

BOOK REVIEW

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Book Review: Coming Back to Life: The After-Effects of the Near-Death Experience, by P.M.H. Atwater. New York, NY: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1988. 243 pp. + ix, \$16.95 (New York, NY: Ballantine, 1989, pb)

Some years ago, those members of a Friends of IANDES support group who were not near-death experiencers (NDErs) found themselves deeply frustrated. Month after month the group had met, but although the nonexperiencers had enthusiastically discussed the NDE and its implications and meanings, the near-death experiencers themselves had said almost nothing: there was little reporting of experiences, no sharing of what they had learned—just silence.

Then one night an out-of-town NDEr came to speak. She not only described her own experience, but admitted to having some difficulties in adjustment after her medical recovery, and asked the others what life was like for them now. She might as well have opened the valves of Hoover Dam; the previously silent NDErs couldn't talk fast enough. Out it all tumbled: anger at having had the light "taken back," frustration with families and friends who did not understand, and confusion about the lives to which they had been so abruptly returned. The outpouring continued for perhaps ten minutes, until another member of the group, not herself an experiencer, cried in dismay, "But you

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shouldn't feel this way! You have been to the Light; tell us what to do!" And the experiencers were silent again.

I hope that group of experiencers and the other chapter members will read P. M. H. Atwater's *Coming Back to Life*. It is a quite extraordinary piece of work.

By now, the broad outlines of NDE after effects have become part of common lore: NDErs typically report losing their fear of death; becoming unconditionally loving, peaceful, more spiritual and less materialistic; wanting to serve others; and some researchers have included mention of paranormal events. From these reports and other writings both ancient and modern has emerged the popular tendency to glorify experiencers as persons who, having "been to the Light," are suddenly transformed, perhaps superhuman gurus who can "tell us what we are to do."

Coming Back affirms the basic research findings about after effects and goes beyond them to others previously unreported. Its greater contribution is that in this first work about and for experiencers *afterwards*—after the aftereffects—the author sets out to explore "consequences . . . what happens when known worlds collapse and belief systems collide." In the process, she provides a wealth of information about the realities encountered when ordinary people, having perceived "a perfect world and a greater reality," try to live what they have learned.

Coming Back derives from a powerful native curiosity and thirst for information, resident in a writer of unusual talents. A straightforward and deeply thoughtful layperson, Phyllis Atwater undertook the study out of her own hunger for information after having three near-death experiences in 1977. She is widely if unconventionally informed, unfailingly compassionate (except toward arrogance), and never, ever dull. Kenneth Ring assisted her in developing a systematic questionnaire for this study, and comments in his introduction that Atwater's freedom from academic constraint enables her "to probe fearlessly into controversial areas of this experience that more conventional investigators are inclined to bypass or overlook altogether." Her candor and sharp intelligence have produced an incisive analysis of the post-NDE experience remarkably free from stock assumptions or wishful thinking. Further, the book is notable for the embeddedness of the near-death experience in every line.

After the usual summary of the general NDE pattern, Atwater presents a vivid commentary on the nature of death and dying, suicide-related NDEs, and—another first, and an important one—a straightforward exploration of the usually ignored "negative" experience. With

the certainty born of personal knowledge, she then details the experiencer's too-often-grounded sense of isolation, of ostracism, of being "a family embarrassment." Especially for NDErs who still believe themselves alone in their pain, this section by itself may justify the book's purchase.

A candid report of the author's own life, near-death, and after-near-death experiences constitutes Chapter 2. Although somewhat lengthy, it provides the ground for the substantive analysis of aftereffects that follows.

In Chapter 3, "Major After-Effects," Atwater writes, "It is easy to report (positive) findings . . . for the general public is open and receptive to them. These findings seem to confirm traditional religious teachings and idealistic notions of that which constitutes 'good.' Even if scientists deem the near-death phenomenon unsettling, its purported after effects somehow make everything okay. Little else is said."

With that as preamble, she moves steadfastly toward her own truth—demonstrably shared with countless other experiencers—just as she did in the articles for the IANDS newsletter, *Vital Signs*, which formed the early basis of this material. There is nothing to equal it anywhere in the literature for sheer abundance of information, sensitivity, and readability.

Her truth includes the discovery that "coming back can be just as traumatic as going out." NDE after effects are all-pervasive, broader, and often more troubling than has previously been reported; even the most desirable can be quirkish and disorienting. Like a first labor pain, they signal not birth—yet—but the onset of lengthy and often agonizing work. Joy is there, and will be, but it is hard won.

Atwater's unflinching observations about seven common types of after effects challenge comfort on all sides. She recounts an incident in which a *Vital Signs* editor objected vehemently to her column's discussion of psychic abilities as an NDE after-effect. His objection was based largely on fear for IANDS' reputation in the academic community if the newsletter were to be associated with occultism. As then Executive Director of IANDS, I can attest that the incident did, in fact, happen as reported, and some readers who shared the editor's opinion cancelled subscriptions. Happily for reporting "the way things are" for many NDErs, journalistic freedom prevailed, and the "Coming Back" column continued its important but not-always-popular course for another three years.

