

DEATH BRINGS LIFE INTO FOCUS

Betty Bland

Why are we so fascinated with near death experiences (NDEs)? Certainly they are a curiosity and something beyond normal experience, but it seems to be more than that. Out-of-body experiences, premonitions and other psychic experiences are numerous but they do not have the notoriety of the NDE. There are not so many best-selling books or lecture tours about the other types of phenomena. Death, however, does seem to get our attention since we are all headed in that direction. Moreover, although the NDE reports are so varied in detail that we cannot get a clear picture, the NDE does give important clues to the basic questions of life. Why am I here? What is my purpose? Am I condemned for past mistakes? Are my loved ones forever lost to me?

Our relationship with death defines for us the meaning of life. If there is no existence beyond the grave, then we are more tempted to “eat, drink, and be merry.” But if our consciousness continues on without the physical body, then we may be facing major consequences beyond this earthly sojourn. Religious traditions can promise us anything from going to that great hunting-ground in the sky, to being thrown into the fiery lakes of hell for all eternity. The implications of our demise can lift us high or cast us into the doldrums.

In the Buddhist tradition, preparing for the moment of death is a major practice. Over some period of time the practitioner visualises his or her death with all the trimmings – funeral, decay, impermanence. While this may sound morbid to our western ears, the exercise can do much to shake the foundations of the grasping, anxiety-ridden ego. In doing so, it creates an opening in the psyche for a fuller, happier life with less impelling attachments.

Recognition of consciousness beyond the physical body can give us some consolation and even hope. This recognition may be the result of an NDE such as I had, intensive meditational practices, or even the rare spontaneous realisation. Theoretically we know we are more than this body but, as with many intellectual concepts, it does not necessarily penetrate our inner convictions. I might compare it to my feelings about bungee-jumping. I see pictures of a lot of people who have done it, and I see that the spring mechanism seems safe, but I am not willing to trust myself to it; for me, it remains a theory that does not impact my inner core. I will not alter my actions just because I think it might be OK. I will not strap on that harness and step over the edge of the precipice.

In our inner worlds the precipice that we are most likely unwilling to step over is the relinquishment of the patterns of our minds. These are the patterns or vibrations that make up our personal self with all its conditioning, fears and attachments. In the Yoga Sutras Patanjali says that in order to begin yoga, one must work on stilling these vibrations of desire, angst, for example, in order connect with more beneficial, harmonious energies.

Through whatever means obtained, an absolute certainty of our existence beyond this dimension will impact our total worldview. We then know for a certainty that we are more than the body. However the NDE goes further than that. The particular value of the NDE is that the vast majority of cases are imbued with a loving atmosphere with compassionate beings, assurances of non-condemnation for misdeeds, and a sense of purpose with an altruistic mission. When experienced in this way, priorities become reversed. What may have seemed important in the physical realm diminishes and spiritual values grow in significance. Although the lesser personality is still present, awareness expands to include an interconnectedness of all, a sense of responsibility for the path one is treading, a broader perspective of time and a gentle, patient optimism.

What better gift can one receive than knowledge of our integral participation in the greater All? This realisation imparts a feeling of connection, love, compassion and whatever else one would want to call it. The resulting inspiration and joyful recognition of the value of life naturally draw one toward altruism in all its forms. Within the recognition of our connection with the whole resides a sense of mission, or pilgrimage. Once one has experienced a glimmer of the splendour of the soul, one is drawn toward that light. Granted that this journey may be arduous, but a soul-satisfaction arises as one works out the difficulties, similar to an athlete's pleasure on developing strengths and skills.

With these efforts comes a broader sense of time. As one travels the path, one always sees further vistas. The goal is so far off that it may seem unobtainable; however, the exhilaration of participating in the grand scheme carries one forward. The paradox arises that every detail is of utmost importance but that it all should be held

lightly and nothing really matters in the moment. There is the sense that we are passing through this life's classroom but we will have others and other opportunities to correct failures and complete tasks. From what may be called the '100-year Rule' many difficulties fade into insignificance. Viewing any crisis through a time-lens of 100 years into the future does add a broader perspective.

These effects of an NDE parallel the Three Fundamental Propositions as put forth in the Secret Doctrine by Madame Blavatsky; 1) intelligent, interconnected unity; 2) vast cycles of time; and 3) individual pilgrimage and self-responsibility. The universality of these principles is striking whether derived from ancient mystery teachings as referenced in the Secret Doctrine, or current encounters with near-death. Each source confirms the other and provides us with hopeful landmarks along the way. Such confirmation should at least give us hope as it says in 1 Corinthians: "Death is swallowed up in victory" and the grave no longer has its sting. With full understanding we can allay the fears of death, although I do admit, as Woody Allen once said, "I don't mind dying, I just don't want to be there when it happens." The many reports of NDEs, however, do give assurances that one passes beyond discomfort into a glory worth waiting for.

Accounts of near-death experience impart a gift to us all. They provide encouragement that we live in a benevolent universe with compassion and purpose. Moreover, the contemplation of death encourages us to let go of some of our smaller personal concerns, in other words, to die to self that we might experience life more fully in all its abundance.

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