

Amazing Grace: The Healing Effects of Near-Death Experiences on Those Dying and Grieving

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ABSTRACT: Kenneth Ring (1991) argued that near-death experiences (NDEs) act as compensatory gifts helping individuals cope with and understand life's difficulties. He saw NDEs as conferring "amazing grace" on individuals whose lives were spinning out of control toward self-destruction. Expanding on Ring's contention that NDEs can be seen as healing gifts, this study presents evidence of seven categorical situations where participating in or knowledge of NDEs and nearing-death awareness experiences serve as healing agents in facing one's own death or the death of a significant other. NDEs and nearing death awareness seem to free persons from paralyzing death anxiety and, consequently, allow them to focus on additional ways to help each other face dying and grieving.

When hearing the term near-death experience (NDE), one thinks of some or many of the following elements: a sense that one is near death; perceiving that one's consciousness has been separated from the physical body; entering a darkness and moving at great speed through a transitional space, often described as a tunnel; meeting "beings of light," often identified as deceased relatives or friends or as Jesus, Moses, or some other religious figure; occasionally contending with hostile or frightening entities; encountering and sometimes being embraced by a radiant "Being of Light," described as being golden or white in color, and as being loving and the source of all

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life; experiencing an instantaneous, panoramic life review in which one relives every thought and feeling, including, at times, the thoughts and feelings of others that one has interacted with; feeling a oneness with the universe, and having a sense of understanding everything and knowing how everything works; realizing that there is no past, present or future, just "isness," and perceiving things that will happen to oneself and the world in the future as if they are already happening; being told that one will remember these things after returning to the body, but only as they are needed; becoming aware of approaching a boundary like a door, a river, or a cliff, that may not be crossed if one is to return to life; being told telepathically that it is not one's time to die; and returning to one's body. Most NDErs report an overwhelming sense of peace, joy, and well-being (Horacek, 1992; Morse and Perry, 1990; Ring, 1984).

Although the above description contains the most recognizable elements of the near-death experience, what follows afterwards is equally if not more important to the experiencer. The principal aftereffects of the NDE are loss of one's fear of death, more interest in the spiritual than the material, and heightened zest for life (Morse and Perry, 1992; Ring, 1984). Other effects can include changes in human relationships, feeling disoriented in the world, and searching for the meaning of the experience and what one is meant to do with the rest of one's life (Atwater, 1988, 1995; Ring, 1984).

Like raindrops on a lake that produce expanding ripples, NDEs continue to cause many aftereffects for years to come in both experiencers and those around the NDEr. In an attempt to explore the meaning of NDEs and their aftereffects and why they happen to certain persons, Kenneth Ring (1991), using four case studies, argued that some NDEs happen to people who have suffered grievous physical and/or emotional wounds in their lives, and are like compensatory gifts that act as healing forces in these people's lives. In the four cases, Ring saw these individuals' lives spinning out of control toward self-destruction. Then, with apparently providential timing, it was almost as though a guiding intelligence conferred an "amazing grace" through these NDEs. Expanding on Ring's contention that NDEs can be healing gifts, this article focuses on seven categorical situations surrounding the dying and grieving process in which NDEs can serve a healing function.

Seven Categorical Situations of Amazing Grace

Over the last six years I have gathered more than 60 cases where NDEs and related phenomena called "nearing-death awareness" (Callanan and Kelley, 1992) have aided those who were dying and/or grieving. These cases were collected from personal interviews, written accounts given to me, and published materials.

Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley (1992) used the term nearing-death awareness to describe what are commonly called deathbed visions. Nearing-death awareness experiences, like NDEs, contain glimpses into another world, visions of dead loved ones or spiritual personages, and usually a strong sense of peace and calm. Nearing-death awareness differs from NDEs in that the person dies soon after the experience. In addition, the person seems to drift between this world one minute, then gone from it the next, then back again. Sometimes the nearing-death experience is communicated to witnesses at the time of the experience itself. Nearing-death awareness is more often, but not always, associated with persons dying of progressive illnesses, while NDEs are usually triggered by acute medical crises such as cardiac arrests and near-drownings. I am including NDEs and nearing-death awareness experiences together because they are part of the same fabric of producing healing effects on those dying and grieving.

