

# Historical Perspectives on Near-Death Phenomena

Barbara A. Walker, Ph.D.  
*Eastern Illinois University*

William J. Serdahely, Ph.D.  
*Montana State University*

**ABSTRACT:** The authors present an introductory overview of the history of near-death phenomena, followed by a synopsis of near-death research representative of three historical eras: 1880s-1930; 1930s-1960; and 1960 to the present.

Belief in life surviving physical death is hardly a new concept. As long ago as 2500 B.C. men were writing about this incredible phenomenon (Rawlings, 1978). *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, considered one of the oldest pieces of literature in the world, contains a collection of prayers and formulas that can be used for assistance in the next world (Rawlings, 1978; Ross, 1979). Ancient Egypt was the first culture to teach that the soul was immortal (Rawlings, 1978). Within that society it was believed that when a person's physical body died the soul would enter the Judgment Hall of Osiris where it would then begin a life filled with everlasting joy and happiness (Budge, 1956; Ross, 1979). Various ceremonies described within *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* indicated that the deceased would regain memory, speech, and physical movement upon entry into the Other World. Likewise, the book

---

Dr. Walker is with the Department of Health Studies at Eastern Illinois University, and Dr. Serdahely is Professor of Health Science at Montana State University. Requests for reprints should be addressed to Dr. Walker at the Department of Health Studies, Lantz Building, Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, IL 61920.

states that when one dies one will be able to recognize deceased friends and relatives within this new world (Ross, 1979).

The ancient Greeks also believed in the existence of the immortal soul. The Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato both advocated that the soul departed from the physical body at death, freed in order to be reunited with deceased friends and relatives. Plato believed that the reunion occurred in a place of great brilliance, after which the soul would leave in order to observe a life review and receive judgment (Rawlings, 1978).

Plato (428–384 B.C.), in the tenth book of *The Republic*, also described a tale about a soldier, Er, who died on the battlefield. At the moment of physical death Er's consciousness departed from his physical body to roam the countryside, reentering his earthly body just prior to his intended cremation (Rawlings, 1978).

Christianity also assumes a fundamental doctrine encouraging a belief in the immortality of the soul (Rawlings, 1978). This doctrine of belief is founded upon the teaching of the scriptures contained within the Holy Bible. The Bible contains numerous examples to support a belief in life after death. The Apostle Paul made reference to this in his letter to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 5:1, 7–10):

For we know that when this tent we live in now is taken down—when we die and leave these bodies—we will have wonderful new bodies in heaven, homes that will be ours forevermore, made for us by God Himself, and not by human hands. . . . We know these things are true by believing, not by seeing. And we are not afraid, but are quite content to die, for then we will be at home with the Lord. So our aim is to please Him always in everything we do, whether we are here in this body or away from this body and with Him in heaven. For we must all stand before Christ to be judged and have our lives laid bare—before Him. (*The Living Bible*, 1973)

As that passage illustrates, Christian belief in an afterlife is dependent upon the spiritual faith expressed within this doctrine. It is also interesting to note that Paul mentioned a life review and judgment process, common elements contained within much of the contemporary near-death literature.

Although many Oriental cultures had expressed beliefs in the afterlife since the third century A.D. (Becker, 1981; Ch'en, 1964), it was not until the eighth century A.D. that those ideas were expressed in written form (Rawlings, 1978). At that time *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* was created to assist the dying in their transition from life to death (Fremantle and Chogyam, 1975; Moody, 1977; Rawlings, 1978).

The Tibetan account describes the art of dying and delineates the various stages of the soul. Accordingly, upon physical death the soul becomes enveloped within a new body known as the "shining." Instantaneous travel, heightened sensory awareness, meeting deceased loved ones, feelings of extreme peace and contentment, and a judgment are also described within the content of the book (Becker, 1985; Fremantle and Chogyam, 1975, Rawlings, 1978).

Many of the afterlife experiences described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* correspond to traditional Indian yogico-tantric exercises used in meditation (Eliade, 1971). Yoga suggests that within a truly meditative state the person must "die" to this life in order to transcend to a level of higher consciousness. Within the Indian culture, yoga has served as an important tradition whereby we are aware of the possible separateness of body and consciousness; a practice that Mircea Eliade (1971) wrote can help us to anticipate death in order to be reborn into a sanctified life.

Throughout the centuries numerous historical figures have made personal testimonies related to near-death phenomena. Among the better known figures describing such experiences have been Carl Jung, Thomas Edison, Benjamin Franklin, Elizabeth Browning, Eddie Rickenbacker, Louisa May Alcott, and Ernest Hemingway (Rawlings, 1978). In fact, Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* is said to be based in part upon a personal near-death incident he encountered on the battlefield during World War I (Audette, 1982). Likewise, whether based on personal experience or not, a number of other authors have recounted tales containing elements of near-death phenomena. Listed among these have been such people as William Shakespeare, Leo Tolstoy, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, Thornton Wilder, Victor Hugo, and Katherine Anne Porter (Audette, 1982; Bertman, 1979; Flynn, 1984; Straight, 1984).

During the 1700s out-of-body and near-death concepts were publicly clarified by a famed Swedish scientist of the era, Emanuel Swedenborg (Rhodes, 1982). For a number of years Swedenborg experienced out-of-body travel, during which many spiritual ideas and deceased people were supposedly revealed to him. As a result of these enlightening experiences, Swedenborg left the realms of science and government to pursue spiritual truths. He recorded his experiences, many anonymously, in hopes of helping others to understand this domain better.

Swedenborg claimed that there is constant interplay between the spiritual world and the earthly world, serving as the source of our emotions and ideas. He stated that in reality humankind is a spirit within a mortal body, here on earth to learn and help others. He also

claimed that the complete human being, in reality, is a married pair. Within his book *Heaven and Hell* (1928), Swedenborg discussed ideas relating to the afterlife: deceased elderly becoming young again; after-life existence within a nonmaterial world perceived according to the arrangement of ideas and images created within our own minds; and existence in an afterworld in which time has no meaning and space is signified in emotional terms, designated only by how "close" we are to those like ourselves (Rhodes, 1982).

During the 1700s and 1800s various physicians, clergy, and others reported experiences in which people returned from death (Audette, 1982; Rawlings, 1978). An article relating to a near-death incident encountered by the Cardinal Archbishop Donnet of Bordeaux was published in *Lancet* in 1866. Recorded tales obtained from the Chipewewa Indians during the 1820s described warriors who traveled outside their bodies at the moment of death, later returning to tell of their spiritual adventures (Schorer, 1985–86). Likewise, tales of NDEs experienced after high doses of hashish were recorded by French hashish clubs during the mid-1800s (Siegel and Hirschman, 1984). Many of these club members were Swedenborg followers as well.

Public testimonies of near-death accounts have become increasingly prevalent during the twentieth century. Whether because of better life-sustaining measures, longer life spans, or more open disclosure of the subject, near-death experiences are fairly commonplace today. Thousands of case studies have documented NDEs, particularly over the past 25 years. According to a 1980 Gallup survey, 5 percent of the adult population have gone through a near-death experience (Gallup, 1982). Projecting this percentage onto the current population, it is estimated that approximately thirteen million American adults have lived through a near-death incident.

### Near-Death Research

Although accounts of near-death phenomena have existed for thousands of years, scientific research has been necessary to lend credibility to the topic in modern Western cultures. Since the seventeenth century, under the influence of Sir Francis Bacon and the Royal Society of London, the scientific method has replaced doctrines of faith as a valid source of truth within most Western societies. Moreover, areas of study that could not be measured within the realms of natural law and direct observation were seldom welcomed within the scientific community (Ross, 1979).

Nevertheless, interest in the unexplained has prevailed, manifesting

itself within what some consider pseudoscientific areas of study. Scientific research into whether human personality survives physical death has existed for more than a century. Ian Stevenson (1977) has divided this field of endeavor into three historical periods: (1) 1880s–1930s; (2) 1930s–1960; and (3) 1960 to the present.

### 1880s–1930s

Contemporary near-death research is a derivative of early paranormal experimentation and observation. Paranormal investigators during this era were primarily concerned with collecting, classifying, and analyzing stories related to personal contact with the deceased (Stevenson, 1977). During the 1870s and 1880s the work of William Crookes, a respected chemist, lent support to the scientific study of paranormal phenomena (Ross, 1979). Crookes had originally set out to expose paranormal occurrences as fraudulent; however, he soon came to believe in the existence of certain psi phenomena, or extrasensory perception (ESP).

Many types of psi phenomena were investigated by Crookes and others during the late nineteenth century, including clairvoyance, spirit writing, spirit music, spiritual impersonations, trancelike states, trance speaking, apparitions, and possession (Ross, 1979). Although many published reports were met with criticism and skepticism, public and scientific curiosity continued to grow.

Supported by the scientific community, the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was established in England during 1882 (Ross, 1979; Stevenson, 1977). This organization was founded by prominent scientists and scholars interested in establishing a formal forum from which to investigate paranormal phenomena. Early members included a number of well-known scientists from Cambridge University, and many members of the society became followers of the spiritualist movement, whose tenet held that psi phenomena were evidence of life surviving physical death. An American branch of the SPR was begun in 1885 under the leadership of William James, a leader in the American spiritualist movement (Ross, 1979; Stevenson, 1977).

A leading SPR member during this era, Frederic W. H. Myers, was extremely interested in proving the existence of life after death. He and his colleagues believed that research into this area would serve three important functions: (1) increase our total understanding of the universe; (2) expand the focus of all science and philosophy to include “the knowledge of life in man independent of blood and brain”; and (3) apply this newfound knowledge to open limitless avenues for further discovery (Ross, 1979).

Despite the quality of the research conducted, work done by the SPR was often met with criticism by other factions of the scientific community. It is believed that the indirect influence of the Darwinian theory during this era created ideological conflicts concerning belief in the existence of the human soul and its potential for surviving physical death (Stevenson, 1977). An example of this conflict is evident in the fact that Alfred Russel Wallace, who together with Charles Darwin developed and publicly advocated the theory of natural selection, was privately an ardent proponent of spiritualism (Stevenson, 1977).

During the late 1800s many scientists began to shift attention from professional psychics to ordinary people reporting paranormal phenomena (Audette, 1982; Ross, 1979). Anecdotal accounts increasingly replaced controlled experiments as evidence of paranormal phenomena, generally receiving the stamp of approval only after intense scrutiny by the SPR. As more cases were reported, discrete psi categories became recognized. With the increased use of these anecdotal accounts, a new philosophy began to take shape within the field of parapsychology, now placing the burden of disproof upon skeptics (Ross, 1979).

Skeptics, many of whom were psychologists and physicians, suggested that these accounts represented evolutionary psychoses used for self-adaptation. That attitude toward paranormal phenomena served as the foundation from which the multiple personality theories of psychological study began (Ross, 1979; Stevenson, 1977). Myers contended that man possessed a subliminal level of cognition, a theory that won acceptance from many scientists and was used to support the spiritualist and nonspiritualist views alike (Ross, 1979).

In 1900 Theodore Flournoy noted that psychology had fully embraced the concept of a subliminal subconscious, though often generally denouncing the existence of spiritualism. Rigid scientific attitudes kept many psychologists from further exploring this area. William James tried to promote paranormal philosophies in the field of psychology, believing that some mental disorders were independent of the physical body. His attempts, however, were generally met with resistance (Ross, 1979).

### 1930s–1960

Paranormal research relating to life surviving death was greatly ignored during this historical era. As a result of the poor reception such research received prior to this period, many parapsychologists

lost interest, believing this area of study to be "premature at best and hopeless at worst" (Stevenson, 1977). The field turned its attention toward the study of extrasensory perception with living persons.

Although life after death issues were not a primary focus of attention in the field of parapsychology at this time, a few significant research contributions were conducted within this 30-year period. In 1945, Gardner Murphy, a well-respected psychologist, wrote three noteworthy essays on the topic of life surviving death. Although Murphy claimed that much of the existing research was inconclusive, he felt that recurring evidence might be suggestive of postmortem survival (Murphy, 1945a; Murphy, 1945b; Murphy, 1945c; Stevenson, 1977).

Personal testimonies continued to be published in the scientific literature during this period, as well. The near-death accounts of such well-known people as Ernest Hemingway, Richard E. Byrd, and Carl Jung during this era rejuvenated some public and scientific attention, but the attention was basically short-lived (Audette, 1982; Ross, 1979; Stevenson, 1977).

One of the more notable studies of this era was conducted by Donald West in 1948, wherein he sampled a small portion of the English population concerning psi phenomena. West reported that 14 percent of his sample had undergone a hallucinatory experience and 9 percent had reported seeing apparitions of the dead (West, 1948).

A few loosely controlled clairvoyant studies were also conducted at this time in an attempt to communicate with the dead. In the 1950s, Hornell Hart noted recurrent similarities within a large number of reported cases of apparitions and out-of-body experiences (Hart, 1956; Stevenson, 1977). Many of these characteristics paralleled Raymond Moody's (1975, 1977) later findings regarding NDEs.

## 1960 to Present

In 1961, Karlis Osis conducted a survey of physicians and nurses who had witnessed the alleged deathbed visions of their dying patients. Osis concluded that these reported visions, suggestive of postmortem survival, were not hallucinations. He noted that hallucinations of the sick are generally only visual in nature, whereas these accounts included auditory occurrences. He also noted that medical factors predisposing one to hallucinations, such as a high fever, did not increase the number of visions reported. Of those apparitions reported, 90 percent involved communication with close, deceased relatives. This was the first study that used modern survey methods and statistical evaluation in examining death-related phenomena (Osis and Haraldsson, 1977b).

The 1961 survey served as a pilot study for later research conducted in 1977 (Osis and Haraldsson, 1977a). This second study involved the surveying of physicians and nurses from the United States and India about the deathbed visions of dying patients. More than 1,000 Americans and 700 Indians participated in the study. Of those interviewed, 216 American physicians and 255 Indian physicians reported having observed patients who described seeing visions while close to death. Most of these patients were terminally ill. Identity of these apparitions included those already dead, religious figures, and those still living. In cases where the dying patient saw apparitions of the dead, 65 percent felt that these figures had come to aid them in their transition into another worldly existence. When demographic factors such as gender, age, education and, socio-economic status were examined in relationship to specific aspects of patient apparitions, no significant correlations could be identified. Culture and religion seemed to have a slight influence on the reporting of different religious figures in this study, however (Osis and Haraldsson, 1977a, 1977b).

The modern revival of circumthanatology, the study of near-death phenomena (Lundahl, 1982), is credited to Russell Noyes, a psychiatrist. In 1972, Noyes began to accumulate anecdotal accounts of NDEs derived from personal interviews and clinical records. Many of Noyes's subjects were victims of drownings, falls, and similar accidents. Within this research and subsequent works, Noyes noted that persons exposed to life-threatening danger commonly experience feelings of hyperalertness, depersonalization, and mystical consciousness (Noyes, 1972; Noyes, Hoenk, Kuperman, and Slymen, 1977; Noyes and Kletti, 1976a, 1976b, 1977; Noyes and Slymen, 1978-79). According to Kenneth Ring (1982), Noyes's work marked the beginning of two significant changes in the field of near-death studies: (1) a shift from parapsychological dominance to medical dominance in investigating near-death experiences; and (2) an attempt to investigate the experience of dying using the direct interviews of near-death survivors.

In the early 1970s Elisabeth Kübler-Ross began talking publicly about the existence of near-death phenomena. Well-known and respected for her study of the terminally ill, Kübler-Ross became intrigued with the topic and stated that she herself had heard testimonies of such accounts (Kastenbaum, 1979; Moody, 1975). Her comments created a considerable impression upon the general public, and she probably did more to arouse public acceptance and curiosity about NDEs than any other single figure. Although Kübler-Ross openly acknowledged having a great interest in this area of study, she has not published any methodological accounts of her findings (Ring, 1982a).



The affirmation of Kübler-Ross created a more receptive climate for researchers who followed. In 1975, Raymond Moody, Jr. published *Life After Life*, a book that is given credit for coining the term "near-death experience." Moody, a psychiatrist, interviewed 150 people claiming to have had a near-death experience. In examining the content of these interviews, Moody noted the 15 common elements that typify a near-death experience (Moody, 1975). These common elements were described as follows:

1. ineffability (having difficulty describing the experience in words);
2. hearing oneself being pronounced dead;
3. hearing a loud buzzing or ringing noise at the moment of death;
4. feeling that one's consciousness has been detached from the physical body, and/or viewing one's physical body as a spectator;
5. feeling a sensation of total peace and well-being;
6. moving through a long, dark tunnel;
7. meeting spirits of loved ones and/or others previously known;
8. appearing before a "being of light";
9. within the presence of this "being of light," undergoing a three-dimensional panoramic life review;
10. approaching a border or boundary, beyond which there is a world of intense beauty;
11. suddenly returning to one's physical body, sometimes being told that it was not one's time to die;
12. being reluctant or afraid to tell others;
13. undergoing value changes toward life;
14. experiencing a change in attitude towards death; and
15. corroboration of out-of-body events.

Collectively, these 15 elements constitute what Moody referred to as a "core" or deep near-death experience. Despite similarities in reported accounts, no two were found to be identical. Likewise, none of his subjects described all 15 elements within any single account (Moody, 1975).

Moody's book appeared at the top of the best-seller list in this country within a few months of publication. Translated into 30 languages, it was instrumental in attaining worldwide interest in near-death experiences (Ring, 1982).

With international interest sparked, several near-death researchers

convened in Charlottesville, Virginia, during November, 1977, to discuss future directions for near-death studies. This meeting marked the founding of the first professional organization dedicated to the study of near-death experiences, the Association for the Scientific Study of Near-Death Phenomena (ASSNDP). This organization was instrumental in stimulating scientific research in the area of near-death studies (Ring, 1982).

In 1979, John Audette published an account of 2,300 cases collected by Fred Schoonmaker of persons who had nearly died in a life-threatening situation. Of these reported cases, 1,400 reported having had a near-death experience. These testimonies served to substantiate further the existence of near-death phenomena.

In 1980, Ring authored the first book to investigate the topic of NDEs from a scientific viewpoint. That book, *Life At Death*, was based upon the interviews of 102 patients who had come close to death. In addition to the interviewing method, Ring developed and used an instrument called the Weighted Core Experience Index (WCEI). The purpose of the WCEI was to examine various elements of the subject's near-death experience and to determine the "depth" of the encounter. Scores were based on arbitrarily weighted items used to assign values based upon various components of Moody's 15 near-death elements (Moody, 1975). Scores on the WCEI ranged from 0 (absence of NDE) to 29 (a deep, rich NDE). A score of 6-9 was designated as representing a "moderate" NDE, while a score of 10 or higher represented a "deeper" NDE. Ring described the "core experience" as being comprised of a series of five stages: peace, body separation, entering the darkness, seeing the light, and entering the light (Ring, 1980). Of the 102 patients interviewed, 48 percent reported having undergone a near-death experience. Ring's research also attempted to compare the NDEs of three categories of people: victims of illness, accidents, and suicide. Based upon the results of his interviews, Ring noted that, overall, NDEs occurred most frequently among victims of illness, and least among those attempting suicide. However, subsequent research conducted by Ring and Stephen Franklin (1981-82) did not support these findings.

Ring (1980) also investigated the relationship of gender and religiosity to frequency and depth of the near-death encounter. Religiosity did not appear to play a significant role in either frequency or depth of the NDE. Gender did not appear to affect depth of the near-death encounter; however, a greater number of women experienced NDEs in relationship to illness, and more men experienced NDEs because of accidents. Ring cautioned against generalizing from these findings, however, as the population sample was not randomly selected and, thus, subject to bias (Ring, 1980).

Ring also noted that many experiencers reevaluate their personal values following their return from a near-death encounter. This reassessment process, or aftereffect, is particularly prevalent among those having undergone a deeper, core experience.

In 1981, the ASSNDP was incorporated in Connecticut as the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), located at the University of Connecticut. IANDS has since served as a professional and service organization, with an extensive archive of near-death case studies, a research referral system, and this journal, initially published as *Anabiosis* but since 1987 as the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*.

In 1982, Michael Sabom published *Recollections of Death*, a book that recounted the interviews of 116 patients. Only medically documented cases where a patient was unconscious and experiencing a life-threatening situation were used. Patients unconscious only as a result of anesthesia were deleted from the study. Personal interviews were conducted as soon after the event as possible. Of Sabom's respondents, 42 percent claimed to have undergone a near-death experience. Sabom, once a skeptical cardiologist bent on disproving this phenomenon, was impressed by these testimonies, which included many of his own patients. He investigated these accounts from a medical perspective, concluding along with Ring (1980) that medical interpretations alone could not explain away the experiences (Sabom, 1982; Ring, 1982). Likewise, Sabom concluded that demographic variables and the type of life-threatening situation encountered had no influence upon the incidence of NDEs.

In 1982, George Gallup, Jr. published *Adventures in Immortality*, a book recounting his data derived from a Gallup Poll. Gallup conducted a national survey of 1,500 randomly selected American adults. Based upon his findings, Gallup determined that approximately five percent of the American adult population has experienced a near-death event. Gallup also examined the relationship between the occurrence of NDEs and a variety of demographic variables. Included among those variables were age, gender, race, social class, educational level, occupation, income, area of residence, religious background, and frequency of church attendance. Gallup's data showed little or no relationship linking the incidence of NDEs to the specified variables.

In 1984, Ring completed his second major scientific investigation of NDEs, following up on the results of this first study in 1980. The major purpose this study was to interview experiencers concerning the elements of the NDE and related aftereffects. Forty-two participants were interviewed directly, while an additional 174 subjects completed a written questionnaire. Ring concluded that many near-death experi-

encers undergo significant value changes following their NDE, particularly those who have undergone a "deeper" experience. His data, along with those of Bruce Greyson (1981, 1983a) and Charles Flynn (1982), suggest that the near-death experience affects personal value changes in the following ways: deeper love and concern for others; increased spirituality, deemphasizing formal religion; better self-image; lessened fear of death; more acceptance of others; heightened quest for knowledge; an increased sense of purpose in life; decreased concern for impressing others; and a decreased desire to attain material things.

In addition to the various personal transformations already mentioned, some experiencers have also had problems in adjusting to their return to everyday life (Ring, 1984). This is particularly prevalent among core experiencers. The experiencer often has trouble accepting the fact that he or she has been removed from paradise, a place of total peace and beauty, and forced to exist within the earthly realms of pain and sorrow (Ring, 1984).

Many experiencers also become severely depressed as a result of trying to convey the importance of their encounter to others (Bush, 1983; Ring, 1984). Often, health care professionals and family members cannot relate to the concept of a near-death experience, choosing to discount the experiencer's claims as a stress-induced illusion. As a result, experiencers become frustrated and depressed, choosing to keep quiet for fear of being labeled mentally ill (Ring, 1984).

A number of variables account for this unwillingness to listen, most of which are associated with our cultural fear of death and the inability and unwillingness to relate to a phenomenon of this type. Likewise, well-established philosophies among the behavioral sciences have inhibited our willingness to accept NDEs. Orthodox Christianity's varied interpretations of the afterlife also create a skeptical foundation upon which to judge near-death phenomena. Some psychologists have theorized that when an individual is faced with imminent death, ego defense mechanisms take charge to preserve the value of one's existence (Widdison, 1982).

Based upon informal discussions, academic debates, news articles, and articles contained within semiprofessional journals, Harold Widdison (1982) concluded that most psychologists do not feel that a few "deviant cases" of reported near-death phenomena are proof of postmortem existence. He wrote that although many people have experienced close encounters with death, psychologists have received few accounts of reported near-death experiences (Widdison, 1982). However, Barbara Walker and Robert Russell (1989) conducted a study of 117 randomly selected registered psychologists from within the state of

Illinois, 19 percent of whom indicated having counseled a near-death client. This study also indicated that 7 percent of these psychologists had personally undergone an NDE, while 28 percent indicated having had personal contact with a near-death experimenter.

In recent years, the nursing profession has begun to address ways of providing for the spiritual and emotional concerns of the near-death client. In 1978, Anthony Lee observed that many patients would try to discuss their near-death experiences with nurses following cardio-pulmonary resuscitation. Feeling that most nurses were not professionally equipped to handle these situations, Lee developed some clinical guidelines to assist in dealing with the problem. Included within the guidelines were giving the patient assurance, whether conscious or unconscious; attentively listening to any near-death accounts expressed by the patient; maintaining a nonjudgmental attitude toward the account; medically charting the event; consoling the patient and family that these reported accounts are common; and observing changes in patient behavior following the near-death event (Lee, 1978).

Annalee Oakes (1981) conducted a survey of 30 critical care nurses, asking them to express their personal and professional feelings toward anecdotal cases involving near-death phenomena. Most respondents were fascinated by the topic. Half of the respondents felt that NDEs should be reported, although they were not quite sure whose specific duty it would be to handle the experiencers' concerns. Eighty percent claimed that if a patient spoke about having had an NDE it would not influence the type of nursing care given.

In 1986, Roberta Orne carried out a more comprehensive study involving the attitudes and beliefs of 912 nurses toward NDEs. Ninety-three percent of these respondents claimed that patient reporting of NDEs would not influence nursing care. Orne also found that nurses' knowledge about NDEs and their "religious precepts" influenced their attitudes toward the topic of near-death phenomena. The greater the nurses' knowledge base, the more positive their attitude. Nurses working in emergency departments had the greatest knowledge concerning NDEs, while nurses in maternity units had the least. Of all the nurses involved in this study, those working in psychiatric services were the most accepting of these phenomena.

One aspect of the near-death experience that has recently begun to receive the attention of near-death researchers is pediatric NDEs, in which children, while still children, report their experiences. While the near-death literature contains several hundred published accounts of adults recounting their childhood NDEs, the literature contains less than 20 documented cases of children describing their NDEs.

Most of the work on pediatric near-death experiences has been car-

ried out by Melvin Morse and his associates (Morse, 1983; Morse, Castillo, Venecia, Milstein, and Tyler, 1986; Morse, Conner, and Tyler, 1985). Nancy Bush has also contributed a documented pediatric case to this small field of literature (1983). These authors believe the pattern of the pediatric NDE is quite similar to that reported by adults. The five stages Ring identified for adult near-death experiences have also been found by Morse and his coworkers in pediatric NDEs.

Acknowledging their sample was small and nonrepresentative, the Morse group did note two differences between pediatric and adult NDEs. The pediatric near-death experiences they studied never contained a life review, nor did their young respondents report experiencing an altered sense of time. William Serdahely (1989–90) studied an eight-year-old boy whose NDE was precipitated by nearly drowning when he was seven. This pediatric respondent also did not have a life review during his NDE, but he was quite emphatic about the fact that time ceased to exist while he was out-of-body, a finding commonly reported for adult NDEs.

One feature unique to Serdahely's pediatric case is that while the boy did not encounter any deceased relatives during his NDE, he was greeted by two deceased family pets during his tunnel experience. The deceased pets comforted him, and after being licked by his dog, the boy found himself back in his body, having regained consciousness in the hospital.

Although our acceptance of people's near-death experiences has improved, their origin is, obviously, difficult to verify. In an attempt to explain the NDE scientifically, numerous theories have been suggested in recent years. Among these are stress-induced limbic lobe dysfunction (Carr, 1982), depersonalization (Noyes and Kletti, 1976a, 1976b, 1977), ego regression (Prince and Savage, 1966), Freudian reductionism (Rank, 1971), drug-induced hallucinations (Rogo, 1984), and birth-recall models (Grof and Halifax, 1977; Sagan, 1979). Likewise, many articles have been published refuting these hypotheses (Becker, 1982; Greyson, 1983b; Grosso, 1981). Of all the research to date, none constitutes absolute scientific proof regarding the authenticity of the near-death experience. However, the findings accumulated thus far have been beneficial in reducing fear of death (Ring, 1982), deterring suicide (McDonagh, 1979; Ring and Franklin, 1981–82), and assessing personal values (Greyson, 1983a; Ring, 1984).

Whether the NDE is a physiological, psychological, and/or spiritual phenomenon, some thirteen million adults in the United States claim to have experienced some form of out-of-body transcendence while in a state of clinical death or near death (Gallup, 1982). Its historical roots

lend some credence to the authentic foundation of this occurrence. In an attempt to increase our knowledge about NDEs through research and anecdotal accounts, we can gain further insight into what might lie beyond death and learn a little about who we are in the process.

## References

- Audette, J. R. (1979). Denver cardiologist discusses findings after 18 years of near-death research. *Anabiosis* [East Peoria], *1*, 1–2.
- Audette, J. R. (1982). Historical perspectives on near-death episodes and experiences. In C. R. Lundahl (Ed.), *A collection of near-death research readings* (pp. 21–43). Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall.
- Becker, C. B. (1981). The centrality of near-death experiences in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, *1*, 154–171.
- Becker, C. B. (1982). The failure of Saganomics: Why birth models cannot explain near-death phenomena. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, *2*, 102–109.
- Becker, C. B. (1985). Views from Tibet: NDEs and the *Book of the Dead*. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, *5*, 3–20.
- Bertman, S. L. (1979). Communicating with the dead: An ongoing experience as expressed in art, literature, and song. In R. Kastenbaum (Ed.), *Between life and death* (pp. 124–155). New York, NY: Springer.
- Budge, E. A. W. (1956). *The book of the dead* (2nd ed.). London, England: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Bush, N. E. (1983). The near-death experience in children: Shades of the prison-house reopening. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, *3*, 177–193.
- Carr, D. B. (1982). Pathophysiology of stress-induced limbic lobe dysfunction: A hypothesis for NDEs. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, *2*, 75–89.
- Ch'en, K. K. S. (1964). *Buddhism in China*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Eliade, M. (1971). *Yoga: Immortality and freedom*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Flynn, C. P. (1982). Meanings and implications of NDEr transformations: Some preliminary findings and implications. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, *2*, 3–14.
- Flynn, C. P. (1984). Death and the primacy of love in works of Dickens, Hugo, and Wilder. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, *4*, 125–141.
- Fremantle, F., and Chogyam, T. R. (1975). *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Berkeley, CA: Shambhala.
- Gallup, G., Jr. (1982) *Adventures in immortality: A look beyond the threshold of death*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Greyson, B. (1981). Toward a psychological explanation of near-death experiences. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, *1*, 88–103.
- Greyson, B. (1983a). Near-death experiences and personal values. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, *140*, 618–620.
- Greyson, B. (1983b). The psychodynamics of near-death experiences. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, *171*, 3767–381.
- Grof, S., and Halifax, J. (1977). *The human encounter with death*. New York, NY: Dutton.
- Grosso, M. (1981). Toward an explanation of near-death phenomena. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, *1*, 3–26.
- Hart, H. (1956). Six theories about apparitions. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, *50*, 153–239.
- Kastenbaum, R. (Ed.). (1979). *Between life and death*. New York, NY: Springer.

- Lee, A. (1978). The Lazarus syndrome: Caring for patients who've returned from the dead. *RN*, 41, 53-64.
- Living Bible, The*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House.
- Lundahl, C. R. (Ed.). (1982). *A collection of near-death research readings*. Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall.
- McDonagh, J. (1979, August). *Bibliotherapy with suicidal patients*. Paper presented at the 87th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, New York, NY.
- Moody, R. A., Jr. (1975). *Life after life*. Covington, GA: Mockingbird.
- Moody, R. A., Jr. (1977). *Reflections on life after life*. St. Simon's Island, GA: Mockingbird.
- Morse, M. L. (1983). A near-death experience in a seven-year-old child. *American Journal of Diseases of Children*, 137, 959-961.
- Morse, M. L., Castillo, P., Venecia, D., Milstein, J., and Tyler, D. (1986). Childhood near-death experiences. *American Journal of Diseases of Children*, 140, 1110-1114.
- Morse, M. L., Conner, D., and Tyler, D. (1985). Near-death experiences in a pediatric population. *American Journal of Diseases of Children*, 139, 595-600.
- Murphy, G. (1945a). An outline of survival evidence. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 39, 2-34.
- Murphy G. (1945b). Difficulties confronting the survival hypothesis. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 39, 67-94.
- Murphy, G. (1945c). Field theory and survival. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 39, 181-209.
- Noyes, R., Jr. (1972). The experience of dying. *Psychiatry*, 35, 174-184.
- Noyes, R., Jr., Hoenk, P. R., Kuperman, S., and Slymen, D. J. (1977). Depersonalization in accident victims and psychiatric patients. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 164, 401-407.
- Noyes, R., Jr., and Kletti, R. (1976a). Depersonalization in the face of life-threatening danger: A description. *Psychiatry*, 39, 19-27.
- Noyes, R., Jr., and Kletti, R. (1976b). Depersonalization in the face of life-threatening danger: An interpretation. *Omega*, 7, 103-114.
- Noyes, R., Jr. and Kletti, R. (1977). Panoramic memory: A response to the threat of death. *Omega*, 8, 181-184.
- Noyes, R., Jr., and Slymen, D. J. (1978-79). The subjective response to life-threatening danger. *Omega*, 9, 313-321.
- Oakes, A. R. (1981). Near-death events and critical care nursing. *Topics in Clinical Nursing*, 3, 61-78.
- Orne, R. M. (1986). Nurses' views of NDEs. *American Journal of Nursing*, 86, 419-420.
- Osis, K. (1961). *Deathbed observations by physicians and nurses*. New York, NY: Parapsychological Foundation.
- Osis, K., and Haraldsson, E. (1977b). Deathbed observations of physicians and nurses: A cross-cultural study. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 71, 237-259.
- Prince, R., and Savage, C. (1966). Mystical states and the concept of regression. *Psychodelic Review*, 8, 59-75.
- Rank, O. (1971). *The double*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Rawlings, M. (1978). *Beyond death's door*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- Rhodes, L. (1982). The near-death experience enlarged by Swedenborg's vision. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 2, 15-35.
- Ring, K. (1980). *Life at death: A scientific investigation of the near-death experience*. New York, NY: Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan.
- Ring, K. (1982). *Near-death studies: A new area of consciousness research*. Storrs, CT: International Association for Near-Death Studies.
- Ring, K. (1984). *Heading toward omega: In search of the meaning of the near-death experience*. New York, NY: William Morrow.



- Ring, K., and Franklin, S. (1981-82). Do suicide survivors report near-death experiences? *Omega*, *12*, 191-208.
- Rogo, D. S. (1984). Ketamine and the near-death experience. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, *4*, 87-96.
- Ross, B. (1979). The same old story: A historical perspective. In R. Kastenbaum (Ed.), *Between life and death* (pp. 29-44). New York, NY: Springer.
- Sabom, M. B. (1982). *Recollections of death: A medical investigation*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Sagan, C. (1979). *Broca's brain*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Schorer, C. E. (1985-86). Two Native American near-death experiences. *Omega*, *16*, 111-113.
- Serdahely, W. (1989-90). A pediatric near-death experience: Tunnel variants. *Omega*, *20*, 55-62.
- Siegel, R. K., and Hirschman, A. E. (1984). Hashish near-death experiences. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, *4*, 69-86.
- Stevenson, I. (1977). Research into the evidence of man's survival after death. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, *165*, 152-170.
- Straight, S. (1984). A wave among waves: Katherine Anne Porter's near-death experience. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, *4*, 107-123.
- Swedenborg, E. (1928). *Heaven and hell*. New York, NY: Swedenborg Foundation.
- Walker, B. A., and Russell, R. D. (1989). Assessing psychologists' knowledge and attitudes toward near-death phenomena. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, *8*, 103-110.
- West, D. J. (1948). The investigation of spontaneous cases. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, *8*, 264-300.
- Widdison, H. A. (1982). Near-death experiences and the unscientific scientist. In C. R. Lundahl (Ed.), *A collection of near-death research readings* (pp. 3-17). Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall.