gutsy one who talks about negative near-death experiences. Keep doing it. Don't stop."

I was so startled by her comment, I momentarily slowed my pace and yelled back, "Who are you? What do you mean by that?"

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Her answer surprised me. "I'm a surgical nurse at a hospital in Phoenix, Arizona. We have lots of near-death cases there, and almost all of them are the negative kind. You know what I mean—people who wind up in hell!"

Before I could respond further, she was out of sight. I wanted to go after her and ask more questions—what hospital? how many cases? how long has this been happening? why haven't you reported it?—but my pressing need to hurry convinced me otherwise. I barely made my connection.

This incident happened in 1989, a year when I was nearly overwhelmed by reports from people who experienced a hellish environment at the brink of death, rather than a heavenly one.

Most researchers of the near-death experience (NDE) report that unpleasant cases are quite rare, numbering less than one percent of the thousands thus far investigated and of the eight million tallied by a Gallup Poll during a survey on the subject published in 1982 (Gallup and Proctor, 1982). Yet my experiences interviewing near-death survivors since 1978 have consistently shown me otherwise, suggesting an abundance of such cases: 105 out of the more than 700 I have queried.

At the 1990 Washington, D.C., conference of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), Bruce Greyson, a psychiatrist noted for his long-term commitment to near-death research, admitted that people like himself had not been asking the right questions to identify those who might have undergone "dark" or distressing episodes. He confessed: "We didn't try to find them because we didn't want to know." His comment underscored the fact that, for the most part, published reports of near-death studies have side-stepped "negative" accounts.

Greyson and Nancy Evans Bush, President of IANDS, have recently completed a descriptive study of 50 terrifying cases they have collected over the past 9 years (Greyson and Bush, 1992). Others whose work has acknowledged the existence of such experiences include British researcher Margot Grey (1985) and sociologist Charles Flynn (1986). Cardiologist Maurice Rawlings and myself, however, have actively pursued near-death reports of a hellish nature since the very beginning of our involvement in the field.

Beyond Death's Door, Rawlings' first book (1978), focused on his observations of people in the process of being resuscitated after clinical death. In it, he recounted story after story of near-death experiencers describing unpleasant or threatening scenarios: being surrounded by grotesque human and animal forms, hearing other people moaning

and in pain, violence and demonic types of torture. He thought that because he was present when the phenomenon actually occurred, he was able to obtain pure and unrepressed reports. This led him to formulate his theory that at least half of the near-death cases begin as hell-like, then become heaven-like as the episode proceeds, with the average individual able to remember only the heavenly part once revived.

His second book, *Before Death Comes* (1980), added to these accounts and included his conviction that in order for people to die a good death and avoid the horrors of what must assuredly be hell, they should commit themselves to the doctrines of Christianity. Needless to say, Rawlings caused quite a stir among other researchers. So far no one has been able to substantiate either the extent of his anecdotal findings or his theory, even when present during ongoing resuscitation procedures conducted in clinical settings.

My first introduction to the NDE was in a hospital room listening to three somber people describe what they had seen while technically "dead." Each spoke of grayness and cold, and about naked, zombie-like beings just standing around staring at them. All three were profoundly disturbed by what they had witnessed. One man went so far as to accuse every religion on earth of lying about the existence of any supposed "heaven." The fear these people exhibited affected me deeply.

A decade passed before I, too, had a personal opportunity to discover what might exist beyond the threshold of death. Not once did this happen to me, but three times. A miscarriage and hemorrhage precipitated my first encounter in January of 1977. Two days later the second occurred when a major thrombosis in my right thigh vein dislodged, accompanied by the worst case of phlebitis the specialist had ever seen. Three months afterward I suffered a complete and total collapse. On the occasion of each of these "deaths," I experienced uplifting and enlightening, heaven-like, near-death scenarios. Although each was different, one somehow led into the next as if the three were progressive. When my experiences were over, I determined to find out as much as I could about the phenomenon from as many different people as possible. This quest began an exploration of the subject that resulted in my book, *Coming Back to Life: The After-Effects of the Near-Death Experience* (1988 and 1989).

