

BOOK REVIEW

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The Wisdom of Near-Death Experiences: How Understanding NDEs Can Help Us Live More Fully by Penny Sartori, Oxford, UK: Watkins, 2014, 256 pp., \$14.95 pb (ISBN 978-1-78028-565-8); Kindle ed. \$7.69 e-book.

As a master's level Licensed Professional Counselor Intern working on a doctoral degree in counseling at the University of North Texas, I have no background in the scholarly study of near-death experiences (NDEs). I have had some transpersonal experiences, including at least one that seems to have met criteria for a mystical experience, so I feel I can relate at some personal level to NDEs, but I have never delved into the professional literature about them. In hopes of broadening my horizons on this account, and particularly because I am beginning to counsel veterans suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder, some of whom may have had NDEs, I read and reviewed Penny Sartori's book. I have no relationship with Sartori, and this is the first of her books that I have read.

Sartori introduced her professional self and the basis for her expertise in NDEs through the Introduction to her book. She described her first encounter with a patient experiencing an NDE while she was working as a nurse in a Welsh hospital Intensive Therapy Unit (ITU) in 1995. This was a life changing experience for her leading to a career studying NDEs. She is currently considered an expert in NDEs and undertook the UK's first long-term prospective study. Author of the 2008 book *The Near-Death Experiences of Hospitalized Intensive*

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Care Patients: A Five Year Clinical Study, she lectures both nationally and internationally and currently teaches two courses at Swansea University in Wales.

In this, her most recent book, Sartori focused her writing on the implications of NDEs for both the individual and society. She accomplished this objective by sharing and analyzing various case studies, theories, and questions regarding NDEs as a whole. In my view, this book makes a significant contribution to the field of near-death studies by providing an up-to-date summary and explanation of the process, experience, variations, and effects of NDEs.

Throughout her book, Sartori interwove explanatory text with case examples both from her own research and from correspondence with NDErs who had contacted her. She began by introducing readers to NDEs and what comprises them. In Chapter 2 she described the possible aftereffects, which can be unpleasant for some people but are usually positive and can include reductions in fear of death and in materialism and increases in tolerance and compassion for other people, in appreciation of life and spiritual values, in sense of purpose in life, and in concern for the environment. In Chapter 3 Sartori discussed childhood NDEs and possible aftereffects. Much like with adults' experiences, these aftereffects can be distressing in some instances but are usually beneficial experiences depending on the child's ability to integrate the experience into their lives.

In Chapter 4 Sartori discussed the cultural variations of NDEs including historical information from numerous non-Western cultures: Asian—from India, Thailand, Tibet, Japan, China, the Philippines, Guam, Melanesia/Western New Britain; Africa; native—Hawaiian, as well as African aboriginal, Maori, Native American, and Chilean Mapuche; and Muslim. Although symbolism and individual accounts varied from culture to culture, many NDErs reported universally consistent elements, which led Sartori to suggest the possibility of a collective unconscious as proposed by Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung. In Chapter 5 she focused on the phenomena of end-of-life experiences and after-death communication, which can include symbolic journeys or visitation with dead relatives, continuing to include numerous case studies and accounts of multiple surprising occurrences. In Chapter 6 she listed and discussed various proposed physiological and psychological explanations of NDEs, finding these explanations generally lacking the ability to provide a satisfactory explanation that accounted for all aspects of NDEs. Such proposed explanations included but were not limited to anoxia and hypoxia, hypercarbia, drugs, au-

toscopy and heautoscopy, neurobiological process, hallucination, and wishful thinking.

In Chapter 7 Sartori documented her five-year study researching NDEs at the ITU where she worked, and in Chapter 8 she discussed the history of the medicalization of death and how members of Western society have insulated themselves from it, transforming it into something that they find very hard to accept. Sartori began her closing in Chapter 9 by discussing “Implications for a Greater Understanding and Acknowledgement of NDEs” (p. 149), proposing therapeutic benefits for NDErs, trauma patients, and end-of-life patients’ families if healthcare workers were to better understand NDEs. She concluded her book by discussing how a change in society’s view of NDEs can further benefit humanity as a whole and by briefly revisiting some of her previously mentioned points.

I found Sartori to address NDEs in a comprehensive manner, explaining not only the experiences and aftereffects but also the implications they carry for both individuals and society as a whole. I believe she did a great job of helping the reader understand what NDEs can be like for individuals and their loved ones. Sartori explained NDEs as a powerful force capable of changing someone’s life, providing readers an opportunity to understand what possibly to expect when encountering someone who has had such an experience. I viewed her presentation in an inspiring light, especially in focusing on how NDEs change so many individuals’ lives for the better.

I found Sartori’s chapter on physiological and psychological explanations to be very helpful in understanding how difficult it is to attribute NDEs to such causes. I believe these processes were explained fairly clearly, though I would have found more information on the subject of neurobiological implications to have been helpful. The book also might have benefitted from more quantitative analysis. Although Sartori provided many case studies throughout her book, she mentioned only a small number of quantitative studies. The quantitative analyses that were included were very helpful in understanding group effects and long-term implications of NDEs. Sartori certainly encouraged further research. Despite these criticisms, I found the book to be very informative, interesting, and worthwhile. Sartori’s language and writing style made for an approachable read that was inspirational and positive. Her blend of personal experience, research, case studies, and explanations provided a rich experience that I found to be not only educational but also inspiring and motivating as the book left me feeling encouraged to continue studying NDEs.

As a newcomer to the field of near-death studies, I followed my read of Sartori's book with a read of two other NDE overview books—*Lessons from the Light* (Ring & Valarino, 2006) and *The Handbook of Near-Death Experiences: Thirty Years of Investigation* (Holden, Greyson, & James, 2009)—and watched the hour-long BBC documentary *The Day I Died* (Broome, 2002). My recommendation to other “newbies” to the field is to read/view all of these materials, as they all provide valuable information, accounts, and perspectives on NDEs. If one were to have limited time, I would recommend the materials in the following order: (1) *The Wisdom of Near-Death Experiences* for Sartori's readability and pace in introducing the reader to NDEs; (2) *The Handbook of Near-Death Experiences: Thirty Years of Investigation* for its collection of topic-focused writings, rich perspectives, and case studies; (3) *Lessons from the Light* to further establish a comprehensive understanding of NDEs; and (4) *The Day I Died* to witness further individual accounts of NDEs in a brief amount of time.

In summary, Sartori has written a book that I found informative and inspiring as a counselor interested in learning more about the phenomenon and meaning of NDEs. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in learning more about the subject, especially professionals in areas of health and wellness. Sartori emphasized the importance of medical healthcare professionals understanding NDEs in order to better serve patients, and I believe that the same is true for individuals in the mental health field including counselors, social workers, and psychologists. It could also be helpful for those who have experienced an NDE themselves in order to normalize the experience or those with a loved one who has had such an experience to help both the NDEr and oneself cope with the NDEr's transformation.

References

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