

### **Are OBEs Evidence For Survival?**

To the Editor:

Amid the burgeoning "evidence" of consciousness above or beyond the physical body explored in this journal and countless other publications, Susan Blackmore's article, "Are Out-of-Body Experiences Evidence For Survival?", is notable as a well-written and thorough presentation of the evidence that seems to dismiss much of this fascinating subject (Blackmore, 1983).

Distilled, Blackmore said that out-of-body experiences (OBEs) and near-death experiences (NDEs) are unproven, because it cannot be demonstrated that anything leaves the body during such experiences; she added legitimate questions about some reported experiences that could not be factually verified. The real question is: is Blackmore's article evidence that there is no survival? The human mind has the inborn capability of approaching such questions, but in a rather different way than the scientific method.

Rather than attempt to discredit Blackmore's argument, let me start by agreeing with her methodical insistence that conclusive evidence has not yet been shown. I can imagine a fairly simple example that would be very close to "hard evidence." Imagine an accident in which two or more people are injured to the point of near-death, and then both recover in different hospitals, and both report NDEs in which they journeyed through the tunnel and viewed the beautiful light together, commenting to each other or sharing some incident they independently describe.

But rather than seeking some incontrovertible experience that could abolish Blackmore's arguments, we can constructively analyze what is involved in the OBE and NDE in such a way that her reasoning will no longer hinder our appreciation of these truly remarkable incidents in human consciousness.

Evidence is what we think it to be. We cannot depend on our physical senses, and throughout most of human history we had no dependable measuring devices to prove all sorts of things. First of all, we are satisfied that we live in a world that is solid, walking upon solid earth, sitting on sturdy chairs in durable structures. Yet most people today accept that our senses deceive us, that these physical surroundings are incredibly lacking in substance. Each atom is enormously empty, thrashing around at a tremendous rate, in spite of the appearance that the ground below us is firm. Likewise, our senses do not tell us that we are on a rotating globe whirling around its orbit in a vast galaxy that is hurtling toward some remote destiny beyond our comprehension; but we accept that as true.

We accept that our five familiar senses tell us only a tiny fraction of what constitutes our existence. Our eyes and brain pick up only a narrow portion of the electromagnetic spectrum. We cannot hear the cries of the bat as it maneuvers in darkness; our senses of touch, taste, and smell are not difficult to deceive. True, we have devices that expand our senses into the infrared, ultraviolet, and ultrasonic, as well as microscopes, telescopes, radar, time-lapse photography, etc. These, if we wish to say so, provide evidence that can then be transmitted over great distance by invisible, unsmelt, unheard, and unfelt electromagnetic waves.

We might do well, then, to ask whether in seeking evidence we must not first admit that our consciousness or experience is simply not designed to provide such proof. On far more levels than the singular, "I think, therefore I am," we may assert that what we experience, is.

At a certain point we must begin to reckon with the sort of evidence that is being sought. Blackmore's article includes the rather astonishing statement that "if nothing leaves the body in an OBE, then there is nothing to survive, and the OBE cannot be cited as evidence for survival" (p. 142). That is like the assertion, "if I can't poke my finger through this stone, it must be solid."

But that is not intended as sufficient response to Blackmore's contentions. Various aspects of the subject deserve serious consideration, most notably, what is meant by the "thing" part of "nothing." Must it be visible or have weight? She refers to this "thing" no less than a half dozen times in the article, so it is a legitimate question; and a similar question could be raised about magnetism, gravity, x-rays, etc. These sorts of "things" are not easily measured by our thinking process any more than is that most exalted of all "things," life itself. Does life leave the body at the time of death? It certainly gives that impression. And

this is important because Blackmore's argument is that if something does not leave the body, the OBE offers no evidence of human survival.

Before getting into more serious analysis, it seems allowable to ask whether the "thing" that Blackmore could not imagine leaving would be visible. There have been numerous references to some "thing" described as a silver strand, like a supernatural extension cord connecting a power source to an airborne vehicle. Does it have weight or temperature? Is it a conductor or an insulator? A host of imponderables arise even before we contemplate the astral body itself.

The astral body concept has been given much attention over the ages, and it is a semantic question when this "thing" is also called a soul. Rather than seeking an observable or measurable "thing" that is *in* a human body during life, *out* of the same body when death occurs, and on occasion travelling *in and out* to bring about an OBE or NDE, should we not look for other forms of evidence?

It is legitimate to note that many modern concepts are based on tenuous evidence. The DNA helix became a useful model without being seen or weighed. The mystifying tracks in atomic cloud chambers are cited as evidence of numerous subatomic properties of matter and energy. The evidence of modern medicine includes symptoms of pain, dizziness, weakness, and nausea, "things" (which, incidentally, come and go in the body) that are more related to consciousness than to physical anatomy.

But evidence takes other forms, too. Perhaps the most impressive evidence of the validity of the NDE is not only its repeatability, in that millions of people of all sorts have strikingly similar NDEs, but that the variety of experiences is so harmonious. Nearly everyone dreams, yet how many people have the same dreams? That simple fact speaks against a broad range of "hallucination" and "imagination" arguments. Thoughtful people, too, would consider it evidence that, unlike dreams, these experiences produce observable changes in the experiencers' lives. Often these experiences are vividly remembered over periods of many years; yet few of us could remember a dream from last month.

But the evidence goes far beyond that. There is much that is evidential in the vast treasure of ancient tombs, monuments, and temples. From a practical, economic, or physical point of view, it is hard to imagine why ancient people would labor with incomprehensible zeal to construct enormous and magnificent pyramids, ziggurats, and tombs unless they had reason to believe in something beyond physical death. To them, at least, there was certainly evidence.

Less impressive physically, there is astonishing evidence, too, in the

surviving stories and legends and beliefs, spoken or written, that proclaim through the ages that there was some sort of evidence that this enormous expenditure of energy was for a purpose. A thoughtful reading of the thanatological literature and of the Bible reveals that visions of a being of light, and a life beyond that of the physical body, are not phenomena that emerged in our lifetime.

If anything, we can say that people tended to keep quiet and not acknowledge their experiences until the surge of evidence that they were not going out of their minds. We can assert, then, that there is an abundance of evidence that people have OBEs and NDEs; but Blackmore's contention remains that this does not prove survival. She is absolutely correct, but is it for the reasons that she thinks? The lack of evidence, I contend, is for another reason.

As a Swedenborgian, my own special interest in the NDE is not only my acceptance of it as a glimpse into life after death, but also my firm conviction that there is a purpose, an order and reason why such experiences do occur (Rhodes, 1982). Personal religious beliefs do not lend themselves really to brief explanations, but let me simply assert that Our Heavenly Father, the Creator and Ruler of the Universe, is running the show far more than we can comprehend. Such things as NDEs are not aberrations, accidents, or meaningless events. Swedenborgians believe that God is meticulously guiding each of us toward a blessed destiny ("heaven") except to the extent that we choose to reject that guidance. The OBE, then, is one of the countless ways in which our God infuses into our minds ideas that can further our development into full human beings.

In other words, experiences enable us to learn something that will contribute to our eternal welfare. I believe that the large number of OBEs of great variety are telling us something, and we should be paying attention. Just about all of our experiences are provided in order that we can get a message, and thereby direct our courses and conduct our lives.

Next, and most importantly, Swedenborgians teach that our God is so concerned with our spiritual freedom that He will not permit anything that will compel us to believe. We cannot be compelled to love what is good and true, to love whatever God we believe in. We are human, and in the image and likeness of God, because of this God-given freedom. Careful thinking then leads us to the essential point that God will not compel us to believe in a life after death. He may hope that we will, and He may give us abundant evidence that there is a purpose to creation, but He simply will not compel our belief.

Ponder this a moment, and it will be fairly obvious that an all-wise God will arrange things so that we remain free to doubt, free to reject the evidence. No matter how vivid and emotionally convincing an NDE, we will remain free to dismiss it as some sort of hallucination. It follows, then, that it is a quality in ourselves that, no matter what the experience, will make it possible for us to reject the sights and emotions and derive no harm or benefit from even such a traumatic moment as dying. Or, we can cherish this new memory and let it play a part in our lives.

It is difficult to avoid the clear and simple implications in Luke 16:31, "And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."

### References

- Blackmore, S. (1983). Are out-of-body experiences evidence for survival? *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 3, 137-155.
- Rhodes, L. S. (1982). The NDE enlarged by Swedenborg's vision. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 2, 15-35.

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