

MEETING WITH THE LIGHT

Ever since the famous books *Life After Life* and *Return from Tomorrow*, we have all heard, in one way or another, of near-death experiences (NDEs). The typical experience of those who reach the other side during a “clinical death” roughly entails the following sequence. At first they realize that death isn’t what they imagined. They float in spirit above their body and see everything being done to it, as if from the outside. The whole of their lives passes quickly in review in front of their sight. Then, they travel at infinite speed through a tunnel and, on the other side, meet a being of light, of a radiance much brighter than the sun yet neither burning nor blinding. The being envelops them in an all-encompassing love and acceptance. A review and judgment of their lives may follow but is more rare. This is the basic pattern, although the sequence is not always complete, and other stages can also follow.

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross was one of the pioneers in the study of these phenomena, beginning as early as 1977. Some of her observations are of interest here. A first experience is reported even from patients who had been blind for at least ten years: they could describe all the details and colors of the operating room in which they were, a first indication that they are not seeing with their physical eyes. The Swiss doctor also reports that the tunnel is not as universal an experience as has been made popular in more recent days. However, in one form or another, the step after death is represented as a threshold: if not a tunnel, then a bridge, river, or gate. In one of her own NDEs, Kübler-Ross had to go through a mountain pass covered with wildflowers, an image most likely culturally bound to her upbringing.¹¹

While all of the above has been abundantly described elsewhere, there is another part to the story. Not all near-death experiences are alike. Some are decidedly different in pattern and, for lack of better word, “negative” or mixed (negative to positive) to contrast them with classical, “positive” experiences. What the percentages are remains arguable, as is whether or not we could really determine them. The problem may lie beyond science or methodological issues. It is important, however, to be aware of these other possibilities, so as not to have a schematic or sensationalistic view of the facts. We will return to the negative experiences later in the chapter.

In order to classify the experiences, I will assume P. M. H. Atwater’s standpoint.¹² Her approach is new in the field; she looks at the experience in relation to the person. There is no such thing as a universal standard

experience; there is always a concrete person behind it. In order to understand the “purpose” of the experience, we have to look at the person’s whole life prior to the experience. Atwater believes that we should also look at life after the experience. Atwater’s methodology may derive in part from the different kinds of NDEs (positive and negative) she has personally experienced.¹³

In reality we cannot explain the “why” of something so vast, beyond human comprehension; but we can start feeling and sensing how it fits into the context, how it can provide meaning to the person’s life and how easy or difficult it may be for the person to integrate the experience.

The way I classify the experiences is simpler than Atwater’s, but very similar. Like Atwater, I define them according to whether you can call them positive or negative from the standpoint of the person concerned. In a strictly phenomenological process, there would be no such negative or positive approach. There can be a positive or negative outcome, however, depending on whether the individual makes use of the experience no matter how hard this may be, or undergoes a deep crisis and is not able to assimilate the new content.

The positive experiences correspond to the general profile that we have given at the introduction of the topic. The transcendent experiences are more complex or dramatic than that of the basic NDE. They include additional parts and could easily be the subject of an entire book.

Positive Experiences: Meeting the Light

Let us first look at some of the more common experiences, those we can call positive. We will look at children’s experiences from seventeen cases mentioned in *Closer to the Light*,¹⁴ and four cases that appear in *Transformed by the Light*.¹⁵ All these experiences stop at encountering the Light. All of the individuals, except one, experience the presence of the Light, either by seeing it from afar or by coming into contact with it. Except in one case, the Light is not identified or it is simply called God. All of these experiences are positive, except one undergone by a child who has attempted suicide.¹⁶ Children’s encounters entail no life review and no judgments or feelings about deeds performed in life. Among all the examples there is only one child wanting to stay in the Light. The others want to go back to their lives.

The following is the near-death experience of Spencer Christian (the weatherman on the television show *Good Morning America* in 1992), at age five:

I had a near-death experience when I was five years old. I was living in Newport News, Virginia, and I had gone into the hospital for what was thought to be a routine tonsillectomy.

