

BOOK REVIEW

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Parting Visions: Uses and Meanings of Pre-Death, Psychic, and Spiritual Experiences, by Melvin Morse, with Paul Perry. New York, NY: Villard, 1994, xvi + 207 pp, \$20.00.

This is Melvin Morse's third book written with the help of Paul Perry. *Closer to the Light: Learning From Children's Near-Death Experiences* was published in 1990 and *Transformed by the Light: The Powerful Effect of Near-Death Experiences on People's Lives* came out in 1992. These earlier works presented Morse's pioneering work on children's near-death experiences (NDEs), and on how those who had NDEs as children had had their lives transformed now that they were adults.

Parting Visions, like their previous collaborations, is written in a clear, organized, and invigorating style. Anyone interested in near-death and related experiences will enjoy reading this book. Morse and Perry weave together the results of Morse's and others' research for a general audience, avoiding complicated scientific language and the use of references and footnotes. This is a strength in terms of readability but an annoyance for the serious scholar who would like to follow up on Morse's arguments by reading resources mentioned in the text. Morse and Perry offer a lengthy bibliography, but not every author or work mentioned in the text is cited in the bibliography. Like their previous two books, *Parting Visions* lacks an index, which would have made this book more reader-friendly.

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As the title of the book indicates, Morse examines a variety of what he calls "spiritual" or nonordinary experiences that he puts under the umbrella phrase of "death-related visions." These include precognitive experiences, deathbed visions, NDEs, post-death visitations, and healing visions. Morse states that his aim in writing this book was, as a researcher, to gain a better understanding of these visions, and as a clinician, to explore the healing possibilities of these experiences. Unlike his previous two books, the focus here is on people of all ages; and while presenting some of his own research, this one relies much more heavily on what others have done in these areas.

In the prologue, Morse spends some time arguing that research into NDEs and acceptance of NDEs have reached a point where "patients who have near-death experiences no longer have to worry about being branded mentally ill or 'weird.' Instead medical schools now teach that the near-death experience is a natural and normal part of life, and doctors everywhere are removing their intellectual blinders" (pp. xiv-xv). He does not present any evidence for this conclusion, and many of us would call such a statement exaggerated and wishful thinking.

The early sections of the book present a number of stories illustrating a variety of death-related visions. These include NDEs, post-death visitations, deathbed visions, and shared visions. Very striking are the shared visions or dreams about the medical condition and prognosis of an older woman by members of her family. Early into the second chapter of the book Morse concludes that all these types of visions are "cut from the same cloth" (p. 33). He argues that what binds these visions together is that they have the power to reduce our fear of dying and comfort us in our grief. This common theme continues throughout the book.

Morse could have strengthened the argument that all these visions share a common thread if he had discussed the works of others who studied these related visions. For example, in the area of deathbed visions, Karlis Osis and Erlandur Haraldsson's work (1977) is included in the bibliography but not discussed in the text. Likewise, he does not refer at all to the illuminating book by Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley (1992) in which they discussed the concept of "nearing-death awareness," and how these experiences are similar to, yet different from, NDEs.

The third chapter discusses an unpublished study done by Richard Hardoin and Judy Henslee on parents who have had children die of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Morse uses the study to bring

in premonitions of death as one type of death-related visions. Although he mentions the fact that nine of the respondents felt that the premonitions helped them in their grieving, he also mentions that 18 reported that the premonitions created feelings of helplessness, fear, anger, and guilt. So much for the comfort factor of these experiences! This chapter does not support totally the common theme of the comforting and healing functions of death-related visions.

In the first three chapters Morse raises two interesting questions. First, can we find a common link for all these visions that would shed light on the source of these mystical or spiritual experiences? Second, can we go beyond clinical examples to validate these visionary experiences using scientific methods? For answers to these questions Morse returns to what he calls the "circuit boards of mysticism": the common source for all these visions, according to Morse, is located in an area of the brain that when stimulated triggers visionary experiences. This area is the right temporal lobe. Morse's two earlier books presented the similar thesis that this "seat of the soul," the right temporal lobe, is the physical source for NDEs.

