

BOOK REVIEW

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The Light Beyond, By Raymond A. Moody, Jr. with Paul Perry.
New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1988, 161 pp., \$18.95

In his foreword to this book, Andrew Greeley, a prominent priest and sociologist, introduces his comments with the following statement: "Raymond Moody has achieved a rare feat in the quest for human knowledge; he has created a paradigm." He then refers to Thomas Kuhn, who pointed out in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that scientific revolutions occur when someone creates a new perspective, a new model, a new approach to reality. Although Greeley acknowledges that Moody did not discover the near-death experience (NDE), he contends that because Moody put a name to it in his previous bestseller *Life After Life* (1975), he therefore deserves credit for the new paradigm that has evolved. Greeley then refers to *The Light Beyond* as characterized by Moody's "openness, sensitivity and modesty." This he attributes to Moody's acknowledgement that the NDE does not represent proof of life after death; rather, it indicates only the existence and widespread prevalence of the NDE.

I must question why Greeley does not comment more on the content of the book, and why Moody felt it was appropriate to be credited with creating a new paradigm. During the last fourteen years since *Life After Life* was published, increasing amounts of research and study related to the NDE, as well as numerous other mystical, paranormal, and metaphysical phenomena must all be incorporated into what we can identify as the slowly evolving paradigm shift. To give sole credit

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for initiating a new scientific revolution to one man who named the NDE is to negate the direct experiences of thousands of experiencers, academicians, and practitioners who are taking professional and personal risks every day in their attempt to be part of an evolutionary movement that is slowly changing the consciousness of our planet.

Ironically, one such person who deserves to be acknowledged as a facilitator of this paradigm shift is Greeley himself. In 1975, he published a study out of the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, entitled *The Sociology of the Paranormal: A Reconnaissance*. Using sampling techniques and statistical analyses, Greeley examined the frequency with which the general American population claims to have had three classes of experience: (1) *deja vu*, extrasensory perception, and clairvoyance; (2) communication with the dead; and (3) mystical experiences. His findings indicated that almost a fifth of the American population reported frequent paranormal and mystical experiences. Although his work was clearly not a bestseller, its importance should nonetheless be acknowledged.

The Light Beyond attempts to synthesize the state of the art of near-death research since *Life After Life* first examined NDEs in 1975. Moody accomplishes this by describing the NDE in terms of descriptors, characteristics, and aftereffects, and then shares with the reader some topical concerns, such as why the NDE intrigues us and how the NDE differs from mental illness. He concludes the book with a review of other near-death researchers and, finally, some explanations for the NDE.

Chapter 1 is a basic review of the commonly known NDE traits as described in *Life After Life*, with some additional demographics and descriptors that focus on the research of George Gallup, Jr., Ken Ring, and the Evergreen research team. The traits identified as being inherent in the NDE include a sense of being dead, peace and painlessness, the out-of-body experience, the tunnel experience, people of light, the Being of Light, the life review, rising rapidly into the heavens, reluctance to return, altered time and space, and, for some, the flashforward. The characteristics are made meaningful to the reader by anecdotal case studies used to illustrate each of the traits.

Moody also briefly refers in this first chapter to the story of George Ritchie, a psychiatrist whose NDE paved the way for Moody's research when he was a philosophy student at the University of Virginia. He also relates a synchronistic incident that occurred in 1975 on Halloween, when his children were trick-or-treating at the home of a woman who, during her NDE in 1971, had been told to look up a man by the name of Raymond Moody.

For those readers familiar with the NDE, this chapter is probably redundant, but for those who are not, it most certainly will hold their interest. And certainly the first sentence of the first page will motivate the uninitiated to read further:

What happens when people die? . . . There are many ordinary people who have been to the brink of death and reported miraculous glimpses of a world beyond, a world that glows with love and understanding that can be reached only by an exciting trip through a tunnel or passageway.

