

BOOK REVIEW

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Children of the New Millennium: Children's Near-Death Experiences and the Evolution of Humankind, by P. M. H. Atwater. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 1999, 288 pp, \$14.00 pb.

Subtext for Children of the New Millennium, by P. M. H. Atwater. Charlottesville, VA: P. M. H. Atwater. Available from the author at P.O. Box 7691, Charlottesville, VA 22906-7691 or at <www.cinemind.com/atwater>.

In *Children of the New Millennium*, P. M. H. Atwater continues to analyze her extended research into near-death experiences (NDEs). However, this book is particularly concerned with children's NDEs. The reader should always keep in mind that Atwater is herself an experiencer, having had three near-death episodes in 1977. As Kenneth Ring (1984, 1992) aptly pointed out, ineffability is one of the characteristic features of NDEs, which are not easily comprehended and evaluated by nonexperiencers. Thus, a person who is him- or herself an experiencer is much better suited than the nonNDEr to understand the message of the NDE. Another background of Atwater's research is her extended experience with more than 3,000 adult experiencers whom she interviewed following their episodes.

For this book, Atwater investigated 277 people who had undergone NDEs while they were children and discloses the similarities and differences between children's and adults' NDEs. The causes of the childhood NDEs Atwater studied included, in order of frequency, drowning, major surgery, minor surgery such as tonsillectomies, child abuse, trauma, and lightning. Unlike many other authors, she accentuates both the positive and not-so-positive effects of NDEs, in this book even more

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deeply than in her previous writings (1988, 1994, 1996). In a most analytical way, she first presents her results, based on interviews of these 277 childhood experiencers, 52 of whom filled out extended questionnaires, and then develops her conclusions drawn from the results, step by step. As usual in her work, she offers very provocative ideas and implications. Throughout the book, Atwater presents many case reports, often with original drawings, to underline the development of her ideas, which she then discusses comprehensively with the findings and viewpoints of other authors from the extended literature on the subject.

Children of the New Millennium is divided into 11 chapters and an extended section of footnotes, commentaries, and additional ideas. Atwater further provides a subtext for this book, available by mail or from her website, since the publisher was unable to carry the whole contents of the original version of the book because of space limitations. The subtext contains this "missing material" and comprises three appendices, with recommendations for working with children, research methodology, and resources and bibliography. Thus a complete understanding of this work comprises both the book and its subtext. The reader should not expect a smooth and comprehensive presentation of childhood NDEs, but rather, as usual in Atwater's works, a very challenging and often provocative evaluation of her well-rounded research findings, sometimes contradicting what other authors in the field have found.

Children's NDEs are far more common than generally imagined. Atwater writes that "*the vast majority of children who face death experience a near-death scenario. And these children contend with the same aftereffects, both psychological and physiological, as do adults . . . but in a different manner*" (p. 4, original italics). This is the central statement of the book. Afterwards, these children exhibit a noticeable brain enhancement, often combined with a sharp rise in intelligence, which Atwater calls a transformation of consciousness or a "brain shift/spirit shift," by which she means nothing less than a chemical and functional change in the brain that could cast light on the mechanisms of human evolution: "The 'engine' of evolution . . . is normally so gradual that centuries must pass before we can even glimpse the changes it fosters. Brain shifts/spirit shifts jump-start that process. . . ." (p. 18). These claims might look risky to some people, but Atwater gives good reasons for her statements in view of the effects found in children.

According to Atwater, brain shifts/spirit shifts represent expansions of consciousness and faculties into the next plane of growth and

learning. In children, the brain shift/spirit shift provides for a “jump-start” of learning, emoting, multiple sensing, clustered thinking, and parallel processing, a repositioning of brain/mind structures from conventional modes to more expansive possibilities, as a refinement of the intellect that enables the individual to function comfortably in multiple dimensions of reality.

NDEs seem to cluster around distinct ages, which may be explained by an expansion of distinct phases of brain development. Children have no natural sense of time and space; future does not appear as future, but as another aspect of “now” until they establish the validity of continuous scenery. Future memories, a phenomenon Atwater described in a previous book (1996), show up often in the reports of childhood NDEs. Three- to 5-year-olds commonly have paranormal and psychic occurrences. The imaginal adventures of childhood are necessary for the development of healthy minds. NDEs during this time appear to accelerate mental growth in child NDErs. Prayer and meditation take on dynamic proportions immediately afterwards. But those individuals who had been steeped in certain religious dogmas before their NDE often find that the call to access and express the spiritual runs cross-current to their earlier indoctrination. Child experiencers seldom remain alienated from God, but their feelings about church attendance do change. As with adult experiencers, one-third stay with their church and two-thirds leave, but children tend to cut ties permanently.

More than 70 percent of the children reported angelic visitations, as Melvin Morse also reported (Morse and Perry, 1990, 1992), but they also frequently described meeting deceased relatives and friends, and deceased pets and other animals. These children saw religious figures variably, consistent with their religious backgrounds; and they experienced God as ultimate and always male, never female or devoid of gender, or among children of school age, as a sphere of light.

In children, the NDE strongly manifests in the subsequent enhanced aptitudes and proficiencies in certain areas. The majority showed highly creative and inventive minds and had a significant enhancement of intellect; half tested at genius level; almost all were highly proficient in mathematics, science, and history, and many were gifted with languages. More found school easier after the experience than harder, but many rejected school discipline. In 75 percent of child NDErs, after-effects increased over the years.

Atwater describes the aftereffects of childhood NDEs at length. Children who experience an NDE contend with the same aftereffects as adults. How they do so differs, however. The full impact of the aftereffects

seldom hits the children until they reach maturity. These aftereffects include an ability to desensitize themselves from physical sensations, an ability to communicate through nonverbal means, a partial loss of the ability to communicate verbally, problems reintegrating the ethereal self back into the physical self, and problems interacting socially. Atwater found that child NDErs have stabler relationships later in life than adult NDErs: most find satisfaction in their jobs, and are homeowners, which may indicate their attachment to a home as a direct result of losing their "home" as a youngster.

The children who have undergone NDEs are instilled with a sense of mission and they are powerfully obsessed with a desire to change things. However, child NDErs seldom do anything about a "mission" until they are older, even if they know what that "mission" is. Physiologically, child NDErs tended to have lower blood pressure, increased light and sound sensitivity, and lower tolerance to pharmaceuticals. As Atwater points out: "The child you get back after a near-death episode is a remodeled, rewired, reconfigured, refined version of the original" (p. 121).

Atwater notes that a child's learning ability is enhanced after an NDE and often reverses, in that instead of going from concrete details to abstract concepts, child NDErs go from abstract to concrete. However, the enhancement of abilities may be a mixed blessing: bias against creative thought in the adult world is the reason why most childhood NDErs seldom reach or maintain their full potential.

Aside from the transformation, children can often be confused, disoriented, angered, and/or traumatized by their NDEs. Whereas adult NDErs almost unanimously say they have been uplifted by their NDEs, and this is true for many children, other child NDErs suffer extreme pain and confusion and personality changes for the worse. Children sometimes feel abandoned, not by their parents, but by the "bright ones." Having found their "home," they could not stay. As a result, child NDErs later become alcoholics and attempt suicide more often than do adult NDErs. Many childhood NDEs are followed by serious bouts of depression, again in sharp contrast to adult NDEs, which are, for the most part, suicide deterrents. Difficulty handling the aftermath of "coming back" seems to be more common when the experience happened to school-aged children, but seldom if the episodes occurred to infants or toddlers. How children deal with their aftereffects is tightly connected to their interactions with their parents, from whom they require great acceptance.

The above features caused Atwater to replace the originally described classic elements of NDEs (Morse and Perry, 1990, 1992; Ring, 1984,

1992) by another classification, which she found to hold up consistently, regardless of age, education, gender, culture, or religion. Because most people who undergo NDEs do not experience all elements of the classical model and are therefore sometimes embarrassed by the fact that they are not “complete NDErs,” Atwater developed this new model, which comprises the following four basic types of NDE.

The initial experience involves elements such as loving nothingness, the living dark, a friendly voice, or a brief out-of-body episode. This type is usually experienced by those who seem to need the least amount of evidence for survival, or who need the least amount of shaking up in their lives at that point in time. *The unpleasant and/or hell-like experience* includes a threatening scenario or hellish purgatory, or scenes of a startling and unexpected indifference. This type is usually experienced by those who seem to have deeply suppressed guilts, fears, and angers, and/or those who expect some kind of punishment or discomfort after death.

The pleasant and/or heaven-like experience involves heaven-like scenarios of loving family reunions with those who have died previously, reassuring religious figures or light beings, validation that life counts, and affirmative and inspiring dialogue. This type is usually experienced by those who most need to know how loved they are and how important life is, and how every effort has a purpose in the overall scheme of things. Finally, *the transcendent experience* involves exposure to otherworldly dimensions and scenes beyond the individual’s frame of reference, and sometimes include revelations of greater truths, seldom personal in content. This type is usually experienced by those who are ready for a “mind-stretching” challenge and/or individuals who are more apt to utilize the truths that are revealed to them.

Atwater found three-fourths of child NDErs to have the initial experience, versus only 20 percent of adult NDErs. A characteristic feature of this type of NDE in children, rare in adults, is the “warm and friendly dark,” the “darkness that knows,” which is a warm, protective cradle, totally surrounding and embracing the child. The second most common type was pleasant/heaven-like experiences, while unpleasant/hell-like experiences and transcendent experiences were relatively uncommon among children. Mixed types of experience occur, as do repeated NDEs. Unlike adult NDEs, imagery and light are not necessarily prime components of children’s NDEs.

Children who have undergone NDEs frequently describe vivid pre-birth memories that often can be verified, although they may fade if the child is ridiculed or silenced for relating them: “Most of what they

report . . . is not only accurate but startlingly mature, *as if they, as souls, were comfortable with leaving and reentering a life continuum existent beyond that of the earth plane*" (p. 163, original italics). As Atwater points out, life may be a journey of eternal proportions, a life continuum that neither birth nor death can encompass or delineate. The plan of the soul seems to encompass multiple dimensions of existence, as well as overlapping countless lifetimes. Atwater regards these prebirth memories as the working out of a "soul plan." Prebirth memories usually begin around the sixth or seventh month of pregnancy, some even earlier; so according to Atwater, the third-trimester fetus already has a developed consciousness.

Indeed, new lines of inquiry show evidence of pre- and perinatal awareness and a life continuum, expressed by near-death experiences, near-death awareness, after-death communications, and pre-birth experiences. Atwater writes:

[T]he idea of a life continuum is no longer relegated to the dustbin of sloppy interviews or dismissed as wish-fulfillment. . . . What we are discovering is what we've previously overlooked—that other dimensions of life, other realities have always existed. We just didn't have the right tools before to properly identify them. (p. 184)

Children often recall "multidimensional" memories. Fewer child NDErs than adults report encounters with beings from another planet; renditions of alien existences from child experiencers rarely match accounts from adults and children seldom recount extraterrestrials or spinning spheres. However, 39 percent of child NDErs describe beings from another *dimension*. For most of them, the special lights they see are guides who accompany them through the stages of learning. Thus, in children, claimed contacts with other beings are not so much from other worlds as from other dimensions.

Children are six times as likely as adults to "tuck away" their experience, but sooner or later the power of the NDE tends to assert itself. Recall may be spontaneous or triggered by some sort of scenario. It is possible, however, for someone who came close to death, nearly died, or was revived from clinical death to exhibit NDE aftereffects without knowing that he or she has had such an experience. It is likely that episodes involving youngsters are grossly underestimated and underreported. Atwater emphasizes that the NDE may be recognizable more by the pattern of aftereffects than by memory of the episode. The aftereffects validate the phenomenon, and unrecalled NDEs should

be suspected whenever a person exhibited marked behavioral changes after a serious illness or an accident, a cascade of aftereffects with increased intelligence, psychic abilities, and an almost obsessive drive to fulfill certain tasks and projects.

Bearing in mind the frequency of NDEs when a person comes close to death, it should come as no surprise that there are a number of historical cases in which an NDE was extremely likely. Atwater describes a number of historical persons in whom this could well have been the case, suggesting that the NDE itself may have been a primary factor stimulating the growth of culture throughout the ages. Advanced technology today is returning increasing numbers of patients from death's door; Atwater sees therein evolution itself at work.

Not only are babies becoming more alert and smarter each year, but many of those born during the last three decades rival, in the characteristics they display, child experiencers of near-death states. So a new vanguard of children has been entering the earthplane in large numbers. The signs are evident that a new race is emerging in our midst now. There are major evolutionary leaps in consciousness and a vast process of "quickenings" and refinement of humankind. The emerging subculture is more holistic in attitude, has exceeded expectations, and is "culturally creative." Atwater estimates that roughly 25 percent of the American people fit this category. She sees this in a larger context of an "integral culture" that merges modernism with traditionalism, East with West, to create a renaissance mindset. Nothing less than the evolution of society is thus at hand, the subculture becoming the dominant culture, an advanced "Age of Globality" with advanced technology.

The brain shift/spirit shift that happens in such large numbers to today's youngsters offers the most compelling evidence yet that mind itself is also changing. It is therefore possible to reconsider the four types of NDEs described above in the following manner: the initial experience is a stimulus, an introduction for the individual to other ways of perceiving reality; the unpleasant or hell-like experience is a healing, a confrontation with distortions in one's own attitudes and beliefs; the pleasant or heaven-like experience is a validation, a realization of how important life is and how every effort that one makes counts; and the transcendent experience is enlightenment, an encounter with oneness and the collective whole of humankind. Thus these four kinds of near-death experiences can be considered stages of awakening rather than difference types of NDEs. *Children of the New Millennium* ends with the final statement that the immense talents and creative skills

of both the childhood NDErs and evolution's newest children permit a truly optimistic outlook: the future is in good hands.

In Atwater's opinion, however, the self-published subtext for this book, available directly from her or from her website but not included in the printed version, is equally as important for a complete understanding of the findings and conclusions of her research. Appendix 1 deals with tips for counseling child NDErs and "being in spirit." She emphasizes that the vast majority of children who face death have NDEs, experience aftereffects, and exhibit complex dynamics that defy ready explanation. Parents are usually unprepared for the fact that children experience NDEs and aftereffects; their acceptance is of utmost importance and benefit for all, not only the child experiencers, whereas denial or ignorance of these experiences will lead to alienation and behavior problems. As far as counseling is concerned, benefits or lack thereof are intimately related to the sensitivity and training of the professional counselor or therapist. In Atwater's opinion, therapists who are trained in transpersonal psychology are best suited for this purpose, and, since research on children's NDEs and their unique response to the aftereffects is difficult, no psychologist or counselor can have specific training in how to handle child NDErs without having had an NDE him- or herself.

In Appendix 2, Atwater describes her research methodology. Based on her interviews with adult and childhood experiencers, she emphasizes the importance of examining the near-death phenomenon from 360 degrees, combining interviews and observation, with questionnaires regarded as auxiliary. Appendix 3 comprises an extended resource and bibliographical section.

Summing up, I believe that Atwater goes to the very frontiers of contemporary near-death research with this book. Atwater has always been a critical person, not easily conforming to mainstream NDE research. Readers familiar with her previous writings will recognize that she has continued to develop her ideas and implications, but they will find themselves confronted with challenges and interpretations that reach far beyond common concepts, which is exactly the intention of this book. In *Children of the New Millennium*, she discloses the unique characteristics of childhood NDEs, throws light on both positive and negative aspects of childhood experiences, and comes, finally, because she also went from hell to heaven, to a very optimistic outlook toward our future. This outstanding work of near-death research is an absolute must for every person interested in the subject.

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