

To the Editor:

I am writing in response to Keith Augustine's article on paranormal perception in near-death experiences (NDEs) in the Summer issue of the Journal (Augustine, 2007a) and his subsequent response to commentaries on that article (Augustine, 2007b). However, before addressing some of Augustine's critique and commentary concerning my own work and views, I would like to enter a couple of qualificatory statements.

First, having formally withdrawn from the field of near-death studies in 2000, I am, as it were, "coming out of retirement" after seven years of silence in order to address some of the issues Augustine raised. Second, I must confess that I do so reluctantly because I am convinced that debates of this sort rarely settle anything. Disagreements between materialists and believers in some sort of transcendent reality have been raging since the days of Democritus and Plato and have never been resolved by either argument or evidence. And even since the beginnings of Spiritualism in the middle of the 19th century and extending through the subsequent rise of psychical research and finally into the modern era of near-death studies, nothing fundamentally has changed. Any reader familiar with the history and personages of the aforementioned domains will recognize that the

contentions, *pro* and *con*, in this Journal are merely replays of the same tedious speeches that have been declaimed throughout the years as believers and skeptics have faced off against each other.

It is therefore both naïve and preposterous to think this comes down in the end to the matter of “evidence.” It does not. People believe and will continue to believe what they do based on personal temperament, worldview, and the normative structure of their reference groups. Thus, in my opinion, this exercise in opinion-mongering is a fruitless undertaking. For the purposes of the following remarks, I will just have to pretend that things are otherwise, but I have no illusions that my words will change anyone’s mind.

In order to keep this letter to a reasonable length, I will restrict my comments to just three sections of Augustine’s papers. First, I would like to address his views on the veridicality issue in NDE target identification studies; next, I will concern myself with his critique of my research on NDEs in the blind; and, finally, I will respond to his interpretation of my views on the matter of life after death, expressed in his response to Bruce Greyson’s commentary (Greyson, 2007).

To begin with, I am in complete agreement with Augustine’s summary of the evidence in controlled studies attempting to find evidence of veridical perception during NDEs. While the evidence for such perceptions is abundant from *anecdotal sources*, as I have already pointed out in Chapter Two of my book *Lessons for the Light* (Ring and Valarino, 1998), there is so far *no evidence at all* from controlled studies. Thus, the burden of proof remains on the proponents of this argument.

When it comes to Augustine’s critique of the research on NDE in the blind as reported in my book, *Mindsight* (Ring and Cooper, 2007), however, most of his objections can be easily refuted or otherwise dismissed.

Augustine seemed to rely pretty much on Mark Fox’s earlier critique of this research (Fox, 2003) and initially made reference to Fox’s questioning the fact that our blind respondents seemed to “see” without difficulty, whereas it is well known that when congenitally blind persons recover their sight in later life they often experience significant visual confusion and frustration. However, if Augustine had read our book carefully, he would have seen that this same distress was sometimes reported by our congenitally blind respondents when they found themselves “seeing” for the first time. Take Vicki Umipeg, for example, one of our prime cases. When first asked

how well she coped with her initial experience of seeing, Umipeg told the interviewer:

I had a hard time relating to it [i.e., seeing]. I had a real difficult time relating to it because I've never experienced it. And I was something very foreign to me.... Let's see, how can I put it into words? It was like hearing words and not being able to understand them, but knowing that they were words. And before you'd never heard anything. But it was something new, something you'd not been able to previously attach any meaning to. (Ring and Cooper, 2007, p. 42)

Later Umipeg remarked to me that this experience was not only strange and distracting to her, but actually frightening. So visually relating to things of the physical world at first by blind NDErs is not necessarily always the immediately easy perception that Augustine implied.

Similarly, Augustine, again citing Fox, suggested that perhaps the narratives of blind NDErs were merely confabulations based on the now familiar accounts of these experiences that have had long been disseminated in the media. But some of our principal cases in this book, such as those of Umipeg and Brad Barrows, for instance, were based on near-death incidents that took place in 1973 and 1968, respectively, years before there was any attention at all to NDEs in the media. Indeed, the very term "near-death experience" was not even coined until late 1975 when Raymond Moody's groundbreaking book on this subject, *Life After Life*, was published.

