

BOOK REVIEW

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Full Circle: The Near-Death Experience and Beyond, by Barbara Harris and Lionel Bascom. New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1990, xvi + 285 pp, \$4.95

What was my reaction when asked to review *Full Circle*? First, I was struck by the title, a title that most recently has come to have personal significance in my life. Changes, transitions, and deep experiential work that I have been involved in over the last several years have led me to merge what I perceive as the spiritual world with both the psychological and physical worlds. This, then, has enabled me to see my life as no longer separated into each of these dimensions, but rather as coming together in a full circle.

As I began to think about writing this review, I realized that I was operating in a manner that was atypical of how I usually undertake this kind of task. Normally, I would read the book, outline each chapter, take notes, and put on my academic hat. So, although my paper and pen were next to me as I prepared to write this review, I discovered that the warmth, authenticity, and familiarity of events that lie within these pages quickly shattered my attempts to assume any kind of "scholarly" role. As Barbara Harris's words, feelings, and experiences drifted before my eyes, I had the image of the two of us sitting before a roaring fire, sipping wine, and sharing intimate, life-changing experiences in a low-key, warm, and comfortable manner.

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This is an important message that I believe is inherent in *Full Circle*. The near-death experience (NDE), along with its aftereffects and all it implies, is in fact a *natural* phenomenon rather than something categorized as "supernatural." It should not become the focus of a theoretical debate between the left-brained scientists and the right-brained mystics. Rather, the NDE and related spiritual experiences are opportunities for increasing numbers of people to access an expanded reality, which many of us know is much more than twentieth century Western society had led us to believe.

Harris's story is one of humility, struggle, and at the same time divine inspiration. It is a story that should be acknowledged and respected as we attempt to explore the meaning and implications of the NDE.

In the introduction to this book, Bruce Greyson, IANDS Research Director and Harris's colleague, discussed his impression of her when they met for the first time to appear on a television interview:

I should have guessed from the fact that the show was scheduled for April Fool's Day that I was in for a surprise. Instead of my fantasized invalid, I was confronted by a vibrant and dynamic person full of childlike joy and wonderment, who over the intervening years has continually challenged my own intellectual biases and breathed into my research the reality that comes only from experiencing. (p. 2)

Full Circle provides the reader with very specific and comprehensive descriptions of Harris's two NDEs, which corroborate the research data and anecdotal case studies that have been accumulated over the years. As she describes her experiences, the reader also becomes more knowledgeable about such issues as kundalini, psychical research, biofeedback, and aspects of healing. In addition, she shares the personal accounts of her encounters and relationships with such people as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan, Kenneth Ring, and Raymond Moody, and allows the reader to see these people through her eyes. Clearly, this book is one that appeals to both the human elements and the intellect.

Although Harris describes her experiences in a relaxed, informal manner, she makes some major points that should be listened to carefully by both the scientific and psychiatric communities. She describes the life review experienced in one of her NDEs as "a force or some sort of intelligent energy that was taking her on a guided tour of her life" (p. 24). Significant emotional events perceived by her as if in bubbles provided strong transformative psychological understanding

that she identified as having "a profound and immediate healing effect on her. It was like years of psychotherapy in an instant" (p. 26). How much we in the helping professions can learn from her experience!

As psychiatrists and psychologists attempt to reshape behavior either by initiating superficial cognitive restructuring or by bowing to the almighty psychoanalytic notion of insight, we are missing the truth of what really brings about changes in people. Certainly all our clients cannot have NDEs, but acknowledgement of the enormous transformative power of direct spiritual and mystical experiences should encourage psychiatry to begin to shed the idea that good mental health reflects atheistic, achievement oriented, materialistic values.

Psychiatry needs also to learn that mystical experience should not be dismissed, treated with drugs, and automatically labelled "schizophrenic, religious ideation." This perspective is expanded in the Appendix of the book, where Greyson reviews "Clinical Approaches to the NDEr." This is a summary of clinical methods developed at the IANDS conference by some 30 clinician/experiencers in 1984 at Harris's home. It is clear from both Harris's comments and the proceedings of the conference that direct spiritual experiences have the potential not only to lead to personal growth but also to contribute to evolutionary development that could ultimately save our planet.

I especially enjoyed reading the chapter on synchronicity. In it, Harris exemplifies the concept of synchronicity, as Albert Einstein and Carl Jung explained it using the relationship between mind and matter, through her description of a baby's Christening dress flying from a moving car and hitting her on the chest, so that she could give it to her friend's sister's baby whose Christening was coming up. Certainly, this was a delightful example of a complex concept that readers could understand and relate to.

Harris's honesty and courage are manifested as she invites the reader to come full circle with her before and after her NDEs. She describes her insecure childhood and her pre-NDE role as an upper middle class matron. We then share her NDEs and travel with her through the trauma of divorce and subsequent ego death, to her ultimate rebirth.

Harris also discusses some of the friendships and activities that she has been involved in over the years. From her attendance at the wedding of NDEr Kim Clark, to the recounting of three stories of people whom she helped to find new meanings in their lives, Harris once again enables the reader to see the world through her eyes. While most NDErs make some changes in their lives so that they can serve others, Harris has dedicated her life to this end. Her work with such

groups as Friends of IANDS, Theos for widows and widowers, and Compassionate Friends for bereaved parents, once again illustrates the altruism and service to others that many NDErs adopt.

Fifteen years have passed since Moody's initial case study of people who described their NDEs. Harris has made a significant contribution to the field of near-death studies by going beyond the description of experiences. She has not only openly discussed the effects that the NDE has had on her life, but she has also let the reader begin to understand what the implications of the NDE can be for science, for the helping professions, and for the development of higher consciousness for evolutionary growth and the future of the world.

Greyson in the Introduction states:

I believe the NDE is one of those puzzles that just might force scientists to develop a new scientific method, one that will incorporate all sources of knowledge, not only logical deductions of the intellect, and empirical observations of the physical, but also direct experience of the mystical. (p. 6).

Greyson can be seen as a scientist who respects scientific rigor and at the same time remains broad in his vision. In the Scientific Commentary at the end of the book he identifies the four components of the NDE: the cognitive, affective, paranormal, and transcendental. I believe that his acknowledgement of these components being related to other psychospiritual experiences, such as kundalini and other bioenergetic conditions, have important heuristic value.

In this issue of the Journal, Ring discusses the concept of an NDE-prone personality as having significance for human transformation and the emergence of a more highly evolved human being, which he identifies as the Omega Prototype. I believe that the Omega Prototype is what we can look forward to in coming generations. *Full Circle* illustrates some of the difficulties in getting there. If scientists and health professionals can expand their understanding beyond the limited scientific method that certainly did nothing to facilitate Harris's journey, then perhaps society's evolving journey toward an expanded reality will be supported instead of sabotaged. And then perhaps we can all experience the challenges and wonders of coming full circle.

Thanks, Barbara, for paving the way.