

Letters To The Editor

Counseling After a Near-Death Experience

To the Editor:

I strongly disagree with Joseph Geraci's statements that "the NDE is not a human experience" and that "the most difficult adjustment [for a near-death experiencer] is being human again" (1987, p. 28).

The phenomenon of an NDE is the experience of a reality or dimension not previously known, or possibly only known about. However, the NDEr is not someone different, greater, or even lesser during the NDE. Research has shown that the NDE expands and raises the consciousness of NDErs; it changes their perception and understanding of reality and of themselves (Moody, 1975; Kelsey, 1982; Greyson and Flynn, 1984). Yet they are, in their constitutional nature and essence, still human *during* and *after* their NDEs.

Every experience a person has registers, at some level, upon the human psyche or soul, whether in or out of the physical body. It is through the psyche that we experience reality or realities. Now this experience of reality varies. The psyche of a 6-month-old infant perceives, experiences, and relates to reality differently than that of a 35-year-old adult. But the infant and adult are human in their constitutional nature, and always will be. As research has shown, at no point during the NDE do NDErs lose awareness of who they are. Their identity going into the experience is not lost afterwards. This is quite different in the case of psychosis or multiple personality disorder.

It is not a question of how a professional counselor, therapist, or anyone else can help an NDEr "be human again." It is a question of how they can help the human NDEr live in this reality or dimension again without giving up or losing the effects of the reality encountered during the NDE.

I fully empathize with Geraci's experience of the NDEr being "subjected to mere curiosity by some and to dissection by others" (1987, p. 28). It is a shame that the majority of the medical and scientific communities still approach the NDE this way. What NDErs do have is

an experience that the majority of humanity, no matter what culture, has not yet had. Given the assumption that what NDErs have encountered is a valid reality or dimension of human existence, then what they share can help humanity come to a greater understanding of the nature of things.

In all the research I have read concerning the NDE, it is exciting to note the strong similarity it has with traditional Christian mystical experience. Theologically speaking, what the NDEr and Christian mystic, and mystics of other faiths, share is a strong *metanoia* where one's values, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and understanding of reality and of oneself are profoundly and positively altered. There is a turning away (*metanoia*) from one world view to a new world view (Kelsey, 1982; Johnston, 1984; Egan, 1982, 1984). This change for the NDEr appears to be quicker due to the intensity and uniqueness of the NDE.

If in time sound clinical research reveals that the most common and profound part of the NDE is the encounter with or experience of the presence or "being of light," and that that is the same experience of God that the Christian mystics have had during deep contemplative prayer, then, as Geraci has clearly stated, "it's time to give the NDEr a chance to 'successfully intervene in the adjustment process' " of humanity experiencing and living in this reality of time and space.

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Joseph Geraci Responds

To the Editor:

Although I disagree with the parameters of research that Michael Schaefer places on the NDE, I truly appreciate his interest and com-

ments. I believe that dialogue regarding the NDE is necessary if its meaning is to be understood and shared. Perhaps one day the concerns of Schaefer and other researchers will be answered when the NDEr is able to verbalize the essence of the experience, which yet remains locked inside.

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Are OBEs Evidence For Survival?

To the Editor:

Amid the burgeoning "evidence" of consciousness above or beyond the physical body explored in this journal and countless other publications, Susan Blackmore's article, "Are Out-of-Body Experiences Evidence For Survival?", is notable as a well-written and thorough presentation of the evidence that seems to dismiss much of this fascinating subject (Blackmore, 1983).

Distilled, Blackmore said that out-of-body experiences (OBEs) and near-death experiences (NDEs) are unproven, because it cannot be demonstrated that anything leaves the body during such experiences; she added legitimate questions about some reported experiences that could not be factually verified. The real question is: is Blackmore's article evidence that there is no survival? The human mind has the inborn capability of approaching such questions, but in a rather different way than the scientific method.

Rather than attempt to discredit Blackmore's argument, let me start by agreeing with her methodical insistence that conclusive evidence has not yet been shown. I can imagine a fairly simple example that would be very close to "hard evidence." Imagine an accident in which two or more people are injured to the point of near-death, and then both recover in different hospitals, and both report NDEs in which they journeyed through the tunnel and viewed the beautiful light together, commenting to each other or sharing some incident they independently describe.

But rather than seeking some incontrovertible experience that could abolish Blackmore's arguments, we can constructively analyze what is involved in the OBE and NDE in such a way that her reasoning will no longer hinder our appreciation of these truly remarkable incidents in human consciousness.

Evidence is what we think it to be. We cannot depend on our physical senses, and throughout most of human history we had no dependable measuring devices to prove all sorts of things. First of all, we are satisfied that we live in a world that is solid, walking upon solid earth, sitting on sturdy chairs in durable structures. Yet most people today accept that our senses deceive us, that these physical surroundings are incredibly lacking in substance. Each atom is enormously empty, thrashing around at a tremendous rate, in spite of the appearance that the ground below us is firm. Likewise, our senses do not tell us that we are on a rotating globe whirling around its orbit in a vast galaxy that is hurtling toward some remote destiny beyond our comprehension; but we accept that as true.

We accept that our five familiar senses tell us only a tiny fraction of what constitutes our existence. Our eyes and brain pick up only a narrow portion of the electromagnetic spectrum. We cannot hear the cries of the bat as it maneuvers in darkness; our senses of touch, taste, and smell are not difficult to deceive. True, we have devices that expand our senses into the infrared, ultraviolet, and ultrasonic, as well as microscopes, telescopes, radar, time-lapse photography, etc. These, if we wish to say so, provide evidence that can then be transmitted over great distance by invisible, unsmelt, unheard, and unfelt electromagnetic waves.

We might do well, then, to ask whether in seeking evidence we must not first admit that our consciousness or experience is simply not designed to provide such proof. On far more levels than the singular, "I think, therefore I am," we may assert that what we experience, is.

At a certain point we must begin to reckon with the sort of evidence that is being sought. Blackmore's article includes the rather astonishing statement that "if nothing leaves the body in an OBE, then there is nothing to survive, and the OBE cannot be cited as evidence for survival" (p. 142). That is like the assertion, "if I can't poke my finger through this stone, it must be solid."

But that is not intended as sufficient response to Blackmore's contentions. Various aspects of the subject deserve serious consideration, most notably, what is meant by the "thing" part of "nothing." Must it be visible or have weight? She refers to this "thing" no less than a half dozen times in the article, so it is a legitimate question; and a similar question could be raised about magnetism, gravity, x-rays, etc. These sorts of "things" are not easily measured by our thinking process any more than is that most exalted of all "things," life itself. Does life leave the body at the time of death? It certainly gives that impression. And

this is important because Blackmore's argument is that if something does not leave the body, the OBE offers no evidence of human survival.

Before getting into more serious analysis, it seems allowable to ask whether the "thing" that Blackmore could not imagine leaving would be visible. There have been numerous references to some "thing" described as a silver strand, like a supernatural extension cord connecting a power source to an airborne vehicle. Does it have weight or temperature? Is it a conductor or an insulator? A host of imponderables arise even before we contemplate the astral body itself.

The astral body concept has been given much attention over the ages, and it is a semantic question when this "thing" is also called a soul. Rather than seeking an observable or measurable "thing" that is *in* a human body during life, *out* of the same body when death occurs, and on occasion travelling *in and out* to bring about an OBE or NDE, should we not look for other forms of evidence?

It is legitimate to note that many modern concepts are based on tenuous evidence. The DNA helix became a useful model without being seen or weighed. The mystifying tracks in atomic cloud chambers are cited as evidence of numerous subatomic properties of matter and energy. The evidence of modern medicine includes symptoms of pain, dizziness, weakness, and nausea, "things" (which, incidentally, come and go in the body) that are more related to consciousness than to physical anatomy.

But evidence takes other forms, too. Perhaps the most impressive evidence of the validity of the NDE is not only its repeatability, in that millions of people of all sorts have strikingly similar NDEs, but that the variety of experiences is so harmonious. Nearly everyone dreams, yet how many people have the same dreams? That simple fact speaks against a broad range of "hallucination" and "imagination" arguments. Thoughtful people, too, would consider it evidence that, unlike dreams, these experiences produce observable changes in the experiencers' lives. Often these experiences are vividly remembered over periods of many years; yet few of us could remember a dream from last month.

But the evidence goes far beyond that. There is much that is evidential in the vast treasure of ancient tombs, monuments, and temples. From a practical, economic, or physical point of view, it is hard to imagine why ancient people would labor with incomprehensible zeal to construct enormous and magnificent pyramids, ziggurats, and tombs unless they had reason to believe in something beyond physical death. To them, at least, there was certainly evidence.

Less impressive physically, there is astonishing evidence, too, in the

surviving stories and legends and beliefs, spoken or written, that proclaim through the ages that there was some sort of evidence that this enormous expenditure of energy was for a purpose. A thoughtful reading of the thanatological literature and of the Bible reveals that visions of a being of light, and a life beyond that of the physical body, are not phenomena that emerged in our lifetime.

If anything, we can say that people tended to keep quiet and not acknowledge their experiences until the surge of evidence that they were not going out of their minds. We can assert, then, that there is an abundance of evidence that people have OBEs and NDEs; but Blackmore's contention remains that this does not prove survival. She is absolutely correct, but is it for the reasons that she thinks? The lack of evidence, I contend, is for another reason.

As a Swedenborgian, my own special interest in the NDE is not only my acceptance of it as a glimpse into life after death, but also my firm conviction that there is a purpose, an order and reason why such experiences do occur (Rhodes, 1982). Personal religious beliefs do not lend themselves really to brief explanations, but let me simply assert that Our Heavenly Father, the Creator and Ruler of the Universe, is running the show far more than we can comprehend. Such things as NDEs are not aberrations, accidents, or meaningless events. Swedenborgians believe that God is meticulously guiding each of us toward a blessed destiny ("heaven") except to the extent that we choose to reject that guidance. The OBE, then, is one of the countless ways in which our God infuses into our minds ideas that can further our development into full human beings.

In other words, experiences enable us to learn something that will contribute to our eternal welfare. I believe that the large number of OBEs of great variety are telling us something, and we should be paying attention. Just about all of our experiences are provided in order that we can get a message, and thereby direct our courses and conduct our lives.

Next, and most importantly, Swedenborgians teach that our God is so concerned with our spiritual freedom that He will not permit anything that will compel us to believe. We cannot be compelled to love what is good and true, to love whatever God we believe in. We are human, and in the image and likeness of God, because of this God-given freedom. Careful thinking then leads us to the essential point that God will not compel us to believe in a life after death. He may hope that we will, and He may give us abundant evidence that there is a purpose to creation, but He simply will not compel our belief.

Ponder this a moment, and it will be fairly obvious that an all-wise God will arrange things so that we remain free to doubt, free to reject the evidence. No matter how vivid and emotionally convincing an NDE, we will remain free to dismiss it as some sort of hallucination. It follows, then, that it is a quality in ourselves that, no matter what the experience, will make it possible for us to reject the sights and emotions and derive no harm or benefit from even such a traumatic moment as dying. Or, we can cherish this new memory and let it play a part in our lives.

It is difficult to avoid the clear and simple implications in Luke 16:31, "And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."

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Susan Blackmore Responds

To the Editor:

Leon Rhodes believes "that the large number of OBEs of great variety are telling us something, and we should be paying attention." I couldn't agree more.

But what comes of our attention is entirely different. Rhodes argues that God has control of our lives and can give the OBE as a glimpse of an afterlife—while not compelling us to believe in it. He further seems to accept that something leaves the body and survives after the death of that body. He awaits death with confidence that a further life follows.

I prefer to use my attention in two quite different ways: first by having OBEs and practicing altered states of consciousness, and sec-

ond by keeping on asking questions when explanations seem inadequate. In this way experience and explanation work on each other.

I would like to set the OBE in the context of the many experiences that occur during personal development, during training in meditation, when taking drugs (especially hallucinogens), and when facing death or other life crises. For those of us who seek explanations (and Rhodes is clearly one) there are generally three kinds.

First there are the occult or pseudo-scientific explanations. These are characterized by *ad hoc* multiplication of "new energies," "vibrations" or "forces unknown to science." While couched in apparently scientific terms they cannot be made to yield predictions and do little or no scientific work. Their great appeal is that they seem to account for the phenomenology of the experiences.

To someone who has had an OBE the idea of the astral body may make a lot of sense and give reassurance. However, the astral body is, as I have tried to show, a vacuous concept (Blackmore 1982). Rhodes points out that "The DNA helix became a useful model without being seen or weighed." Indeed it did. And that is precisely what the astral body fails to do. It is not a useful model. It explains nothing (e.g., why the OB world looks the way it does, why OBEs occur when they do, why one looks from above and not from across the room on the floor) and predicts nothing. I used the examples of weighing and seeing as possible predictions that have failed the test of experiment. For these reasons, and not without a little sadness, I reject the whole concept of astral projection.

The second type of explanation is the skeptical dismissive type. This is just as useless. In the case of OBEs one might say "they are just hallucinations," "just imagination," or, for those convinced of perception at a distance, "imagination plus ESP." The advantage of such "theories" is that no great revision of science is required. However no scientific work is done here either. Such theories cannot explain the phenomenology of the OBE and their predictions are limited.

Considering these all too common approaches makes it clear what the criteria should be for a really useful theory of the OBE. It should first account for the phenomenology (explain why the OBE is like it is and why it comes about, and make good sense to experiencers); second it should build on scientific understanding rather than rejecting it; and third it should provide helpful predictions.

I have proposed that the OBE occurs when a person's normal sense-based "model of reality" breaks down and a bird's eye view constructed from memory and imagination takes over as "real" (Blackmore 1984). I do not claim that this fulfills all the criteria of a good theory in one go.

Nevertheless, it does account for why the OBE seems so real, why the OB world has the features of "cognitive maps," why experiments searching for an astral body or astral vision have failed, and what conditions can initiate and end an OBE. It has also led to predictions, such as that people with good spatial imagery skills and those who are better able to switch viewpoints in imagery should be more likely to report OBEs. These predictions have been confirmed (Blackmore 1987; Irwin 1986). It is also competing with other related theories, such as Irwin's "synaesthetic model of the OBE" (Irwin 1985). In other words, we can make progress with such theories.

The same three approaches can be applied, for example, to the tunnel experience. It is not helpful to compare the tunnel to the birth canal or make it a path to another life (Sagan 1977; Blackmore 1988). It is equally pointless to call it "just imagination." However, recent theories that explain how it arises from the structure of the visual cortex make a genuine contribution to our understanding of NDEs (Blackmore 1988; Cowan 1982).

Experiences of oneness, cosmic consciousness, self-transcendence, and emptiness may look harder to tackle, but the same principles apply.

I am acutely aware that some readers will take this approach as some kind of denial of the validity of the OBE, and indeed of all sorts of experiences that they find spiritually or personally important. No such denial is intended, nor does it follow from what I have said.

Seeing the OBE as a purely psychological phenomenon, as an "illusion of reality," puts it in a most interesting perspective. There are many experiences that contribute to a person dropping the usual illusion that we are independent selves inhabiting bodies and separate from the world around us. The OBE can be one such experience. It can make the physical body seem unimportant, one's daily desires and intrigues trivial, and a world other than the sensory world seem "real." However, it is a very limited step. The usual body is replaced by a replica, and the world around just seen from a different viewpoint. For some it can be a stepping stone, however. The replica can be dropped, the imagined world allowed to dissolve, and progress to less restricted states made.

These further steps are easier if you drop the astral projection notion, and they are helped by psychology's insight that the self and world are constructions of an information processing system. If OBEs "are telling us something" I think it is how strong is our tendency to hang onto our constructions of a self and its world.

This reminds me that, in many spiritual traditions, trainees are

advised to ignore such experiences if they wish to progress. A fruitful science of personal development will make the reason for this injunction quite obvious (Blackmore, in press). Although such work is in its infancy, it is certainly beginning (Wilber, Engler, & Brown, 1986).

The analogy with the three kinds of explanation should now be clear. The first is just like the clinging to that replica body. It replaces one world of bodies and objects with another, one self with another. The second also blocks further questioning by denying that the experience is interesting. Only the third (in its widest sense, not any one theory) really "pays attention." The person who tries this approach does not rest with easy "answers" and can only go on experiencing and questioning. In this way personal experience and science require the same skills, not to rest content with vacuous explanations and to keep on facing up to the phenomena.

And what is the point of all this? Unlike Rhodes, I do not assume that life has a purpose nor any goal. I do not await death with any certainty of an afterlife. Indeed, I rather imagine that with practice I might die before my physical body rather than afterwards.

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