Chapter 2 is a discussion of the transformative powers of the NDE. As in *Life After Life*, Moody reviews the characteristics of these changed lives. He identifies these changes as an elimination of the fear of dying, an awareness of the importance of love, a sense of connection with all things, an appreciation of learning, a new feeling of control, a sense of urgency, and a better developed spiritual side. This review is followed by a short discussion of the difficulty people who go through NDEs have "reentering the real world." He then briefly talks about his spiritual psychiatric practice in which he works with people to help them integrate these experiences into their lives.

A sense of disappointment in this book became apparent to me in this chapter for several reasons. First, in identifying these characteristics, Moody said little more than he had fourteen years ago in *Life After Life*. Why are we not made privy to some of the more complex cases that he has seen in his psychiatric practice that specializes in these cases? As a practicing psychologist, I also see persons in spiritual crisis and I am aware of the deep life-shattering changes that more often than not take place, and, at least from my perspective, can be much more complex than what we read here.

In Chapter 3, we read about children and NDEs. Moody suggests that because young children who have NDEs have no cultural preconceptions regarding them, these episodes validate the core NDE. He also writes that when individuals have an NDE at a very early age, it seems to get incorporated into their personalities so that they are not afraid of death anymore, and thus they are happier and more hopeful than those around them. Another interesting perspective relates to those researchers who have concluded that NDEs are the mind's defense mechanism against the fear of dying; Moody believes that childhood NDEs refute that theory because children have very different perceptions of dying than do adults. Under age 7, death is perceived as a temporary state from which we return, while during ages 7-10, death

is seen as magical and is personified. This chapter concludes with case studies and identifies David Herzog and Melvin Morse as researchers studying children's NDEs. The anecdotal material is interesting and Moody's discussion of the particular ways in which children's NDEs further validate the experience adds some new and interesting perspectives that were not referred to in his previous book.

At the outset of Chapter 4, Moody addresses why people are intrigued by the NDE. One of Moody's strengths is that incorporated within his straightforward writing style are many profound truths. An example of this is found in the statement: "We human beings have spent our lives laying down boundaries. . . . We learn that death is something to be avoided. . . . We try to keep thoughts of death out of our consciousness and usually learn gradually the meaning of death. It is this dividing line between life and death that is challenged by the NDE." I believe that through this interpretation we can better understand both the etiology of our death-denying society and the intense reactions, both positive and negative, toward the NDE. Moody further identifies in this chapter the commonly asked questions surrounding the NDE, and in so doing provides an arena in which he can elaborate significant thoughts on the following questions and topics:

Are NDErs really dead? This question leads the way to a rather basic discussion on the philosophy of dying that touches briefly on the questions and ethics of modern resuscitation techniques. Moody concludes that, technically speaking, NDErs are never really dead, but that they are much closer than most of us have ever been.

How do NDErs regard their bodies? Moody makes several important points that reinforce what he has already told us earlier in this book about the transformative changes that follow NDEs. He notes that most NDErs regard the body as a house for the spirit. As a result they become less frightened of the world around them and of outside opinions about their appearance. Moody quotes a psychiatrist who had an NDE as saying: "In life you may think you know what you look like. But when you get out of your body and see your own physical body, it's very difficult to see which one of all the bodies in the world is yours." Also, many handicapped people who have NDEs find that their handicaps are gone in the spiritual realm, where they are whole beings. And finally, NDErs do not become risktakers; rather they become more careful of their bodies.

The NDE as religious confirmation. Moody's basic idea here is that NDEs are experienced by nonbelievers just as frequently as by be-

lievers. Both groups emerge with an appreciation of religion that concerns being able to love, not adhering to doctrine and dogma. As additional material, the reader is familiarized with descriptions of NDE-like phenomena both in the *Journal of Discourse of the Mormon Church* and in *I Corinthians* 15:35–52.

The NDE in literature. NDEs are described in such works as Charles Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*, Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, and Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider."

Explaining combat NDEs. Moody differentiates the combat NDE from the regular NDE in several ways. When soldiers find themselves in intensely dangerous situations, they often find their perceptions extremely altered. While they don't experience the ecstatic state of the NDE, the light, and the tunnel, they instead may experience brief flashbacks of their lives, or suddenly everything may appear to slow down. Some of these experiences also involve an individual going somewhere else to avoid the unpleasant situation he or she may be in. While these experiences cannot technically be described as complete NDEs, certainly they contain aspects of such experiences and should be considered on a continuum with them.

