

### Nancy Evans Bush Replies

To the Editor:

I thank Leigh Henderson for bringing to our attention this interesting case of childhood near-drowning.

Although this account includes the recollection of scenes from the boy's earlier childhood, it remains atypical of the childhood NDEs gathered so far. In addition to the 18 cases presented in the *Anabiosis* article (Bush, 1983) and Melvin Morse's (1983) first published case, 3 instances of childhood NDEs have more recently been described in detail by Glen Gabbard and Stuart Twemlow (1984). All have lacked anything resembling a life review. Morse's ongoing study, not yet published, has produced 9 additional instances of classic NDEs in children, with none of them reporting such a recollection (Morse, personal communication, 1985).

This absence of life reviews in 31 cases is not conclusive evidence that such a review cannot occur in a childhood NDE, but simply suggests that its incidence in adult experiences may be significantly

higher than in children.

The Gallup Poll cited by Henderson dealt exclusively with adults, as did Kenneth Ring's data, which provided the comparative percentages for my *Anabiosis* article. The apparent rarity of life reviews among children may well be a developmental issue; if so, the relative maturity of the boy in this case (12 years) might have influenced his having experienced a review of incidents from his life. The possibility of there being a developmental component to the experience has, in fact, been an unexpected and intriguing aspect of this early study.

Another issue is whether the account given here is of a near-death *experience* or a near-death *event*. The description is clearly one of a close call with drowning. However, the marked absence of all characteristic NDE elements except the life review—itsself, as noted, apparently atypical in childhood NDEs—and the strongly cognitive tone of the account suggest that this may be the compelling remembrance of a nearly fatal event rather than memory of an NDE of the sort described by Raymond Moody (1975), Ring (1980), and Michael Sabom (1982).

People who come close to death may be profoundly marked by the experience, often recalling vivid life reviews and other phenomena as described by Albert Heim (Noyes and Kletti, 1972), Russell Noyes and Roy Kletti (1978), and others. The event may produce life-changing results. It is nevertheless important to recognize that the near-death *experience* is *defined* by elements not present here. Of these elements, perhaps the most essential are the sense of ineffability or other-dimensionality and the powerful affect (either positive or negative) arising from within the experience itself rather than from the individual's response to being near death.

If one uses Ring's list of NDE characteristics as the basis for a quick differential diagnosis, so to speak, with the other childhood accounts and the one here, the distinction is very clear. (A list of those characteristic elements appears on p. 189 of my 1983 *Anabiosis* article.) Henderson's case contains the time distortion, speeded-up thought process, and revival of memories frequently found in cases of life-threatening danger; however, of characteristic NDE elements the only one mentioned here is that reported by none of the other children. This account appears to be a classic description of a near-death event rather than an NDE. While irrelevant to the subjective significance of the experience in an individual life, this distinction seems important for researchers in the early stages of establishing the data base.

In regard to Henderson's interpretation that a decision to return to life "constitutes (a) sense of being judged," that is questionable.

Etymologically, "judgment" and "decision", while closely related, are not synonymous. Judgment denotes authoritative opinion, evaluation, and interpretation; decision denotes a determination or conclusion. Connotatively, especially in death-related situations, judgment carries the historical Judeo-Christian sense of divine evaluation of one's ultimate merit—of the goodness or badness of one's life and behavior.

Ring's use of the term is clearly related to this sense of the quality of the life and self, made by the experiencer rather than by an external power. "If a judgment was passed," he noted (1980, p. 196), "it was one *they* (the experiencers) made *of themselves*" (emphasis in the original). This sense of evaluation, of assessment, was distinguished by Ring from the "decisional crisis," the determination of whether or not to return to life. Although both Moody (1975) and Ring recognized the link between the life review and sense of judgement, neither has ever equated judgment with the decision to return, either conceptually or in the temporal course of the NDE.

Henderson's letter serves to emphasize how interesting these phenomena are and how complex their interpretation can be. I certainly concur with her sense of the need for more in-depth investigation and careful analysis, for only through thorough and meticulous analysis of individual cases can we pick up those fascinating, and perhaps critically important, features overlooked in statistical analyses of larger samples of cases.

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