

BOOK REVIEW

Kenneth Ring, Ph.D.
University of Connecticut

Whole in One: The Near-Death Experience and the Ethic of Interconnectedness, by David Lorimer. London, England: Arkana, 1990, 340 pp, £6.99 (Distributed in the United States by Viking Penguin, \$9.95).

A friend of mine who had had a near-death experience (NDE) once described an incident from his life review this way: As a youth, he had had an uncontrollable temper, and one day it really got him into trouble. He had been driving his car rather fast and somewhat recklessly through town and nearly hit a pedestrian. Angry words were exchanged, soon followed by blows, and my NDEr friend eventually pummeled his victim into unconsciousness and left him lying in the middle of the street. Shortly afterward, overtaken by remorse, he reported the incident to the local police and the beaten man was spared any further harm.

During my friend's life review, this encounter was replayed from a dual perspective. From one, he found himself as if in a high building overlooking the street and simply witnessed, like an elevated spectator, the fight taking place below. But from the other perspective, my friend was again *involved* in the fight. However, this time he found himself in the role of *the other party*, and experienced each blow—thirty-two in all, he said—before collapsing unconscious on the street.

It is this feature of the life review—the empathic identification with others—so often reported by NDErs, that is the theoretical basis for

Dr. Ring is Professor of Psychology at the University of Connecticut. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Ring at the Department of Psychology, University of Connecticut, 406 Babbidge Road, Storrs, CT 06269-1020.

David Lorimer's brilliant and inspiring new study of the NDE and its implications for a postmodern ethics. Lorimer, as many readers of this Journal will know, is not only the author of a previous book on the survival issue (Lorimer, 1984), but has long been the Chairman of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) in England, and one of the most prominent and eloquent speakers on NDEs at many international conferences. And with this book, which will surely be recognized as an enduring contribution to the field of near-death studies, he has clearly emerged as one of the leading and most searching thinkers on the moral and spiritual aspects of NDEs and mystical experiences generally.

What Lorimer attempts to show in this book is how the essence of both the life review specifically and the NDE as a whole provides a powerful experiential basis for a moral order based on the principle of what he has called "empathic resonance." By this term, he means the direct perception of an underlying web of interconnectedness and interdependence among human beings, and indeed all life. In the life review, for example (and Lorimer makes a distinction between the panoramic memory aspect, which is little more than a holographic show of memory-images, and the life review proper, which induces a nonjudgmental but still moral assessment of one's life), one sees with both compassion and empathic understanding how one's actions, and even one's thoughts and feelings, have affected others.

The form in which this information is processed, however, as in my opening example, makes it clear to the experiencer that we are all interconnected, and one sees immediately and intuitively that the Golden Rule is not merely a prescription for moral conduct; it is simply and purely *the way it is*. Similarly, the ego-shattering effect of the NDE itself, which reveals the illusion of a separate ego by inducing an unforgettable experience of cosmic unity, leads in Lorimer's own words "to a conscious realization of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all existence and therefore an empathic resonance with all phenomena" (p. 91).

From even this briefest of exposures to the core of Lorimer's theoretical ideas, you can see that what he is about in this book is to articulate a moral frame of reference based on the holistic perspective that has emerged from the last two decades of consciousness research generally. For example, the now widely known writings of such veteran "New Paradigm" architects as Stanislav Grof (1985) and Fritjof Capra (1982), as well as more recent theorists such as Larry Dossey (1989), Michael Talbot (1991), and Chris Bache (1991), have helped us to see that the old mechanistic and materialistic basis of science is beginning to erode

in the face of the challenges presented by new findings in physics, biology, medicine, psychology, and parapsychology, as well as near-death studies.

Accordingly, new perspectives of holism, such as Dossey's emphasis on nonlocality theory or Talbot's on the holographic paradigm, have come to the fore precisely because they give us a conceptual framework in terms of which phenomena such as NDEs make sense and no longer have to be arrogantly dismissed or relegated to the wastebasket status of "anomalous experiences." Lorimer is clearly sympathetic to these developments and aligns himself with this "New Paradigm" thinking; indeed, he has already established his credentials as an effective champion of these views. But the special contribution he makes in this new book is to take these ideas, along with the findings of near-death research, and show clearly where they lead when they are applied to questions of the moral order.

In this respect, however, though Lorimer's contribution here is by far the most thoughtful and carefully argued, as well as the most scholarly, it is not without its precedents even within the field of near-death studies. The late sociologist Charles Flynn, for example, had developed similar ideas in his early articles on NDEs (Flynn, 1982, 1984), and, like Lorimer, gave pride of place in his thinking on the moral implications of NDEs to the life review. In his book *After the Beyond* (Flynn, 1986), he addressed these issues again, and more deeply (see, for example, Chapters 5, 10, and 11), and in ways very reminiscent of Lorimer's own argument.

Rosalie Newsome, in her work on moral development and NDEs (Newsome, 1988), has also broached these concerns within a holistic perspective. It is a little surprising to me, in fact, that Lorimer, whose knowledge of the near-death literature is as vast as anyone else's and whose bibliography for this book exceeds fifteen pages, did not cite this work, especially Flynn's (although he once mentions his name in passing), since it is so germane to the heart of his thesis.

This, however, is a minor omission in light of the enormous range of findings, case history materials, and historical information that Lorimer incorporates into his book and marshals so convincingly on behalf of the ideas about the emerging moral order he offers in *Whole in One*. To give you a brief idea of these contents, let me provide something of an overview of the book itself.

Lorimer begins with an introductory discussion of the life review in the context of the NDE and continues in the next chapter with a similar discussion from the standpoint of such experiences as they appear in the literature dealing with postmortem states of conscious-

ness. In his survey here, he draws not only on "channelled" materials, but also on the writings of such celebrated spiritual adepts as Emanuel Swedenborg, Rudolf Steiner, and Paul Brunton. The fit between the findings from near-death research and purported postmortem experiences is obvious and impressive, and sets the stage for the next chapter on empathic resonance, where Lorimer presents a full discussion of the unitive and transformative aspects of the NDE.

The fourth chapter marks a seemingly abrupt turning point—although again the findings of near-death research really do anticipate it—into the nature of the moral order suggested by reincarnation and its usual correlative, karma. And here the book will indeed take a perhaps unexpected course for some readers, as the next few chapters present essentially an extended discussion of the historical development of afterlife notions and the moral order that each successive afterlife perspective implies.

It is in these chapters especially that Lorimer shows both his erudition and his ability lucidly to summarize large and complex chunks of materials as he considers preliterate, ancient, Hebraic, early and medieval Christian, and more modern conceptions of the nature of the afterlife, ending with the decline of such views with the rise of humanistic and secular thinking in the eighteenth century. In the last chapter, however, Lorimer adroitly links the preceding historical materials with his earlier ideas on empathic resonance and in a moving and passionate conclusion, based on systems theory and other holistic ideas, becomes an eloquent spokesman for a postmodern ethical viewpoint he feels is emerging in our time and with whose energies of love and wholeness he exhorts us all to align ourselves.

My synopsis of Lorimer's book, I regret to say, fails utterly to convey the wealth of ideas and penetrating insights that make reading *Whole in One* such a stimulating and rewarding experience, both intellectually and spiritually. Among the many jewels of this book, for example, are Lorimer's frequent samplings from the writings or conversations of several spiritual authorities whose works are unjustly neglected or otherwise little known here in the West. Here I am thinking especially of some of Lorimer's own favorites, such as the Bulgarian master Peter Deunov, the Cypriot sage and healer Daskalos, and that still towering but somewhat remote spiritual giant Albert Schweitzer, to whose celebrated concept "reverence for life" (interestingly also mentioned in Flynn's book) Lorimer gives a central place in his own ethical thought. It is one of the many virtues of this book that the author will lead at least some of his readers back to the work of these and some of the other spiritual figures whom he cites in

the course of advancing his personal thesis concerning the coming moral order.

Perhaps I have said enough, however, to induce you to take a look at this book and to ponder for yourself the merits of the vision Lorimer so compellingly (at least in my view) presents. In my opinion, it would be time and money well spent, and I therefore urge any reader who has a serious interest in NDEs and ethical issues to acquire a copy forthwith. *Whole in One* is probably the most thoughtful and important book to appear in our field since Carol Zaleski's *Otherworld Journeys* (1987), a book that also deals with similar issues though from a different point of view, and it deserves to be widely known and much praised.

References

- Bache, C.M. (1991). *Lifecycles: Reincarnation and the web of life*. New York, NY: Paragon House.
- Capra, F. (1982). *The turning point*. New York, NY: Bantam.
- Dossey, L. (1989). *Recovering the soul: A scientific and spiritual search*. New York, NY: Bantam.
- Flynn, C.P. (1982). Meanings and implications of NDEr transformations: Some preliminary findings and implications. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 2, 3–14.
- Flynn, C.P. (1984). Death and the primacy of love in the works of Dickens, Hugo, and Wilder. *Anabiosis: The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 4, 125–141.
- Flynn, C.P. (1986). *After the beyond: Human transformation and the near-death experience*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Grof, S. (1985). *Beyond the brain: Birth, death, and transcendence in psychotherapy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Lorimer, D. (1984). *Survival? Body, mind, and death in the light of psychic experience*. London, England: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Newsome, R.D. (1988). Ego, moral, and faith development in near-death experiencers: Three case studies. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 7, 73–105.
- Talbot, M. (1991). *The holographic universe*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Zaleski, C. (1987). *Otherworld journeys: Accounts of near-death experience in medieval and modern times*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.