

Alex Bunn asks if there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Near death experiences

Rene's van aquaplaned out of control, smashing her skull on an industrial power pole...

I was moving headfirst through a dark maelstrom of what looked like black boiling clouds. I felt that I was being beckoned to the sides. That frightened me. Ahead was a tiny dot of bright light that steadily grew and brightened as I drew nearer. I became aware that I must be dead...I rushed greedily forward towards this light.

I arrived with an explosion of glorious light into a room with insubstantial walls. I was standing before a man in about his thirties, about six feet tall, reddish brown shoulder length hair and an incredibly neat short beard and moustache. He wore a simple white robe. Light seemed to emanate from him. I felt he had great age and wisdom. He welcomed me with great love, tranquillity, peace (incredible), no words. I felt as if "I could sit at your feet forever, and be content". This struck me as a strange thing to think, say or feel. The fabric of his robe fascinated me. I tried to figure out how light could be woven!"

IN FILMS SUCH AS FLATLINERS, RECENT TELEGRAPH ARTICLES AND THE JOURNAL OF NEAR DEATH STUDIES, A QUESTION IS BEING ASKED: 'COULD NDES BE GLIMPSES OF HEAVEN?'

What is a 'Near Death Experience'?

'Near Death Experiences' (NDEs) appear to offer objective insights into life after death. The media interest reflects a widespread belief that they constitute scientific evidence for an afterlife. In films such as *Flatliners*, recent *Telegraph* articles and the *Journal of Near Death Studies*, a question is being asked: 'Could NDEs be glimpses of heaven?' Dr Peter Fenwick, consultant neuropsychiatrist at the Maudsley Hospital, presides over the International Association for Near-Death Studies. In response to a 1987 QED documentary, he collated a database of over 300 NDE accounts. Common features include:

- feelings of overwhelming peace, joy and absence of pain
- an out of body experience, where the person comes to rest at a vantage point, frequently near the ceiling
- passing along a dark tunnel towards a pinpoint of light
- brilliant light drawing the person towards it



- a being of light: an indescribable experience, characterised by warmth and overpowering love
- life review with weighing up of past actions
- appearance of (usually dead) relatives or significant others
- point of no return, an impassable barrier
- wanting to stay but having to return to unfinished business or family needs

How common are NDEs?

The first *prospective* NDE study recently made headlines: six percent of cardiac arrest survivors on a coronary unit described a classical NDE and three percent more had experienced some of the above features.² Unfortunately, none were able to identify objects placed above eye level so as to confirm a literal out of body experience! In *retrospective* studies, up to 33% had had an NDE.^{3,4,5} Statistically, we have all looked after such patients.

Is there an organic explanation?

1. Are they drug induced?

In theory, drugs given during anaesthesia or as part of a resuscitation attempt could disorder brain function and produce elements of an NDE. However, only 14% of patients on Dr Fenwick's database had been given drugs at the time of their experience.

2. Are they endorphin-mediated?

The body's own pain-killing chemicals could induce a sense of euphoria. Still, only a fraction of people who undergo extreme stress, such as athletes, experience an NDE. There is a surge of endorphins following grand mal seizures but the effect is anything but euphoric and coherent visions are not reported.

3. Are they a result of cerebral hypoxia?

This elegant theory is based on the fact that most visual system neurones are devoted to the centre of the visual field. Hypoxia might cause random firing of neurones, resulting in a central dot of light that spreads out to the peripheries. Subjectively this would look like movement down a tunnel of light.

However, doctors may recall a student respiratory physiology experiment where subjects are attached to re-breathing circuits, become hypoxic and blackout in a similar way to fighter pilots in training; neither students nor pilots report NDEs.

Another anomaly relates to memory. Experience with head injury patients has taught that the more

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significant brain injury, the greater the amnesia. The temporal lobe is acutely sensitive to hypoxia so there should be no memory of such a hypoxic event. Moreover, we know that the EEG during cardiac arrest is flat.

So, what then is the substrate of these experiences? Is consciousness independent of brain activity? Fenwick claims that it is the clarity of the NDE, a self-perspective seldom afforded the normal conscious mind which appears to confound the definition of the dying brain.⁶ He points to the detailed panoramic life-review; people not only receive flashbacks of thought and action but also a realisation of how these have affected others around them. He does not believe that neurophysiology can explain these experiences but does concede that neural events could occur as consciousness returns and the recall projected back to unconscious period. Co-researcher Sam Parnia is even more convinced:

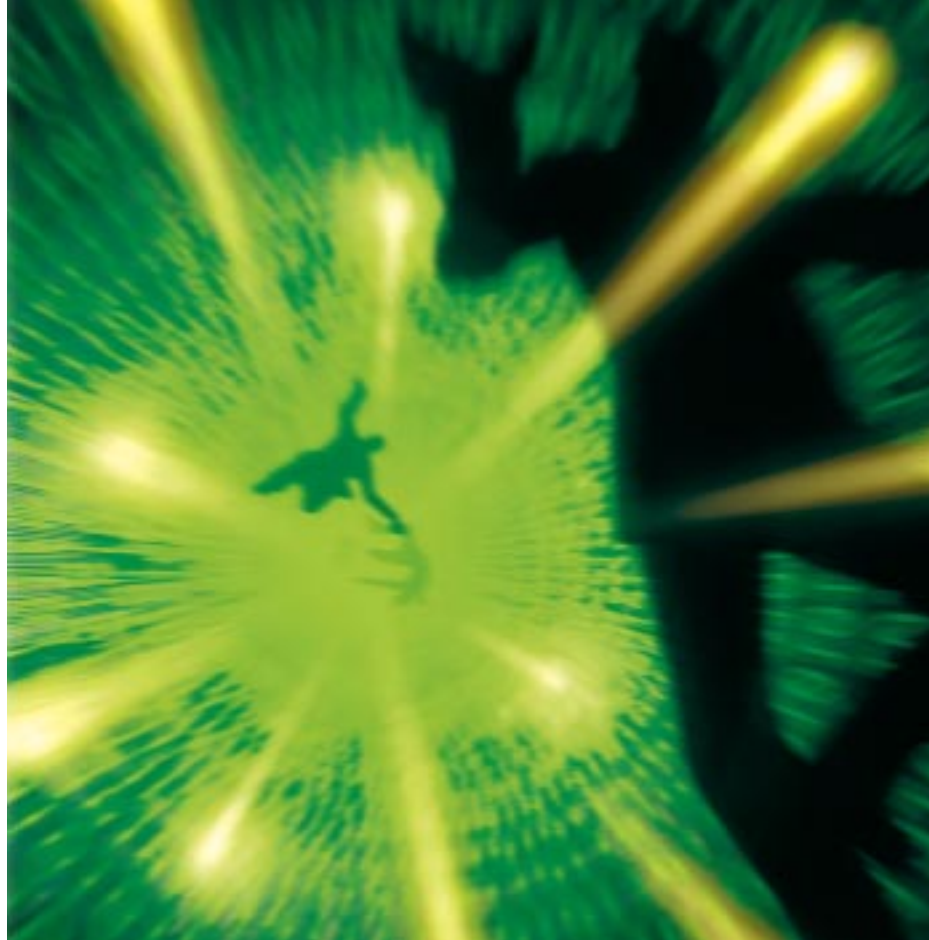
‘I started off as a sceptic but, having weighed up all the evidence, I now think that there is something going on. Essentially, it comes back to the question of whether the mind or consciousness is produced from the brain. If we can prove that the mind is produced by the brain, I don’t think there is anything after we die because essentially we are conscious beings. If, on the contrary, the brain is like an intermediary which manifests the mind, like a television will act as an intermediary to manifest waves in the air into a picture or a sound, we can show that the mind is still there after the brain is dead. And that is what I think these near-death experiences indicate.’⁷

4. Are they hallucinations?

NDEs are visions that subjects believe to be real. Whether they have a basis in external reality is debatable. Unlike NDEs, hallucinations are renowned for their subjective content that others cannot appreciate. However, despite some similarities, NDEs are quite varied and many are culturally laden.

5. Are they derived from upbringing or culture?

Children don’t commonly contemplate death but they do have NDEs. Many accounts come from



children less than seven with underdeveloped abstract thinking. Without preconceived notions, their NDEs are unlikely to be a product of wish-fulfilment. One man recalls surviving pneumonia as a five year old:

‘I saw the doctor put the sheet over my body as I too was rising over my own body. I clearly saw angels around the window, then I sort of drifted into my body...You don’t talk about these things as folks will think you are some kind of nut. Only my close family knows about this.’⁸

Children have more overtly religious experiences: a more concrete Heaven with golden gates, angels and a Jesus figure, whereas adults generally experience such a figure when faith is already present. Are children more spiritually receptive or merely more impressionable?

What about NDEs in other cultures? An Indian survey revealed similar visions with life reviews and judgements but more frequent religious beings. However, the apparent reason for return from the brink of death was commonly an administrative error or case of mistaken identity rather than a mission to complete or obligations to loved ones.⁹ This demonstrates the potential for cultural bias, a subjective interpretation of what must be an extraordinary experience. For example, what do we make of Rene’s Christ-like vision? Was Jesus, an ethnic Jew, really a six foot man with reddish brown hair or is this image derived from romanticised Victorian art?

6. Are NDEs a supernatural phenomenon?

Some accounts do not relate to life-threatening circumstances. Some people can meditate and have these visions at will. This questions whether all these experiences can be put down to

KEY POINTS

Near death experiences are surprisingly common, have standardised features, and are difficult to explain on the basis of drugs, endogenous endorphins, hypoxia, hallucinations or in terms of upbringing or culture. Recent research has led support to the belief that consciousness out-survives the brain, prompting speculation about the existence of an afterlife. But, even if NDEs do provide knowledge about the supernatural, Christians need to measure their content against the teaching and ‘real death’ experience of Jesus Christ to ensure they are not being deceived. Unlike personal experience, Jesus’ words are fully trustworthy, and we need to advise patients and colleagues accordingly.

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- 26 John 3:13

physiology. Indeed, there is no satisfactory neurological explanation, so it is tempting to ascribe the scientifically inexplicable to the supernatural. However, irrespective of the mechanism, NDEs could be supernatural revelations.

What do NDEs tell us about the afterlife?

Taken at face value, NDE accounts suggest that consciousness survives physical death. They confirm belief in an ecstasy that awaits us, a divine presence that often bears striking similarity to biblical descriptions of Christ. They are consistent with theistic doctrine on these points, even speaking of some form of judgement. Moreover, less well publicised are numerous negative encounters with eternity:

'I found myself in a place surrounded by mist. I felt I was in hell. There was a big pit with vapour coming out and there were arms coming out trying to grab mine...I was terrified that these hands were going to claw hold of me and pull me into the pit with them.'

Another woman refused to elaborate, saying 'I had a hell-type experience twenty years ago, and it has haunted me ever since'. Hellish encounters are described by one to twelve percent of reports and this is probably an underestimate as survivors are reluctant to talk about them.¹⁰

False reassurance?

Most commentators are comforted by the stories they select. Fenwick's concluding quote conveys a survivor's optimism: 'One thing is for sure, and that is that death has no fears for me'.

Where does this leave us? How do we weigh up contradictory versions of the afterlife? There is only one certainty: they can't all be right!

For example, what do we make of accounts that contradict biblical revelation? Take Rene's life review, in which she was burdened by guilt but then felt 'the balance was in my favour, and I received great love'. She then received a commission: 'It is time to live according to your beliefs, whatever they may be, for the end times are upon us!'¹¹

Her vision may be tantalising but does it give a reliable picture of God? The Jesus-like figure cannot be the historical Jesus of Nazareth. The real Jesus warned that our knowledge of and obedience to him in this life would determine who enters heaven.¹² Ultimately we will all bow before one reality, whatever we choose to believe before death.¹³

Are visions and revelations near truth experiences?

God does speak through dreams, visions and visitations¹⁴ but the Bible warns of the dangers of relying on this form of revelation; spirits need to be tested:

'Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.'¹⁵

This means that any message must be consistent with Jesus' 'in the flesh' teaching. His teaching is reliably recorded in the historical documents that make up the New Testament. Even if an angel preaches us a different message (for instance 'live according to your beliefs, whatever they may be') we are not to believe it.¹⁶

Alternative origins of revelation are someone's imagination¹⁷ or a more sinister power.¹⁸ We're warned that the devil himself can masquerade as an angel of light,¹⁹ offering just enough truth to attract us. False prophets typically tell us the lies 'our itching ears want to hear'.²⁰ However comforting, false reassurance is like dressing a serious wound with a plaster: it only serves to compound our spiritual state.²¹

Sadly, our sincerity offers no protection from deception: 'The heart is deceitful above all things'.²² Many people suppose that only those with a weak faith are sceptical. In contrast, Jesus warns the faithful of their vulnerability to false teaching. Instead, he commands us to be as shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves.²³

So who are we to believe on the subject of life after death?

Jesus returned from a real death experience

All of the witnesses considered above stopped short of the threshold of death, only to wonder at what really lay beyond 'the final frontier'. They are inevitably ignorant of what will really happen when we die. In contrast to them, Jesus definitely died when he was executed two thousand years ago. The Roman guard demonstrated his death by piercing his thorax with a spear and showing that his blood and plasma had separated.²⁴ However, three days later, Jesus appeared once more, recognisable but different. His disciples thought he was a ghost or vision but Jesus assured them, 'Touch me and see: a ghost does not have flesh and bones as I have'.²⁵ He alone has the authority to tell us what lies beyond death because only he, fully God and fully man, has been there: 'No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven - the Son of Man'.²⁶ We can trust his account of the way things are. Recorded in the Bible, his words have greater authority than any man's and must be the measure of all others.

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