

Commentary on “Frightening Near-Death Experiences”

Arvin S. Gibson
Bountiful, UT

ABSTRACT: Kenneth Ring and Nancy Evans Bush both wrote papers concerning frightening near-death experiences (NDEs) in the Fall 1994 issue of this Journal. The results of my own research are more supportive of Bush's position than they are of Ring's. This paper gives some of the reasons why and illustrates other data accumulated by me concerning frightening NDEs.

The Fall 1994 issue of the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* contained Kenneth Ring's fascinating analysis and hypotheses concerning frightening near-death experiences (NDEs) and commentaries on that article. We are indebted to Ring, Bruce Greyson, and Nancy Evans Bush for establishing a dialogue in this area, and, of course, should also recognize the earlier contributions of Maurice Rawlings (Rawlings, 1978, 1993). My own research is more supportive of Bush's position than it is of Ring's. If, as Ring suggested, “Frightening NDEs merely reflect the fact that hell is actually the experience of an illusory separative ego fighting a phantom battle” (1994, p. 22), then it also should be true that radiantly transcendent NDEs of light and beauty are merely examples of an illusory separative ego confirming a fantasy experience in life continuation. My own research would argue that frightening NDEs are just as valid, or just as invalid, as “expressions of Reality” as are the more euphoric NDEs.

Arvin S. Gibson is a free-lance author with a major interest in near-death experiences and research. Reprint requests should be addressed to Mr. Gibson at 1412 East Vineyard Drive, Bountiful, UT 84010.

Results

Experience Patterns

In my article "Near-Death Experience Patterns From Research in the Salt Lake City Region" (Gibson, 1994b), I tabulated the findings of 68 case studies associated with near-death or analogous experiences. Six percent of the cases indicated a feeling of remorse for how the individuals had lived during their earthly life, and 12 percent of the experiences involved fear. In all of these cases the experiences were just as realistic to those who went through them as were those who had more uplifting NDEs.

Howard Storm

Ring mentioned Howard Storm's NDE and suggested that the initial part of his experience, with the evil beings who attacked him, was part of an ego destruction process. It may be true that the ego plays a part in the unfolding NDE drama, as evidenced by Theresa's experience discussed below, but that does not diminish the probability that *all* of the NDE is real. An equally valid interpretation of Storm's NDE would be to accept the evil beings as a part of ultimate reality as much as the celestial creatures that he later met. To quote from another part of Storm's experience that was included in my book, *Journeys Beyond Life* (Gibson, 1994a, pp. 224-225):

Only God knows the truth about every individual. . . . God will ultimately judge every individual. And God will allow people to be dragged into the darkness with like-minded creatures. I have told you, from my personal experience, what goes on in there. I don't know from what I saw any more than that, but it's my suspicion that I only saw the tip of the iceberg.

I deserved to be where I was—I was in the right place at the right time. That was the place for me, and the people I was around were perfect company for me. God allowed me to experience that, and then removed me, because he saw something redeeming in putting me through the experience. It was a way to purge me. People who are not allowed to be pulled into the darkness, because of their loving nature, are attracted upwards, toward the light.

Dee's Terrifying Experience

The terrifying portion of Storm's experience was similar to that of Dee, interviewed by me in 1993. Quoting from portions of Dee's experience (Gibson, 1994a, p. 63):

The next thing I knew was . . . there was something behind me, and I was afraid. I felt this awful presence—and I knew that it was after me. This . . . this thing, this awful, this terrifying thing—I could feel it on me. . . . I was being chased by something that was the personification of evil. And it wanted me. It wanted to destroy me. I was terrified and I was crying, and I remember thinking: *Oh God, help me, help me God.*

Dee found herself back in her body after she uttered the brief prayer. She told me that her life, prior to her experience, had been a living hell because of a controlling and abusive husband. She lived in fear and hate until her experience. Subsequently she left her husband and changed her life.

As Dee told her experience to me and to my wife Carol, we could see her terror as she relived the experience, just as we can see the ecstatic feelings expressed by those who tell and relive their beautiful experiences. Dee was certain that all of the events described by her were real, and she changed her life accordingly.

Elizabeth Marie's Surprising NDE

A truly interesting NDE was reported by Elizabeth Marie (Gibson, 1994a, pp. 126-132). Elizabeth Marie, as a 14-year-old, decided to have a contest with her boyfriend by smoking narcotics. In her subsequent out-of-body experience she was taken to a room filled with other spirits who had lived less-than-desirable lives in this life. She was clothed in a white garment that had black spots on it, the spots representing evil deeds that she had done in life.