Since the heavenly version is well-known by now and so, too, its attendant positives, I think it is time that *all* aspects of the phenomenon be examined, including all the contrasting reports still commonly bunched together under the singular term "hell-like." What Rawlings spoke of a decade ago needs to be reconsidered, especially in light of

observations that challenge how near-death experiences are categorized. To accomplish this, I'd like first to offer a context for broadening our understanding of the word "hell."

Historically "hell" is not Biblical, although many people think so. What came to be translated as "hell" was a peculiar idiom in the Aramaic language that used the name of a city dump where trash was burned to signify "mental torment" and "regret." Centuries later, and after numerous translations of the Bible, what was originally expressed as "Gehenna of Fire" was changed to "hell."

The word hell is actually Scandinavian and refers to Hel, the Teutonic queen of the dead and ruler of "the other world." According to myth, "to Hel" is where people went who were good, but not quite good enough to transcend to Valhalla, that heavenly hall reserved for heroes killed in battle and other special folk. Unlike more modern imagery depicting a Satan and being burned for one's sins, there was nothing evil or scary about the supposed hell or Hel herself, except her looks. She was said to be deformed, with half of her face human and the other half featureless. Allusions to Hel eventually connoted "an abode of the dead," but not some place of everlasting punishment.

Hell, as most people think of it today, was a European conceptualization used during the early days of Christianity to ensure the obedience of converts. Modernized versions were made popular in such classics as Dante's *Divine Comedy* (14th century/1955) and Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843/1983). Even *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder (1938) served to illustrate how those who "cross over" might linger for a while in cemeteries before continuing their after-death journeys.

A reference to the hell an individual could encounter during the death process and after passing through death's "door" is found in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Evans-Wentz, 1957). This ancient text described three stages to the bardo (the intermediate disembodied state said to follow death), and how each stage represents an opportunity for the departed to inhabit a different level of existence. The book claimed that heavenly visions, resembling what are now defined as states of consciousness, occur during the first week after death; hellish ones the second week; and various opportunities for judging one's life in the third. Unlike Dante's *Divine Comedy* (14th century/1955), this traditional Tibetan view chronicled the various gateways possible for one to enter after death and between incarnations. Specifically detailed was a period of 28 to 49 days after a person has died.

Heaven-like scenarios outlined in the book are strikingly similar to modern near-death reports: visions of pure light, vibrant landscapes as

if in springtide, blindingly open clear sky, dazzlement. Equally so are the hell-like versions: terrifying deities, gruesome apparitions, racking and painful torture. Also described are the life-review process, judgment, and a disembodied state, then rebirth into this or other worlds for further growth and learning.

In 1980, Kenneth Ring reported the finding that those with prior knowledge of the NDE were *less* likely to experience it, while those with no prior knowledge were *more* likely to do so. A clue as to why this could be true was also mentioned in the Tibetan book, where the claim was made that all postmortem visions, regardless of type, are actually *projections from the mind of the participant*. This implies that the next world may be structured by the subconscious mind, that mental imagery determines what is met after death. Also implied is that both heavenly *and* hellish scenarios might well represent part of the natural course of consciousness as it shifts from one state of awareness to another, and through numerous levels of existence.

Oddly, the realness of near-death experiences is not diminished by this claim, or others like it. The phenomenon becomes subjected instead to psychic rather than physical laws, which I believe accounts for the variation of details and descriptions from culture to culture.

During my own interviews of experiencers, for instance, I discovered little difference between heavenly and hellish near-death episodes in consideration of how elements unfolded in sequence. By that I mean the universal elements now identified as central to an NDE can and often do appear in both types and in the same basic sequence pattern: an out-of-body experience; passing through a dark tunnel or some kind of darkness; seeing a light ahead; entering into that light, and suddenly finding one's self in another realm of existence usually replete with people, landscapes, and occasionally animals.

Even the fact that experiencers of hellish visions often travel in a *downward* direction (down "the tunnel" as opposed to up) does not distinguish one type from another, simply because many experiencers of the heavenly kind also report downward passage when in the tunnel. Hellish episodes can also include dialogue with beings on the other side of death along with glimpses of the life just lived, elements once thought to occur only in heaven-like cases. Both types are, in fact, a lot alike. Yet they do differ, through the specific details given, and through the interpretation of individual responses.