I am not including any frightening or distressing NDEs or nearing-death awareness experiences (Atwater, 1992, 1995; Grey, 1985; Greyson and Bush, 1992; Horacek, 1992) in this study. Frightening NDEs do demonstrate the healing power of those experiences to the NDEr (Bush, 1994; Horacek, 1992; Ring, 1994); however, to date, I do not have any cases with sufficient detail to illustrate that the experiencer used the frightening NDE or nearing-death awareness experience to cope subsequently with facing the process of dying or grieving. On the other hand, it can be argued that frightening NDEs are powerful experiences that can transform the lives and values of the NDEr just as do light experiences (Bush, 1994).

The cases that I have gathered seem to fit into seven categorical situations in which the NDE or nearing-death awareness serves a healing function when a person is facing dying or grieving. The seven categorical situations are:

- 1) a dying person shares verbally and/or behaviorally his or her NDE or nearing-death awareness with significant others just prior to death, and this helps the experiencer to face death;
- 2) a person had an NDE earlier in life and it helps him or her to face death in the present;
- 3) a person had an NDE earlier in life, has shared this experience with significant others, then dies, and knowledge of the NDE helps survivors with the loss;
- 4) a griever had an NDE earlier in life and it helps him or her to face the loss of a significant other later in life;
- 5) a griever has an NDE or nearing-death awareness after a loss and it serves as a healing agent;
- 6) knowledge of and understanding NDEs and nearing-death awareness helps a person to face death; and
- 7) knowledge of and understanding NDEs and nearing-death awareness helps a griever to face the loss of a significant other.

Examples of Amazing Grace

The following cases illustrate each of the seven categorical situations described above. Several of these cases illuminate more than one of the categories.

Sam Kinison

As reported in *The Los Angeles Times* by Amy Wallace (1992), comedian Sam Kinison was driving down U.S. Highway 95 on Saturday, April 11, 1992, on his way to a sold-out show in Laughlin, Nevada. Two young men, both in their late teens, were drinking and driving, when their pickup truck crossed the center line, hitting Kinison's Pontiac Trans-Am head-on, fatally injuring the comedian and knocking Kinison's new wife, Malika, unconscious.

Friends of Kinison who were following in another car said that at first he appeared to be okay. Kinison had worked his way free of his wrecked car with cuts on his lips and forehead, and lay down on the ground only after his friends insisted.

What happened next is somewhat out of the ordinary. Kinison's best friend, Carl LaBove, held his bleeding head in his hands and heard Kinison say, "I don't want to die, I don't want to die." According

to LaBove, Kinison then paused, as if listening to a voice that couldn't be heard. Next Kinison asked, "But why?" and according to LaBove it sounded like

he was having a conversation, talking to somebody else. He was talking upstairs. Then I heard him go, "ok, ok, ok." The last ok was so soft and at peace . . . whatever voice was talking to him gave the right answer, and he just relaxed with it. He said it so sweet, like he was talking to someone he loved. (Wallace, 1992, p. 3)

Shortly after this Kinison died at the scene, apparently of severe head injuries when he hit the windshield. Kinison's experience is an excellent example of a deathbed vision, or nearing-death awareness. Whatever happened to Kinison obviously gave him comfort and allowed him to die a very peaceful death (categorical situation #1), and gave support and comfort to his friends in their grieving (category #7).

Erica

This story was told to me in 1992 by a former student. The pharmacy student, who also worked as a nursing assistant in a large Midwestern city, related a story about a 52-year-old woman, Erica, who was diagnosed with brain cancer early in 1992. The student said that Erica was receiving invasive medication to fight parts of a brain tumor that surgery had not eliminated.

The student became acquainted with Erica in the context of doing research on an anticancer drug used to fight brain tumors. The student related that even though Erica was suffering from various side effects from the chemotherapy, she exuded incredible warmth and love that just seemed to radiate out of her. The student said that she thought this was due to the fact that Erica had had a near-death experience earlier in her life. Erica had told this student that her experience included traveling through a very bright tunnel that was soothing and surrounding, and that she had been touched by the hand of God. The student related that tears came to Erica's eyes whenever she told her about this experience, but her tears were soon replaced by a radiant smile. Erica said, according to the student, that this life is only the beginning of an eternal journey, and that the NDE gave her great strength during the dying process.

What makes this story even more touching is the fact that Erica had shared with her two children the story about her NDE and about what would happen to her after she died. Erica said she did not worry about her children because they spoke of their mother as being about to embark on a journey to a greater place that she had visited earlier in life. Adding more poignancy to this story is the additional element that the student claimed to have had an NDE earlier in life. Erica's earlier NDE not only enabled her to face her dying with calmness and radiance (category #2), but her children and the student were able to receive comfort from Erica's description of her NDE, and were able to accept her approaching death as a journey to a greater place (category #3).

Susan

This story was told to me in 1989 by a former student. The story is about her best friend, whom I will call Susan, a 44-year-old woman who died of breast cancer in October of 1989 in the Midwest. The student described Susan as a woman who always worried about something or other, so when Susan first mentioned a lump on her breast, her best friend, the student, did not attach much importance to it. However, a diagnosis of breast cancer was made in 1984.

Over the next five years, Susan's battle against cancer drew her friend closer to her and her family. The student worked as a health-care professional and was able to talk at length with each family member as various test results showed that the cancer was progressing. Likewise the student was able to talk openly with Susan and to offer her comfort and support.

Susan slowly got worse and had to be hospitalized. She was in a lot of pain and was taking several medications. During her last hospitalization, Susan became very depressed, according to my student, hanging on to her family, crying and sobbing, "I don't want to die." The whole family became increasingly upset and depressed and had a hard time communicating with her. Then one evening Susan woke up from a nap and described an experience to her student friend.

She said she had seen and talked with her uncle, who was dead, and also a friend who had died of breast cancer. She told her family and my student that her dead uncle and friend were "waiting for her," and that she was ready to die. According to my student, her entire *persona* changed, as if a huge weight had been taken off her

shoulders. Her acceptance of dying allowed those around her to begin to accept it also, according to my student. Susan spent the next day talking individually with family members and friends. Her daughter commented that she felt lucky that her mother had gotten to this point where they were able to talk and tell each other things that they never would have been able to otherwise. In late October of 1989, Susan died peacefully. Susan's nearing-death awareness not only enabled her to die peacefully (category #1), but also gave her the opportunity to share this experience with those closest to her, giving them comfort (category #7) and, in turn, allowing her family and friends to give comfort to her.

Geri

I met Geri, a woman in her early 40s, in June of 1989 at the national conference of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) at Rosemont College in Philadelphia. Geri had remarried, had two sons, and lived in New Jersey, and she told the story of her own near-death experience and a later experience when her first husband was dying.

She described having her NDE at age 15 after having had an allergic reaction to drugs following surgery, and almost dying. She related that she left her body and floated toward the ceiling and could see and hear everything that was being said by those trying to revive her. She said she didn't make it to the tunnel but "felt" the light. While her physical body had been in great pain, all she felt as she floated above were joy and peace. She came back to her body and said she was severely depressed for three days. Later, while reflecting on this experience, Geri stated that she came to the realization that there is a reason for everything, even physical suffering. Up to the time of her experience, she stated that she had had a hard time accepting that God could allow great suffering in the world.

A few years prior to the conference where I met Geri, she helped her first husband through the process of dying. Her 33-year-old husband was diagnosed with cancer and was given about six months to live, but he ended up living three and a half years. Geri described in detail the last day of her husband's life. Her husband, who chose to die at home, stated that he was going to die in two hours. Then he described somebody standing at his bedside, a soldier holding a yellow flower. Then more of these soldiers came, according to Geri's

husband. Late in the morning he asked Geri to turn off the light because it was so bright. She told him that the ceiling light was not on. Calmly, her husband said "the soldiers are back," then he said "goodbye," and died very peacefully. Geri stated that without having had her earlier NDE she would never have been able to help her husband through those three and half years (category #4), and her husband found comfort in her talking about her NDE (category #7). Her husband's nearing-death awareness experience during his last day helped him to die (category #1), and gave comfort to Geri (category #7).

Nancy and Bob Nims, and Their Son, Mark

I met Nancy and Bob Nims at the same IANDES conference at Rosemont College in 1989. Nancy said that she and her husband, Bob, had been "sent" by their son, Mark, to this conference. Mark, 18 years old, had died of cystic fibrosis at Children's Hospital in Boston on January 9, just six months prior to this conference. Nancy and Bob felt they had an important story to tell to help give hope and comfort to others who were grieving.