Atwater's views have also stirred the ire of persons who cherish idealized views of spiritual development. Popular wisdom commonly holds unconditional love, for example, to be an unmixed blessing, one

of the goals of the ideal, enlightened life. Global development of unconditional love underlies theories of the "New Parousia," the working-out of the "hundredth monkey" concept that suggests we may have only to wait for "critical mass," for that sufficient number of individuals to have near-death or other transformative experiences, and by the power of after effects the planet will be saved.

Persons familiar with the Old Testament or the letters of Paul to 1st century "New Age" groups may reflect that even among the fervent the road to the Promised Land has not in the past proved so simple. This is Atwater's perspective, that unconditional love is paradox, a gift of "boundless, infinite, all-encompassing love" that nonetheless manifests as a bittersweet reality, an "inability to personalize emotions." Confusion is unavoidable; depression and rupture of life patterns are common; for many, the price of unconditional love is the destruction of relationships, and social and familial alienation.

The essentially paradoxical nature of spiritual discovery is a truism saturating the observations of the most deeply spiritual persons of all ages and traditions, and something which NDErs have been demonstrating all along, although this has had little press. However, pointing out what might be termed the yin with the yang of the spiritual path draws objections from those wanting simpler solutions, who would venerate unconditional love as a panacea. I recently encountered just such an impasse with a graduate-level academic advisor so entranced by idealization that she flatly refused to admit documented evidence that this type of love produces turmoil as often as bliss. Nonetheless, the experiencers quoted in this chapter provide a moving and clear-eyed depiction of both the wonder and the unsentimental realities of trying to live out the affective level of deep conversion experience.

Other after-effects that Atwater finds to constitute a pattern include: an inability to recognize boundaries or limits; a sense of timelessness; enhancement of spatial and intuitive/psychic perceptions; a shifted view of physical reality; a different sense of physical self; and difficulty with communication.

After reading the book, three NDErs have called me to endorse enthusiastically Atwater's discussion of these after effects. The discussion may tend to sound unsettling and obscure to nonexperiencers, almost like a private language—an observation made also by the startled participants in IANDS' 1984 conference on clinical practice. Nonexperiencers may be at a disadvantage simply because the inherent subjectivity of the phenomenal effects—their dependence upon an experiential base—renders them difficult for others to access lin-

guistically; ideas must be comprehended intuitively as well as logically. Persons who themselves have experienced the effects, and who therefore live from within them, tend to respond strongly and with profound identification.

However carefully presented such concepts may be—and the author achieves some considerable success—we are here confronted with the very collapse of normalcy that makes the NDE such a fascinating yet troublesome subject for the nonexperiencer (and most reporters to date fall into this category). Extraordinary sensitivity is demanded of logically-oriented persons upon reading that “what is, isn’t, and what isn’t, is. Rationale of any kind is no longer rational . . .” Also, wishful fancies and pop spirituality aside, it remains difficult for most individuals in our culture to relate at a practical level to mention of “meeting with light beings or angels” or “feeling the approach of an accident before it happens.” However, for anyone serious about understanding the experience of being an experiencer, the attempt must be made.

Certainly Atwater’s observations are congruent with the personal comments of many other NDErs. Whether they will stand up to academic research remains to be seen. The much discussed biological after effects constitute only one of the clusters amenable to quantifiable research. Whether or not one agrees that certain phenomena are possible, whether one wants them, whether they support our personal beliefs, we are called to deal with them honestly. It is high time for research in these areas, stringently designed to avoid bias in either direction.

The second half of *Coming Back* seems a bit overwhelming, rather like sharing the 12th century voyage of the fabled Madoc ap Owain Gwynedd, who launched a reed coracle from the shores of Wales and reputedly landed in the New World. Seventy pages of text is a frail vessel with which to explore the entire subject of spirituality and the nature of reality, as the author agrees; one tosses about in an immensity of subject matter. Atwater tackles everything from sacred traditions to the chromatic structure of the retina to Ruth Montgomery’s theory of “walk-ins.” While the success of the venture, like Madoc’s, may be inconclusive, one can but applaud the grit of the effort and the craft’s arrival anywhere near harbor.

In fact, Atwater’s accomplishment should not be underrated. For one thing, she neatly summarizes Richard Bucke’s classic *Cosmic Consciousness*, efficiently relating it to conversion experiences of many types. What is more, she clearly recognizes that the difference between a religious experience and a spiritual experience lies in vocabulary rather than in essence. In the face of so much contemporary glibness

that sets “spiritual” experience against “religious” as though they were phenomena of different orders and diverging directions, this is a welcome change. Although like many other writers she tends to confuse Christian with fundamentalist views, she has avoided the naivete of discounting Judeo-Christian tradition as irrelevant, and contributes a thoughtful comparison of Eastern and Western approaches to spirituality. While theologically thin—but what can one do in six pages?—this provides a perspective for readers unfamiliar with the substance of the traditions.

In her comments on psychism, reincarnation, and energy, as in the chapter on the physiology of consciousness and death, Atwater further demonstrates that her thinking is bound to no school but that of her direct study and sensibilities. Whatever the merit of these speculations—which at the very least deserve objective examination—her observations about attitudes are right on the mark. She knows the territory too well to be misled by the romanticism that would deify extraordinary experiences as ends in themselves, and declines to rhapsodize about psychic or spiritual events that bear no fruit but sensationalism. Further, she knows first hand the danger of confusing spiritual awakening with personal merit, that attitude in which the potential for wisdom collapses into ego-puffery, having mistaken higher consciousness for “my consciousness is higher than your consciousness.”

“If you can’t scrub floors with what you know,” Atwater writes, “then it isn’t worth knowing.” She is not being flippant. This is grounding, an Idahoan version of “Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water; after enlightenment, chop wood and carry water.” Throughout *Coming Back*, her goal is to help all experiencers *integrate* spiritual breakthrough into the lived human reality. Every reality, she argues, is valid; and for everyone still breathing and metabolizing on Earth, this is where the work is to be done, at least for now. It is Atwater’s breadth of understanding, her sensitivity to the immensity of the experience and the difficulty of its integration, and her healthy sense of survival which have won her such a following among the experts: other experiencers.

In keeping with her practical nature, the author concludes with two chapters of resources. The first suggests “How To Help Near-Death Survivors.” Intended primarily for the families and friends of experiencers, it is the clearest and most useful piece I know. The other chapter is a rich, 32-page compendium of published and organizational resources on near-death experiences, holism, religion, spirituality, dying, and expanded world views. Any reader new to “all this” will undoubtedly find the chapter invaluable.

The book is full of “firsts.” *Coming Back* stands alone in the field of near-death studies as a book-length investigative work written by a near-death experiencer. It is the first study to explore in depth the lived perspective of individuals after an NDE, and the first to offer caring and definable assistance toward integration. This is also the first book sympathetic to the experience to challenge some of the assumptions of near-death orthodoxy (and yes, a body of doctrine has emerged over the past decade). In short, because it is written from within the experience and its aftermath, *Coming Back* holds a unique and valuable place in the literature.

The book is, of course, imperfect. Mechanically, although easy in the hand and on the eyes, it suffers from sloppy proofreading which occasionally distorts the meaning of entire sentences. Some of the author’s facts are incorrect—for example, the account of IANDS’ founding—and while this may be minor, its existence weakens the whole. It would also seem preferable to have announced from the outset that the author’s experience of psychic events dates from childhood and that she had worked in the field, rather than to parcel out that information as the book progresses.

Atwater’s casual acknowledgment of the paranormal and of such controversial subjects as aura-reading and astrology will doubtless prove a major stumbling block to many readers. Two sentences buried in Chapter 1’s brief commentary on “forbidden zone” topics therefore deserve special attention: “. . . (C)oming back means facing your belief system and everything you ever knew about yourself and the world around you. It also means facing everything you have ever believed or not believed about God . . . and all those things termed sacred and holy or wicked and unholy.”

The phrase “sacred and holy” encompasses the creeds of *Skeptical Inquirer* and New Age adherent, with intellectual and theoretical stances of every other stripe, as well as faith in James Fowler’s sense of the word; the “wicked and unholy” applies, of course, to opposing views. In Atwater’s terms, “facing everything” means setting aside prior assumptions, public positions, and wished-for conclusions, to go where the data—not one’s most cherished presuppositions—lead. As this rigor is mandated for those who “come back,” it is incumbent as well upon all others—sympathizers or skeptics, researchers or general public—who profess an interest in understanding. This *is* what happens “when known worlds collapse and belief systems collide.”

Depending, then, on one’s perspective, *Coming Back* may be either irremediably flawed or a long awaited breakthrough, “telling it like it is.” Perhaps it is both. Herein lie both the glory and the weakness of Phyllis Atwater’s work. The reader prepared for such a venture will

find this book a treasure of insights (to say nothing of one-liners); persons holding to more orthodox conventions will undoubtedly find much to criticize.

A final quote is a cautionary word to all of us—experiencers, researchers, and interested observers alike:

Just because others are drawn to you seeking counsel and wisdom does not mean you really *know* what you know or that you have anything truly worthwhile to say. Anyone can mouth 'Love will solve all the world's problems,' but few are those willing to get off their posteriors to do anything about it. (p. 108)

Some of us, at least, think this deserves a standing ovation. There are 99 monkeys waiting.