

BOOK REVIEW

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Children of the Light: The Near-Death Experiences of Children, by Cherie Sutherland. New York, NY: Bantam, 1995, 199 pp + xi.

Cherie Sutherland, who is the preeminent researcher of near-death experiences (NDEs) in Australia, the author of two previous books on the subject (*Reborn in the Light* [1995] and *Within the Light* [1995]), and the founder of AUSTRALIANDS, has now extended her explorations of NDEs in Australia by focusing on those of children. Her book is a welcome addition to the literature on NDEs in the young and, as with her earlier work, demonstrates an obvious continuity with the findings already reported by investigators such as Nancy Evans Bush and Melvin Morse who pioneered studies of NDEs in children in this country.

In Sutherland's case, however, her book begins with an informing vision that not only gave her research its impetus but also points to the special value it will and is meant to have for many of its readers. Sutherland, who is a near-death experiencer herself, found that, after the publication of her first book on NDEs, she was at a bit of a loss concerning how her work should proceed. Staying with this uncertainty and the frustration it bred, she ultimately and unexpectedly underwent an experience that showed her unmistakably where she would find her next source of inspiration. In what she labels simply a "vision," she was carried aloft until from a great height she saw a scene below of children playing joyously with one another, radiating an inexpressible happiness. And somehow she was given to understand that these were the spirits of children who had died—but who were more alive than ever! At the same time, however, she became

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aware of a second group of spirits who were in a dark place and from whom emanated feelings of bewilderment, grief, and terrible devastating loss. These, Sutherland intuitively realized, were the parents of these children who had “no idea how blessed these child spirits felt themselves to be, living on in the light, safe and loved, in the company of angels” (p. x).

Following that vision, Sutherland reports, she found herself meeting or hearing from a substantial number of grieving parents, who expressed to her how much stories of NDEs had helped to succor them in their own loss, and, eventually, she was led to persons, some of them still children themselves, who had had NDEs as kids—and their stories were even more helpful to those dealing with the desolating anguish that the death of a child often unleashes. Sutherland’s book, then, is primarily motivated by a desire to bring these stories to a larger audience, particularly to parents and siblings of a deceased child, in order to spread a blanket of comfort over those who are still grieving and to accelerate the process of healing from one of life’s most unbearable ruptures.

And Sutherland herself presents some compelling testimony throughout her book to show just how healing it can be to such parents when they learn about the NDEs of children. Her book in fact begins with one very touching account of this kind of discovery. A mother named Maria had lost her five-year-old son in a tragic drowning incident, and was in despair over it. In addition to all her natural grief, she was tormented by questions concerning whether her son had been frightened as he was drowning or whether he had cried out desperately and in vain for his parents to save him. As she testifies, she was obsessed with the question, “Was it terrible to die?” (p. 4).

In time, and quite adventitiously, she came across a story of a childhood NDE based on a near-drowning incident that had much in common with the actual drowning of her son. Reading it was a revelation and immediately provided a powerful anodyne that relieved years of protracted suffering, guilt, and doubt. In Maria’s own words,

I felt exhilarated after I had finished. I was so astonished by the almost identical conditions at the two scenes of accident, and the two little boys of virtually the same age, that I had no trouble believing that this “coincidence” was, indeed, the answer I had been searching for. From that day on, my thirst for more and more information about the NDE was unquenchable. I read everything I could find about it, and with each new account, the bottomless, black

despair I had felt for so long receded, and a wonderful new hope was born somewhere deep within me. (p. 6)

Now, through the instrumentality of Sutherland's book, Maria's own experience of healing can itself be a source of solace and hope for bereaved parents and others who have suffered a similar loss. And, from reading stories like Maria's and the many moving accounts of childhood NDEs that Sutherland provides in this book, there are even more benefits to be derived, as Maria's own narrative suggests:

Not long afterwards . . . I realized that the devastating grief and suffering I had been through had produced after-effects similar to those following a near-death experience: I was no longer afraid of death; I felt more genuine compassion for others; I wanted to help others; I was more aware of others' pain. In a sense, I too had died and been brought back to life. . . . [And] I now believe that death is truly a transition from our limited existence into a splendid new life, an adventure beyond our wildest dreams. (pp. 6-7)

With this as a kind of preface to the *raison d'être* for her book, Sutherland is now ready to introduce the persons whose stories constitute both the bulk and the heart of this volume. In all she presents the narratives of 18 cases. The stories are told in the first person, sometimes by children who have had NDEs, often supplemented and clarified by interview material from their parents, and sometimes by persons who retrospectively describe their own childhood NDEs. Sutherland, in all her work on NDEs, has always been very sensitive to the integrity and importance of the personal narrative, and her books, including this one, are rich sources of the texture of NDEs and the meaning they have had, both for those who undergo them and for family members who have been affected by them. In allowing her respondents to tell their stories in this straightforward fashion, Sutherland makes them serve the purposes for which she intended this book: to inform, inspire, and console. In this respect, she has succeeded admirably.

