

BOOK REVIEW

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The Journey Home: What Near-Death Experiences and Mysticism Teach Us about the Gift of Life, by Phillip L. Berman. New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1996, 207pp + xiv, \$14.00 pb.

The Journey Home is a book born of Phillip Berman's personal experience surviving a near-fatal sailing accident and the loss of an infant daughter, as well as his research as an oral historian. A Harvard-educated theologian, he collected hundreds of stories from Americans concerning "mystical" experiences, some of them evidently near-death experiences (NDEs), which form the basis for this book. *The Journey Home* is a combination of both personal and professional insights designed for popular instruction and inspiration about how to celebrate life in view of the wisdom gleaned from NDEs. At this level, the book is successful. For near-death researchers or readers already familiar with the literature, it may be less so.

On the positive side, *The Journey Home* expands the NDE literature by offering new case material, although the text is thickly augmented by excerpts from familiar researchers and experiencers, such as Raymond Moody, Kenneth Ring, Melvin Morse (whose name was consistently misspelled throughout the book), Bruce Greyson, George Ritchie, and P. M. H. Atwater. In addition to illustrative examples of certain NDE phenomena from his research participants, Berman presents in-depth NDE narratives from four individuals, two apparently new and two well-known cases (George Rodonaia and Yvonne Kason). These are interesting accounts for those who never tire of NDE stories.

The book also features historical NDE stories less commonly encountered in the literature, most of them from Western sources. Less well developed than contemporary materials, the historical material is not

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merely reassuring for general readers, but evocative for professionals. Sources include St. Paul, Egyptian and European clergy of the first millennium A.D., medieval laity and nobility, and Black Elk. Berman also refers to thanatological myths supporting various aspects of the NDE from old Teutonic, Egyptian, Mediterranean, and North American sources and brings in other Jewish and Christian theologians on related spiritual topics. This intriguing and potentially rich area of his expertise is as much teasing as it is informative, for it is easy to see that the author is much more conversant with these interesting avenues than the constraints of a mass-market book permit.

For the general reader interested in death, dying, grief, and theodicy, or in search of inspirational material, this book is appealing. It seeks to address the spiritual yearnings of humanity with the messages NDEs provide. In contrast to the veridicality focus of most near-death researchers and writers, Berman treats the meaning of NDEs and the larger question of what they say about the meaning of life and how it is to be lived.

For professionals, or even educated readers, however, *The Journey Home* has little new to offer, and worse, suffers from inadequate editing that renders the text confused, contradictory, and misleading. In the first place, the research methodology is entirely missing. For instance, by providing unqualified long narratives from the four individuals mentioned above, Berman creates the impression that these are new accounts uncovered in the course of his research. Although he may indeed have personally interviewed Rodonaia and Kason, anyone familiar with the literature knows that their stories appear at length elsewhere—although no citations or references to those previous publications appear. Given Berman's standing, presumably the original study was well done, but considering the many serious technical lapses in the book, I was left with the distinct impression that the author was hurriedly cannibalizing previous research to create a bestseller exploiting the current interest in NDEs. This impression was furthered by the superficial and dated treatment of spiritual material, and the strong suggestion that well-accepted NDE research somehow originated from the author's own efforts. Waiving any scholarly pretensions, the text's aggrandizement of the author's efforts and lack of proper attention to other sources created such a sense of exploitation as to mitigate, at least for me, the heartfulness that might otherwise redeem the book as a popular effort.

The slipshod handling of citations is one of the most arrant editorial lapses. Other researchers' work is paraphrased and cases are

quoted verbatim without endnote numbers in the text, except inexplicably for Chapter 7, where they suddenly appear, for at least a few of the references—but not all. If only the citation numbers in the text were missing, but the endnotes appeared in order, readers might have a chance of attributing material to the proper sources, but the book is inconsistent in this regard. Chapter 3 contains direct quotes by Atwater, Albert Heim, Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson, Carl Jung, Russell Noyes and Roy Kletti, Ritchie, Moody, George Gallup, Teilhard de Chardin, and Dylan Thomas, yet only two endnotes appear for this entire chapter: Noyes and Moody, who are given a single note each, despite the fact that Noyes's material is scattered over several discontinuous pages in the chapter text. Similar problems exist for a number of chapters, making one wonder about the publisher's liability concerning attribution.

The book is divided into sections addressing spiritual needs. After a brief introduction covering his personal reasons for writing this book, Berman begins with the centrality of the fear of death to spiritual traditions. Here he presents the four narratives mentioned above, complete with the subjects' own interpretation of the spiritual significance of those events. These are followed by a rather idiosyncratic history of near-death research, ground so familiar to professionals as to be surprising only in terms of whose research is emphasized and whose goes unmentioned; fortunately some of the most glaring omissions do appear later in the book, notably Carol Zaleski, Ring, and Greyson, though without compensatory references for the quality of their contributions. This haphazard organization sets the tone for the difficulties with the rest of the book: Berman's popular spiritual agenda and the rather unremarkable quality of his own findings, given the maturity of the field, lead to unfortunate juxtapositions of material, erroneous statements concerning the novelty of his ideas, and misdirection.