They knocked me out with ether. While I was in surgery I began to hemorrhage severely and lost a great deal of blood. I know this because I was told, not because I really recall the loss of blood. I was told later that my loss of blood became so severe and I became so weak that I was near dying. The doctors thought they were going to lose me on the operating table. However, my memory of what happened while I was on the table is that I regained consciousness while the surgery was going on. I remember seeing the doctors and nurses working furiously over me and I could feel the pulling and tugging of things in my throat.

The next thing I remember is the sensation of being outside my body and being able to see from some point above the operating table. I was up in a position near the ceiling, looking down.

I recall feeling a complete loss of fear and panic. I just had a feeling of the most complete comfort and security that I have ever felt. I guess I liken it to the feeling of your mother holding you in her arms and rocking you.

I don't recall actually encountering a being that I would define as God. But I do recall the sense of having an option as to whether I wanted to go back or not. Somehow I do recall choosing to go back and reenter my body.¹⁷

Aftereffects of NDEs have been generally overestimated by a wave of enthusiastic commentators on the near-death phenomena. The truth of the matter is that there is no absolutely positive experience—even a positive experience can be interpreted negatively in some instances. An initial positive reaction can be followed by tormenting doubts about one's sanity. The person's knowledge and frame of reference, as well as the degree to which the experience is accepted by others make a drastic difference in the outcome. Context, as we mentioned above, plays an important part in defining what is positive or negative. Dannon Brinkley, who had a very elaborate NDE, mentions that a turning point in his recovery was a talk given by Raymond Moody that helped him reorient his life. Later, his personal friendship with him played an important role.¹⁸

One key symptom of the experience is found in a common reaction of the adult undergoing the encounter with the Light. At that stage the soul, gripped by an intuition of being home, wants to remain in the Light. A forerunner of these experiences, Benjamin Franklin, said after his own NDE, "I suffered a good deal, gave up the point in my mind, and was rather disappointed when I found myself recovering; regretting in some degree that I must now some time or other have all that disagreeable work to do over again."

What is it that makes even the most hardened materialist look at earthly experience with new eyes? Once again we will refer mostly to Atwater's results, since they include the context factor in their analysis. As we will see, nothing is black and white. The spiritual experience acts as an awakening, but the result of it in our own lives depends on our own exertion of will. There is no doubt, however, that many people look at an NDE as a major turning point in their life.

The most discussed aftereffect is a different view of body and self. Those who have left their body know, beyond doubt, that they are souls living beyond the physical. They acquire a different view about death and consequently a lower amount of anxiety and concern with the matter. It is life in the body that may cause problems. If we are much more than our body, the next burning question may be "Why do we have to deal with the limitations of it?"

Receiving unconditional love in the other world makes recipients of NDEs more accepting of everyone in their environment. They look at the miracle of each individuality with a true sense of wonder. With this new attitude comes a possible inability to discriminate and direct this love. The person may lend little credence to old codes of behavior and give them up entirely. The new behavior, on the other hand, may be very naïve. Proper discernment and a healthy sense of caution might not be used. Because of this the person becomes vulnerable to ill intentions. NDE recipients have been attacked, cheated, robbed, or otherwise mistreated for this very reason.

Another change occurs, not only in relationship to others, but in relation to the person's inner faculties. The near-death survivor is almost always more psychic, and may intuit future events. In telling of these experiences, she may lose discernment of what is appropriate to reveal and what is not. A feeling that time does not flow in the usual way may also emerge. Survivors live more easily in the present. This may lead toward their wish to live without clocks and watches, or refusing to make plans for the future. It is, in other words, an overall reversal of values that occurs after a near-death

experience. Survivors may have difficulty relating to mundane concepts; on the other hand, they may feel at home in a world of newly acquired ideas.

Since a reversal of old paradigms seems to take place in those who have experienced an NDE, it comes as no surprise that the personality itself is altered. NDEs, rather than set a norm, seem to bring what is most needed in terms of personality integration. A quiet person can turn into an energetic, convincing leader, or a “take charge” individual may all of a sudden experience the need to let things flow without exerting control.

All these changes can create a strain in relationships around the survivors. New behaviors and all-out trusting attitudes may cause concern over the mental health of the person, or simply be misconstrued. New psychic gifts may be simply odd or downright frightening. The new way of relating to time can ease previous tensions or cause major irritations. Of all these alterations, personality changes can be the most frightening. NDE survivors have been assigned to psychiatric wards, although this is less the case these days with our increased understanding of the phenomenon. Quite often the families have been sorely tested in accepting the “new person.”

For some individuals and families this has been an opportunity for a concurrent change of heart. For many others, the challenge has ended in divorce and other separations. Integrating the life-altering perspective of an NDE is an ongoing process. It takes, at the very least, a number of years, sometimes as long as five, seven—even more. In the chapter discussing Alcoholics Anonymous, the NDE of Bill Wilson will be looked at within the overall context of his biography. Integrating his experience against the background of, and damage caused by, his alcoholic past was the task of a lifetime.

The following is an example of an NDE that gives us the benefit of context both before and after the fact. It is taken from *Transformed by the Light*:

Suzanne, a 53-year-old mother of two, had a near-death experience twenty years ago . . . hers is an example of an NDE that led to an immediate and very visible transformation.

For nearly fifteen years Suzanne was married to an abusive husband. To the outside world, her husband seemed like the perfect man. In the privacy of their home, Suzanne suffered through almost daily sessions of slapping and shouting. She wanted to divorce him, but her religious parents told her to stay married and maybe things would change.

After fourteen years of miserable marriage, Suzanne experienced what she now calls “a stroke of luck.” While reaching into the glove compartment of her car, she failed to notice that the traffic ahead had come to a stop. She slammed into the rear of a stopped car while going approximately thirty-five miles an hour. She was taken to the hospital with internal bleeding. While her injuries were being assessed she had a cardiac arrest.

“In the midst of all this hospital chaos, I just zoomed out of my body and into a tunnel. I was walking down a tunnel with the most beautiful light at the end that was enveloping and warm. I could feel myself being surrounded by the most loving arms and my cheek could feel the warmth of being against someone whose chest I seemed to be leaning on. There were people in the distance and I wanted to go greet them.

A man’s voice, very warm and caring, held me back from going to the people. The voice seemed to be coming from whoever or whatever was holding me in that wonderful loving warmth. The voice said, ‘Suzanne, turn around.’ I turned around and I saw my children standing in mid-air. Then the voice said: ‘Go back and be a good mother.’”¹⁹

Suzanne’s life changed dramatically and immediately as a result of that message. She left her abusive husband and stopped going to the church where he was a mainstay. She went back to school and struggled, as many late-in-life students do, to get a degree. After a few years, she remarried and now has a healthy marriage and home.

Her faith is still intact, although in a different form. “I don’t go to church anymore, but I have a deep personal faith. For the longest time I thought that the warm entity that held me was Jesus and I was sure that the experience was a testimony to my faith. But I can never be a part of organized religion again. After standing so close to the light, I can’t bear bureaucracy in religion anymore.”

Near-death experiences affect people even at the physiological level. While studies are not exhaustive on this account, the following are observations made by those who have undergone such experiences or those who have accompanied people who have.

Survivors on the whole look and act younger. The ability to handle stress more easily may be one of the main causes of this change. They also become more sensitive to light and sound levels. People who previously liked rock

and roll music most often grow to dislike it for this reason. This heightened sensory perception extends to the other senses. Survivors feel that they can better perceive odors, textures, and tastes. This new sensitivity is accompanied by a heightened perception of electric or magnetic fields. Many anecdotes report that lights, clocks, or other electrical fixtures suddenly stop working around many of the survivors of NDEs. A last effect is the ability to more readily attract birds, animals, and small children.

Transcendental Experiences

We can now briefly cast a glance at the most developed and unusual NDEs, those that Atwater calls *transcendental*. In her book, a few lengthy examples are given. We will refer to experiences that have appeared in a book written by those who personally experienced these trials.

In *Beyond the Mirror*, Henri J. Nouwen, a Catholic priest and widely read author, provides a superb description of an experience of the cosmic and personal dimensions of the near-death experience.²⁰ During the period from December 1987 to June 1988, Nouwen experienced an extreme and deep anguish as a consequence of having to separate from a friend upon whom he had become very dependent. The irony did not escape Nouwen's self-analysis. In a book published almost ten years later, he recalls that during this time he was in a state of extreme anguish and wondered whether he would be able to hold on to life:

Everything came crashing down—my self-esteem, my energy to live and work, my sense of being loved, my hope for healing, my trust in God ... everything. Here I was, a writer about the spiritual life, known as someone who loves God and gives hope to people, flat on the ground and in total darkness. What had happened? I had come face to face with my own nothingness. It was as if all that had given my life meaning was pulled away and I could see nothing in front of me but a bottomless abyss.²¹

The crisis culminated in a car accident, where Nouwen, who was walking along frozen paved road, was hit by the side mirror of a van. For a while his life hung in the balance. The turning point was cleansing, healing, and powerful. About it, Nouwen says: "It was not a warm light, a rainbow, or an open door that I saw, but a human yet divine presence that I felt, inviting me to come closer and to let go of all fears." And further: "I knew that he was there for me, but also that he was embracing the universe."²² As he reflected on this

experience of divine love, Nouwen realized he needed new theological language to convey the depth and breadth of his new outlook on life. A diary he kept at the time holds this short entry entitled “Work Around Your Abyss”:

There is a deep hole in your being, like an abyss. You will never succeed in filling that hole, because your needs are inexhaustible. You have to work around it so that gradually the abyss closes. Since the hole is so enormous and your anguish so deep, you will be tempted to flee from it. There are two extremes to avoid: being completely absorbed in your pain and being distracted by so many things that you stay away from the wound that you want to heal.²³

These words graphically express Nouwen’s challenge in integrating his spiritual experience. Like others, he felt at home on the other side and wished to remain in the Light. Coming back, he felt, was the chance to express theological knowledge gained directly from experience of the other world. The challenge lay in finding the words to convey the otherworldly reality he had known firsthand.

The two following experiences are the most well known of all the literature on NDEs. We will look at what made them unique.

Betty Eadie clinically died in a hospital the night before undergoing a hysterectomy. Her experience of the tunnel is thus conveyed: “I felt as if I had been swallowed up by an enormous tornado. I could see nothing but the intense, almost tangible darkness. The darkness was more than a lack of light; it was a dense blackness, unlike anything I had known before.”²⁴

What her experience adds to other experiences is the extensive “spiritual training” she received. She remembers experiencing the creation of the Earth as if it were re-enacted before her eyes. She experienced the power of the “Word” and the importance of a living “imagination” as the key to better understand reality, and was given insight into the role of death in human evolution. She also witnessed shining examples of how souls decide to enter their bodies. In two instances she saw how the souls of a developmentally disabled person and of a homeless alcoholic actually belonged to very evolved individualities, happily undertaking the sacrifice of that existence for the progress of other souls.

George Ritchie's well-known experience blazed the trail for the recognition of NDEs. His was almost a complete opposite experience to that of Betty Eadie. He was given a vivid introduction to the world of souls who live chained to their desires, the lower rungs of the spirit world. His first encounter with the Light is followed with a closer approach that he describes in terms very similar to those of Nouwen: "He would be too bright to look at. For now I saw that it was not light but a Man who had entered the room, a Man made out of light, though this seemed no more possible to my mind than the incredible intensity of the brightness that made up His form."²⁵

A similar experience is told by Eadie: "I saw a pinpoint of light in the distance. . . . As I approached it, I noticed the figure of a man standing in it, with the light radiating all around him. As I looked closer the light became brilliant."²⁶

Something similar happens also to Howard Storm: "Soon the light was upon me. I knew that while it was indescribably brilliant, it wasn't just light. This was a living being, a luminous being approximately eight feet tall and surrounded by an oval of radiance. The brilliant intensity of the light penetrated my body. Ecstasy swept away the agony."²⁷

A final example, from the many in the specialized literature, comes from Sarah Hinze, whom we have already met in chapter 2 in relation to the Pre-birth Experiences. Sarah, the mother of nine, recalls the experiences that preceded a difficult birth. Her fifth pregnancy had ended in a miscarriage. In a dream, less than two months later, she was showed that the baby girl was only temporarily delayed in her homecoming. She also saw that the child was reluctant in leaving her heavenly home. After conceiving again, she was hemorrhaging and on the verge of miscarrying again. She prayed fervently and had a vision in which she seems to have experienced anew her own sense of loss in descending to incarnation. This was accompanied with fear and a sense of loneliness. The vision ended with the sense of the promise that incarnation offers. She soon returned to her senses and in full consciousness she recalls:

