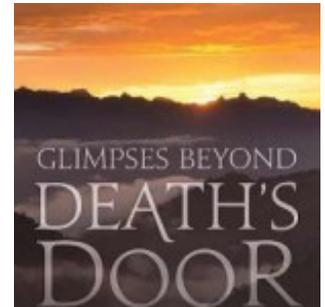


# Near-death experiences get treatment from a Mormon perspective

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I'm fascinated by the pop science/theology behind near-death experiences. I've read the "Life After Life" books by Raymond Moody and several similar books. It was interesting to discover a new book, "Glimpses Beyond Death's Door," ([here](#)) by Brent L. and Wendy C. Top, from the publisher Covenant Communications, which strictly follows LDS theology and authority. One can assume that "Glimpses ..." has been thoroughly vetted by LDS leaders.



The authors provide a fascinating, everything-and-the-kitchen-sink, overview of near-death accounts, using many sources liberally with an emphasis on the "Journal of Near-Death Studies," the book "Heaven and Hell," by Emanuel Swedenborg, the 18th century Swedish Lutheran and scientist who claimed to have received access to the afterlife. Also, there are numerous discourses and writings from LDS Church leaders, including "Journal of Discourses" accounts from Brigham Young, Parley P. Pratt and Orson Pratt.

If one had to summarize "Glimpses ..." approach quickly, it'd be, "throw out traditional, man-made concepts of crime and punishment" and "law and order." Based on a consistency in nature of the NDE accounts compiled, compassion and love are the dominating sensations experienced at death. Whether greeted by family members, a guardian angel, or a life reviewer, death appears to be a very positive experience. Many didn't want to return and were unaffected by the grieving of family members and friends.

*(I will digress here to mention that for this essay, I am assuming that these experiences are real, although other than the amount of professed NDEs out there, they certainly can't be proven. Belief in divinity, an afterlife, or other theological claims cannot be proven, and that's why heated debate usually leads nowhere. But even for skeptics, I'd wager the topic has interest.)*

LDS theology teaches that after death, we go to a spirit world, which is located here on earth, but in another sphere which we can't see as mortals. Much of "Glimpses ..." is devoted to taking the many NDEs of Swedenborg, Moody and others, and applying what they witnessed as glimpses into an LDS-taught afterlife spirit world. While readers must be aware that the authors can pick and choose sources as they wish, the Tops do make an effort to put most precedence on NDEs from non-Mormon sources.

Based on "Glimpses ...," it's clear that death, and the subsequent journey into a spirit existence, is not a place where a "true church," or "true gospel," is revealed to newly arrived spirits. In fact, the most persons who have had NDEs, the authors claim, experience a jump in spirituality, but not any discernible move toward a particular religion.

In fact, the afterlife spirit world, based on many of the NDE accounts, is a place where autonomy, the ability to choose, still exists for the deceased person. Despite being in a sphere that is more advanced than earth's (time travel and increased, almost effortless comprehension of reason, memory and why bad things happen have been reported) there is no traditional purgatory or hell.

However, most accounts show a separation of spirits based on knowledge accumulated and charitable love expressed for others while on earth. The spirits who might be in a place considered

“paradise” are not tethered to their own self interests or to so-called worldly pleasures. They want to serve others. They also appear to shine with a greater light. Spirits who might be considered to be in a “prison” are focused on their own personal needs or worldly indulgences. It is hypothesized that these latter group of spirits, still obsessed with the world and themselves, are those who haunt TV ghost shows, or seances, etc.

Not surprisingly, spirits tend to congregate based on similarities of light and interests. It is hypothesized by many that more self-centered spirits are simply not comfortable within the light that more “righteous” spirits possess. Hence, “hell” or spirit “prison” is defined not as an application of pain, but an inability to comfortably exist with other, more righteous people. (*This frequent NDE observation may be one reason that conservative, fundamentalist Christians, who preach a literal hell of eternal pain and fire, are very skeptical of NDEs.*)

In “Glimpses ...,” the authors point to these distinctions, personal autonomy, and the absence of a “true church” or “gospel” as evidence that missionary work is active in the afterlife spirit world. This is one main concept, of course, that distinguishes this NDE book from others. What may surprise LDS readers of “Glimpses ...” is that missionary work in the spirit world appears to be harder than missionary work here on earth. The Tops quote Swedenborg, who describes an afterlife of spirits waiting to be taught more information, but not until they are ready to receive it.

One of the more interesting concepts of afterlife found in “Glimpses ...” is that it is far harder to convert a spirit than it was during that spirit’s mortal existence. That’s because a spirit retains all that he or she learned — secular or non-secular — into the spirit world. Personalities and beliefs are molded in life, as well as passions, biases, prejudices and pride. In other NDE recounted in “Glimpses ...,” persons who had been skeptics of divine authority while on earth were observed still believing what they had once taught, and rationalizing, in a manner favorable to their own self interests, what they were now experiencing.

While reading “Glimpses ...,” I was struck by how closely aligned some NDEs were to literature. In one NDE, persons who had caused great evil or tragedy (such as suicide) were observed trailing people on earth — who could not hear them — and begging forgiveness to those who had been hurt. It reminds of Marley’s ghost, in Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol,” telling the unrepentant Scrooge that he had, after death, sat by his former partner in his office often.

Also, the idea that persons are assigned in the afterlife based on where they feel comfortable is similar to the C.S. Lewis novella, “The Great Divorce,” where residents of “hell” are taken on a journey to “heaven,” where spirits there minister to those in hell and attempt to convince them to remain with them, endure some discomfort (a metaphor for repentance), and live in heaven. Most of the travelers reject the offer, either because they are still afflicted with self pride and self pity, or, interestingly, believe that they are already in heaven.

That may sum up a key theme of “Glimpses ...,” which is that in the spirit world, we end up basically where we are most comfortable. In Mormon doctrine, this requires a Millennium’s worth of missionary work, and the attendant patience and love, to bring everyone to knowledge of God’s plan of salvation.

Rather than viewed condescendingly, or as a tool to argue with, “Glimpses ...” can be an interesting — and unique — opportunity to learn how Mormon theology views NDEs and how it fits into its doctrine.