In *Parting Visions*, he argues that NDEs as well as all other spiritual visions emanate from this site. Two reviewers of his earlier books (Kastenbaum, 1992; Twemlow, 1991) commented that this is an interesting theory; however, Morse presents this theory as a fact proven by his and others' research. Unfortunately, no new compelling evidence is offered in this book to bolster this theory.

Furthermore, Morse repeats his summary of a retrospective study at Seattle Children's Hospital where he compared children who almost died and those who were seriously ill, in order to show that only those near to death had NDEs. Previously, Stuart Twemlow (1991) questioned the criteria for assigning the patients to these two groups in this study, and Morse's statement, without mentioning evidence to the contrary, that only persons close to death can have NDEs. Morse's argument is just as controversial here as in his first book, and ignoring evidence contrary to his does not help his argument nor the case for the scholarly investigation of NDEs.

Toward the end of the fourth chapter Morse offers some results from his own research into the transformative effects of NDEs. Using a battery of three-hour tests, he has found that other visionary experiences are as transformative as NDEs. He indicates that it does not matter whether someone has a vision while dying or while near someone else who is dying, while sleeping, or in a state of spiritual crisis: "the same sort of visions take place, with same effects on the

person having them" (p. 89). If a person can have a death-related vision without being close to death, then Morse's argument in the Seattle Hospital study that only children close to death have NDEs seems very strained.

In the next chapter Morse states that knowledge of death-related visions makes him a member of "the secret club," a club composed of persons who want to use this understanding in the practice of medicine. Once he started publishing his studies on NDEs, Morse found that other health care professionals, physicians, and nurses began to contact him with stories of out-of-body experiences, parting visions, and other visionary experiences, and how they have helped people die peacefully. Morse gives the example of Gören Grip, a Swedish anesthesiologist who had an NDE as a child and is now able to go beyond the cold, hard facts of what dying is like and offer the spiritual aspects to his patients. Morse chides his fellow physicians for failing to talk about the spiritual aspects of dying and death-related visions. He argues that most physicians are insensitive to these visions because of their need for scientific proof, their need to process patients faster, their fear of criticism, and their fear of loss of control over the dying process.

Furthermore, Morse argues that knowledge of death-related visions not only gives us an understanding of what our own death will be like, but also offers meaningful lessons about living. For example, these visions can help us to live more fully, with less fear of death, and can help us to integrate spirituality into our everyday lives. According to Morse, such knowledge can also affect the practice of medicine, as it already has in such areas as therapeutic touch as a form of healing, and sensing auras to diagnose drug withdrawal and ear infections. He gives the example of a woman who had an almost "pathological fear of death," who then read several books on these experiences and was subsequently able to help her mother die, and then went on to work with the terminally ill in a local hospice.

These latter chapters, along with the last major chapter on the significance of these visions in everyday life, read almost like an inspirational religious treatise. For example, Morse states that his "scientific studies of death-related visions have convinced me that our ordinary lives are filled with purpose and meaning" (p. 165). Furthermore, he argues that there is a divine "something" that is the "glue" for the universe, and that on the basis of his research we should accept that the same light that is present in NDEs and other

death-related visions is always present in our lives. These are strong statements that come more from Morse's faith than from his science.

In the last chapter Morse adds one paragraph on the meaning of "hellish" NDEs, concluding that these experiences are the result of an "unhappy, hellish life" (p. 173). He offers no evidence for this conclusion beyond one short anecdote. Morse does list the study by Bruce Greyson and Nancy Evans Bush (1992) on distressing NDEs in the bibliography, a study that postulates three types of frightening experiences, and which discusses the complexity of such experiences. However, Morse does not mention in the text that his interpretation might not be the only way to explain why some people have hellish NDEs, and that these experiences might be more complex than he portrays them. The book would have been better off without this paragraph.

All in all, keeping in mind its tendency to offer conclusions that sometimes go beyond the evidence offered, this is a well-written book that articulates very nicely the vision, passion, and faith of a man who sees death-related visions as a meaningful and integral part of our lives.

References

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