A related objection that Fox made and Augustine again repeated was that NDE testimony regarding an experience that occurred many years before is to be distrusted as unreliable. This simply shows a lack of direct familiarity with NDErs. In my experience, most critics of NDE research have not spent much, if any, time actually interviewing persons who have had NDEs. I personally do not know anything about Augustine's credentials in this regard, but many of my NDE researcher colleagues have personally interviewed or talked with hundreds, if not thousands, of such persons, as I myself have done. And all such qualified researchers would, I am sure, attest to the fact that the great majority of NDErs who had their experiences many years before their interview will state without qualification that in recalling their NDE, it "was like it happened yesterday," or will use phrases to that effect. The living memory of NDEs tends to be indelibly implanted and is remarkably stable, even down to small details many years after the event. Just the other day, in fact, an NDE researcher

told me about a woman NDEr who had recently died of Alzheimer's disease. By the time of her death, she no longer recognized those who were talking to her, but she remembered her NDE to the last. And as Greyson pointed out in his commentary to Augustine's article, repeated administration of the NDE Scale to experiencers on two occasions two decades apart showed no change in their recollections of their NDEs (Greyson, 2007).

Another of Fox's arguments, again parroted by Augustine, was more puzzling to me. Fox apparently thought that, because congenitally blind NDErs sometimes do not see at first see in color, their accounts are somehow suspect. But why should we necessarily expect those blind from birth to see immediately in color, when the concept of color may be entirely meaningless to them? For instance, to me one of the facts that made Umipeg's testimony *more* creditable was that, whereas she could detect form, she had no real understanding of the *color* of objects. All she was aware of was different "brightnesses" of light, and she later wondered whether that was what sighted people meant by "color."

The next reservation that Augustine cited from Fox really made me wonder how desperate some critics may be to search for anything, no matter how farfetched, to question the integrity of those whose work they wish to discount. I am referring here to Fox's apparently finding it remarkable that Sharon Cooper and I were able to locate 21 blind NDErs, something he called (apparently into question) "a remarkable achievement." But the argument about the antecedent improbability of finding as many as 21 such cases is not an argument at all; it is mere insinuation of the rankest sort. What did Augustine (quoting Fox) mean to imply by this? That we made it up? That we did not do the work? On the contrary, we beat the bushes for years trying to find such cases, and Cooper, my research colleague and co-author who actually did most of this work, was indefatigable in her efforts, working with great conscientiousness with as many as 11 different organizations to locate such persons. Perhaps Augustine would like to look at our files and records to assure himself that what we reported was based on the actual interviews we conducted for our research.

As for the snide implication that one should distrust Umipeg's testimony because her case was originally brought to our attention by Kimberly Clark Sharp, that is really close to impugning the integrity of four people – Sharp, Cooper, Umipeg, and myself – and hardly deserves even to be dignified by a response. Still, I am sure if Augustine were to take the trouble to talk to Umipeg directly, he

would be convinced that her account is absolutely authentic, however he might choose to interpret it.

When we come to Augustine's final criticism based on Fox's book, we can at least and at last once again find ourselves on common ground. Fox here claimed that the corroborative evidence Cooper and I provided for veridical perception in the blind was less than definitive and that more research was needed before we could have greater confidence that such perception truly can occur in the blind. This, of course, was precisely what we wrote in our book. We believed that our data and the corroborative evidence we provided were highly suggestive, but they were not conclusive, and we, too, encouraged more research on the subject.

However, Augustine, again following Fox, would seemingly upbraid us for failing to try to provide more evidence from potential witnesses. But, on the contrary, we *did* provide such evidence, especially for the cases where there was a reasonable possibility for external events originally reported by a blind NDEr to be corroborated by others. (See, for example, the extensive documentation provided for the case of Nancy, in Ring and Cooper, 2007, pp. 109–120). In our defense, we furthermore already had made plain the sheer difficulty that would confront any researcher attempting to do a similar investigation in searching for corroborative evidence of this kind:

The reasons, of course, will be apparent: In many cases (and here Vicki's and Brad's can stand as prototypes), the reported NDEs or OBEs took place so long ago that it is no longer possible to know precisely who the witnesses were or, even if their names were known, where to locate them. In other instances, potential informants have died or were not accessible to us in our interviews. As a result, much of the testimony of our respondents is dependent on their own truthfulness and the reliability of their memories. (Ring and Cooper, 2007, p. 97)

To sum up this section of my rebuttal, Fox and Augustine were certainly well within their rights to argue that the case for veridical perception in the blind has not been conclusively established. That was also our conclusion and it remains a challenge to other researchers to establish the claim. Nevertheless, I trust it will be clear to most readers that almost all of their specific objections to our research are either specious, unwarranted, or unfair. In addition, we believe that any openminded reader of our research, taking the evidence provided as a whole, would agree with us that the case for veridical perception in the blind is nevertheless very plausible, and

that the accounts provided by our respondents are not easily explained away by any purely naturalistic explanation proffered so far.

Finally, let me respond to Augustine's statements in his response to Greyson's commentary about my belief in life after death, and some of the facts he alleged to support his interpretation that I am an obvious, if sometimes covert, believer in an afterlife. I will not speak to the issue of what other NDE researchers as a whole believe about this matter, since Greyson (2007) has adequately addressed that issue in his commentary. But for the record, and for Augustine's information, I can certainly attest that I never initiated my own study of NDEs because I believed in life after death, as any person who knows me well can readily confirm, nor has that at any time been the basis of my interest in the subject. None of my work has ever been directly concerned with establishing the case for life after death, as a close reading of my last major book on NDEs, *Lessons from the Light* (Ring and Valarino, 1998), would make clear. Moreover, if Augustine had ever attended any of my many public lectures on NDEs or had sat in on any of my classes on this phenomenon, he would doubtless would have heard me say, whenever the subject of the implications of NDEs for life after death came up, something like the following: "The once nearly dead are not the irretrievably and forever fully dead, so NDE research itself can never definitively answer this question. Besides, the dead are notorious for never returning the questionnaires we send them."

Joking aside, when it comes to Augustine's specific inferences about my beliefs, again some of them were simply fatuous. For example, he alluded to my *curriculum vitae*, making reference to my work on "prophetic visions." If he had read the article in question, he would have seen that it had nothing whatever to do with life after death. Similarly, my interest in providing evidence for veridical perception was not in itself motivated to prove life after death, but only to demonstrate that such perceptions may not be explained by conventional means. It is a long leap from that to asserting claims for life after death, and I have never taken that leap.

However, what Augustine should realize and what I certainly acknowledge is that after having spoken to many hundreds of NDErs, if not more than a thousand (for I have lost track by now), I have long become aware that from the *standpoint of NDErs themselves*, there is generally *no doubt* that the end of physical life is not a *dead* end. They confidently assert that there is something more. It has been my role and privilege often to speak for the many NDErs who do not write

books or give public talks, and in doing so, I have often tried, as accurately as possible, to reflect the views of those NDErs whom I have chosen to represent. In doing so, I have tried to speak in their voice so that *they* would be heard, not me. In this respect, the evidence from NDEs is, I believe, highly suggestive that some form of consciousness continues after death; the abundant NDE testimony I have heard and read convinces me, as it does most others, of that. Augustine of course is free to reject such testimony or to insist that it does not prove anything. I can certainly agree with him on the latter point, but I cannot disregard what NDErs have shared with me over a period of more than twenty years, and I dare say that if Augustine had had the opportunity I did during the time I was active in the field, he might well find himself concurring with me. In any case, I encourage him to look into the matter for himself by cultivating direct contact with NDErs.

For my part, I appreciate having had a chance to have my say on these matters, whatever the response to them may be, but I will now again take my leave of the field and happily cede further discussion and debate to others.

References

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