BOOK REVIEW

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Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife
by Eben Alexander, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2012,

To Heaven and Back: A Doctor’s Extraordinary Account of Her Death, Heaven, Angels, and Life Again: A True Story

These two books, Proof of Heaven and To Heaven and Back, are accounts of deeply personal near-death experiences (NDEs) by physicians. I recognize the profound meaning the books represent for the authors as well as the courage it must have taken for persons of science to relate experiences that seem to challenge what they had been taught, what they had lived by, and, perhaps, who they thought they were. I feel a deep sense of respect for them and for their commitment to share their message, and I am honored to be reviewing their work.

One might expect a great deal of similarity among various accounts that present personal NDEs, especially if one is not that familiar with this area. Although, the core or essence of the experiences for both of these authors, Mary Neal and Eben Alexander, is similar, I found the totality of the reading experience to be very different. What this

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difference immediately emphasized for me is how very much an individual's personality, way of moving through the world, and belief system are reflected in one's writing and in what and how one communicates. The interpretation and meaning attached to experiences are influenced not only by personal cultures but also by individual hopes and dreams, by perceived needs, and by desires sought.

**Summary of Proof of Heaven**

Alexander's text is short—35 chapters—each brief and succinct. One should not, however, confuse brevity with ease of reading. On the contrary, each chapter is filled with descriptions and teachings, some quite complicated and unquestionably written by a scientist and, as he put it, “seeker of truth.” There is nothing sentimental about this work. One learns about the workings of the brain and meaning of consciousness as well as the limitations of human language to express experiences of deeper spiritual realms.

It is clear that Alexander wanted readers to grasp the importance of his experience, the unlikelihood of it occurring to someone like him with a scientific background and little religious connections, and his difficulty communicating its true essence. Although I was aware that much of what is experienced within an NDE is separate from the person on the physical plane, Alexander's physical context did help me to understand the person who had the transcendent experience and enabled me to feel more like a companion on the journey rather than just an observer of it. At several points I found I had to really engage my intellectual processes with focused concentration. Only occasionally were my emotions tapped. After reading some of the more complex chapters, I found I wanted merely to sit still and ponder what I had just read. I found it a thought-provoking and extremely interesting experience.

In the Prologue, Alexander introduced himself with a peek into both his personality and his training as a neurosurgeon. He also laid the groundwork for the serious and unusual illness that arose suddenly, progressed rapidly, and resulted in, as he termed it, his brain “crashing.” He related how he slipped into a coma that lasted 7 days, during which time the outer surface of his brain, the neocortex, was totally nonfunctional. He opened the doorway to his remarkable journey: “The neocortex was out of the picture. I was encountering the reality of a world of consciousness that existed completely free of the limitations of my physical brain” (p. 9). He then presented the caveat
to which he returned in one form or another throughout the text: that his experiences are beyond ordinary understanding. Yet his passion for sharing them was evident from the beginning.

In Chapters 1–4, Alexander graphically but succinctly described the onset of pain, its rapid increase, his rush to the emergency room, and his eventual incapacitation. Initially baffled, his doctors eventually diagnosed his illness as a serious form of bacterial meningitis. Alexander offered the reader some foundational medical information regarding this disease that, besides being very interesting to learn, also underscores how rare and, most often, fatal it is. Tests showed how truly ill he was, and family from various parts of the country began to arrive. No one was prepared for what they witnessed. Alexander described the experience of his oldest son, Eben IV, when he saw his father in the hospital, in a coma, attached to machines:

In spite of all the machines doing their best to make it seem otherwise, he was looking at what he knew was, essentially, a corpse. My physical body was there in front of him, but the dad he knew was gone. (p. 28)

In Chapter 5, aptly titled “Underworld,” Alexander began to describe his experience of his body in coma. As I read, I found I needed to relinquish attachment to my rational mind and open myself to intuiting what Alexander was sharing. In the first of many paradoxes Alexander presented throughout the book, he related that he felt submerged in mud while at the same time was able to see through it. The boundaries usually associated with consciousness dropped away, and the anchors of memory and personal identification disappeared. He also related a pounding sound that sent vibrations through the mud. Alexander was clear that at this time he had no awareness of his body, nor did he have a sense of time. In retrospect, he initially considered that this experience might be connected to what his brain was experiencing while being destroyed by bacteria, but then he recognized that during the experience his consciousness was limited but not foggy—presumably exceeding what a brain in that condition should have been about to produce: “I was simply a lone point of awareness in a timeless red-brown sea” (p. 31). His experience reminded me of the occasional times I have awakened from a deep sleep and for a few moments have not known where I was, feeling suspended with an inability to attach to anything familiar. I recalled the experience being uncomfortable and the relief that emerged when I finally identified time and place.

Alexander also related feelings of discomfort and a sense of being
trapped, of not belonging or being part of what he was experiencing. He identified grotesque faces of animals that would rise up and then disappear. He heard terrifying sounds that were, however, somewhat familiar to him. A fascinating observation that he made was that the more he felt separate from what was surrounding him, from what he was experiencing, the more ugly and threatening the faces became and the more intensified the sounds. Duality and separateness increased the discomfort. He felt as if he was moving close to panic. He felt a need to escape—but did not know where to go. He related one of the mysteries of his experience: As he asked himself the question of where to go, immediately something new arose out of the darkness—something exactly opposite of what he was experiencing. He left me knowing that something indescribable was about to emerge.

In Chapter 6, Alexander presented his relationship to religion, or better expressed, the absence of any real relationship to religion and his belief that the afterlife was reserved for religion, not the domain of science. “As much as I’d grown up wanting to believe in God and Heaven and an afterlife, my decades in the rigorous scientific world of academic neurosurgery had profoundly called into question how such things could exist” (p. 34). I got the sense that he wanted to assure the reader that what was forthcoming in the next chapter was not something he would have conceived of, believed in, or created, given his strong immersion in science.

In Chapter 7, Alexander described a light that emerged out of the darkness. The hard metal sound was replaced by the most beautiful music he had ever heard. He moved from looking at the light to being through it. He used adjectives such as “brilliant” and “ecstatic” to describe what he was seeing and experiencing. I sensed he could neither contain nor express what he had experienced: “I felt like I was being born. Not reborn, or born again. Just . . . born” (p. 38). This is one of the many times that the limits of language became evident. I also felt certain that a reader could not truly grasp the experience without actually having had it oneself. He described a beautiful girl with whom he found himself riding on the wing of a butterfly:

She looked at me with a look that, if you saw it for a few moments, would make your whole life up to that point worth living . . . it was a look that was . . . beyond all the different types of love we have down here on earth. (p. 40)

And somehow, without words, the girl communicated to him the powerful and critical message that he was loved and cherished, had noth-
ing to fear, and could do no wrong—and that he would be going back. At that point, Alexander could not imagine where “back” was! He asserted unequivocally that this experience was the most real of his life.

In Chapter 8, Alexander further discussed his disease and how he might have contracted it. It is clear that his doctors were uncertain of its origin and were very concerned about his prognosis.

Chapter 9 is very aptly entitled “The Core.” Here Alexander presented the heart and center of his experience. He spoke of the absence of duality and the experience of a higher vibration. He identified a brilliant orb, a Being, which he referred to as God, the Creator, the Source, and which he described with the term “Om.” Ineffability and paradox were again apparent, as in his use of “dazzling darkness” to describe God. He continued to emphasize the presence of love as the most powerful force. He spoke of many universes and countless higher dimensions that can be known only through direct experience. I sensed his inner push to share all he possibly could, yet his awareness that there was so much more: “It will take me the rest of my life, and then some, to unpack what I learned up there” (p. 49).

In Chapters 10 and 11, the person of Alexander continued to be fleshed out. Among the many things he shared about himself was the importance of family to him and the fact that he was adopted. Throughout most of his younger life he moved in and out of being interested in his adoptive status with a minimum of emotional consequences. However, later married and, subsequently, through his son’s curiosity, he attempted to find his biological family. His initial failure in this attempt resulted in powerful feelings, like “someone cut off from my source. I defined myself in the context of something I had lost and could never regain” (p. 56). As Alexander shared his struggles, which included bouts of depression and difficulties with alcohol, I found myself being very impressed and moved by his courage to reveal his vulnerability. In the midst of the sadness he experienced, he realized that he wanted a God, one that was all loving, but he did not believe it was possible to find one. His personal darkness seemed to have been lifted when he finally was able to reconnect to his birth family, yet the question of God’s existence still remained unanswered for him.

Chapter 12 returned focus to the Core. Providing further description, Alexander expressed this experience as being akin to a tour of the “invisible spiritual side of existence” (p. 69). Time and space did not exist. Thoughts and the fulfillment of thoughts were simultaneous. And, again, the essence of the experience was indescribable Love. I felt the power and awe of his closing words to this chapter: “The
unconditional love and acceptance that I experienced on my journey is the single most important discovery I have ever made, or will ever make... that sharing this very basic message... is the most important task I have” (p. 73).

In Chapter 13, Alexander re-emphasized the seriousness of his physical condition. Thus he reminded readers that while at a transcendent level amazing experiences were manifested, at the physical level the situation was dire.

In Chapter 14, Alexander emphasized some of the uniqueness of his NDE compared to others’ accounts. He did not engage in a life review and did not remember his earthly identity. He did not meet anyone he recognized as someone who had previously died. For Alexander, he was free completely of his earthly identity. Even to him, pondering this absence seemed perplexing. Yet, he considered this unusual state of total identity amnesia to have been beneficial, because it facilitated full acceptance of his experience as he was experiencing it, with total equanimity.

I found Chapter 15 to be one of the more complex chapters but certainly extremely informative and interesting. Alexander expanded on the beneficial process of forgetting. What struck me the most was how forgetting allowed him to be fully present to the here and now. As one who practices mindfulness meditation, I am very aware of how the past and future continually pull me from the experience of the Now. Yet, I must admit, releasing the attachment, even though I strive for it through practice, does evoke fear. For Alexander, this process was an “organic” one, devoid of anxiety, that enabled him to be conscious of spiritual realms that he realized were the true reality.

Chapters 16–19 return the reader to the hospital and the experiences of those “left behind” during Alexander’s travels to spiritual realms. He described a psychic connection with a friend of his wife’s—a source of encouragement to family in the midst of the serious physical condition that showed no sign of improvement. Family and friends maintained their vigil, trying to keep fading hopes alive. They continued to talk to his comatose body, encouraging him to heal himself and assuring him of their love for him.

In Chapter 20, Alexander referred to the young woman on the butterfly wing as his guardian angel—a constant companion as he learned an “eternity” of lessons from the Creator. Although Alexander had originally been able to move from the realm of the “Earthworms-Eye View” through the “Gateway” into the “Core” merely by thinking about it, at this point he discovered that this process was no longer
possible: “The gates of Heaven were closed” (p. 102). Alexander struggled again to express the keenness and depth of disappointment that he experienced with words such as “heartbroken” and the phrase a “world of ever increasing sorrow” that he fell into. He began to see beings that resembled people that he knew in life. He also felt these beings praying for him, and he believed that their prayers were aiding him in his transition. He also realized that he would always have Heaven within him. He sensed that he was returning to his body but that he was not alone in this process.

Chapters 21–23 recount the continued gravity of his physical condition. According to his physician, the higher-level functioning of his brain was still completely absent. There was serious consideration from his doctors that it was time to let his body die. Yet, still in the spiritual realm, Alexander was becoming aware of more vaguely familiar faces. Although returning to his body was not what he wanted, he began to become powerfully aware of how important his survival was to his young son. It is as if this strong bond and responsibility spurred him on in his journey to return to his body and to life. Just at the moment when all hope of his survival was just about lost, Alexander opened his eyes and uttered his first words in seven days: “Thank you,” and then “Don’t worry, all is well” (p. 113).

In Chapters 24–28, Alexander continued to explore his challenging return to his body. He was delusional and confused, uttering unintelligible statements and unable to remember the names of those close to him. He was definitely back—in a severely disabled brain. “My mind—my real self—was squeezing its way back into the all too tight and limiting suit of physical existence, with it spatio-temporal bounds, its linear thought, and its limitation to verbal communication” (p. 117). What before his NDE he had thought was the only possible existence subsequently became an existence filled with limitations. However, as his neuro-challenges began to lessen, Alexander realized that he was compelled to tell his story. He decided, on the advice of his older son, to write down, as best he could, all that he experienced—and only then would he read about others’ NDEs so that their influence on his account would be minimized.

It should not be surprising that those people of science with whom he desperately wanted to share his experience really struggled with embracing it. At one time, he realized, he would have been among those skeptics. He was clearly changed through his experience. But he knew that somehow he had to make sense of what seemed impossible: that while his brain was not working at all, he had been completely
aware within an existence totally filled with “love, consciousness and reality” (p. 130). For him, that experience was more real than—and essentially different from—his physical existence. “How was I going to create room for both of these realities to coexist?” (p. 130).

In Chapter 29, Alexander presented the similarity of his experience with other NDEs even though, as he indicated, each experience is unique. Among the often-shared elements were a dark tunnel opening into a beautiful bright landscape, the presence of angelic beings as guardians—more sensed as angelic rather than necessarily looking the role, being outside of linear time and space, hearing in one’s total being otherworldly music, instantaneous understanding, and, above all, experiencing total unconditional love.

In Chapter 30, Alexander presented a moving account of a former patient’s dying daughter’s encounter with a “miracle” in the form of a dream of a loved one who had previously died. When first told of this dream, prior to his own NDE, Alexander was sure it was without substance and was only a way to ease the fear of this dying girl and her mother. However, after his own experience, he viewed her experience as real, a true encounter with what existed after death. How does science make room for miracles? He could now accept that they both can exist. Yet even his own knowing was tenuous in that at times he had to reaffirm for himself the validity of his experiences.

This phenomenon segued into Chapter 31 in which Alexander classified people into three groups regarding the question of the reality of NDEs: believers who find it easy to accept, those who are absolutely dismissive of any possible reality or validity of NDEs, and a middle group who do not believe yet are open to the possibility. The latter group was Alexander’s intended audience. In this chapter, he first presented possible arguments against his experiences being a true encounter with the afterlife and then countered these arguments from a scientific perspective. Clearly, he wanted to be proactive in confronting the position of skeptics!

In Chapter 32, Alexander expressed how his NDE provoked in him a different perspective on religion. Whereas religion had previously held no meaning for him, after his NDE some religious symbols had come to hold meaning related directly to his NDE.

As was the case with some previous chapters, Chapter 33, “The Enigma of Consciousness,” was one of the denser and more technically instructive. Alexander began with his own struggle in the face of consciousness as viewed by traditional science versus his personal experience of consciousness within his NDE. As someone with an interest
in, but only a layperson’s understanding of, quantum physics, I appreciated Alexander’s comprehensible explanation of energy and relationships at the subatomic level. Nevertheless, I found it difficult to clearly grasp the relationship between the mechanisms of the quantum world and the case Alexander was trying to make for consciousness existing beyond the physical body. What I could appreciate is how very much he wanted to “prove” the reality of his experience in concrete terms so that readers would not question its validity. This issue relates to my perception of the difference between knowing and believing. Alexander knows his experience is real; the proof is within him. For those of us who have not had these experiences, we can only believe in what he says. Alexander is aware of this dilemma as indicated in his own words: “The universe is so constructed that to truly understand any part of its many dimensions and levels, you have to become a part of that dimension” (p. 156). He followed this admission with a statement I found both powerful and exciting: “You have to open yourself to an identity with that part of the universe that you already possess, but which you may not have been conscious of” (p. 156).

Here we have it! Non-NDErs can become conscious, even as Alexander was, without dying; we just have to open to what is already present. Many of the spiritual traditions, in one way or another, speak to this point. Jack Kornfield, for example, addressed the timelessness of the human spirit (2009):

The knowing or pure consciousness is called by many names, all of which point to our timeless essence. Ajahn Chah and the forest monks of Thailand speak of it as the ‘Original Mind’ or the ‘One Who Knows.’
In Tibetan Buddhism it is referred to as ‘rigpa,’ silent and intelligent.
In Zen it is called the ‘mind ground’ or ‘mind essence.’ Hindu yogis speak of the ‘timeless witness. (p. 42)

And the way to this experience of deep consciousness is prayer and meditation. Alexander’s recommendation of these processes reflected his passionate desire that everyone experience connection to God as he had.

To my mind, the book would have been complete at this point. Yet Alexander had withheld from readers one further powerful confirmation of the reality of his experience—which he revealed in Chapter 33 and which I leave for readers to discover, savor, and contemplate for themselves.

Alexander related that through his NDE he experienced a deep transformation and committed himself to making the world a better
place for all who live in it. I continue to feel inspired by his commitment and grateful that I have benefited from it through the reading of this book. For me, he may not have proved the existence of an afterlife, but he certainly reinforced that possibility.

**Summary of To Heaven and Back**

Neal laid the foundation for this reading with her opening statement: The accident that resulted in her NDE, rather than being the tragedy that many people had called it, was actually the best thing that had ever happened to her. “Not only did I have the privilege of experiencing heaven, but I continued to experience the intensity of God’s world and conversed with Jesus several times in the weeks after my return” (p. xiii). Throughout the text, Neal presented correlations and clarifications for her experiences with references to the Bible. Like Alexander, she felt compelled to share her experience with others.

This text is relatively short, with 33 brief chapters, each headed with a quote from the Bible. I noted a pervasive religious overtone throughout, and, although Neal indicated that she often questioned her spirituality, it seemed to me that spirituality was woven, to one degree or another, into the fabric of her entire life prior to her NDE.

In Chapters 1–7, Neal presented a biographical sketch of the years leading up to the accident that resulted in her NDE. She consistently made reference to her spiritual development. She related feeling loved and content within her family despite her parents’ divorce when she was in the 7th grade. Though her illusions of the all-American family were crushed, she did not seem deeply traumatized. She held on to the belief that her dad would return, even though he never did.

Neal related a high school incident that demonstrated her openness to the presence and intervention of God. After she and some friends were in an auto accident, she heard the reassuring voice of God. She identified this experience as the first time she was aware of God’s presence in her life and as her opening to the possibility of God being a greater force and reality than she had considered previously. Neal related her teenage missionary experience in Mexico and the increased intensity of her religious fervor. In recalling this time, Neal expressed the belief that God had been present in her mission hospital work.

As she matured and pursued her education, with the ultimate goal of becoming a doctor, her thoughts regarding spirituality receded somewhat. During this time, she took up scuba diving and one day found herself once again in a life-threatening situation. Having unintention-
ally entered an underwater cave, she and her instructor discovered that their oxygen tanks held less air than they needed to reach the surface. Neal remembered calling out to God for help and immediately feeling His presence. Her resulting comfort enabled Neal to slow her breathing, and shortly thereafter, they discovered a crack in the rock through which they could surface. Whereas her instructor attributed their survival to luck, Neal attributed it to Divine intervention. She credited this experience with re-awakening her dormant spirituality.

Neal described her medical training and her connection to Bill who later to became her husband. She related how she had again relegated God to a peripheral position in her life: “It was as if I consigned God to the backseat of my car. I wanted Him to be present, but didn’t want Him to distract me and I certainly wasn’t ready for Him to drive the car” (p. 25). Neal also, like Alexander, conveyed the view that spirituality was considered incompatible with science.

Indicating a retrospective awareness that God was woven in subtle ways into her early work as a physician and her developing relationship with Bill, Neal eventually described having achieved “success” in both her work and her personal life. She philosophized about the struggles of working women with families. Having pondered if she was truly following God’s plan for her, she acknowledged, “I had done a lot of thinking and contemplating with regard to my spirituality, my desire to put God and my family at the top of my priority list, . . . but not much in the way of action” (p. 40). With this awareness, she renewed her commitment to live a “Christ-centered life,” and her family moved from Los Angeles to Jackson Hole, Wyoming for an existence both quieter and closer to nature.

In Chapter 8, Neal introduced the couple that were her and Bill’s companions on the trip to Chile in which her kayaking accident resulted in her NDE. Then in Chapter 9, Neal described the trip leading up to and including the crucial event on the river. I felt tense and apprehensive reading her account of her kayak cresting the waterfall, “rocketing” down the waterfall with its front end diving under another boat, and eventually becoming lodged under water beneath the other boat and underwater rocks. The force of the water made escape impossible. In Chapter 10, she related how she did not panic but reached toward God for intervention (at which point I recalled Alexander’s last words before slipping into coma: “God help me.”), how she thought of her family and her relationship with God, how she felt God present and holding her while she remained fully aware of her predicament.
and surroundings, and how she felt profound comfort and peace as she gave up trying to breathe and assumed she would die.

In Chapter 11, Neal related how after 14 minutes under water, her rescuers managed to save her—according to them, only through Divine intervention. They described her body as purple, bloated, and oxygen-starved; they believed if she survived, she would be in a permanent vegetative state. After prolonged CPR and prayer, Neal took gasping breaths and eventually breathed more normally.

Neal’s NDE during submersion and rescue is the subject of Chapter 12. “While my body was being slowly sucked out of the boat [by the force of the water], I felt as though my soul was slowly peeling itself away from my body” (p. 68). She described her soul rising out of the river at which time she encountered 15–20 souls that she believed were sent by God. These souls seemed to embody pure joy, which permeated her being. Although she could not identify them specifically, she was aware she had known them “for all eternity” (p.68). Her sense was that they were her guides and protectors across what she referred to as “the divide of time and dimension that separates our world from God’s” (p. 69). She described these souls as blindingly and invigoratingly brilliant and as communicating without speech. Absolute love was “palpable,” and love and joy were deeper than she had ever experienced on earth as she hugged and danced with these souls. At this point Neal expressed, as did Alexander, the absolute inadequacy of human language to describe her experience. Meanwhile, amidst her ecstasy, she observed her companions on earth pleading with her to breathe, and out of empathy for them, she returned momentarily to her body to take a breath and then left again.

Neal recounted being pulled toward a radiant hall filled with unconditional love. “I knew with a profound certainty that it represented the last branch point of life, the gate through which each human being must pass” (p. 73). Within the hall, she believed, the life review was experienced, at which time those who entered it were offered the final opportunity to choose God or to turn from God for all eternity. She was ready to reunite with God even as she continued in awareness of her earthly companions’ supplications for her to live and she began feeling annoyed with them for not letting her go. Her spiritual companions explained that she had not completed her work on earth and thus was not ready to enter the hall—the reasons for which, after returning to her body, she would better understand in time. She believed they shared her sorrow and grief about her having to return. “I sat down in my body and gave these heavenly beings, these people who
had come to guide, protect, and cheer for me, one last, longing glance before I lay down and was reunited with my body” (p. 74).

In Chapters 13–15, Neal described her decision to forego treatment until she arrived at her home hospital in Jackson Hole and the challenges of that journey—including inability to move her legs and extreme difficulty breathing. Upon reaching the hospital, Neal lost consciousness and was considered at risk of dying. She attributed her gradual stabilization in part to the prayers of many caring people.

In Chapter 16, Neal described an unusual occurrence. Upon awakening in the hospital, her vision was extremely blurry. Unable even to see the television clearly, she picked up a Bible to search for words of strength. All was blurry except three passages that emerged crystal clear: “Rejoice always” (I Thessalonians 5:16), “Pray without ceasing” (I Thessalonians 5:17), and “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God’s in Christ Jesus for you” (I Thessalonians 5:18). Neal expressed the belief that these messages were directions from God not only to her but also to all humanity.

Chapters 17 and 18 present Neal’s beliefs about the purposes of her NDE as well as the reasons for her return to life. She reported that following her NDE, she became more accepting of and compassionate toward people for whom she previously would have felt considerable irritation. She addressed the constant presence of angels as well as, during her month-long hospital stay, several meetings with an angel in which she received teachings. These included lessons about God’s intentions for humans on earth as well as the responsibilities that we humans have for each other. They also included additional reasons for her return to life: to ensure her husband’s continued health; to support her family upon the future death of her son; to help others find their way back to God; and finally, to tell the story of her experiences.

In Chapter 19, Neal spoke of the various struggles she experienced upon returning home. Both legs were in casts up to her hips, so she depended on others for mobility. Though physically present, emotionally she was in her own world trying to make sense of her experience. She indicated that it took her more than a year to accept that she was sent back because she had work to do.

Chapters 20–21 address some events related to two significant people in Neal’s life: her father and her stepfather—both near death. She described both the importance and the challenges of her to travel to their bedsides; how, upon their deaths, she was able to be a comfort to family; and how some small “miracles” in the process confirmed for her a Divine presence.
In Chapter 22, Neal addressed the beginning of her sharing her experiences with the public. She encountered great interest from people hungry for conformation of life after death. She strove to convey that God considers each person special and of value. She discovered that telling her story opened the door for others to relate similar experiences that, up until then, they had kept secret. She observed that no matter how much time elapsed, people’s descriptions of experiencing either God’s presence or intervention reflected consistency and clarity. She noted the similarity between her own and others’ NDEs. Like Alexander, Neal emphasized that everyone has the potential to have intense spiritual experiences like NDEs if they can transcend the distractions of everyday life and thereby “discern that which is most important: our relationship with God” (p. 138). Both Neal and Alexander indicated that through dedicated prayer and meditation, one can train oneself to be mindful of Divine presence.

In Chapter 23, Neal revisited her emotional confusion following her accident and NDE, wondering still what she was supposed to do with her life. She renewed her commitment to live a God-centered life, believing that if she followed this path, then whatever she needed would come her way.

Chapters 24–26 focused again on significant people in Neal’s life, and I found these chapters quite moving. She detailed her close connection—which she termed a soul connection—with her oldest son, Willie, including a particular comment he’d made to her prior to her accident: “You know I’m never going to be eighteen. That’s the plan. You know that” (p. 150). Reflecting on her NDE message about his impending death, Neal described anticipatory grief as well as close calls in which Willie’s life had been spared and her hope that perhaps the plan had changed. She also recounted how Divine intervention led her to urge her husband to get a physical exam in which a tumor was found early enough to be treated as well as how a young man involved in her family’s life was inspired by the “miracles” recent events to commit to a God-centered life.

In Chapter 27–29, Neal interwove the topics of her ambivalence and practical challenges in writing about her NDE and the events leading up to Willie’s death. In particular, she expressed the irony that shortly after she had finally completed her manuscript and felt “I had been obedient to God. Life could not have seemed better” (p. 171), she received the news of Willie’s fatal accident: struck by a young, distracted driver.

Neal’s response to her son’s death—both practical and spiritual—
was the topic of Chapters 30–33. In particular, she detailed the complex role her NDE played in her grief and her circuitous path toward forgiveness and toward rediscovering at yet another, deeper level, the necessity of relying on God to get beyond human limitations.

Neal entitled her final Chapter 33 “Logical Conclusions.” From her experiences, she has concluded that she is always connected to God who is real and can be trusted, has a plan for her, and will support her in this plan. She reported a personal transformation that included a deeper faith. Although I appreciate her perspective, not having had her experiences I did not arrive at her same logical conclusions but was more open to accepting them as a matter of faith.

Conclusion

In summary, I found reading To Heaven and Back an engaging and emotionally evocative process. I considered the book an inspirational, perhaps even devotional work that reminded me of teachings I received as a young person within a traditional Christian church. By contrast, with Proof of Heaven, I found it necessary to really concentrate and study what often was quite technical material. Even the NDE presentation had that “scholarly” twist. Alexander conveyed that his NDE was an equally deeply spiritual experience as Neal’s but without the aforementioned religious overtones. Clearly, despite the now-well-established similarities among NDEs, even among physician NDErs, perspectives can vary considerably.

I found each book valuable in its own way, and having read them both, I came away feeling wiser, more informed, curious, hopeful, and grateful for the opportunity the authors provided by sharing their life-transforming experiences. For me, the greatest gift was the message from both authors that if we humans engage in our own inner work and care for others with loving-kindness, we can participate in the experience of unconditional love.

References