Letters to the Editor

More on Kenneth Ring’s “Swan Song”

To the Editor:

I have read with amusement the banter between Kenneth Ring and various corresponents concerning his supposed retirement from research. Ring’s impact on the field of near-death studies precludes and transcends any retirement on his part. His work continues to inspire and challenge virtually everyone in the field, from Buddhist parapsychologist Susan Blackmore to mainstream medical scientists such as German psychiatrist Michael Schroeter-Kunhardt or myself, to reductionistic psychoanalysts such as Russell Noyes or Stuart Twemlow. Few articles on near-death experiences do not reference his work. Virtually every month I receive a phone call from a graduate student stating, “I am working on a research project and Dr. Ring suggested I call you.”

In contrast to Vincent Luciani, I would be intensely interested in any book written by Ring. I have read The Omega Project (Ring, 1992) three times and have learned something each time. The insights I gained from reading that book have served as the basis for most of my own theoretical insights into death-related visions and their implications for consciousness research. Once we recognize that dying experiences are only one element of a wide range of healthy and unhealthy mental dissociative processes, we suddenly understand the links between dying experiences and the experiences of those in spiritual crises as diverse as child abuse or multiple personality disorder. This insight is one of the most powerful understandings useful in helping healthcare professionals to use spiritual visions to empower the dying and heal the grief of the living.

Luciani (1995) has challenged me to report conclusive evidence in support of his contention that every person who has survived a near-death experience receives a spiritual mandate of some sort. I sympathize with his desire to control the outcome of scientific studies and produce conclusions that conform to his world view. Unfortunately, near-death studies are clearly paradigm-shattering and challenge our preconceived spiritual and intellectual world views. The
implication of Luciani's challenge is anti-intellectual. It is the same line of thinking that has led people such as Paul Kurtz, a well-known materialist, to publish in their own vanity presses research supporting their own views. We must reject that comfortable pathway and engage in the intellectual bloodletting necessary for revolutionary scientific thought.

No one has been more critical of Ring than I have. In my own recent review of death-related visions I stated: "His interview format is filled with leading questions . . . heavily weighted toward answers which would please the interviewer by disclosing mystical events and personality transformations. The book is filled with impressive statistics based on a biased subject sample and poor data collection techniques" (Morse, 1994, p. 60). My own mother had to intervene to keep me from writing even more critical comments. Lest anyone think that I spared myself in this review, I pointed out that my own $100,000 two-year attempt to document the transformations associated with near-death experiences was dismissed by Robert Kastenbaum as "campfire stories" (Kastenbaum, 1993, cited in Morse, 1994, p. 61).

Healthy criticism is the lifeblood of science; refusing to consider studies that conflict with one's world view is not. Of course, researchers want to please the public who buy their books, so Luciani's threat to not read books that he does not agree with is a powerful economic statement. If is for these economic and political reasons that a well-designed study from Australia that found no transformative effects attributable to near-death experiences remains unpublished.

Ring's contributions cannot be measured by how many books he sells. He is one of my personal heroes, a man who has profoundly affected by own research. Every time a grieving parent thanks me for the insights he or she has gained from reading my books, I know that thanks also go to Ring and many others, researchers I often disagree with. I do not feel it is at all controversial to assert boldly that practical advances in fields as diverse as cancer treatment, parapsychology, healthcare reform, psychiatry, consciousness research, computer science, and the treatment of grief will come from understanding near-death experiences. Near-death studies are too important to be stifled by politically correct thought police.

I issue my own challenge to anyone who writes books not accepted by the near-death establishment—the Maurice Rawlingses, the Blackmores, and, yes, sometimes even an establishment figure such as Ring: for every copy of your books that Luciani and those who agree with him don't buy, I will buy ten.
References


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