

Journey to the Edge: Faith and Near-Death Experiences

Part 1: What Is a Near-Death Experience (NDE)?

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Scripture: Isaiah 26:19; John 11:25-26

I. An Out-Of-This-World Experience

In the Jewish and Christian scriptures, from the mouths of prophets and Jesus himself, we hear claims that our lives don't end after we physically die. Isaiah speaks of a day when "those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy." As Christians, we proclaim Christ's resurrection from the dead, and that those who believe in him will never die. These claims about life continuing after death lead to two basic questions, one of which is quite modern, the other has been asked continuously throughout history.

The question rarely asked by the ancients is, "Is life after death real, or is it just wishful thinking?"

The question perennially asked is: "What might the afterlife be like?"

In the last few decades, we have come shockingly close to answering both of these questions. Thanks to the medical community's vastly enhanced ability to revive people who were quite close to physical death, or who were even pronounced clinically dead, there has been a sharp increase in the reports of what are now called "Near-Death Experiences" (NDEs). That is, experiences where someone seems to temporarily cross over to the other side, but returns to their physical body. These people speak of having experiences that are so far beyond their earthly experience that they struggle to find words to describe them, yet they also regularly speak of these experiences as being more real than anything they've ever experienced before.

Incidentally, since putting out the call for your NDE stories last week, I've had five conversations with parishioners or their friends and relatives who have experienced some form NDE. Two additional people approached me who have had what is known as "Shared Death Experiences." A Shared Death Experience is one where the person participates in some way in another person's passing. A visitor last week reported seeing her daughter standing at the foot of her own bed wearing beautiful new clothes, smiling, and holding someone's hand at the moment her daughter's physical body succumbed to death in that bed. A church member reported holding her husband's hand as he was dying, but then her husband said, "You've got to let go now. Jesus is on the way and he needs my hand." She let go. He took a couple more breaths, and died. I myself have had two Shared Death Experiences. Isn't it interesting how pervasive these kinds of experiences are, even as they're so rarely talked about in public?

While Near Death Experiences tend to be quite varied, with no single experience exactly replicating another, what is becoming clearer as researchers cull through tens of

thousands of NDE reports, and subject these reports to statistical analysis, is that common threads may be found. A dozen or so characteristics emerge that are frequently attested by experiencers regardless their cultural context, ethnic identity, religious beliefs – or even lack of prior religious beliefs.

What is gradually emerging is a picture of the afterlife that I personally find compelling and believable. Call it a “geography of heaven.” Even though this geography is a bit fuzzy and imprecise – like “looking through a mirror darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12) – what I find especially inspiring about Near Death Experiences is not only what they suggest about the afterlife, but what they tell us about our present life. As we’ll find throughout the series, they reveal something about why we’re here, and what our purpose is.

I get especially interested when ancient beliefs about the afterlife are confirmed by NDE experiencers. Yet, I also find it interesting when common NDE characteristics appear to contradict certain long-held beliefs, either within a particular religion or beliefs of the NDE experiencers themselves. For instance, an atheist or Jew might find themselves welcomed into the hereafter by Jesus – which comes as a surprise both to them and to those who believe heaven is only inhabited by Christians. Similarly, a Christian may be welcomed by a friend or relative from another faith. It’s like this “Christian Pluralism” thing we were talking about in our last series has some basis in more than just wishful thinking.

Of course, Near Death Experiences themselves could be the product of wishful thinking, or hopeful expectations based on the prior beliefs of those who report having them. That’s why I’m loving all the scientific research that has been appearing in recent years. Science may not be able to determine the difference between a “real” NDE and a fake or imagined one, but at least science can isolate accounts from people whose deaths, or near-deaths, are objectively verifiable, and cull through thousands of such reports to isolate themes that transcend religious or cultural background or bias.

This morning we’re going to focus on two people’s NDE stories that reflect two commonly reported elements. Again, NDEs are quite varied and not every NDE contains one or both of these elements. They simply surface regularly in people’s accounts.

The first common element is known as an “out of body” experience in which a person reports floating above their surroundings as death was immanent. In a surprising number of cases, the person is accurately able to recount what happened during that time even though they were in a coma, or were even clinically brain dead.

An example of this kind of out-of-body NDE comes from my own mother, Phyllis Elnes. My mom is one of the fortunate souls whom medical personnel have been able to revive after experiencing heart failure. As it happens, 10-20% of those revived report having a Near-Death Experience. This fact has not escaped the notice of cardiologists, many of whom are now on the cutting edge of NDE research.

When I was a young boy, my mother went to the hospital for a medical procedure. Following the procedure, while still under sedation, she went into cardiac arrest. My mom remembers suddenly waking up, floating above her body, and looking down over the whole scene as it transpired. A nurse's aide was frantically trying to find her pulse. After a few different attempts, she ran out of the room seeking help.

My mom's attention then turned to the intense beauty, peace, and love she felt surrounding her – a peace and love that has never left her. When asked to describe what she saw and felt, she has a very hard time finding the right words. This ineffability is perhaps the most common element of NDE reports. People see colors they have never seen, hear beautiful sounds they have never heard. The love and peace many feel transcends any experience they have ever had by many orders of magnitude.

The next thing my mom remembers is the RN entering the room, having been alerted to the situation by her aide. After trying unsuccessfully to find a pulse herself, she gave a sharp pound on my mom's chest with her fist, using a procedure that is rarely used today but is known as a precordial thump. Her heart restarted. At that moment, my mom experienced being sucked back down into her body. All the way down she was crying, "No, no, no!" She didn't want to leave that special place and go back to the pain.

Long after this experience, my mom wrestled with feelings of guilt over wanting to move further into that loving and peaceful realm without thinking for a moment about the affects her death would have had on her husband and two young boys. Curiously, this lack of concern for those left behind is also quite common in NDEs. In fact, about three-fourths of NDE experiencers say that the afterlife is "*a blissful state of peace and tranquility*, with no pain or suffering."¹

As a child, I was never really offended by my mom's lack of concern for us during her experience. The peace and tranquility she felt gave me some assurance that, when I die, I too will be at peace, untraumatized by the trauma of others. Also, it was clear that the love and peace my mom felt during her experience really did remain with her. She was – and still is – a fabulously loving mother. And, she has always felt that she returned to this life to fulfill a higher purpose related to loving and helping others. She still takes this mission with upmost seriousness, even at age 88.

Once again, my mother's experience closely mirrors other NDEs. One of the most common characteristics of an NDE is that the experience changes people's lives, often convincing them that they have come back for a reason, to fulfill a higher purpose. Many believe that we're all here to serve a higher purpose, related to our specific path in eternity.

Before going further, I invite you to pause for a couple of minutes to ask yourself if you have ever had an experience that suggested your life serves a higher purpose? If so, did you accept the experience, or suppress it?

¹ Bruce Greyson, *After*, p. 131. (See addendum)

II. The Red MGB

Approximately two-thirds of those who experience NDEs report encountering someone known to them, such as a relative or friend who has died. Since we have no way of verifying people's encounters with others, it may be tempting to attribute these accounts to mere dreamlike states, or wishful thinking. Before rushing to such a conclusion, two facts should give us pause: First, research suggests that people whose experience moves beyond floating above their earthly body and takes them into another realm don't encounter those who are still alive on earth. The absence of such people tends to rule out the dream hypothesis. In everyday life, we dream about people who are still alive all the time, and only occasionally dream of the deceased. Further, a certain number of NDE experiencers report encountering people they *believe* are still physically alive but, in fact, were dead at the time of their NDE. These experiences are especially hard to explain away.

