Forgiveness and the Near-Death Experience

To the Editor:

Because of the near-death experience (NDE), we now have the opportunity to ground our concepts of the afterlife in a large body of empirical data. Studying NDEs and teaching about them to my students has had, and is having, a profound effect on me as well as on my students. I wish to share with readers of the Journal one such effect.

It is probably impossible to be human without accumulating over the years a number of resentments and grudges against those who we feel have hurt us or wronged us in some way. Whenever I have asked myself what it would take for me to release and let go of my resentments, so
that I could feel at least emotionally clear if not loving towards those who have harmed me, the answer always takes the following form: To reach a state of forgiveness I need first, some acknowledgment from the other that his or her actions have in fact been hurtful to me, and second, some sense from the other that he or she knows, understands, and empathizes with how I felt as a consequence of his or her behavior. And I believe this is generally the case with other people. Indeed, even in extreme cases, the lust for revenge—to do unto others what others have done unto you—is simply a desire to make the transgressors feel what it felt like to have been at the receiving end of their offending behavior.

But this is exactly what happens in the life review component of the NDE. NDErs report experiencing in the life review not only everything they did and felt, but also the effects their actions had on others; and, most importantly, they experience these effects in the first person, as if what they did to another was really done to themselves. Not only do the NDErs come to know that their actions have harmed another, they experience that harm directly.

So when I think of those who have harmed me or, to put it more positively, those who have helped me grow in ways that were subjectively very unpleasant at the time, I now know that eventually they will know and feel in detail all the pain they caused me. Thus the two conditions for forgiveness listed above will in fact be satisfied, albeit in the future. This leaves me with a choice: I can either hold on to my resentments until those who have harmed me (or I) have had a life review, or use my knowledge of what those who have hurt me will certainly experience to help me release the resentments now.

The more I read and think about NDEs, the more I experience the accumulation of resentments and grudges leaving me now. At the level of feeling and emotion, the NDE has reinforced my belief that God is taking care of these things, and hence there is no need for me to burden myself by keeping a record of life’s hurts. And indeed, sometimes when I think about those who have hurt me and what lies ahead for them, I feel not only the absence of resentment but also the presence of compassion.

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