I sensed a being of power enter the room. I felt compelled to rise. I cannot explain how, but I knew it was Jesus Christ. I was totally immersed in His love. I begged Him to heal my body for the sake of the child within me. In answer, he conveyed these words to my mind: "I am the Great Physician. I will heal your body, and this baby will be born whole and well, for I have so decreed it." The promise delivered, His presence gently withdrew. I rested upon the bed, enveloped in a peaceful,

healing power. Soon, the pain and hemorrhaging stopped entirely. I was whole. And, above all, my baby was safe.²⁸

We have covered a vast array of the most vivid experiences of the meeting with the Light. Rudolf Steiner first described what we can describe as the new Christ encounter – in a more conscious experience – in his first Mystery Drama, *The Portal of Initiation* in terms that are reminiscent of much that has been said in the most transcendental experiences above. In scene 1 of the play the seeress Theodora first says: “Before my spirit stands a Form in shining light. And from it words sound forth to me. . . .” Later in the same dialogue she adds: “A human being emerges from the radiant light. It speaks to me: . . . The Christ once lived upon the earth, and from this life it follows that He encompasses as Soul men’s growth on earth.”²⁹ This statement introduces us to further aspects of the Light experience that we will discuss in the next chapter.

In many of the above experiences the Light weaves with the darkness. In fact, before reaching the Light, many souls experience their own darkness. George Ritchie found himself traveling outside his body towards an earthly city. He was in a place where the living and the dead existed side by side. In it he witnessed the presence of other departed souls, who could neither contact the souls next to them nor come out of their own darkness. Among these he noticed a group of other souls. Ritchie learned that these were the souls of suicides. At another time he found himself surveying from above the scene of a bar. Together with the living he could perceive the souls of the dead chained to their alcohol craving. Fights broke out between the souls for a desired glass of alcohol. Leaving the place of the living, Ritchie entered more deeply into this limbo-like scenario. Here were souls persisting in their negative earthly habits of hatred, lust, and destructive emotions. They were all unaware of the Beings of Light that hovered above them. Like them, Ritchie was unaware of these Beings for a while. The realization of their presence took him to a whole other dimension of spiritual existence, into experiences much more similar to those described by Betty Eadie.

The most vivid example among experiences of the “light filled” NDEs is that of Dannion Brinkley. Since his experience covers much of the territory we have already explored, we will look in some detail at his moral life. According to the author, “I was faced with the sickening reality that I had been an unpleasant person, someone who was self-centered and mean.”³⁰ Dannion Brinkley relived every action of his life from the perspective of the

victims of his violence or those who had died from the consequences of his actions. At the end of his experience Brinkley concludes:

I looked at the Being of Light and felt a deep sense of sorrow and shame. I expected a rebuke, some kind of cosmic shaking of my soul. I had looked at my life and what I had seen was a truly worthless person. As I gazed at the Being of Light I felt as though he was touching me. From that contact I felt a love and joy that could only be compared to the nonjudgmental compassion that a grandfather has for a grandchild. “Who you are is the difference that God makes,” said the Being. “And that difference is love.” There were no actual words spoken, but this thought was communicated to me through some form of telepathy.³¹

Brinkley experienced clinical death once more later, as he relates in his book. It is very instructive to know that he relived his moral life review, and that the first part of it (the first twenty-five years) was equivalent to what we have just described. He concludes: “Watching these early years again was painful, I won’t deny that, but the agony was tempered by viewing the years since the first experience.”³² It would appear that this experience has a lawful, objective place in Brinkley’s life and that it will still be there awaiting him at his final, real death.

We have been introduced to many dimensions of spiritual existence, what spiritual literature calls the “lower astral” and what organized religion would call hell or purgatory. It is to this realm of existence that we now turn to look at “negative” experiences, keeping in mind that this is only a relative term. Let us keep looking at this from a phenomenological perspective. To do this we turn once again to the direct experience of souls who have been vouchsafed knowledge that usually lies within the unconscious mind.