BOOK REVIEW

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Early on in my research of near-death states, I discovered people who were not near death, many not even in physical danger, who suddenly, unexpectedly experienced what we now term a near-death experience. These people faced the same challenges as did near-death experiencers in integrating what happened to them and dealt with the same spread of long-term physiological and psychological aftereffects. I alluded to them in the columns I wrote back in the 1980s for Vital Signs, the newsletter of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), mentioned them in my first book (Atwater, 1988), and then in Beyond the Light (Atwater, 1994) devoted an entire chapter to what I called “near-death-like” experiences. In most of my books since then I have used separate chapter headings to explore the existence of these experiences and the puzzle they present to ongoing research.

More than a decade ago, IANDS sent out an unofficial questionnaire to its membership, inquiring about those who considered themselves to be near-death survivors. How close they had been to actual physical death when their episodes occurred was one of the questions. Of the 229 who replied, 23 percent experienced the phenomenon during clinical death, 40 percent at the time of serious illness or trauma, and 37 percent had theirs in a setting unrelated to anything that could be construed as life threatening (Atwater, 1994). This latter group claimed to have had experiences every bit as real and involved and...
life-changing as those that happened to people during death or close-brush-with-death crises, and their reports mimicked or matched the same spread of scenario types and aftereffects.

Certainly, it has long since been established that the closer one is to cessation of vital signs, the more apt one is to have a near-death experience; yet this large contingent of near-death-like experiencers indicates that the occurrence of this phenomenon is not necessarily dependent on the physical body’s possible demise. Even though another such query has yet to be undertaken by IANDS, many others in the field are obtaining similar percentages in their research. Herein lies the case of Nancy Clark, author of Hear His Voice.

What makes Clark’s case so fascinating, and her book so special, is that she first experienced a near-death episode, then years later had a near-death-like one – the second being the more powerful. Because of this, I think it is appropriate that we touch upon both of these events before I review her new book.

In 1962, Clark developed toxemia during her pregnancy. She was monitored for a month before delivery, since the threat of convulsions and death was very real. She left her body and floated away after 38 hours of difficult labor:

It was as if I had taken off my overcoat. Below, I saw the nurse pounding on my chest repeatedly shouting, “Come on back, Nancy, you have a son, come back.” But that part of me that had separated from my physical form did not want to come back. I felt that I wanted to go toward the light, but once again that darn nurse’s voice interrupted my peaceful bliss. (Atwater, 1994, p. 87)

Angry at the nurse, she finally reentered her body, only to discover that she had to peel down a sheet covering her face and hands. She had revived in the morgue.

Seventeen years after her near-death episode, she had a near-death-like experience that was presaged by a vivid dream of her dearest friend dying in an airplane crash. The next morning, he did. Asked to deliver the eulogy at his funeral service, Clark hedged, offering to write the piece if someone else would give it. About 15 minutes before the service was to begin, she felt a strange sensation. Starting at the tips of her toes and gradually working its way up her body were gentle waves of a powerful energy. The force exited out the top of her head, replacing her grief with a peaceful acceptance of her friend’s death. When asked for the eulogy she had prepared, she surprised everyone by announcing that she would deliver it herself.
While walking to the podium, she had the sense that her friend was walking with her, hand-in-hand. "My conviction about this is absolute," she declared during a session I had with her (Atwater, 1994, p. 88). Once at the podium, she was only able to deliver three sentences when her eyes were drawn to the back of the room: "I immediately saw a brilliant, pure, radiating, white light. It was unlike any kind of light that you can observe with your physical eyes, nor was it like any kind of light present upon this planet earth" (Atwater, 1994, p. 88). She described this light as being like a trillion suns merged into one. "I knew I was in the presence of God" (Atwater, 1994, p. 88).

Clark recounts an outpouring of unconditional love that was beyond human comparison, and pulsations of luminosity that encircled her in a whirlpool of upward-spiraling energy. All knowledge entered her consciousness. In an out-of-body state, she moved around the room like a sparrow's feather, noticing the radiant white light in everyone who attended as she observed herself, still standing at the podium delivering the eulogy. She left with the light, moving through the ceiling, past the building, above city streets, the planet, and into the dark universe in less time than an eye blinks. She was awestruck at the multidimensional cosmos she beheld, and became aware "of at least ten dimensions as opposed to our three-dimensional world. Time and space were non-existent. Everything was occurring simultaneously... I observed the Light as the Supreme Being and sole creator and starting point of everything ever created" (Atwater, 1994, pp. 88-89).

As she returned to Earth, she understood the reason behind social injustices, crime, all chaos and disorder. She was shown that the simplest acts of kindness are of major importance, and that each person is a unique and integral part of some larger plan. She was given a life review that focused on the times she did not love herself, so she could realize that her true nature, and everyone else's, was love. She was told by the Light to become a communicator and help people become aware of their true identities and understand that there is life after death. In a "flash-forward" scene, she saw how people would ridicule her and resist anything she said until, eventually, the world would realize that life is a continuum.

In *Hear His Voice*, Clark tells us the rest of her story. Each of the 17 chapters begins with inspired wisdom. There are extra sections on "How and Why This Book was Written," "Comment," and "A Final Thought." Kenneth Ring wrote a glowing Foreword. An Appendix Bibliography is included but no Index. "About the Author" tells us that Clark graduated from Women's Medical College at the University of
Pennsylvania, specializing in cytology, the study of cells. For 30 years she worked in the research and clinical cytology arena at Ohio State University and other laboratories studying cells for early detection of cancer and diseases. This scientific background enabled her to analyze her own mystical experience objectively before arriving at the conclusion that parallel realities do indeed exist. Now retired, she is devoting her life to her passion of spiritual work, "by inspiring others toward the Transcendent nature of life and into the mysterious union with the Light of God" (p. 181).

Chapter titles reflect her approach. They are: "Reflections of a Mystic"; "Looking Back"; "A Turning Point"; "A New Life Begins"; "First Wonder, Then Discover"; "A Rare Gift"; "Mysterious Writing"; "The Awakening"; "Why Me, God?"; "Aftereffects"; "Enhanced Abilities"; "Conversations with God"; "Revelatory Wisdom"; "The Call to Hear His Voice"; "From My Heart to Yours"; "The Important Message"; and "Hear His Voice." As any reader can discern from this, she truly is passionate in explaining what happened to her; yet at the same the time, she is careful to show how what she learned from her experiences applies to all of us.

Accepting her mission as a communicator of God's message was not easy, yet:

When I gave my answer of acceptance, I immediately felt a tremendous infusion of spiritual wisdom or knowledge as if volumes and volumes of material entered my soul. I have noticed that this wisdom surfaces only when I am engaged in the actual work for God such as writing this book. I am always amazed that this wisdom surfaces because it is not something I have previously read about in someone else's works. (p. 73)

What made it easier for her to finally open up was a chance visit she made to a local church, where the book Life After Life (Moody, 1975) was being reviewed as part of their Lenten educational series. The book's contents jumped out at her. "This is exactly what happened to me" (p. 81), she exclaimed as she began to share her story. To her great surprise, the minister and the people attending the meeting were open and accepting of her experience. The minister told her about Paul in the Bible, whose life was changed when a brilliant light from heaven surrounded him and instantly changed his life. Shortly thereafter, she joined the newly formed IANDS, and in 1984 founded the Columbus, Ohio Friends of IANDS, a group she still facilitates today.

Clark's intimacy in this book is touching:

Before my encounter with the Light of God, I had no self-esteem, was a perfectionist, judgmental, unforgiving, and a host of other negative
qualities. But immediately following my return back from my experience, those qualities disappeared. I became very loving toward God, self and others, not in the old way that says if you are nice to me, I'll be nice to you. Instead, my actions speak more of unconditional love, the love that says I love you, no strings attached. (p. 88)

We are able to recognize from this admission how similar her story is to the vast majority, as told by those who either revived from physical death, were at death's door, or were scared out of their wits by the perception of imminent death, only to transcend this reality and enter another one.

Throughout her book I kept hearing and seeing the thousands of people I have had the privilege of interviewing and studying. After over 26 years of doing this, I still cannot tell the difference between a near-death experience and a near-death-like experience, except for what triggered the episode. For all intents and purposes, it is the same phenomenon with the same life-changing aftereffects. The fact that Clark experienced both, yet feels the first one "served as a means of further preparing me for my actual union with God during my mystical experience in 1979" (p. 45), demands our attention.

Detailed in her book is what happened to her during that second experience: she experienced an unearthly peace, sensed her deceased friend's presence and held his hand, was lifted out of her body and saw that the physical world was an illusion, entered into the reality of her real "Home," encountered a brilliant illuminating light, merged into complete union with what she called the "Light of God," communicated telepathically with this light, experienced indescribable unconditional love, reviewed her life, traveled through a dark void at tremendous speed, wanted to stay but was told to leave to fulfill an Earthly mission, saw segments of her future while infused with tremendous amounts of knowledge, perceived 12 guides who would help her complete her mission as God prepared the way, and returned to Earthly consciousness rapidly, incapable of ever being the same again.

The Nancy Clarks of the world challenge the field of near-death studies. Cases like hers are why I no longer consider the near-death experience to be a separate anomaly, but, rather, part of the larger genre of transformational events that significantly or radically change an individual's consciousness, hence his or her lifestyle and behavior. More emphasis is put on near-death states than the others because, for the most part, these particular episodes occur in hospitals, clinics, or at accident scenes where cessation of vital signs has occurred or was threatened and there is a factual record of some kind that can verify
the event. Also, near-death episodes can and do happen to anyone, anywhere, of any age, race, or belief system, and with similar results. The near-death experience, then, is an ideal state for medical evaluation and statistical research. Unlike with mystics of old who had visions and met spirit beings on mountain tops or in dark caves, we now have a modern miracle for the modern intellect to puzzle over and prod.

Kenneth Ring once said that near-death experiences are spiritual experiences. He might just as well have said that near-death-like episodes are spiritual, too. Clark's book is evidence of this. She says of *Hear His Voice*:

> It has been a great privilege to serve God by completing this book He instructed me to write during my encounter with Him in 1979. I do not know if God is finished working through me at this point, but one thing I am certain; I will always remain an open vessel for Him, ready to serve Him in any way He calls me. I have the feeling that my work won't be finished until I return "home" to be with Him once again in paradise. This, after all, is what the journey through this life is all about for *all of us*, receiving the gift of life so we can *learn and be* who we truly are. (p. 177)

Her continuous allusions to God as male may offend some, but her story stands as written, a testimony to the transformative power of both near-death and near-death-like experiences, and the obligation we have in this field of research to study both.

**References**

