BOOK REVIEW

Susan C. Gunn, Ph.D.
St. Edward's University


British scholar Mark Fox's recent volume infuses the field of near-death studies, heretofore dominated by the natural and human sciences, with the new wine of the humanities and liberal arts, bringing a fresh perspective to many of the field's persistently baffling questions. Equipped with a background in philosophy and theology, Fox grapples with traditional understandings of dualism and essentialism as he revisits questions of whether or not mind and body may be separable, whether near-death experiencers (NDErs) share a common core experience, and whether that core experience, if it exists, points to an underlying divinity transcending boundaries of race, culture, and class. Through close reading, active listening, and rigorous analysis of scholarly literature and personal NDE stories, he concludes that continual revisions to existing research models are necessary and offers hope for dialogue between established NDE scholarship and new, potentially fruitful lines of interdisciplinary inquiry.

Fox begins by taking inventory of work already done, tracing the historical development of scientific NDE studies and marking each decade's dominant disciplinary paradigm: Raymond Moody's composite medical model of the 1970s, Kenneth Ring's evolutionary model in the 1980s, and the sociological perspective advanced in the 1990s, particularly by Cherie Sutherland. I must say here that although any history is selective, partial, and necessarily incomplete, I found some

Susan C. Gunn, Ph.D., is Director of the Prior Learning Assessment Center in the New College at St. Edward's University. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Gunn at the Prior Learning Assessment Center, New College, St. Edward's University, 3001 South Congress Avenue, Austin, TX 78704; e-mail: susang@acad.stedwards.edu.
of the omissions surprising. For example, the discussion of frightening NDEs mentions the work of Margot Grey (1985) and of Maurice Rawlings (1978), but overlooks a more recent and rigorous study by Bruce Greyson and Nancy Evans Bush (1992), as well as Barbara Rommer's extensive collection of "less-than-positive" narratives (2000). Despite its flaws, however, this broad overview provides a clear and proper context for Fox's subsequent reflections and conclusions.

In the second chapter, Fox stakes his claim to a place for the humanities in NDE studies of the 21st century, and particularly for theology, which largely heretofore has maintained a "deafening silence" (p. 55). His introduction of current scholarship fertilizes old theological issues with new possibilities. For example, from J. C. Hampe (1979) he borrows the elegant and brilliant metaphor of the organ and organist to suggest a relationship between matter and spirit surpassing Cartesian dualism.

Yet this same pregnant and refreshing chapter is more than a little unsettling to me as well. For instance, Fox's ambivalence toward Carol Zaleski's literary and theological scholarship is completely baffling. He credits Zaleski for her recognition of literary devices in the construction of NDE narratives like intertextuality and emplotment (the process of creating narrative order out of chaos, constructing a plot out of more-or-less random memory, fantasy, or creative effort to make a comprehensible story). Nevertheless, he finds it "difficult to escape from the conclusion that her relegation of the NDE to the religious imagination is a tacit acceptance that the NDE, after all, exists only in the mind's eye" (p. 343). Here he seems to succumb to cultural bias against fantasy, a false dichotomy that fails to recognize the interplay of subjective and objective realities in mental life and dismisses imaginative activity as "unreal." What Zaleski's body of work suggests to me is not the "agnosticism" Fox attributes to her (p. 343), but faith operating in full grasp of the subtle and complex ways that reality and fantasy not only overlap but frequently interpenetrate in language and symbol. "If God, the unknowable, wishes to be known," wrote Zaleski from her Christian theological perspective:

[then] what other recourse does God have but to avail himself of our images and symbols, just as he has availed himself of our flesh [in the incarnation of Jesus the Christ]. [And] if God is willing to descend into our human condition, may he not also, by the same courtesy, descend into our cultural forms and become mediated to us through them? (1996, p. 35)
In this passage Zaleski, fully cognizant that “no symbol can ever become completely transparent to the reality it represents” (p. 35), seamlessly blended her scholarly insight with what I take to be a personal testimony of faith. Having not met Zaleski personally, I admit that I could be projecting my own wishes onto her text in my optimistic reading; in my view, however, it is Fox who errs on the side of parsimony.

Having said that, I am convinced that Fox’s project is destined to be studied, referenced, discussed, and highly valued for long time to come. First of all, it suggests multiple sites where the arts and humanities could intersect with scientific NDE research. “Testimony,” he writes, “is what analysis of the NDE is ultimately called upon to explain” (p. 188). Testimony is exactly what scholars in narrative theory, psycho-analysis, literature, linguistics, rhetoric, and composition studies – to name a few – immerse themselves in every day of their working lives. Priming the creative pump for such as these, Fox poses questions such as, “Which is primary, language or experience?” (p. 113). He raises the dialogue to a sophisticated level, affirming that the NDE is necessarily mediated, though not fully captured, by language (p. 140).

Fox’s project offers yet another major gift to near-death research by drawing attention to relatively obscure and thus underappreciated original scholarship. The collection of the Religious Experience Research Centre at the University of Wales, Lampeter, heretofore unknown (at least to me) and apparently never published, is of particular significance. If literary scholarship holds that perception can be shaped by psyche and culture; if composition shifts, selects, and arranges; if memory is shown to be partial and often unreliable; then the apparent similarities among these testimonies collected by unaffiliated scholars from experiencers of many different cultural and national backgrounds prior to the rise of modern near-death studies in the 1970s makes them all the more compelling and valuable. Furthermore, Fox’s analysis of neuroscientific research provides an up-to-date and solid rationale for rejecting explanations based in unitary models that fail to respect the diversity among NDErs’ own stories. This work could very well stimulate a whole new body of scholarship seeking to identify, analyze, and thereby understand the processes by which private experience becomes public confession and ultimately cultural property (p. 190).

In his closing chapter, Fox’s well-crafted chronicle of the religious wars within near-death studies serves as a cautionary flag for scholars and lay people alike who care deeply about this subject matter. From
its beginnings modern near-death study has faced opposition from
mainstream science and religion; now, with that battle at a stand-off,
the field seems to have been overtaken by internecine wars – and
rumors of wars. Fox’s project signals that a fresh challenge, fraught
with possibilities both liberating and terrifying, is about to overtake
the field.

Most of the established scholarship in near-death studies is
grounded in the sciences. Generally speaking, science is embarked
upon a search for truth, privileges facts that can be either falsified or
verified, and is necessarily pragmatic. On the other hand, the new face
at the welcome table – that of the arts and humanities – is primarily
poetic. It finds itself in search of meanings (notice that the plural form
suggests multiplicity), and privileges the playful and paradoxical
relationships between the private world of fantasy and the shared
space of everyday life. Ambiguity is not only tolerated but preferred
over certainty. We poets make much of the fact that Martin Luther
King, Jr. said to the world, “I have a dream,” not “I have a hypothesis.”
We are convinced that dreaming is prior, yet also interpenetrates
invisibly with planning and execution.

The incursion of the arts and humanities into scientific near-death
studies offers hope for new and vigorous intellectual activity – oppor-
tunities for dialogue, interdisciplinary collaboration, new discoveries
to be sure – but also bears the ancient warning about the danger of
putting new wine into old wineskins. Both established scholars and
newcomers – and I include myself in the latter group – must learn to
appreciate one another’s vastly different ways of knowing, embrace
pluralism and tolerance for diverse academic and philosophical cul-
tures while rejecting fundamentalisms of all stripes, and understand
that even vigorous disagreement need not equate to disrespect. If
the scholarly NDE community can make room for one another, the
ensuing conversation can only enrich and enlarge the body of knowl-
edge to the ultimate benefit of academic culture, society, and the
world. Fox’s book is like a fresh gust of wind upon the waters. Watch
the ripples and one may know which way the wind blows.

References

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