To the Editor:

For more than two decades, starting with the founding of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), it has been
fascinating for me to be associated with the foremost students of the near-death experience (NDE). I had been impressed that this subject continued to be challenging, with new perspectives and broadening views beyond the earliest reports of Raymond Moody (1975). The Summer 2000 issue of the Journal was startling in presenting what may be a serious controversy, with two of our most highly respected scholars confronting the religious implications of the NDE (Ring, 2000; Sabom, 2000). My careful reading of the entire issue leads me to inject my own reactions as an admitted member of a small minority Christian denomination with a unique qualification, the Swedenborgian church, based on Emanuel Swedenborg's voluminous descriptions of the life after death, based on “things heard and seen” in the spiritual world from 1745 to 1772.

Swedenborg's most extensive of all experiences clearly presaged descriptions by those who have “died and then recovered,” and verified the astonishing accounts of many thousands of resuscitated experiencers who report being “separated” from their lifeless bodies, observing the mourners around the corpse, a transition into an indescribably beautiful realm, encountering those previously deceased and a “being of light,” and other supernal incidents, before returning to awaken their empty bodies—and, above all, sensing a transformation resulting from their incredible adventure. It would be difficult to argue that these were not religious experiences. Then why the controversy?

At the risk of oversimplifying, the disagreement pits Kenneth Ring's concept of resuscitated experiencers asserting that they found themselves on “the road to Omega” against Michael Sabom's questioning whether this constitutes a glimpse into Heaven without meeting the qualifications set forth in his creed. Each wrote and published his interpretation, based on thoughtful research, but citing opinions subject to personal interpretation. Both adversaries have influenced those active in the field of exploring the higher level of consciousness.

The Swedenborgian view is unique in several aspects, and I would advance the teachings I accept as an inspired revelation simply because both Ring and Sabom are correct. I will confine my remarks to just five of the reasons why the interpretation of the NDE is open to personal points of view. Parenthetically, we should remember that, for the most part, although experiences have been recounted by those who have “been there,” all of those narrators had turned back at the “barrier” they encountered, usually for a reason important for themselves.

First, Swedenborg has assured his followers that the Lord is meticulously careful in providing “welcoming spirits” who know how to welcome a new arrival in a way that will not be disturbing or overwhelming.
These welcoming spirits often accommodate themselves to the ideas in the dying person's mind about what to expect at the time of death. Thus, some experiencers assert that they saw a "being of light" beyond description, a representation of the infinite God who might be the judge of their earthly behavior. Others say that they clearly saw "Jesus Christ," based on artistic depictions or their own imaginations. Others say that they encountered "Mary," whose special role made her primary in their worship; while still others declare only that it was "a light, far brighter than any light on earth, but it did not hurt my eyes." This encounter, and other events, are generally harmonious with their beliefs, because only after a time of preparation will the new arrival at last be capable of grasping the realities of the spiritual world.

Second, despite heavenly scenery and beauty, or even the horrors of frightening NDEs, the near-death experiencer has not yet entered either Heaven or Hell. Swedenborgian teachings make clear that we humans are not yet capable of the adjustment to the final realms for which we were born. We will progress first through a series of preparatory steps accommodating us to a world without time or space, in which we are unable to lie or dissemble, where our inner natures can be brought out. There, if we are good folk, we can reject our false ideas and secret sins; or if we really prefer evil and perversion, we will freely choose a "downward path." After preparation, we will gravitate to that place in the afterlife in which we finally feel "at home."

Third, experiencers admit that they cannot accurately describe the spiritual world, any more than we can really tell someone about our dreams. The higher realm is not easily described, and often experiencers admit that, although their experience was valid, "not a dream but real," it is elusive when they try to write about it.

Fourth, all of our human languages are imperfect. Even our daily experiences are sometimes ineffable, and it is not easy for experiencers to explain to others how it was that they could fly, that things appeared or disappeared, and that they encountered other "beings," including long-deceased relatives.

And fifth, it is surprising to observe that after hearing literally hundreds of NDEs, that experience can be said to be "nondenominational" in that it just does not bear out our religious teachings. We cannot differentiate between the experiences of an atheist who died in an automobile accident and a devout Methodist undergoing a particularly risky abdominal operation. The experiences do not conform to preconceived notions about Heaven or Hell; the angelic beings we encounter have no halos, wings, or harps, just as the tormenting spirits have no
horns or pitchforks. We will join a wonderful “heavenly choir” only if on earth our special delight was rehearsing and performing marvelous ecclesiastical music. Do not expect ghostly or nebulous visions of other-worldly inhabitants. But most importantly, Swedenborg emphatically and repeatedly declared that the Lord does not throw anyone into Hell, baptized or not; for the truth is that He loves all His creatures, and only allows those to choose the alternative place who will be happier there than they could ever be in His true kingdom.

There is a great deal more that could be said, some of which I have written about previously (Rhodes, 1982, 1997) and lectured about, but I advance these ideas simply because I feel very strongly that misconceptions can profoundly becloud the controversy derived from the fine articles in the Journal. Yes, we will have differences of opinion and unalike interpretations. But be patient; we will all find out in due time. These observations are clearly not in agreement with what most churches teach about the life after death, which is why many experiencers say that they become more religious yet stop going to church, because conventional ideas about resurrection “just don’t make sense.”

References


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