Hope for the grief-stricken. Hearing about NDEs can help people reconcile themselves to the death of loved ones. Although the events leading up to death can be agonizing, according to NDErs, once a person gets out of the body, there is no pain, and there will be a reunion with loved ones in the spiritual realm.

The effects of NDEs on the suicidal. Moody refers to Bruce Greyson's research that has shown that both the experience of an NDE and the knowledge of one helps to resolve suicidal inclinations. He believes that the hope of life after life makes people more willing to accept the "here and now."

Would science be altered by proving NDEs? The problem Moody sees with NDEs is that they are just anecdotal evidence. He states that "although these anecdotes have been extremely convincing to me and a host of other physicians, until they can be successfully replicated, NDEs can always be called into question." It is disappointing that Moody, who has been identified in the foreword of this book as starting a new paradigm, won't speak out more strongly against those scientists operating under the old paradigm, who won't acknowledge an experience that doesn't fit into the current paradigm of what consti-

tutes reality. I was hoping that Moody, as a leader on the cutting edge of this field, would have used this opportunity to challenge those who insist on structured replication to validate an experience.

Chapter 5 differentiates between the NDE and mental illness. Moody states that schizophrenia and some organic brain problems are the types of mental disorder most often falsely linked to NDEs. The major difference between schizophrenia and the NDE is that the schizophrenic becomes tormented, goes downhill, and becomes isolated and unable to relate to anyone else in a meaningful way. Clearly, this contrasts to the generally uplifting NDE, after which experiencers are likely to function better in the world around them.

Moody also addresses the suggestion that NDEs are nothing more than a reaction of the brain under duress, or in a state commonly known as delirium. The difference between persons suffering from organic mental disorders and NDErs is that delirious individuals seem to be watching their hallucinations impersonally and more often than not retain only vague memories of them, while NDErs, on the other hand, remember the details decades later and perceive the experience as a spiritual turning point that has brought immense meaning into their lives.

Chapter 6 is a review of interviews that Moody had with a number of prominent near-death researchers. I found this chapter to be the most meaningful, both because the written language was of a higher level than that found in the rest of the book, and also because the information shared by these individuals proved to be pertinent and interesting.

First, Melvin Morse discusses his research carried out over three years on hundreds of cases of children who survived cardiac arrest. His conclusions indicate that every child who had cardiac resuscitation had some kind of NDE, "be it out-of-body or going all the way to the being of light." He states further that he believes the only reason that all people on the brink of death don't remember an NDE is because the drugs they are given cause amnesia. He concludes this because the patients in his study who had fewer drugs had the most powerful experiences.

Michael Sabom, a major contributor to the field, examined the NDEs of 116 people, dividing their experiences into three types: autoscopic, or leaving the body; transcendental, or entering a spiritual realm; and mixed experiences, with both autoscopic and transcendental traits. He found that 23 of 25 "medically smart" resuscitated patients made major mistakes in describing what went on during their resuscitations. On the other hand, none of the NDErs made mistakes in describing what occurred during their resuscitations—strong evidence that these

people were actually outside their bodies looking down. In this section of the book, Sabom reviews briefly his own initial skepticism, his training, his current Christian belief in the afterlife, and his resistance to the NDE being sensationalized. In addition, he cites a number of case studies while at the same time sharing with the reader his personal feelings and reactions to these situations.

After reading the interview with Michael Grosso, I felt excitement and enthusiasm. Grosso, a philosopher, not only is open enough to discuss his own personal paranormal experiences and their effect on him, but also relates the NDE to numerous other paranormal states, such as UFO sightings, channeling, religion, and out-of-body experiences, and discusses the possible meaning of a divine dimension of human consciousness. He incorporates the NDE as an aspect of the spiritual evolution that this planet is currently undergoing, and looks at the implications for society, world survival, and global consciousness. Grosso's honesty and insights regarding his own experiences and ideas, coupled with the depth of his intellectual awareness, are a very positive diversion.

Kenneth Ring, introduced by Moody as the first person to look at the NDE as a scientist, shared his story with a similar excitement and level of personal disclosure as does Grosso. His two books, *Life at Death* (1980) and *Heading Toward Omega* (1984), have provided us in the last ten years with much of the relevant information that we know about the NDE and its implications. Additionally, as most readers of this journal know, Ring was a founder of IANDS and its first president, a fact that surprisingly is not mentioned in this book. Clearly, Ring is a major figure in the field of near-death studies, and his enthusiasm for the subject is still very apparent in this interview.

Finally, Robert Sullivan discusses the research he did with almost 40 combat veterans. In addition to reviewing a few case studies of combat NDEs, he shares his thoughts, feelings, and personal reactions to the NDE. His openness and the excitement that he conveys enrich his research while providing useful information and insights.

Chapter 7 reviews a number of arguments that scientists have made identifying the NDE as a dysfunction of the brain rather than a spiritual phenomenon. First, Moody writes of Carl Sagan, who in his book *Broca's Brain* (1979) attributes the NDE to memories of the birth experience. Moody counters this argument by citing Carl Becker's work, originally presented in this journal, concluding that newborn babies do not have the facilities to retain the experience in the brain. Moody further negates Sagan's view by questioning how the traumatic birth experience can turn out to be transformative for the NDEr.

While I disagree with Sagan's analogy, I also disagree with Becker's

conclusion that newborn babies can't recall the birth experience. Stanislav Grof (1985), along with an increasing number of researchers such as Karl Pribram (1976) and David Bohm (1980), has provided revolutionary alternatives to the mechanistic concept of the mind contained within the brain. As described in Grof's book *The Adventure of Self Discovery* (1988), individuals can recall and reexperience their own births through natural breathwork and altered states of consciousness that ultimately can lead to new insights and transformations.

Moody also discusses some researchers' feelings that the tunnel experience in NDEs is caused by the brain's reaction to increased levels of carbon dioxide in the blood. His questions that theory in light of Sabom's work, in which a patient's blood oxygen level at the very moment his NDE was occurring was found to be above normal. Moody concludes that this research questions the theory of carbon dioxide overload. He also refers readers a second time to Morse's research demonstrating that the NDE is something specifically connected to being on the brink of death, as opposed to just being sick.

Moody also refutes the concept of the NDE as hallucination brought on by mental disorder, stress, lack of oxygen, or drugs on the basis of research that has identified flat EEGs experienced by many NDErs. Even hallucinations, he states, are associated with EEG activity.

Moody again discusses the finding that religious commitment is not a prerequisite for having an NDE. He further raises the idea that unconscious predispositions toward religious beliefs are always present whenever a person faces death, and admits that this is a complex area. I can't help but wish that he had chosen to share some of that complexity with us.

On the topic of why all NDEs aren't the same, Moody compares Ring's research with another study conducted by Timothy Green and Penelope Friedman at California State University. He reviews the differences in percentages of people experiencing the different stages of an NDE, and then notes that no two experiences are ever the same. Finally, he acknowledges researchers' attributions of the NDE to endorphins, wish fulfillment, and the collective unconscious as theories that may have a grain of truth but can't explain factual information identified by people who have had out-of-body experiences as part of their NDEs.

In concluding, Moody questions whether NDEs can confirm that there is a life after life. In the absence of firm scientific proof, he still answers in the affirmative. As if to add credibility to this answer, he quotes Carl Jung, who summed up his positive feelings toward the question of life after life after he had experienced an NDE. Moody

deserves credit for this somewhat cautious “unscientific” disclosure. At the same time, I wonder what important new insights we might all have gained if Moody had openly shared more of his personal experiences, his intellectual insights, and his clinical perspectives. Maybe Moody will reconsider and, at some time in the future, we may really learn from this brilliant man who has so much to share.

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