Nancy and Bob stated that Mark had had a nearing-death awareness experience about seven hours before he died, and had shared this experience with his parents. According to Nancy and Bob, Mark described leaving his body and going to "another plane of existence" and told them that he would soon return to that state when he died, and that he had no fear of dying because he had already been to the other side. He mentioned that he had met with beings he called "the masters," who told and showed him many things. He stated that there were bright lights all around, and he told Nancy that she would "pee in her pants if she knew where he had been." He said his suffering was over, and there is no suffering where he had been and where he was returning. Nancy and Bob stated that Mark described many things that he had seen and heard during his NDE, things that he learned, and that he told them it is "so, so beautiful there." A little while later Mark had a nearing-death awareness experience in which he talked with Nancy's mother, who had died less than a year before. A few hours later he died peacefully.

One night during the conference, Nancy and Bob, along with about a dozen other grieving parents, met together and shared their common experiences. According to Nancy and Bob, Mark's nearing-death

awareness enabled him to die peacefully, with no fear (category #1), and it certainly has helped his parents to cope with Mark's death (category #7), and their story helped comfort those who were grieving and had attended that conference (category #7). Nancy and Bob have since retold their moving experience to many other persons and have done so on television talk shows.

Laura

This is the story of a woman I will call Laura, who had a near-death experience in 1982 when she was 29 years old. She was in a dentist's office, in a town in the Pacific Northwest, and had an allergic reaction to an anesthetic. Then she floated toward the ceiling and watched the frantic efforts of the dentist working on her physical body, which was still in the chair. Laura said she felt no fear or panic; in fact, she said, she felt great!

Next, Laura moved through a tunnel, being pulled through that tunnel at great speed. While in the tunnel, she stated, she met her mother, who had died when Laura was 13 years old. Laura indicated that not a week had gone by, since her mother died, when she did not wish to talk with her mother about several things that she had never had a chance to do. Laura stated that her mother had not been whole, healthy, or beautiful when she died. Now, in the tunnel, she said, her mother was healthy, vibrant, and beautiful. Laura indicated that she communicated telepathically with her mother, in a sense finishing unfinished business, and that for the first time since her mother died she was able to "let go" of her anxiety and feel at peace.

Continuing with the description of her NDE, Laura said that she came into the presence of "the Light," which emanated a forgiving love. She was told that she would have to return to her physical body, and even though she protested, she felt herself "whooshing" back into her body. As have most experiencers, Laura has undergone many changes in her life, including sharing her NDE with dying patients. This story is a wonderful example of a person who had suffered a grievous loss earlier in life, a loss that involved many unresolved issues, after which the griever had an NDE in which she encountered her dead mother, and the experience served to heal her (category #5), so much so, that she is able to share her NDE and

its meaning with dying patients and help them to face death (category #7).

Deborah L. Drumm, R.N.

Two letters published in the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* by Deborah L. Drumm (1992, 1993) gave eloquent testimony of the power of near-death experience accounts in offering hope and comfort to persons who have not experienced an NDE themselves. Drumm wrote that she had been diagnosed with breast cancer in January, 1991. Her physician told her that treatment would involve a modified radical mastectomy and inpatient chemotherapy, and there were no guarantees that these would stop the spread of her cancer.

Deborah was terrified and she described a "smothering fear" of what it might be like to die. However, during her chemotherapy she met a hospice chaplain who shared with her a number of inspiring experiences about dying patients. Later, Drumm began to immerse herself in learning about deathbed visions (nearing-death awareness) and NDEs. She read books by Ring, Raymond Moody, Bruce Greyson, Michael Sabom, and others. She began to question friends and acquaintances as to whether they had ever had an NDE. She felt that her questions were being answered by those who had already had a glimpse of another life. Her fear of death was replaced by excitement.

Eventually she went into remission, and she came to the firm belief that the paralyzing fear that had haunted her during the first half of 1991 would never come again. In fact she stated that even if it turned out that NDEs and nearing-death awareness were caused by anoxia, brain chemicals, or psychological responses to trauma, and that when we died the lights simply went out, these experiences would still offer strength and comfort during the dying process.

As related in her second letter (Drumm, 1993), Drumm's breast cancer recurred and had spread to her right lung. Her physicians said the cancer was incurable. She put her earlier statements to the test, and confirmed that knowing and believing in the content of NDEs and nearing-death awareness has kept her functional, that the paralyzing fear she had felt prior to knowing about these experiences had not returned. She has used her understanding to help offer comfort to those who are dying or grieving (categories #6 and #7); and she hopes that other health-care professionals will consider using NDE and nearing-death awareness accounts as therapy when work-

ing with dying patients and their families, and with those who are grieving. Drumm's letters offer an excellent example of how just knowing about and understanding NDEs and nearing-death awareness help a person to face death (category #6).

Jenny, Sharon, and Bruce

Jenny, 16 years old, the youngest child of Sharon and Bruce, was taken to the University of Minnesota Hospital in Minneapolis for treatment of cystic fibrosis in late October, 1986. Jenny and Sharon shared the same hospital rooms for three months, including an intensive care unit room the last five days of her life. Ironically, the immediate cause of her death on January 27, 1987, was a virus that she caught while hospitalized, producing bronchial pneumonia.

On the day before she died, Jenny mentioned to Sharon and Bruce, "I hate to leave you guys, but I feel like I just have to die." During the semester before she died, Jenny had taken a course on death and dying, and had read Moody's *Life After Life* (1975), so she asked Sharon whether she'd see a "light." Sharon replied that she thought Jenny would experience the light.

After trying various medical procedures, Sharon and Bruce had to talk the physicians into letting her die, because all their attempts were simply adding additional pain, especially putting her on a ventilator twice.

The physicians gave Jenny morphine and Valium to ease her troubled breathing. She wanted to be held, so Sharon got into bed with her, Jenny laid back against her, and Bruce held her hands. Within a few minutes she was unconscious, but several times during the next three hours she raised her arms and Bruce's with hers, and Bruce whispered in her ear to "go toward the light." Some of the physicians who came in saw her raising her arms and suggested that she was dreaming, or that this was due to anoxia or elevated carbon dioxide levels. Bruce and Sharon did not think so, for as they held Jenny, and Jenny raised her arms, they felt a tremendous sense of peace, a sense of peace that they felt they were sharing with her. Jenny seemed to be greeting someone or something as she raised her hands. Finally, after three hours, she died peacefully.

Sharon and Bruce will always remember and feel some of the peace that Jenny shared with them as a final gift, a peace that Sharon and Bruce have been able to share with people who are dying or

grieving. This story illustrates category #1, Jenny experiencing a sense of peace as she lay dying, and sharing it behaviorally with Sharon and Bruce, enabling them to face the death of their daughter (category #7).

Discussion and Conclusions

This study presents evidence of seven categorical situations where the experience or knowledge of NDEs and nearing-death awareness serves as a healing agent in facing one's own death or the death of a significant other. The case of Laura and her mother is an excellent example of how an NDE enables a person to let go of the anxieties associated with the death of a loved one.

NDEs and nearing-death awareness act as healing agents mainly by reducing the fear of death. NDEs have already been shown to decrease significantly death anxiety (Greyson, 1992; Morse and Perry, 1992; Ring, 1980, 1984; Sabom, 1982). Both experiencers and those with knowledge of NDEs and nearing-death awareness (Ring, 1995) connect reduction in death anxiety with belief in the continuing existence of the deceased after death. The case of Nancy and Bob Nims illustrates the gift of Mark's description of what he encountered during his NDE, that it is "so, so beautiful there"; and Mark's description of his conversation with Nancy's recently deceased mother points to the conviction that we continue to exist after death, although such an existence cannot be proven using scientific measures.

With the reduction in death anxiety and the comfort offered by the belief that one continues to exist in some form after death, both the person dying and the griever are able to focus on additional ways to help each other face dying and grieving. The case of Susan and her family demonstrates the power of nearing-death awareness to release people from the clutches of paralyzing fear that often surrounds the dying process. Susan's experience freed her and her loved ones to talk with each other about other significant issues, to finish unfinished business, and to let Susan die peacefully in the loving embrace of those close to her.

Jenny's peaceful dying experience, in which she raised her arms and shared her sense of peace with Bruce and Sharon as a final gift, continues as a powerful healing and transforming element in the lives and work of both Sharon and Bruce.

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