BOOK REVIEW

Jeffrey Mishlove, Ph.D.
University of Philosophical Research


On the positive side, as best as I can ascertain, this book probably is the most comprehensive presentation of knowledge concerning near-death experiences (NDEs) yet assembled in a single volume. Almost 500 pages in length, the book is composed of five sections containing 26 chapters and an additional five appendices. In addition, the book is laid out with numerous side boxes highlighting helpful hints and tips for the reader. This latter feature shows that author P. M. H. Atwater, a multi-talented journalist, near-death experiencer, and researcher herself, organized the book with sensitivity to the varied motives of readers.

In 2000, Atwater published an earlier version of this same book: The Complete Idiot's Guide to Near-Death Experiences. The present volume is her expansion and refinement of that earlier version. Atwater is, unquestionably, devoted to furthering scientific understanding in this area. She proclaims in her acknowledgments page that “half of every royalty check on sales for this book will go to the International Association for Near-Death Studies.” Then she adds, “At the end of five years, they will inherit full ownership and I will bow out.” Such generosity is to be applauded.

Jeffrey Mishlove, Ph.D., is dean of transformational psychology at the University of Philosophical Research in Los Angeles, CA, where he also teaches parapsychology. His 1980 doctoral diploma in “parapsychology” from the University of California, Berkeley, is the only such diploma ever awarded by an accredited, American University. Correspondence should be addressed to Dr. Mishlove at 8270 W. Charleston Blvd, Las Vegas, NV 89117; e-mail: jmishlove@tmius.com.
The book's five sections include descriptions of NDEs, descriptions of the aftereffects of NDEs, and discussion of controversies surrounding NDE research, metaphysical and spiritual implications of NDEs, and the implications of NDEs for science and society. There is no doubt in my mind that this book represents a significant accomplishment. In one back-cover blurb, a leading NDE researcher, Kenneth Ring, maintained the book "stands somewhere between being a Bible for the field and an encyclopedia of it."

Still, I found the subtitle, "the ultimate guide to what happens when we die," to be a misleading hyperbole. Thanatology and eschatology are two important academic areas in which scholars address the question of "what happens when we die." Yet, neither word even appears in the 11-page index of The Big Book. Simply put, The Big Book, in spite of its length and comprehensiveness, was never intended to meet the needs of serious researchers or scholars. In fact, my biggest complaint is simply that the book lacks specific bibliographic references — although it does contain a 10-page appendix listing relevant publications. From a research perspective, the relatively simple addition of either numbered footnote references or American Psychological Association (2001) style citations would have improved this book immeasurably.

One particularly frustrating example of this absence occurs in a side box on page six that lists 10 publications from the 19th century that address the question of NDEs. The sidebox lists the author and year of publication only. No further references were included — even in the Appendix C, titled "Further Reading." Perhaps in the future, when IANDS inherits the rights to this book, it can use the royalties collected to remedy the shortcomings concerning bibliographical citations in a future edition. However, it's unfortunate that the author herself did not undertake this job, through two editions of the book, because it will be much harder for a research assistant to piece this information together at a later date.

At one point, Atwater herself addressed the question of scientific qualifications in the NDE field:

Who had the right to do such work? Who had the research expertise necessary for a field that would straddle religion and mysticism, science and biology, consciousness and the supernatural? It was never the credentials I lacked that was the real question, but the credentials almost all of us lacked. Our struggle for the recognition of our findings ran counter to how modern science regards the practice of research. (pp. 350–351)
Yes, of course, NDE researchers – like those in parapsychology and related disciplines – have had to struggle for recognition from mainstream scientists predisposed toward marginalization. Yes, the task of understanding and integrating the various areas of human inquiry that intersect with the NDE is an enormous one. Few are equipped. However, with regard to an objective evaluation of *The Big Book*, I think that Atwater’s lack of standard academic consideration does become a real and valid question.

For example, Atwater made a bold (and I think significant) research claim that seems to lack the kind of careful support I would like to have read:

> The most striking feature of a near-death experience is that while a human’s brain can be seriously, even permanently, damaged in three to five minutes without sufficient oxygen, no matter how long a person is dead [during the NDE state], there’s usually little or no brain damage. On the contrary, there’s brain *enhancement* once the person revives ... this condition is one of the ways to know that what happened was indeed a genuine near-death experience. (p. 9)

I think that this is a very important claim. If substantiated, it would add significantly to our knowledge of the NDE. But, without such substantiation – and I did not find adequate substantiation for the claim in *The Big Book* – the claim must be relegated, in my mind, to the level of folklore.

There are other interesting claims in *The Big Book*. In fact, in one memorable passage, Atwater shares from the passionate depth of her own NDEs:

As a researcher, I can assure you that any type of near-death experience can be life-changing. But, as an experiencer, I can positively affirm that being bathed in The Light on the other side of death is more than life-changing. That light is the very essence, the heart and soul, the all-consuming consummation of ecstasy. It is a million suns of compressed love dissolving everything unto itself, annihilating thought and cell, vaporizing humanness and history, into one great brilliance of all that is and all that ever was and all that ever will be.

You know it’s God. No one has to tell you. You know. You no longer believe in God, for belief implies doubt. None. You now know God. And you know that you know. And you’re never the same again. And you know who you are – a child of God, a cell in The Greater Body, an extension of The One Force, an expression from The One Mind. No more can you forget your identity, or deny or ignore or pretend it away. There is One, and you are of The One. One. The Light does that to you.
While not every experiencer speaks of God as I have here, the majority do. And almost to a person they gravitate toward a more spiritual viewpoint, preferring to recognize that which is sacred as an integral part of their everyday lives. (p. 95)

This claim, if true, I think would be of the utmost importance to both the research community and the general public. And, I have no doubt that the claim is true if taken as a description of the beliefs of the author herself and (no doubt) many others. However, from a philosophical point of view such claims of religious certainty are problematic. The noted British philosopher, Anthony Flew, has achieved great acclaim in recent years for his conversion from a philosophical atheist to a deist position. In describing his conversion, Flew (2007) insisted that he was swayed by reason alone – and not personal experience. Tellingly, he added, "it is impossible to infer from a religious [and, therefore, I imagine any other personal] experience that it had as its object a transcendent divine being" (p. 49).

Flew's argument is very similar to that of Immanuel Kant in his classic book, A Critique of Pure Reason. Kant, however, allowed for one, and only one, theoretical exception: that mystics might attain such knowledge not through logical inference but through direct experience.

If we trust Atwater's simple sincerity – and I do – when she described so eloquently her inner experience of transcendental realms, then we come down on the side of Kant – and then some. Notably, Kant never claimed to have personally known a mystic who could testify from direct knowledge concerning the reality of God. Nor did he ever claim that particular historical mystics had convinced him of the authenticity of their experiences. Kant merely maintained that such direct knowledge was, in principle, possible.

Atwater's Big Book exemplifies the exciting idea that the field of near-death studies, along with other related fields such as parapsychology and transpersonal psychology, are slowly but surely helping to usher in a new day. In this new era, discourse concerning the nature of reality, or of first principles, is rigorously informed not only by an understanding of the external world but also by the ability to methodically understand and communicate about inner experience. In my estimation, this strength greatly outweighs the weaknesses of The Big Book to which I previously referred. Therefore, I highly recommend this book to all readers.
References