She understood that what she had done was wrong, and that her progress in the next world would be stopped if she chose to stay there. Feeling total remorse for what she had done, she chose to come back. The experience changed her life completely. She is now married with a wonderful husband, two lovely children, and she devotes much of her life to attempting to bring recalcitrant souls to Christ.

Evil Presences

Several individuals whom I interviewed felt during their experiences that they were threatened by an evil presence. One that puzzled me at first was the case of Mike, who fell from a cliff at age 9 and had an NDE (Gibson, 1994a, pp. 32-38). Much of his NDE followed the normal pattern, but Mike described an event while he was in the tunnel in which he felt an evil presence and heard a horrible growling noise. I had previously interviewed others who said they heard an animal-like noise, but in this case I could not understand why a little child would be subjected to this kind of evil influence—until he told me the rest of his story.

It turned out that when he was about 6 years old, he and another small friend were fighting. Mike picked up a piece of lumber that had a large nail sticking out of its end, swung it at his friend, hit him in the head, and killed him. He tried unsuccessfully to hide the body. The police later dismissed the case as an accident, but it provided a possible explanation as to why his experience progressed as it did.

Suicides

Five or six individuals described their suicide attempts to me. In some instances they were spectacularly successful. Whether they had an uplifting or frightening experience seemed to depend on what they needed at the time to turn their lives around. In every case they came back knowing that they shouldn't have done it, and vowing to live their lives in a better manner, defined in a religious sense. Karen, who was going through a divorce, described her experience this way (Gibson, 1994a, pp. 81-85):

One night as I was lying in bed, asleep, I was awakened by a male voice saying: "I'm going to get you. Sooner or later, I'm going to get you." The event frightened me and I sat up, wide awake. I told my roommate, and she said it was just a dream, and not to worry about it.

About a week later, everything seemed so hopeless that I took the bottle of tranquilizers. My full intention was to kill me. It seemed the best way to handle my problems, just go to sleep. . . . At the hospital, I found out later, they pumped my stomach and put charcoal in it. They didn't think I was going to make it. My heart had stopped, and they used defibrillator paddles to restart it.

During this period I became aware that I was conscious, but I was enveloped in total darkness. It was pitch black all around, yet there was a feeling of movement. My conscious self assured me that I was in the form of a spiritual body.

A male voice spoke to me, a different voice than the one I heard a week before. This voice said: "You have a choice. You can stay here, or you can go back. If you stay here, your punishment will be just as it is, right now. You will not have a body, you will not be able to see, touch, or have other sensations. You will only have this darkness and your thoughts, for eternity."

Terrified because of the experience, and because of what I had heard, I understood that this would be my private hell. There would be no contact with other life or with the sensations of life, for eternity. Yet I would remain conscious with my thoughts in total blackness.

Frantically scared, I knew immediately that I had made a terrible mistake. Telling the voice that I had made a mistake, I asked to go back, to return to life. The voice said, "All right, you may return."

Cause and Effect Relationships

In each of these cases that I have cited, there was a cause and effect relationship. That is, the individuals who had the frightening NDEs could point to circumstances in their lives that led to the frightening NDE. This was the case in every instance of those I interviewed who had some type of unpleasant experience. I am aware that other researchers have not found this cause and effect relationship, but in all of the cases I studied it was dramatically evident.

The proposition that either rapturous cosmic encounters or horrifying journeys into the unknown can be related to the previous deportment of the individual undergoing the experience should be a testable hypothesis. In my instance, I was able to ascertain particular cause and effect relationships by encouraging the subjects to discuss other events in their lives that they thought might be of interest. Caution is necessary, of course, to assure that judgments of the interviewer do not intrude on the responses of the subjects.

Another Category of Frightening NDE

Ring mentioned different categories of frightening NDEs, originally described by Greyson and Bush (1992). One he characterized as an "inverted" NDE, in which the fearful aspects later converted to a

more traditional NDE of light; the others he described as “hellish” and “meaningless void” experiences. There is another category that could usefully be considered, which I would characterize as “instructional.”

In the instructional type of NDE, the participant is usually led by some “spirit guide” to an otherworldly area where the subject participant can witness hapless spirit beings suffering extreme agony in a hellish type of existence. In these cases the participant is not necessarily exposed to the extreme suffering that he or she witnesses, except to understand the agony of those who are suffering. George Ritchie and Elizabeth Sherrill (1978, pp. 56-67) described several such instances. A few of the individuals whom I interviewed recounted such circumstances. Elane Durham told of seeing

a host of people. Rays from the light were shining over the tops of the heads of the people, but they didn't seem to notice. They appeared to be shuffling around, and I could feel anger and confusion coming from them. It was as if they were all lost, and they were agonizing over the pain that they felt. (Gibson, 1993, p. 65).

Theresa, a portion of whose experience is described below, also falls into this category.

The Paradox of Opposites

Concerning the paradox of opposites, I recently interviewed a young woman, Theresa, who had an extensive NDE as a result of a heart attack. As in Storm's extensive experience, Theresa received instruction from beings of light. A major difference between Storm, who was a college professor at the time of his experience, and Theresa was that Theresa never graduated from high school. I was astonished, therefore, when she responded immediately, with no pauses for thought, to some of my questions in this manner:

Q: Did you see anything during your experience of a negative nature?

A: No, because there is no such thing as negative.

Q: What do you mean?

A: Negative is a concept that we have developed to describe things that work against our preconceived notions. Everything is both—negative and positive—and they both create energy. It

works for you or it doesn't. It works for God or against Him. But they both serve a divine purpose.

Q: Did you see anything that worked against God?

A: Yes. Even that was of a divine nature, though. It enters a person as ego—a driving force of self, to please oneself.

Q: How did you see that?

A: It came in the form of an angered spirit. I couldn't imagine him being so angry, but he was.

Q: What was happening to him, and why was he angry?

A: He was isolated within himself. The energy emanated by him created his own world, almost a separate planet. When I saw him I also heard laughter. It was a hideous type of laughter.

Q: Were there people trying to help him?

A: No. It was as if he had his own world, and it was of his own making.

Q: Do you have any special messages for anyone who might read your story?

A: Yes. I want to talk a little about fear. Fear is a blessing.

Q: How so?

A: Fear is the key to unfolding what is within us. If we didn't have fear there would be nothing to propel us into the next adventure or experience. Without fear we would not be alert to the full measure of the experiences we pass through. Those experiences are vital for our growth. Tears and grief are what carve the opening for us to have joy and love. If we didn't have a cavity carved by fear, pain, and grief, we wouldn't be able to fully appreciate the love and joy that are within our reach. The key to growth in the future is to love ourselves and to extend that love to others. The interconnectedness of all living beings, and the love we feel for all life, are gifts from God. The Lord made it possible for us to love as we should, but we often deny ourselves that privilege. When we grieve, we should know that we are grieving tears of precious love—a love for the connectedness of all humans.

Q: What about injury and illness?

A: That's a difficult question, because I don't like suffering. When I was suffering the most, though, I actually grew closer to those I loved than when I was well. Sometimes trauma and illness occur in order to help those who associate with the one having the trauma. We tend to feel that we come here and live our lives for ourselves—we are very selfish. In my life's review I

understood that my life was lived not just for me, but for others that I interacted with. We are all connected in God's plan. We, and every other living thing, affect everything else. It is time for people to wake up and appreciate, from the inside, who they are. You don't have to belong to a religion to do that. Religion was created as a tool so that God could help you to know yourself. There is a you inside of you, a soul, that is united with God.

Conclusion

Bush made the insightful comment: "Beyond the wistful assumptions of much contemporary talk about spirituality lies a difficult truth: that dualism cannot be reconciled by attending to only one of its aspects. Paradox is an uncomfortable life partner" (1994, p. 51).

I couldn't agree more. The Cains and Abels of the world have ever been thus, and they are, in my opinion, a paradigm of a larger truth, namely, of a dualism that extends into an otherworldly cosmic reality. That reality suggests patterns of interconnectedness between that world and this one, including likely cause and effect relationships.

References

- Bush, N. E. (1994). The paradox of Jonah: Response to "Solving the riddle of frightening near-death experiences." *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 13, 47-54.
- Gibson, A. S. (1993). *Echoes from eternity: New near-death experiences examined*. Bountiful, UT: Horizon.
- Gibson, A. S. (1994a). *Journeys beyond life: True accounts of next world experiences*. Bountiful, UT: Horizon.
- Gibson, A. S. (1994b). Near-death experience patterns from research in the Salt Lake City region. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 13, 115-127.
- Greyson, B., and Bush, N. E. (1992). Distressing near-death experiences. *Psychiatry*, 55, 95-110.
- Rawlings, M. (1978). *Beyond death's door*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- Rawlings, M. (1993). *To hell and back*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- Ring, K. (1994). Solving the riddle of frightening near-death experiences: Some testable hypotheses and a perspective based on *A course in miracles*. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 13, 5-24.
- Ritchie, G. G., and Sherrill, E. (1978). *Return from tomorrow*. Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell.