

MEDIA REVIEW

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The Day I Died: The Mind, the Brain, and Near-Death Experiences [videorecording], produced by Kate Broome. British Broadcasting Corporation, 2002; color; running time: 60 minutes. Available for purchase in the United States in DVD or VHS format for use in educational venues at: <http://www.films.com/id/11685> (\$149.95 + \$12 shipping) or, for members of the International Association for Near-Death Studies, by calling 860-882-1211 (\$89.95 + \$12 shipping).

In the fall of 2003, The Learning Channel premiered a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) program entitled *The Day I Died: The Mind, the Brain, and Near-Death Experiences*. Immediately following the broadcast, several members of the Board of Directors of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) were in e-mail communication expressing excitement about the quality of the program. The consensus was that, although not perfect, *The Day I Died* came the closest yet to being the long-sought "ultimate" NDE educational video. Through IANDS Board efforts, in conjunction with the BBC and Films for Humanities and Sciences (FHS), this program

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has recently become available on DVD and VHS. According to the terms of release, it is available for purchase in the United States for use in educational venues, though not for individual home viewing. The program is available at a substantial discount to qualifying purchasers who are IANDS members. In this review, three IANDS Board members – a professional counselor (JH), a critical care nurse and nursing instructor (DJ), and a psychiatrist (BJM) – explain our conclusion that *The Day I Died*, though produced for a popular audience, has substantial merit for a variety of venues, including academic and medical.

Summary of Content

The one-hour documentary film follows a specific outline, beginning with a brief, somewhat sensationalized introduction to the popular history of the topic, but then quickly turns to the serious. Questions raised by near-death experiencers (NDErs) and the scientists who study them threaten to transform the very foundation of Western scientific thought. Being unable to answer definitively the scientific speculation, the film shifts to what research has clearly revealed: that an NDE is a profound event that can have life-changing effects on the people whom they touch and often on those who strive to understand their meaning.

The Day I Died begins with a visual representation of movement through darkness toward a light, while a woman's voice, which we later learn is the voice of NDEr Pam Reynolds, provides a brief, poignant recollection from her NDE. Then, while a cardiac resuscitation scene is briefly reenacted, a calm and reassuring narrator tells viewers that reports of NDEs are increasingly common due to advances in resuscitation technology. Viewers meet several other experiencers with brief, interesting, and dramatic vignettes from their own NDEs.

Viewers next meet Dutch cardiologist and consciousness researcher Pim van Lommel. His landmark prospective study of more than 300 cardiac arrest survivors was published in the prestigious British medical journal *The Lancet* (van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, and Elferich, 2001). He states the premise of the program:

Till now, the concept was that the brain is the producer of consciousness and the producer of memories.... When you study near-death experience, you have to ... reconsider this concept, that

perhaps we should consider the brain not as a producer but as a receiver of consciousness. And that's a kind of revolution.

The narrator then poses the focal question of the program: "Could the NDE be happening when the brain is not functioning, when the person is clinically dead?"

Next, the program provides a brief history of near-death studies, beginning with the seminal 1975 work of psychiatrist Raymond Moody, *Life after Life*. Then Bruce Greyson, psychiatrist at the University of Virginia, describes his NDE Scale (Greyson, 1983), which provided an important quantitative and qualitative standard that was needed to study scientifically the scope and depth of NDE phenomena. After his description of each of the four subscales of the instrument, brief clinical examples from actual case reports illustrate the focus of the NDE scale.

The first of four in-depth case studies is then presented, that of Heather Sloan of the United Kingdom. Her case, involving complications arising from an ectopic pregnancy, illustrates several classic features of a typical NDE.

The next focus of the program is the research of Sam Parnia, who was at that time cardiologist at Southampton Hospital in the United Kingdom, who claims that his team's prospective study was "the first ever study that was published in cardiac arrest patients." His co-author, neuropsychiatrist Peter Fenwick, then restates the central scientific dilemma posed by the NDE: "Once the heart has stopped, the brain ceases to function. All experience must stop. If it doesn't stop for some reason, you have a problem." The results of Parnia's and van Lommel's teams' prospective studies are briefly summarized, including a compelling case of veridical perception. Veridical perception refers to reports by the NDEr of happenings that seem physically impossible for the NDEr to have perceived, but that nevertheless are corroborated through objective sources such as medical records and/or the testimony of others who were on the scene.

Next, psychologist Susan Blackmore describes the traditionally held scientific reductionistic theory that explains NDEs in terms of the physiology of the dying brain. A case study is then presented that calls into question Blackmore's theory: that of Pam Reynolds. Her case is presented through descriptions by Atlanta cardiologist Michael Sabom and Phoenix neurosurgeon Robert Spetzler, through Reynolds's own narration, and through reenactment of the surgical procedure with particular focus on the veridical aspects of Reynolds's experience.

Reynolds' case appears to be explored in depth at this juncture of the film in response to a crucial question Blackmore raised: When, exactly, during the crisis and resuscitation process, are NDErs' seemingly veridical perceptions occurring? The answer to that question plays a critical role regarding the evidentiary value for the question of consciousness functioning apart from the brain.

Stuart Hammeroff, anesthesiologist at the University of Arizona, is interviewed regarding his theory of the relationship between consciousness and the brain – a theory that draws heavily from quantum physics. He is looking particularly at microtubules in the brain and speculates on “superpositioning” and quantum entanglement to explain retained experience during a time of physical unconsciousness.

The program then turns from theory and speculation to certainty: “One thing is clear and proven,” says the calm and methodical voice of the narrator, “NDEs have extreme effects on the people who've had them, because, for them, life continued after death.” Greyson returns to describe these aftereffects. Typically, experiencers become less materialistic, more helpful to others, more peace-seeking, and more global-minded. This “Scrooge-like” transformation is richly illustrated in the case study of Gordon Allen of Seattle.

The last in-depth case study is that of Vicki Noratuk, blind from birth, who describes seemingly veridical visual perception during her NDE. Parnia has the last word in the program, reminding viewers that, in the history of science and medicine, what was true yesterday is not true today. He concludes that NDEs may open a new, as yet uncharted, field of consciousness studies that may very well revolutionize the scientific view of the relationship between the brain and consciousness or the mind.

Strengths of the Program

The overarching strength of this program is the skillful way that the producers presented a complex topic. They included every important aspect of research and theory related to the premise that the mind might exist and function independent of the brain. Another important strength is that the program is balanced, presenting both “believer” and “skeptical” perspectives. The producers accomplished this feat through the inclusion of many of the foremost contemporary experts on NDEs.

A further strength is the production quality of the program that clearly reflects BBC financial and technical resources. Through the use of a world map graphic, the viewer can follow the locations of relevant sites in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and various places in the United States.

Regarding the content, the many personal NDE accounts told by the actual experiencers constitute a strength of the program. Represented are a variety of adults: both men and women; individuals of all three races; persons from the United States, United Kingdom, and Netherlands; and one person with the disability of blindness. Through their diversity, these individuals convey the research finding that NDEs transcend gender, race, culture, and other personal characteristics.

Collectively, the several brief testimonials and four in-depth case studies convey much of the range of NDE phenomena. Included are leaving the body through a sensation of “popping” out; the out-of-body experience including movement through “solid” objects; the life review; entry into a light; the profound and emotional experience of unconditional love; the sense that life is purposeful; encounter with deceased loved ones and other spiritual beings who communicate telepathically; the message that one has not yet accomplished what one undertook Earthly life to accomplish; and the experience of omniscience. Also described are the various circumstances of perceived return to the physical body, including a choice to return because of a love connection with a living person, being told or forced to return against one’s will, and being simply and suddenly “back” in the body.

The NDE testimonials also collectively convey many of the after-effects of NDEs. Various disclosure patterns are represented, including nondisclosure for years after the experience, disclosure to a physician, and a compulsion to disclose the experience to numerous people. Also conveyed are a knowing conviction that conscious existence continues after physical death, resulting in a complete loss of the fear of death; a moment-to-moment ongoing sense of connection to that which is “higher”; and the relinquishing of materialistic goals in favor of altruistic ones.

The producer’s choice of Heather Sloane to provide the first testimonial was masterful: Her unassuming manner, warmth, twinkling eyes, humility, groundedness, and soft-spoken earnestness make her both likable and credible. Each of the in-depth case studies added important new features to the previous ones.

An added strength of the FHS package is a 20-page Teacher's Guide/Viewing Guide available for free at http://www.iands.org/news/latest/the_ultimate_video.html by clicking on "Teacher's/viewing Guide" or at <http://www.films.com/id/11685#> by clicking on "related resources." The Guide includes an Introduction, Learning Objectives, Educational Standards, Program Overview, Main Topics, Fast Facts about NDEs, Vocabulary Terms, Pre- and Post-Program Discussion Questions, Group Activities, and Additional Resources. Equipped with this resource, an instructor or discussion leader could enhance the one-hour of viewing time with up to an additional hour of meaningful interaction among viewers.

Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of the program is its use of eminent physicians and academicians whose presence lends credibility to the field of near-death studies. Professionals in the field, aware that research on NDEs and NDErs has been ongoing for over three decades, know that such credibility is deserved. But because NDEs involve transpersonal phenomena that challenge the fundamental scientific assumptions of Western culture and to some degree defy purely scientific inquiry, and because they include aspects that are generally recognized to be of a religious or spiritual nature, a domain that has, for so long, fallen outside the bounds of scientific inquiry, the public at large, and many professionals, may not have perceived NDEs as a valid subject of scientific pursuit. Thus, one of the great strengths of this program is its potential to legitimize NDEs as a topic for discussion, research, and application among the public, researchers, and teachers, as well as medical, mental, and spiritual healthcare providers.

Limitations of the Program

It was beyond the apparent intent of the producer to provide a thorough introduction to all NDE-related phenomena. Because they focused exclusively on pleasurable NDEs, those dominated by feelings of peace, bliss, and love, the program includes no mention of distressing NDEs, those dominated by feelings of terror, horror, or isolation. Although distressing experiences seem to constitute a small minority of all NDEs, they appear to be equally real to experiencers, and the needs of distressing NDErs in the aftermath of their experiences seem equally, if not more, pressing as those of pleasurable NDErs. Thus, as a stand-alone introduction to NDEs, this program

falls short on this point. Fortunately, the Teacher's/Viewing Guide addresses this phenomenon, including how to find further resources. However, nothing guarantees that a user of this program will attend to that aspect of the Guide or make sure that at least a mention is made of the reality and importance of distressing NDEs.

Another limitation is a fine point of accuracy regarding the history of prospective research with cardiac arrest patients. In fact, Parnia's team's 2001 study was not, as stated in the program, the first-ever of its kind. In 1988, Janice Holden discussed the rationale and procedures for such research, specifically to study veridical perception among cardiac arrest patients in hospital; in 1990, Holden and Leroy Joesten reported on their study of this type at Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge, IL; and in 1996, Madelaine Lawrence reported on a similar study she conducted at Hartford Hospital in Hartford, CT. In Parnia's defense, theirs was the first study of cardiac arrest patients to capture reports of NDEs. A point of possible interest is that, like Parnia's study, other such attempts at veridical perception research have yielded inconclusive results. Because the purpose of *The Day I Died* was not to inform professional researchers thoroughly about how to undertake this kind of research but was, rather, to promote interest in the potential for such research, the omission of this historical information does not detract from the overall value and impact of the program.

Other limitations of the program relate specifically to potential venues in which it may be shown. Audiences more interested in the experiential phenomenon of the NDE may react negatively to the more clinical and scientific aspects of the program. Conversely, highly clinically and scientifically oriented audiences may react negatively to some of the production techniques aimed at popular audiences, such as the somewhat sensationalized introductory minute or two of the program, and the repeated use of the geography graphic throughout the program.

Conclusion

Despite its limitations, we consider this program to be an excellent introduction to NDEs, current research on them, and the questions they raise about the nature of human consciousness, for inquiring audiences, both general and professional. For an audience more interested in the experiential aspects of NDEs, a presenter might

consider a more expanded program in which attendees first view a production such as *Into the Light* (Engleman, 1994) or *Life After Life* (Shockey, 1992). But for inquiring or more advanced audiences, these latter productions alone would not provide nearly the intellectual stimulation or currency of information that *The Day I Died* provides.

For more professional audiences, we consider *The Day I Died* to be the single best audiovisual introduction to NDEs that exists to date. In fact, it is our dream that every nurse, physician, emergency medical technician, mental health professional, chaplain, clergyperson, thanatologist, brain researcher, consciousness researcher, and general psychology instructor implement this program along the lines suggested in the Teacher's/Viewing Guide. In an ideal world where this dream had become a reality, understanding of NDEs, constructive responses to NDErs, and our understanding of the nature of consciousness and its implications for a more humane world, would be greatly advanced.

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