

## What Happens When We Die? Part One: Learning from Near-Death Experience

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*A man is dying . . . he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He . . . feels himself moving very rapidly through a long dark tunnel. After this, he suddenly finds himself outside of his own physical body . . . and he sees his . . . body from a distance, as though he is a spectator. He watches the resuscitation attempt from his unusual vantage point . . . in a state of emotional upheaval.*

*. . . Others come to meet and to help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving, warm spirit of a kind he has never encountered before—a being of light—appears before him. . . .*

*The love and warmth which emanate from this being to the dying person are utterly beyond words, and he feels completely surrounded by it and taken up in it, completely at ease and accepted in the presence of this being. . . .*

*This being asks him a question, non-verbally, to make him evaluate his life and helps him along by showing him a panoramic, instantaneous playback of the major events of his life. . . . [T]his question . . . is not at all asked in condemnation . . . [The man] still feel[s] the total love and acceptance coming from the light, no matter what [his] answer may be. . . .*

*At some point he finds himself approaching some sort of barrier or border, apparently representing the limit between earthly life and the next life. Yet, he finds that he must go back to the earth, that the time for his death has not yet come. At this point he resists, for by now he is taken up with his experiences in the afterlife and does not want to return. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love and peace. . . . [H]e somehow reunites with his physical body and lives.*

Whether or not you've ever read *Life After Life*, Dr. Raymond Moody's 1975 bestseller, his description of near-death experience, or NDE, is likely familiar to you. Based on in-depth interviews with 50 NDE survivors, *Life after Life* became an international sensation, selling more than 13 million copies and translated into a dozen languages. The dark tunnel, the out-of-body experience, the beckoning light—all entered the zeitgeist, dramatized in movies and on TV. A 1991 Gallup poll estimated that 13 million Americans—five percent of the population—have had an NDE.

I read *Life after Life* over three decades ago. Although I found Moody's accounts of NDEs intriguing, even inspiring, I wasn't sure what to do with them. If I accepted them, it seemed to me I had to accept not only the existence of a soul that survives death, but also the benevolent intervention of spirit beings who know every detail of our lives—who, if they are not themselves God, then are very likely to have God on speed-dial.

I wasn't ready to go there. So I filed near-death experience away under "Interesting: Can't Deal."

Something that stuck with me was Moody's assertion that things people perceived while out of body, things their eyes could not have seen nor their ears heard even had they been conscious, had been independently verified. If true, this corroboration would refute the claim that NDEs are mere hallucinations of a dying or desperate brain.

But is Moody himself trustworthy? *Life after Life* is a collection of unfootnoted anecdotes. What if Moody is just another charlatan trying to sell books?

Fortunately, we need no longer rely on Moody. Since he opened the door, numerous researchers have studied the NDE phenomenon—with results that give credence to Moody's findings.

When a friend gave Dr. Michael Sabom a copy of *Life after Life*, he dismissed it as “hogwash.” But when he asked his own patients if they'd ever experienced anything like what Moody described, stories poured forth. As a hospital cardiologist, he had access to the medical records of hundreds of heart attack survivors. Of 116 patients who reported NDEs, 32 recalled specific details of their resuscitation while they were unconscious. When Sabom cross-checked their medical records, he found the patients' descriptions matched up exactly.

Dutch cardiologist Pim van Lommel reports a case in which a nurse removed the dentures from a heart-attack victim and placed them in a drawer in the crash cart. When she saw the patient again a week later, he exclaimed, “Oh, that nurse knows where my dentures are. . . . You were there when I was brought into hospital and you took my dentures out of my mouth and put them onto that cart . . . there was this sliding drawer underneath and there you put my teeth.” The nurse was astounded, because when she'd done that, the patient was in a deep coma and in the process of CPR.

Now consider the case of Pam Reynolds. In 1991, when she was 35, Reynolds was diagnosed with a basil artery aneurism, a swollen blood vessel in her brain. If it burst, it would kill her. To save her life, doctors induced hypothermic cardiac arrest in a procedure nicknamed “standstill.” While instruments meticulously monitored every vital sign, Reynolds' body temperature was lowered to 60 degrees, her heartbeat and breathing stopped, her brain waves flattened, and the blood drained from her brain. She was in the deepest of comas, physically incapable of either perception or thought.

Afterwards, she reported hovering above the surgical team as they worked, then being pulled toward a brilliant light. She heard the voices of her grandmother and her favorite uncle, both long dead. “Is God the light?” she asked them.

No, they answered. “The light is what happens when God breathes.”

After she returned to her body and to life, Reynolds was able to describe the exact position of each doctor and nurse around the operating table. She described in precise detail the Midas Rex bone saw the surgeon used, which she had never seen before. She described how they'd restarted her heart with a defibrillator. She recognized the voice of a cardiac surgeon and quoted back to the surgeon something she'd said.

By all medical indicia, Reynolds was brain dead: her EEG was flat, her brain stem did not respond to audial stimulation, and there was no blood flow to her brain. But consciousness remained, unconfined by her body.

In 1972, a singer and pianist named Vicky Bright, after finishing her gig at a Seattle restaurant, accepted a ride home from a young couple who turned out to be very drunk. When their van crashed into a wall, Vicky floated upward, looking down at her own mangled body on the pavement. Later, from the ceiling of the operating room, she again observed her body, which she recognized by her wedding ring. When she couldn't get the doctors' attention, she rose through the ceiling and above the building. She could see the street, buildings, and cars below.

Which was both exhilarating and terrifying to her, because she had never seen before. Vicky Bright had been blind from birth..

Even Raymond Moody doesn't consider the evidence for NDEs scientifically conclusive, although he is personally convinced. When I consider the alternative explanations offered by skeptics, from memory of the birth canal to carbon dioxide overload to temporal lobe epilepsy, none accounts satisfactorily for the near-death experience.

If near-death experience is real, what does it mean for us the living?

It means that death is nothing to fear—not for us and not for those we love.

It means that God really is love, unconditional and all-embracing.

It means that God looks upon us with tender compassion rather than harsh judgment.

It means that the purpose of life is to learn life's lessons, which may be found in both triumph and failure, courage and cowardice, rectitude and error.

It means that all God asks of us is to live with love—not to subscribe to a particular belief system.

Sounds a lot like Unitarian Universalism to me!

“What if you slept?” asked the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. “And what if, in your sleep, you went to heaven and there plucked a strange and beautiful flower? And what if, when you awoke, you had the flower in your hand? Ah, what then?”

Ah, what then?

Last month, as Steve Jobs lay dying, his family gathered around him. “His breath indicated an arduous journey,” his sister Mona Simpson observed, “some steep path, altitude. He seemed to be climbing. . . .

[He] looked at his sister Patty, then for a long time at his children, then at his life's partner, Laurene, and then over their shoulders past them.

Steve's final words were: ‘OH WOW. OH WOW. OH WOW.’”

Amen and Blessed Be.