If we now enlarge the focus of this review and ask what the general reader interested in NDEs—and not just the bereaved person—will find in this book that adds to our knowledge of childhood NDEs, the answer, I'm afraid, is not much. There is, first of all, a fairly brief chapter that summarizes some of the previous work in this area that will be familiar ground to readers of Morse's books and this Journal. That is followed by a longer chapter that presents the principal features of the NDEs of Sutherland's own respondents. It consists mainly of the staple ingredients of the NDE mix that, as we already

know, are much the same for children as for adults and that are now shown to hold for her sample of Australian NDErs as well.

To be sure, there are some special points of interest in this summary chapter that deserve mention. One is that several of Sutherland's cases are those of very young children below the age of four—and in one instance we have an NDE that apparently took place at birth itself—where the prototypical NDE pattern is reported. Another is the emphasis Sutherland gives to a number of cases in which child abuse and other severe forms of trauma are implicated, reflecting a possible predispositional factor to which other researchers (Irwin, 1993; Ring, 1992, Serdahely, 1992, 1993) have previously drawn attention. And, finally, Sutherland's data—in contrast to the position taken by Melvin Morse (Morse and Perry, 1990)—suggest that the feature of the life review, which Morse regards as very rare in childhood NDEs, may be just as common as in adult episodes.

When we come to the stories themselves, along with the very familiar aspects and aftereffects of NDEs, we are made aware of certain observations and findings that are worth lingering over. I will mention and illustrate here some of those that particularly intrigued or delighted me, but other readers will certainly find others that will be of special significance to them.

To begin with, it is interesting how frequently Sutherland remarks that on meeting a child NDEr, she was struck by his or her "luminous" quality or unusually serene appearance, to such an extent that she could sometimes be almost certain that the child had had an NDE before she was apprised of that fact. Of course, these are mere impressions on Sutherland's part, not data as such, but they are consistent with what other researchers, including me, have informally noted. Second, it is worth a more than passing notice how often childhood NDErs become aware afterward of how different they are from other children, which will sometimes lead them to adopt solitary modes of behavior and cause them to "clam up" for a long time about their NDEs. Third, it was amusing to me that several of these children who had encounters with a radiant being they took to be Jesus or who had found themselves in a heavenly realm during their NDE afterward took strong issue with conventional teachings about or images of divine personages and transcendental domains. A few examples follow:

[Emily's mother] can always tell when Emily has had a class of religious instruction at school because on those days she tends to thunder into the house, throwing her bag down and venting her

exasperation. She remembers one recent occasion when Emily came in saying, "Oh, that Father Chris, he doesn't understand anything! He's got it all wrong!" (p. 80)

Erin: I saw Jesus too. And whenever you see pictures of him you really get fed up because that's not what he looks like. (p. 93)

We were flicking through his little book—it was just a little religious book—and it had pictures of Jesus and things. And I said, "This is Jesus." And he said, "No, Mum, that's not what Jesus looks like. And I said, "Well, what does he look like?" And he said, "He doesn't look like that" and he argued with me. This four year old was telling me that this picture and the picture on the wall was totally wrong, that Jesus didn't look like that at all! (pp. 98-99)

Finally, what these children have to say about death is often as striking in its directness as it is pithy in form and precocious in wisdom—and the tone of surety with which these utterances are made cannot help but impress the reader. Consider these statements, for instance:

Death's all right. I know I could die any time so I live just each day. I'd say to people who are dying, "Don't be afraid. It's a beautiful place." (p. 105)

When you die it's like you're still alive. You shouldn't be scared because you're going to be in good hands. (p. 86)

To somebody who's dying I'd probably say that there's nothing to be scared about, and that it's really nice up in heaven. (p. 81)

Although reading all these cases serially can be somewhat repetitious, there are so many precious nuggets like these and so much deeply affecting testimony that the cumulative impact of these stories will be profoundly satisfying to most readers, and not just to those who are drawn to this book because of its healing and inspirational value.

The book ends with a short and somewhat perfunctory afterword, which attempts to sum up the lessons of these narratives, but by the time the reader has reached it, these concluding observations will be self-evident, anyway. No matter, because in writing this book the author has not only remained true to her original vision but has succeeded in her goal of sharing it with us. For this, we have every reason to praise her achievement and to be grateful for it.

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