Consider the case of our second near-death experiencer, Jack Bybee.² Jack was hospitalized with severe pneumonia at age twenty-six, in his native South Africa. While in the hospital, his condition continued to deteriorate until he was moved into an oxygen tent. Over the course of several weeks, he became friendly with a nurse named Anita, from the farmlands of the Western Cape. He even flirted a bit with her. One day, Anita told Jack that her 21st birthday was coming up that weekend, and that her parents were arriving from the country to celebrate. She fluffed up his pillows, as she always did and, as she turned to leave, he caught her hand and wished her happy birthday.

In the next 24 hours, Jack's fragile condition took a steep nosedive, to the point where he went into a deep coma and experienced an NDE. During the experience, Jack encountered Anita on the other side, much to his surprise. When he asked what she was doing there, she playfully responded, "Why Jack, I've come to fluff up your pillows, of course, and to see that you are all right." Then she continued, "But, Jack, you must return. Go back. Tell my parents I'm sorry I wrecked the red MGB. Tell them I love them."

When Jack came out of his coma, he told his attending nurse that he had encountered Anita and what she had said. The nurse burst into tears and fled the room. Jack later learned that Anita and the nurse had been great friends. Anita had been surprised by her parents, who loved her dearly and presented her with a red MGB sports car. Anita had jumped into the car, and in her excitement, raced down the highway along the steep slopes of nearby Table Mountain. At one particularly sharp turn, known locally as "Suicide Corner," her car ran off the road and hit a concrete telephone pole, killing her instantly.

There was no way Jack could have known about Anita's death while in a coma. Nor, of course, could he have known of the red MGB, which was a surprise even to Anita when she met up with her parents.

² Jack's story is recounted in Bruce Greyson's book, *After*, pp. 132-133. See addendum for publication info.

When it comes right down to it, what is most interesting to me about Near Death Experiences like Jack's or my mother's is not what they teach us about the afterlife, but what they teach us *this* life.

For instance, if we can be reasonably assured that our consciousness continues after we die, then we have little reason to fear death. Perhaps, even, we might dare to live more boldly. Some of us might be more willing, even, to risk our lives to help others, knowing that death is not the end but, as author Anne Lamott says, "is just a major change of address."

And, if we can be reasonably assured that in the next stage of life we may continue to be connected to those we know and love, then this suggests that the bonds of love we form here in this life are more powerful than death itself. What a testimony to the power of love! And what a reminder of the value of developing truly loving relationships.

Our ongoing connection with others also tells us that no one is an isolated individual, having their own personal and private eternal experience. Our lives are bound up with each other from start to finish – in this life and the next.

So, this guy named Jesus who claimed long ago that loving God, and loving our neighbor as ourselves are the most important things we can do may have known what he was talking about! Could it be that Jesus also stressed forgiveness so much, and the need to love even our enemies, because these people also may be a part of our deep future? I guess we'll all find out soon enough. Hopefully we'll have learned a thing or two about loving and forgiving those who make us uncomfortable before then!

So, are you intrigued about what else Near-Death Experiences might tell us about this life and the next? Trust me, we've just gotten started! The series continues June 9th.

ADDENDUM: RECOMMENDED READING

(Not at all comprehensive, just six of the most informative books I've read thus far.)

Comprehensive studies of many NDEs that highlight regularly-occurring features:

Bruce Greyson, M.D., *After: A Doctor Explores What Near-Death Experiences Reveal about Life and Beyond*. St. Martin's Essentials, 2021

DJ Kadagian et al. *Crossover Experience: Life After Death – 100 Exceptional Near Death Experiences*. Project Shift, 2022

John J. Graden, *Near-Death Experiences of Doctors & Scientists*. Seconds Out, 2015.

Individual Accounts of NDEs that I find most convincing and compelling:

Eben Alexander, M.D. *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife*. Simon & Schuster, 2012.

Vincent Todd Tolman. *The Light After Death: My Journey to Heaven and Back*. Ascend Publishing, 2022 (I've spoken to the author on Zoom!)

Rajiv Parti, MD. *Dying to Wake Up: A Doctor's Voyage into the Afterlife, and the Wisdom He Brought Back*. Atria Paperback, 2016.