

BOOK REVIEW

W. Stephen Sabom, S.T.D.
Houston, TX

Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times, by Carol Zaleski. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987. 275 pp. + ix, \$18.95

Once upon a time a collared preacher sat down next to a drunk on a bus. After the vehicle started to move, the drunk began yelling over and over: "There ain't no heaven! There ain't no heaven! There ain't no heaven!" Finally, several stops later, the exasperated cleric turned to him and calmly but firmly said, "Well, then go to hell, but just shut up about it."

Sound familiar? Relax; help is on the way. The NDE bus has just picked up another passenger, this one offering mediation between the spiritualist zealots of postmortem survival and the narrow-band debunkers provoked by anything outside of a chi square.

As a religion lecturer at Harvard, the new rider is neither visionary nor scientist but more like a commentator, a sort of Eric Sevareid of symbolic experience, specifically the "return-from-death" experience. In her opinion, the squabble on the bus will continue to the crack of doom and still end in a draw. Hence, in this scholarly, fertile, and readable presentation, she charts a middle course: How about NDE as "story"? How about the near-death experience as the machinations of the generic human narrative imagination? Put another way, do NDE accounts speak to our impoverished religious imaginations as "other-world journeys" once did to medieval Christians?

Certainly today's pluralistic world is starved for a cohesive myth. We ache for a unifying story of humankind that is neither fossil nor fiction, but that is grounded in both experience and culture. Nuclear holocaust and the economic crunch fuel our survival stories. But how about one that comes with a protagonist, plot, and therapeutic casuistry that may help us live without nonstop *angst*?

For sheer popularity, first-person NDE reports are rivaled today only

Dr. Sabom is a psychotherapist in private practice. Requests for reprints should be addressed to Dr. Sabom at 1200 Blalock #116, Houston, TX 77055.

by Vietnam veteran confessions. Interestingly, both genres of experience, when combined with a new vision, can enable a survivor's moral passage (Sabom, 1988). But less frequently mentioned are the didactic and instructional possibilities in NDE accounts. Practically ignored, Carol Zaleski contends, are the fruits of this experience; that is, how the NDE epitomizes and interprets earthly life and promotes "truth-seeking" along with "truth-telling" consequences.

So, with a pragmatic, nontheoretical bias, she pursues the literary and historical links between the modern NDE and the visionary testimonies of the Middle Ages. By examining the oral story instead of the direct experience, she precludes using these accounts to justify an afterlife. Instead, she moves us toward a different, and quite challenging medium, for apprehending immortality experience (Sabom, 1983). What emerge from this study are implications so rich that the author must scramble to find the scope and concept to contain it all. Midway through the reading, one senses an exorcism in the staging. The demons in the NDE debate are getting nervous. Now, if she can only get the drunk's and the preacher's attention. . . .

At the outset, she proposes four prototypical otherworld journeys as pacesetters for our modern renditions. First, St. Paul struck a balance in his afterlife narrative among sin, mercy, and forgiveness. His journey made explicit the universal teaching motif in all otherworld journeys. Then, sixth-century Pope Gregory the Great, in his *Dialogues*, applied the hardened prospects of postmortem punishment and immortal damnation of the otherworld. The eight-century *vir quidam* Drythelm, the folksy subject of the historian Venerable Bede, influenced otherworld journeys with his down-home vision and deathbed conversion. Finally, spatial dimensions were added to the otherworld topography by the ruthless missionary St. Patrick, the patron saint who located an ugly coastal cave and declared it to be a facsimile of purgatory. Apparently the pagan Irish, and a lot of the rest of us, believed him.

Organized with these narrative influences, medieval otherworld itineraries began with the disengagement of the soul from the body. Typically, a lamentation on the infidelity of the flesh presaged the soul's assumption of a corporeal form. An angelic guide or guardian joined the soul as it emigrated through a symbolic conveyance from this life to the next.

Obstacles were encountered. A cleansing ordeal by fire and a ritual crossing of a border or bridge connoted catharsis, sacrifice, penalty, and separation. As earthly deeds and intentions were reviewed and weighed, existing cultural values were reinforced. Restitution through

alms and penance were assigned. Following the return from the otherworld, physical and emotional souvenirs of the trip, such as afflictions, scars, and conversions, were identified. A medieval narrator reminded the audience of the trip's powerful, arcane revelations.

Like the NDE, the medieval otherworld vision was the "poor man's mantle of prophecy": it could happen to anyone. But unlike the NDE, the earlier journeys were sanctioned only when they conformed to the prevailing religious doctrines. For us, the author claims, the mark of an NDE's genuineness is its nonconformity. Nevertheless, in both versions, one discovers the assumption that one need only to leave the body in order to experience supernatural reality directly.

What follows is a comprehensive history of the modern near-death vision. Standing alone, this section is one of the clearest, most systematic reviews of NDE research and researchers in print. But the author's purpose is to introduce the modern otherworld itinerary.

Unlike their medieval counterparts, modern NDEs occur in a friendly universe. By and large, only "good deaths" are noted. Absent is the medieval landscape of heaven and hell. The NDE exit from the body is marked by a shedding of nonessentials and a period of lucid sensory changes, features included in the medieval stories. And the NDE account accentuates its message by moving from metaphor to vision back to metaphor, a course that incorporates both actual experience and socially conditioned precepts.

Light, the loving presence, and the panoramic life review provide kinship between the NDE and its medieval relatives. The remembered self is an actor or actress who fills the stage with projected internal contents, while the observing self serves as an audience. Misdeeds may be noted along the way, but they are not negatively judged. Where the medieval guide is an authority figure, the modern otherworld presence is an affirming advocate. Modern sinners are rehabilitated rather than indicted, and the transformations are primary salutary.

The NDE interviewer or researcher is a high-tech double for the medieval narrator, conquering the survivor's resistance to sharing with reassurance rather than threat. Where the older otherworld trips were used as grist for the penitential and monastic institutions, modern accounts are used to persuade the uninitiated of the NDE's validity and importance. To underscore the NDE's grounding in actual experience, Zaleski takes considerable pains to spell out proposed explanatory theories and rebuttals. But one wonders how much of her trouble was necessary if the principle upshot is that the etiological debate is turgid with petty rivalries.

The most significant contribution of the NDE literature, to her way

of thinking, lies in its experiential raising of the compelling questions of life and death. If the strength of a symbol is that it participates in the reality it represents, then the NDE as symbolic experience promotes a utopian cosmology and gives us an updated commentary on our cultural mindset.

And here lies the theological rub. For, despite oceans of printer's ink on the subjects of grief, dying, care, and ethics, religious critics have steered a wide berth around the NDE, although less inconspicuously than Zaleski suggests (Royse, 1985). Fundamentalist charges of "cheap grace," Satanic tricks, and narcissistic false hopes about the hereafter have commingled with the posturing of liberals who, long ago discarding belief in an afterlife, tag the NDE as something of a joke. The portrait of death as pleasant is not only unsettling to some scientific literalists but also to diehard biblicists. As with any interpretive thinking, the more one ignores the metaphoric, the more narrow become one's conclusions.

To her credit, Zaleski pays her respects to all religious experience in the fashion of William James, and consistently returns to her pragmatic questions: Does the vision make a difference for the living? Does it breed complacency or does it catalyze amendment of life? In my view, this is the theological gift that her study offers to NDE research. Our epidemic denial of human immanence, our impatience with the life cycle process, and our compulsion to control all things material have extended a wide open invitation to the mindset of ancient Gnosticism, a threat that Zaleski acknowledges. To seek to possess the numinous without also owning the ordinary and the ambiguous is not only doctrinally erroneous, it is also dangerous to our health (Sabom, 1985).

Indeed, this study spawns even broader questions. For instance, can we be trusted with our experience, religious or otherwise, apart from double-blind experimental paradigms? Can we usefully deploy this experience, no matter how strange, without full academic approval? Certainly the converse offers little comfort: we have enough proof of the kill-ratios of ten neutron bombs.

Moreover, if authentic experience speaks for itself, then the modern NDE investigator/narrator could be a case in point. Those investigators with firsthand experience interviewing NDErs are also those narrators who find the paranormal features more personally believable and worthy of respect. On the other hand, those of us armchair narrators who study NDE transcripts from a distance are often more skeptical of the experience's validity and merit. The paradox of scientific detachment requires one to pull back from human subjectivity and anecdotal evidence in order to keep up the grant money. And yet, the

more one is estranged from the human ethos of the NDE, the more convenient reductionism becomes, for theologians as well as for scientists.

A psychological construct *does* exist, in my opinion, in the seminal work of psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1958), to support Zaleski's premise that the NDE is the narrative work of *Homo religiosus*. And I was frankly surprised that she didn't mention this, though in fairness, her cross-historical analysis probably belongs more in the tradition of Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson's (1977) cross-cultural surveys of NDEs. Zaleski's summary comment on Gregory the Great's contribution to otherworld narratives comes close to what Winnicott termed "transitional sphere experience," the developmentally appropriate psychic world of the three-year-old and his or her teddy bear or security blanket:

Even at its most sublime, Gregory believes, visionary experience involves the activity of an intermediate mental capacity, in which divine illumination mixes with sensory impressions. (p. 89)

Part real, part imaginary, but with a whole more mysterious than the sum of its parts, the cherished transitional object is our most primitive, self-chosen bridge between the instinctual, nurturing world of mother and the psychological entry into the "otherworld" of strangers.

The "reality" of NDE transcendence is no less certain for the survivor than the provisional world of the child and the teddy bear. The life-to-death transitional climate includes vivid encounters with supportive, familiar objects, condensations of cultural premises about the proto-numinous (noncorporeal life), and intensely regressive sensations of security and oneness. NDE transcendence accounts follow similar sequences with similar "ritualizing" categories of autochthonous contents. NDE transcendence, like something fresh out of Plato's cave, may lie beyond the distinctions of ikonic and sense-impression imagery. (Sabom, 1980, p. 137)

Paul Pruyser (1974) has brilliantly credited this early "transitional sphere experience" with forging our psychic disposition toward religious imagination and belief, and this construct has thrilling possible relationships to Zaleski's findings.

If impotency rather than ignorance is our primary contemporary threat, then NDErs have stared it in the face and emerged with a refurbished "I" position, a relative freedom from the tyranny of time, and a noticeable lack of the ulcerating type A personality imperatives

that no doubt helped engineer the event in the first place. As Zaleski put it, the "very limitation of our mortal condition gives imagination, at least temporarily, a sacramental value" (p. 93). The otherworld journeyers of the Middle Ages knew it; the three-year-old knows it; and so does the NDER. Thanks be to Carol Zaleski for giving us somewhere else to sit on the bus, and for helping us further locate the timeless in the reality of our times.

References

- Osis, K. and Haraldsson, E. (1977). Deathbed observations by physicians and nurses: A cross-cultural survey. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 71, 237-259.
- Pruyser, P. (1974). *Between Belief and Unbelief*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Royse, D. (1985). The near-death experience: A survey of clergy's attitudes and knowledge. *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 39, 31-42.
- Sabom, W. S. (1980). Near-death experience: A review from pastoral psychology. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 19, 130-140.
- Sabom, W. S. (1983). Immortality experience: A reaction to Haule. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 11, 123-126.
- Sabom, W. S. (1985). The Gnostic world of anorexia nervosa. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 13, 243-254.
- Sabom, W. S. (1988). Back from Moriah: Moral trauma and the Vietnam veteran. *Pastoral Psychology*, in press.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1958). In *Collected Papers* (pp. 229-242). London, England: Tavistock Publications.