For example, the second section, "Journeys of the Soul—Past and Present," interweaves historical sources, Berman's cases, and material from other researchers in fleshing out the all-too-familiar characteristics of a full-blown NDE, notably the out-of-body experience, the tunnel, and meeting deceased relatives or other guides. Here the author points to some of his findings as though they are new, or as though they treat information somehow overlooked by contemporary researchers. One of his subjects reports having her soul "jerked" from her body by God (p. 71), a finding Berman develops as if the only corroboration for such reports comes from his own historical research, rather than referencing contemporary sources, such as Osis and Haraldsson or Zaleski, whose

work he cites elsewhere. This pattern is repeated throughout the book, implying—when not outright stating—that Berman has somehow uncovered new findings or “corrected” persistent misrepresentations in the current literature. In another example occurring just a few pages later, he says that in the popular mind, NDEs are characterized by

a journey down a long, dark tunnel toward a brilliant, white light. Yet in my own studies of modern and ancient near-death stories, I have encountered very few accounts of “tunnel travel.” It appears the experience of traveling in a tunnel is actually quite rare. Gallup reports that of those who have had an NDE, only 10 percent actually describe such a journey. . . .

Despite a tremendous amount of digging, I have found very few pre-modern near-death accounts that actually describe a tunnel experience. (pp. 77–79)

The implication is that without Berman’s and Gallup’s rigor, the public would be misinformed. Yet in the first scientific study of NDEs, Ring’s *Life at Death* published in 1980, he qualified the tunnel nomenclature, pointing out that the tunnel phenomenon was not commonly mentioned by respondents and describing it rather as a transitional dynamic characterized by darkness, lack of dimension, etc. (pp. 53–56). Naive readers may be impressed by Berman’s tactics; nobody familiar with the near-death literature is likely to appreciate them.

In addressing spiritual concerns, Berman tends to use exaggerated language that promises more than it delivers, even making allowances for mass marketing. For example, a subsection called “Nature of the Soul” actually describes the spatial forms people believe they have when out of the body. He devotes an entire chapter to hellish NDEs, and it is here that the text reveals some of its most egregious editorial problems. First he states that “just one” person he interviewed reported a negative experience (p. 84). One paragraph later, he speaks of “the most dramatic hellish NDE I have encountered” (p. 84), implying by his use of the superlative that this was one of at least three cases. A few pages later, he writes, “The great majority of those near-death experiencers I spoke with were fortunate enough to bypass hell” (p. 98). Which is it: one, several, or a minority who have hellish NDEs?

The entire section on hellish NDEs is problematic; it seems to have been introduced primarily to address Western religious concerns at a very superficial level. Intriguing allusions to historical and contemporary traditions of judgment in the afterlife point to the universality of this theme in exoteric religion, though these interesting lines of development are not pursued. The research of Zaleski, Ring, and Greyson is

finally presented to introduce the concepts of culturally mediated NDEs, the universality of positive NDEs, and a more spiritual (esoteric) interpretation of traditional representations of the afterlife. Most of this is too late to be effective for the professional reader, and some of the most pertinent findings have been left out. For instance, Berman emphasizes the individual's responsibility for psychological projection in having a negative or positive experience, ignoring well-documented speculation that certain types of anesthesia may play a significant role in creating negative experiences.

The book next discusses the nature of the Light (God) from a perennialist point of view. Again the author suggests he is revealing novel information when he explicates the "gifts" of the Light—actually characteristics long associated with NDEs and their effects on experiencers: freedom from physical suffering; reassurance about the existence of God; faith that there is an afterlife; a sense of the unity of life; gratitude and joy; the chance for a life review; and spiritual transformation. Separate chapters offer interesting insights and qualifications about the life review and transformative power of NDEs, a few new and others so familiar as to be bromides. For the mass market, messages stressing the learning available to all from NDEs may be restated without losing their inspirational value: living in the present, self-confidence, unimportance of material things, spiritual rather than religious values, compassion, a sense of personal mission, and ecological concerns. Professionals will find little of interest here, certainly little that Berman can claim to have discovered.

In the last section, Berman seeks to identify common elements between NDEs and mystical experiences, though without reference to the burgeoning transpersonal literature. According to the author, NDEs convey the essential messages (and have many of the same qualities) as mystical experiences, notably, the interpenetration of divine love and "ordinary life," the total and unconditional quality of that love, and the interconnection of all sentient beings, the planet, and material reality. To substantiate his claim, Berman presents narratives from some of his subjects who have had "mystical" experiences (his use of the term "mystical" is unqualified; discerning readers would describe many of these as nonordinary, transcendent, or exceptional human experiences [EHEs], but Berman's primary references here are Abraham Maslow and William James rather than any of the more recent research). He introduces perennialism, suitably bolstered with inspiring quotes supporting the notion of universal love and connectedness in contrast to judgment and separation.

The final chapter is a guide to better living based on this knowledge. It advocates a reverence for life, compassionate service, gratitude, a sense of wonder, hospitality, community, and the delights of being a seeker—values well communicated by the warm voice of the speaker. While the repetition of such material in an easy-to-read format illustrated with ever-popular NDEs may be uplifting to average readers, professionals are likely to be less pleased with the apparent exploitation of the uncredited work of other scholars in the field.

Reference

- Ring, K. (1980). *Life at death: A scientific investigation of the near-death experience*. New York, NY: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan.