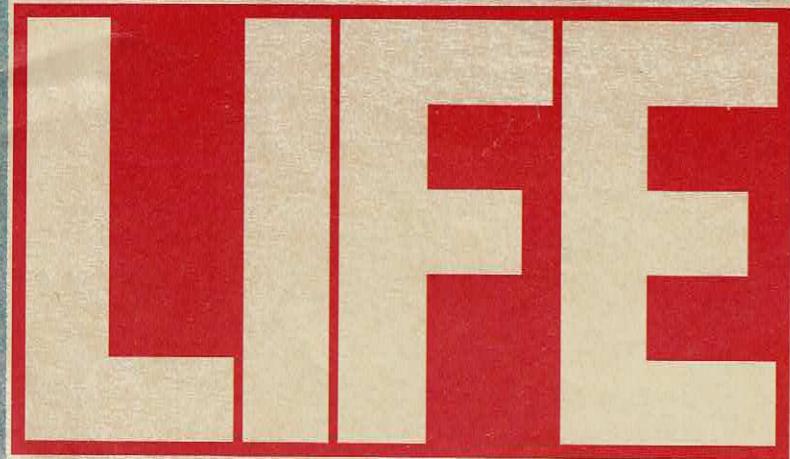


MARCH 1992/\$3.50



VISIONS OF
LIFE
AFTER
DEATH

The
Ultimate
Mystery



03

At the EDGE of

ETERNITY

As scientists study the meaning of near-death experiences, perhaps we can inch closer to an understanding of life by VERLYN KLINKENBORG

I was deathly ill, shaking with fever, when I arrived at the hospital," the woman remembers. "My temperature was almost 106 and I was having cardiac arrhythmias. I felt an incredible pain. The wall of my uterus was ripping apart. I was in septic shock, going into labor. As I lost consciousness I heard a voice shouting, 'I can't get her blood pressure!'

"And then, within the tiniest fraction of an instant, I was out of my body and out of pain. I was up on the ceiling in a corner of the room, looking down, watching doctors and nurses rush around frantically as they worked to save my life. Then one of the doctors, really upset, yelled, 'Shit!' And that somehow turned me over. Now I was in a sort of a tunnel, a cloudlike enclosure, a grayish opalescence that I could partially see through. I felt wind brushing against my ears, except I didn't have ears. I was there, but my body wasn't.

"I began to feel the most incredible, warm, golden, loving feeling, and the feeling was also a wonderful, warm, golden light. I was in this light, part of this light. There was a presence in the light, a wisdom, and that wisdom was the final word. The wisdom loved me and at the same time it knew everything about me. Everything I had ever done and felt was there for me to see. I wanted to proceed into the light and stay there forever, but I was shown that I had to go back and take care of my two children.

"In that same fragment of a second, I was back in my body, back in all the pain. My son was being delivered, and I heard everybody screaming, 'She's back!' I was so upset, so angry to be ripped away from the most wonderful peace in all the universe. And then they told me my son had been born dead.

"I have kept this experience to myself, but I go over it in my mind every night, and it has taught me three things. First, I know that death is not painful. I will never be afraid to die. Second, I know that it's important to be true to myself and to others, because I will be accountable for my life when it's over. I'm talking about eternity, something I'm going to experience for all eternity. And the third thing I know is that when you die you're not snuffed out. I know that I'm more than my body. There's a soul that's me. And I know that I, my soul, will always be there. I know for certain that there is life after death."



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—PROF. CAROL ZALESKI

STRANGE AND POWERFUL though it was, the experience that 12 years ago transformed a Philadelphia nurse named Grace Bubulka was far from unusual. All through history, people who have approached the border of death's kingdom have returned with eerily similar visions. But it was not until 1975 that knowledge of near-death experiences became a mass phenomenon, a subject of both scientific study and public controversy. In that year psychiatrist Raymond Moody wrote *Life After Life*, the first commercially published book to compile anecdotes about near-death experiences, or NDEs. In the intervening years, *Life After Life* has sold seven million copies and given birth to an industry. Now the increasingly open discussion of these visions has begun to change the climate of dying in America.

Where once there were only a few researchers working on the subject, there are now dozens worldwide: physicians, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, biologists, philosophers, theologians, parapsychologists, mediums, shamans, yogis, lamas and not a few journalists. There is a *Journal of Near-Death Studies* and an International Association for Near-Death Studies. There are support groups for people who meet to discuss their near-death experiences out of wonder, or fear. In 1975 Moody was able to interview in depth only about 50 persons who had had NDEs, but since then pollsters have estimated that some eight million Americans have had near-death experiences. Well over a thousand near-death stories have now been gathered, sorted and churned into statistics. In the debate over NDEs, proof meets disproof and expert witness testifies against expert witness. The sole undisputed evidence is the dramatic psychological effect of near-death experiences on the lives of those who have had them.

When she was 22, Kimberly Clark Sharp collapsed outside a motor vehicle bureau in Kansas and lay on the sidewalk, near death. "I found myself surrounded by dense, warm, foggy, gray material. In the fog I could see individual droplets of penetrating lightness and droplets of unfathomable darkness. Suddenly there was an explosion under me and reaching out to the farthest limits of my view was this light. It was absolutely alive, in a greater sense than we experience aliveness. It was so bright, the sun is not as bright, yet it didn't hurt my eyes. It filled up everything, and I was in the center of it. I was back with my creator. This light was all love, there was nothing there but love of the greatest intensity. I was being given information, in a communication between myself and the light, and I understood everything I was told. What is life, why we are born, universal kinds of knowledge. Profound, but there was a simplicity to it. It was like something I had known but had forgotten. It was heaven, more than ecstasy. It was a reunion of the highest order."

Most people who have NDEs experience some combination of strikingly similar and, by now, well-known features: the sense of being in a tunnel, the presence of a great light, a remarkable clarity of thought, strong feelings of warmth and love. Many report experiencing "panoramic memory," a moving recollection of one's entire life. Some of the most interesting accounts have come from those—mainly victims of cardiac arrest—who were able to provide accurate details about how they were brought back to life, details they observed while to all appearances lying dead in a hospital bed or on an operating table. In every case the victim found that despite unconsciousness, despite the temporary loss of all vital signs, despite apparent death, something new had been added to the memory.

Almost from the start, near-death experiences have been heralded as proof of life after death, usually by publishers of such accounts, if not by their authors. Some researchers, impelled by their belief in hard science, have set aside the question of whether NDEs really are experiences of a world beyond this world. Yet the question lingers, and not solely among the less earthbound members of the NDE fellowship. Carol Zaleski, a professor of religion at Smith College, in 1987 published *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times*. It is an extremely temperate work, scholarly, balanced and hard-headed, and it takes a carefully prudent view of conclusions about NDEs.



THE ASCENT INTO THE EMPYREAN, BY HIERONYMUS BOSCH (1450-1516). The soul comes to the end of its long journey and, naked and alone, draws near to the divine light.



TIBETAN PAINTING OF THE DEATH OF THE BUDDHA. At peace and without fear, the exalted one delivers his last sermon: "Look out your salvation with diligence."



'I don't try to overexplain these encounters; I just accept them. Sometimes science dismisses things when it doesn't have the tools for investigation'

—DR. DIANE KOMP

et, standing at the gas range in her Massachusetts kitchen, stirring a pot of black bean soup, Zaleski lets another, more personal side of her emerge. "I want to be as sophisticated as possible about the physiological, psychological and cultural conditions that trigger the death experience," she begins. "But to know what *triggers* an experience doesn't mean you've done the work of *evaluating* it. A hallucination can be a vehicle for an encounter with something deeply true. I want to keep the door open to the possibility that this is a gateway to the divine, an encounter with God. And it seems to me that if God wanted to draw our attention, God, in His or Her compassion and mercy, would use the language of our cultural repertoire, as crude as they are, as limited as they are. I think it would be just like God to speak to us rather hard-of-

hearing human beings in a form that we can hear." Diane Komp, an oncologist and professor of pediatrics at Yale University, agrees. For nearly 25 years she has stood at the deathbeds of children and listened to the calm, hopeful visions of their dying moments, which echo the stories told by children who have had near-death experiences. Early in her medical career, Komp sat with a family beside their seven-year-old girl, who was in the last stages of leukemia. "She had the final energy to sit up and say, 'The angels—they're so beautiful! Mommy, can you see them? Do you hear their singing? I've never heard such beautiful singing.'" Then the child died. "The word that most closely describes what I felt is 'gift,'" says Komp. "It wasn't just that the child was given the gift of peace in the moment of her death, but that this was a gift to her parents. ➤



TIBETAN PAINTING OF THE DEATH OF THE BUDDHA. At peace and without fear, the exalted one delivers his last sermon: 'Work out your salvation with diligence.'

And yet, standing at the gas range in her Massachusetts kitchen, stirring a pot of black bean soup, Zaleski lets another, more personal side of her thinking emerge. "I want to be as sophisticated as possible about knowing the physiological, psychological and cultural conditions that trigger a near-death experience," she begins. "But to know what *triggers* an experience doesn't mean you've done the work of *evaluating* it. A hallucination might be a vehicle for an encounter with something deeply true.

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"I don't try to overexplain these encounters," Komp says. "I just accept them. Perhaps it isn't something to be measured in terms that science is comfortable with, but sometimes science is quick to dismiss things when it doesn't have the tools for investigation."

Children tend to have simpler but purer near-death experiences than adults do—relatively free of cultural shadings—and a far greater number of children who come near death have NDEs than do adults. Those are the findings of Melvin Morse, a pediatrician in a suburb of Seattle and the au-

thor of *Closer to the Light*, a best-seller about children who have had NDEs. A burly, bearded man who speaks to his young patients as mildly as Mr. Rogers, Morse has interviewed more than 70 such children. Sometimes Morse just listens, sometimes he prompts the children with questions, sometimes he asks the younger children to draw what they saw on a large white sketch pad. Often the parents sit nearby on couches or at kitchen tables, puzzled or alarmed by what they are hearing, though their children speak with innocent assurance of an experience whose truth they do not question. "They are just filled with wonder, without a lot of inter-



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pretation," says Morse. "I think we get at the essence of it through them." Through their encounters with these children, both Komp and Morse have lost faith in their native skepticism. "When I was in medical school," says Komp, "I was hanging out somewhere on that nebulous continuum between agnostic and atheist." Her encounters with terminally ill children changed all that. She writes now in an openly Christian manner about using what she has learned to help dying children and their families prepare for death. As a medical student, Morse, too, was indifferent to "God, life after death, any of that stuff." Even now, he says, "I have a tremendous emotional barrier to all this. But you know how, when you are on an airplane, you hit the turbulence, and the thought comes, 'I'm scared, I'm going to die.' I was in a plane not long ago, we hit the turbulence, and I found myself with no fear. All I could think was, 'Now I'll get to see the light.'"

Many people who have NDEs consider them manifestations of God, and it is often glibly assumed that theologians rejoice in the possible evidence of an afterlife provided by NDEs. But that is not always the case. Msgr. Corrado Balducci, a theologian who lives in Rome and specializes in demonology and the paranormal, is now at work on a book about death and the hereafter that will examine, among other things, the anecdotes compiled by near-death researchers. "These 'postmortem visions' can be looked upon as good," Balducci says, "but we can't go beyond that. They cannot be considered proof of the hereafter because proof of the hereafter comes to us only from the word of God. We might consider them the *grace* of God. But we should not look for them. God wants faith from us. If someone believes in an afterlife simply because he had such an experience," he adds, "he is making a big mistake."

On May 29, 1969, during a fire-fight in Vietnam, Capt. Tommy Clack was hit in the right foot by an explosive. "I was immediately thrown in the air, and when I landed on the ground, I sat up and realized that my legs, my right arm and my right shoulder were gone. I lay down thinking I would die. I then lost my vision, but I was aware that medics were trying to save me. All of a sudden I was out of my body, looking at them working on me, and then they covered me with a poncho, indicative of death. We arrived at a MASH unit, and I was taken into an operating room. I watched them cut off my uniform, and at this point a massive bright light permeated the room. It was a wonderful, warm, good thing, like looking into the sun. Then, in a blink, I was back out at the battlefield. Around me were people I had served with who had died. They were moving away from me, communicating not with words. They were not in physical form, but I knew that was Dallas, Ralph, Terry, and they knew me. They tried to get me to go with them, but I would not go. Then, in the blink of an eye, I was back in the operating room, watching the scenario."

When people have NDEs, they at the very least put aside the fear of dying. To find that instead of a sting, dying carries with it the elation and clarity that so many have reported in their NDEs—that has extraordinarily far-reaching emotional consequences.

Stuart Twemlow is a 50-year-old psychoanalyst in Topeka, Kans. As a boy, he fell into a washtub and nearly drowned. "I remember floating in the water, seeing this wide screen before my eyes. I remember the all-of-life review, the panoramic view. Then my mother pulled me out, and I felt angry that she had, because I was enjoying where I was."

The effect, Twemlow says, was to overturn his life. "It's a shift from a universe in which you fight everything to one in which you flow with it. Every day of our existence we live with death—as a potential and as a certainty. People who have near-death experiences may never fear death again. Their faith is strengthened so that the sense of catastrophe with which they live is finally mastered. The NDE has a healing effect."

On that, everyone who has studied near-death experiences agrees. Dr. Bruce Greyson, a psychiatrist at the University of Connecticut Health Center and the editor of the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, attends a monthly support group for people who have had near-death experiences.



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The poet wrote: "A light there is in the beyond which makes the creator visible to the creature, who only in beholding him finds peace."

"If you're not afraid of death, the universe becomes a friendly enough place that you can afford to give up control," Greyson says. "It's a great paradox, but making death more attractive, as the NDE does, doesn't make people suicidal. On the contrary, it makes life more attractive."

But for those millions of us who have not experienced NDEs, numerous questions remain. Do near-death experiences prove the existence of an afterlife? Are near-death experiences "real," or are they hallucinations? Do they really confirm a separation of mind and body? Embedded in these questions are philosophical and psychological problems of such obdurate complexity that a dose of skepticism is appropriate.

To date, the word "science" has been freely tossed around by skeptics and NDE advocates alike, but what methodical research has been done on

near-death experiences is largely based on stories that are many years old. To this end, University of Virginia researchers Dr. Justine Owens and Dr. Ian Stevenson are establishing a sort of investigative strike force. The team, which will include an experimental psychologist, a psychiatrist, a cardiologist, a nurse and a biostatistician, will record accounts of NDEs right after they happen, before they can be altered by memory.

Their work may, for example, address the insistence of some skeptical physicians that NDEs are simply the effects of temporal lobe seizures, or psychoactive drugs, or sensory deprivation. Owens notes, "Even a good model of what was going on in the brain during a near-death experience would not explain it away, or explain the powerful aftereffects commonly reported, the sense of purpose and meaning in life."



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The first one I told about the experience," says a woman who had an NDE as a teenager, "was the doctor, and he immediately had my parents send me to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist said to my parents that this was just a result of the accident and me wanting to say something had happened. I felt that I had done something wrong by saying what had happened. I don't feel that way now. I feel it was God, and it was a very religious experience for me. I am 37 years old, and I have never told anybody about it since."

The near-death experience is so precisely balanced on the boundary of faith and science that, inescapably, it calls one or the other—or perhaps both—to question. If NDEs do not fit the frame of conservative theology, they fit the frame of rational science even less. The popular view of near-death experiences is based largely on a view of existence that has scarcely changed in millennia: the belief that the body is inhabited by a soul or spirit and that mind informs our consciousness and leaves the body at death.

Scientists find little evidence to support this view. According to Daniel Dennett, director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University and author of the highly regarded *Consciousness Explained*, "The various phenomena that compose what we call consciousness are all physical effects of the brain's activities." In Dennett's view, consciousness, like the brain itself, is simply a product of biological evolution. Still, scientists who insist that mental activity arises from the electrochemical operations of the brain have had little success explaining exactly how it works. As Dennett admits, "The very mysteriousness of consciousness is one of its central features—possibly even a vital feature without which it cannot survive."

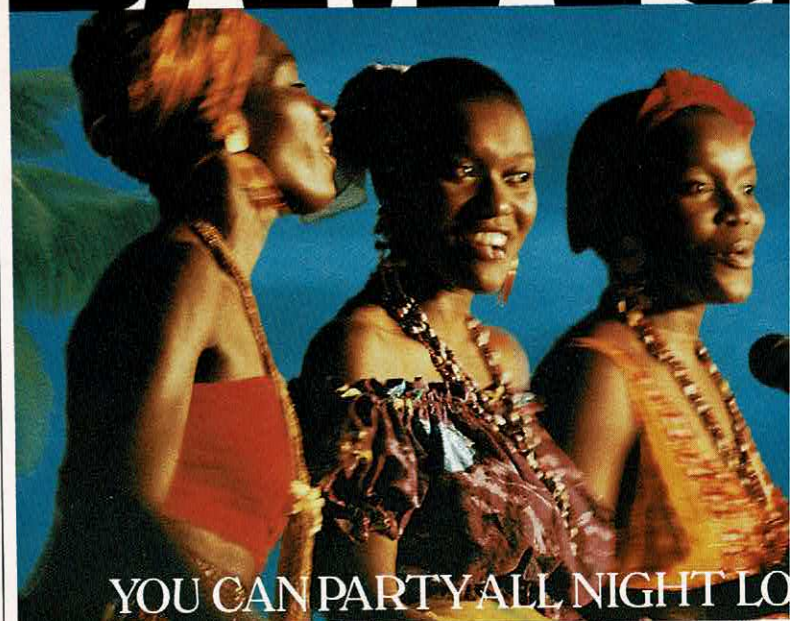
At present, near-death experiences, and our reactions to them, have far more to tell us about our culture's relation to death than they do about the existence of an afterlife or the separation of mind and body. Near-death experiences have become more frequent simply because modern medicine can rescue patients who in the past would simply have died; medical advances have, paradoxically, brought many of us closer to death. Few people understand what a virulent world this was even a hundred years ago, even in Europe and the United States, before medicine had anything modern about it. Vast numbers of people were brought to the brink of death by infection, childbirth and diseases we no longer consider threatening: measles, scarlet fever, whooping cough. Death was present among the living to an extent we can scarcely imagine. "One third of the human race perishes before reaching the age of 28 months," wrote the 18th century French naturalist Buffon. "Half the human race perishes before the age of eight years."

And of all those deaths and near-deaths in the long, bitter era before modern medicine, what portion brought on near-death experiences? The number must be immense. To die well was as important in those times as to live well. Within every faith and every denomination, there was a ritual preparation for death. If one had a deathbed vision—what in some cases we would now call a near-death experience—it belonged to a familiar pattern of religious belief, and it belonged to the relatives and friends who were there to witness it. But modern medicine has postponed death and hidden it away in hospitals, where patients die in the cold company of robots. The idea of near-death experiences is appealing partly because it redeems the ghoulish mess we've made of dying. To many, NDEs provide some of what religion has always provided: a way to talk about death before it comes and a glimpse of death as passage rather than termination.

"Death meets us everywhere," wrote the 17th century divine Jeremy Taylor, and "enters in at many doors." In the 20th century, this seems like an archaic view because modern medicine has so dramatically improved the length and quality of life itself. But modern medicine has not eradicated what Sir Thomas Browne, a contemporary of Jeremy Taylor, called "the incessant Mortality of Mankind." Whatever else near-death experiences may be, they are grounds for hopeful meditation.

"Many things," said Browne, who was both a physician and a man of faith, "are true in Divinity, which are neither inducible by reason nor confirmable by sense." He also said, "I love to lose my self in a mystery." And every mystery—even NDEs—offers the hope of a future resolution. ☐

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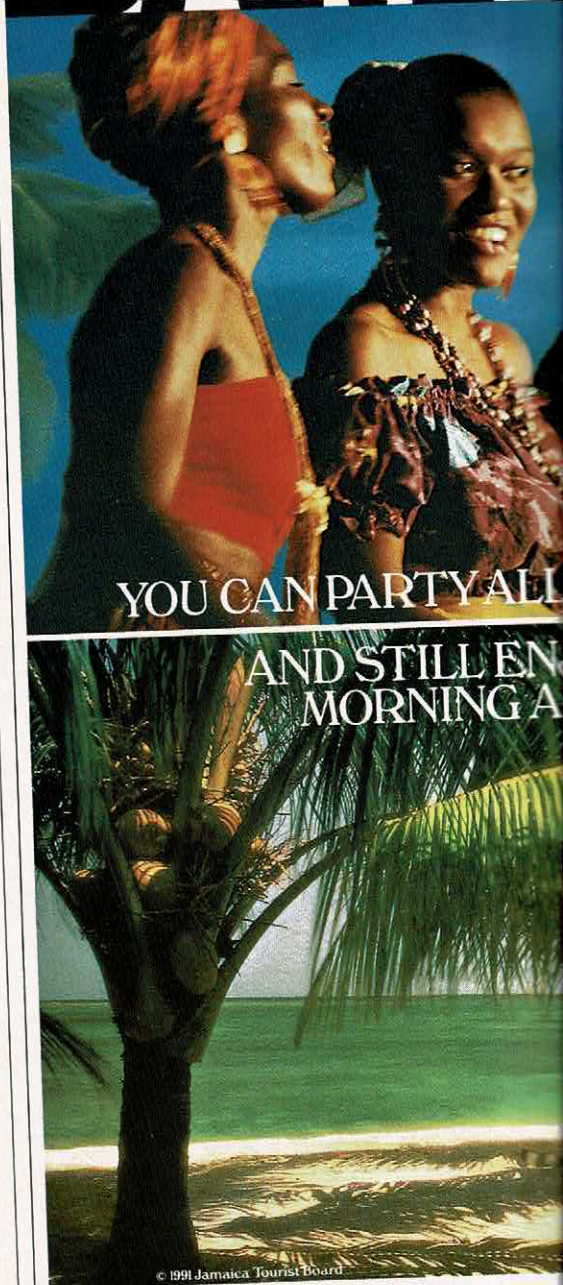
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