To help examine these differences, here is a comparison from my original study that examines the language experiencers used to describe what they encountered. Notice consistent settings and elements, yet obvious contrasts in detail:

Heaven-Like Cases

friendly beings
 beautiful, lovely environments
 conversations and dialogue
 total acceptance and an
 overwhelming sensation of
 love
 a feeling of warmth and a
 sense of heaven

Hell-Like Cases

lifeless or threatening
 apparitions
 barren or ugly expanses
 threats, screams, silence
 danger and the possibility of
 violence, torture
 a feeling of cold (or
 temperature extremes) and a
 sense of hell

Of the hell-like cases I have found, I have yet to come across an individual who reported a fiery hot or burning sensation during the experience itself, although I have spoken with researchers who have. If a sensation of temperature was felt, the majority in the study I conducted commented on how cold it was, or clammy, or shivery, or "icy hard." Also mentioned was the dullness of the light, even grayness, as if overcast, foggy, or somehow "heavy." Many experienced a bright light beckoning to them initially, but when they entered the light it promptly dimmed or darkened.

Invariably an attack of some kind would take place in hellish scenarios, or a shunning, and pain would be felt or surges of anxiety and fear. Any indifference to the individual's presence would be severe, as would the necessity of the experiencer to defend him- or herself and/or fight for the right to continued existence. Themes of good and evil, beings like angels and devils, I found commonplace, as well as hauntings once the individual revived. Examples of this are the numerous reports of a "devil" who physically manifests in broad daylight for the purpose of chasing the experiencer, supposedly to capture his or her soul, or to win "the battle." The manifestation of other threatening beings or creatures has also been claimed, quite similar to what was depicted in the movie *Flatliners* (Schumacher, 1990). Sometimes fearful scenes and sensations reoccur afterward, as when an experiencer is unexpectedly faced with the onslaught of some perceived cyclone, whirlpool, tidal wave, or perhaps an unchecked fall into a void.

Amazing as it may seem, I noticed that the same scene that one individual considers wonderfully positive another may declare negative or horrific. For instance, the light at the end of the tunnel can be terrifying to some while inviting to others, as can any voices or flashing lights experienced during states of darkness, even if nothing threatening is perceived from either the voices or the lights. Passing through a bright light into vast new landscapes can be an incredible

shock to an individual, especially if aspects of creation and worlds within worlds are seen, even if what is experienced in no way puts the individual at risk. Meeting a being composed entirely of light can seem a trick of the devil or a punishment of some kind, especially if the experiencer tends to be more fundamentalist in his or her religious viewpoints.

One woman who described for me a light ray she rode through the vast reaches of time and space was thrilled beyond words to have been granted such a privilege. Yet another woman, in recounting what seemed to me a similar light-ray experience, expressed a sense of horror and revulsion at what had happened to her. Then there was the man overjoyed to tears by the "loving" darkness he encountered after death, in stark contrast to several reports I had previously received from people who felt cursed to have experienced a darkness that somehow seemed "alive."

Not one of the childhood experiencers I interviewed ever mentioned anything fearful or hell-like or threatening. Only the adults in my inquiry reported such stories. This puzzled me. Why would some adults describe the existence of a hell when children never did? Why would what appeared as episodes of equal content be labeled hell-like by one experiencer and heaven-like by another? And why would perfectly normal individuals who had lived what appeared as positive, constructive lives be scared witless by their near-death experience, while others with similar personalities and lifetime achievements be deliriously awestruck?

What made this dichotomy even more puzzling for me was a particular question and answer session held after a talk I had given in Williamsburg, Virginia. A man in the audience related his near-death story, one so positive and so inspiring it brought tears to the eyes of most of those attending. Yet, to everyone's surprise, he went on to reveal how cursed he felt to have had such an experience and how difficult his life had been ever since it had happened. Then a woman jumped up and excitedly recounted her story. Even though her scenario centered on a life-or-death struggle in semidarkness at the edge of a whirlpool, while high winds and the presence of evil threatened, she was overjoyed to have experienced anything so inspiring and so revealing about how life really worked and how salvation is guaranteed by our own willingness to correct our own mistakes. Here were two people: one traumatized by a heaven-like experience, the other uplifted and transformed by a hellish one.

After the Williamsburg affair, I started asking more questions of more people, probing questions I later cross-checked whenever possible

with family members. Sometimes I used my own increased sensitivities to determine what track of questioning to pursue, and sometimes I used plain logic; for I, too, am a near-death survivor. Since apparently, at least from my study, one cannot ascertain heaven or hell by their appearance, my goal changed from focusing on the phenomenon to an investigation of what other factors I might have previously overlooked.

Thus far, this change of focus has enabled me to make the following observations, arranged by experience types and the psychological consistencies I noticed in each grouping. It is my hope that this new way to categorize near-death experiences, and the probability of a psychological profile for each type, will inspire other researchers to redesign their methodologies and pursue different approaches to the subject.

Four Types of Near-Death Experience

Initial Experience ("Non-Experience")

This type of NDE involves elements such as a loving nothingness or the living dark or a friendly voice. It is usually experienced by those who seem to need the least amount of evidence for proof of survival, or who need the least amount of shakeup in their lives. Often, this becomes a "seed" experience or an introduction to other ways of perceiving and recognizing reality.

Unpleasant and/or Hell-Like Experience (Inner Cleansing and Self-Confrontation)

This type of NDE involves an encounter with a bardo, limbo, or hellish purgatory, or scenes of a startling and unexpected indifference, or even "hauntings" from one's own past. It is usually experienced by those who seem to have deeply suppressed or repressed guilts, fears, and angers, and/or those who expect some kind of punishment or accountability after death.

Pleasant and/or Heaven-Like Experience (Reassurance and Self-Validation)

This type of NDE involves heaven-like scenarios of loving family reunions with those who have died previously, reassuring religious figures or light beings, validation that life counts, affirmative and

inspiring dialogue. It is usually experienced by those who most need to know how loved they are and how important life is and how every effort counts.

Transcendent Experience (Expansive Revelations, Alternate Realities)

This type of NDE involves exposure to otherworldly dimensions and scenes beyond the individual's frame of reference, and sometimes includes revelations of greater truths. It is usually experienced by those who are ready for a "mind-stretching" challenge, and/or who are most apt to use, to whatever degree, the truths that are revealed.

It has been my observation that all four of these types can occur during the same experience, exist in combinations, or be spread throughout a series of episodes for a particular individual. Generally, however, each represents a distinctive episode occurring but once to a given person.

When you keep a person's life in context with his or her brush with death, even a clinical death, you cannot help but recognize connections between the two, threads that seem to link what is met in dying with what that individual came to accept or reject about the depths of living. It is almost as if the phenomenon is a particular kind of growth event that allows for a "course correction," enabling the individual involved to focus on whatever is weak or missing in character development. With children, it is as if they receive advance instruction and/or have an opportunity to preview their lives.

In addition, what may seem negative or positive concerning any of the four types listed I found to be misleading, as value and meaning depend entirely on each person involved and his or her response to what happened during the near-death experience and its aftereffects.

Surprisingly, unpleasant or hell-like experiences really can be quite positive if individual experiencers are inspired to make significant changes in their lives because of them. But, pleasant or heaven-like experiences can be incredibly negative if individuals use them as an excuse to dominate or threaten others while engaged in self-righteous campaigns. Even heaven-like or transcendent experiences may be painful or hellish to an individual unfamiliar with the possibility of alternate realities or unwilling to have his or her worldview interrupted or challenged.

Furthermore, my listing of experience types read from top to bottom seems to parallel *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Evans-Wentz, 1957)

and passages therein that detail the various gateways to after-death existences, gateways identified as mental projections from the mind of the participant. But, if we are willing to reconsider the Tibetan claim and those made by other ancient traditions, the listing begins to suggest something else even more extraordinary.

What emerges is a brief panorama of what could be the natural movement of consciousness as it evolves through the human condition on a journey of awakening. This journey extends from the first stirring of something greater and an initial awareness, to confrontations with the bias of perception followed by opportunities to cleanse and start anew, then progressing to the bliss and the ecstasy of self-validation and the discovery of life's worth, until the moment comes when at last the unlimited realms of truth and wisdom are unveiled.

This panorama of awakening consciousness indicates to me that the NDE may be part of *an ongoing process within the human species* and not some isolated or separate event, a process of growth shifting individual souls from one stage of awareness to another and/or from one state of embodiment to another, a process literally encoded within our makeup since our very beginnings. When viewed in this manner, the phenomenon takes on the characteristic of a preparatory adjustment that the transition of death affords—either literal death, where physical form alters, or symbolic death, where life phases alter. This adjustment would enable human systems to ready themselves for the new demands soon to be placed upon them when present form or consciousness capacity changes, thus insuring some form of life continuance and the steady growth of conscious awareness.

In his book, *Closer to the Light*, pediatrician Melvin Morse wrote:

The near-death experience is the first psychological experience to be located within the brain. . . . By locating the area for NDEs within the brain, we have anatomy to back up the psychological experience. *We know where the circuit board is.* (Morse and Perry, 1990, p. 170)

I have reexamined a generation of scientific research into higher brain function and have found that the soul hypothesis explains many "unexplained" events. It explains out-of-body experiences, the sensation of leaving the body and accurately describing details outside of the body's field of view. Events such as floating out of the physical body and giving accurate details of one's own cardiac arrest—things a person couldn't see even if their eyes were open—are virtually impossible to explain if we do not believe in a consciousness separate from our bodies that could be called a soul. (Morse and Perry, 1990, p. 169)

It has been my experience that whatever we need to awaken the truth of our being will manifest when we need it. The way that

happens is basically the same for all of us because, on some fundamental level of existence beyond conscious recognition, we all share space on the same upward spiral of evolutionary development. Surely the NDE illustrates this truth.

Yet maybe not. Other researchers have noted that those who have pleasant and/or heaven-like episodes experience far more permanent life changes than those who undergo unpleasant or hellish versions. Why? Do hellish experiencers repress their aftereffects, or do they have aftereffects that differ from the others? This needs to be researched; so far it hasn't been.

Once, when I was autographing copies of my book in a shopping mall, a man in his middle thirties stopped at my table, looked me straight in the eye, and with tight lips declared, "You've got to tell people about hell. There is one. I know. I've been there. All them experiencers on television telling their pretty stories about heaven—that's not the way it is. There's a hell, and people go there." I could not calm this man or the piercing power of his words, nor could I inspire him to consider other ways of interpreting his experience. He was adamant and firm. To him hell was real and to be avoided, no matter what.

That's what I've noticed with individuals like this man: either there is a special kind of fierceness about them, or an empty fear, or a puzzled indifference, or an unstated panic. If they show emotion at all, it is usually tears. Many feel betrayed by religion. Many resent the endless banter on television talk shows about "the Light," all that warmth and love and joy exuded from those who seemed to have experienced heaven. When I would ask why they weren't on television themselves telling their own stories, most would suddenly become quiet. Eventually I came to realize that they had spoken to no one else about what had happened to them. Most often they indicated feeling too ashamed or fearful or angry to talk about it; furthermore, the possibility of another's judgment or criticism bothered them.

The tremendous popularity of the movies *Ghost* (Zucker, 1990) and *Flatliners* (Schumacher, 1990) has inspired a host of near-death survivors to surface and be counted, especially those who experienced hellish visions. I hope this openness continues. Although researchers in the field of near-death studies have made tremendous strides, there are still relatively untapped aspects of the experience that must be addressed if we are ever going to understand the phenomenon and its aftereffects. Anything less perpetuates a myth that serves no one.

Is there a hell? To one who thinks he or she has been there, the answer is yes. To a person like myself, who has studied what evidence exists and has conducted countless interviews, the answer is this: there

is more to the near-death experience than anyone currently knows. The phenomenon is vast in scope, its implications more important and more dynamic than most people are willing to admit. Heaven and hell may seem more conceptual than fact, but right now they are all we have to go on as we search further afield into what the mind and its mental imagery might reveal about the source of our being.

One fact is clear: people who experience an unpleasant and/or hell-like near-death experience must be welcomed by researchers and relieved of any trace of stigma or judgment. They have a lot to tell us, and we need to hear what they have to say.

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