

BOOK REVIEW

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The Eternal Journey: How Near-Death Experiences Illuminate our Earthly Lives, by Craig R. Lundahl and Harold A. Widdison.
New York, NY: Warner, 1997, 294 + xxvi pp, \$24.00, hb.

The Eternal Journey is a popular book presenting the most comprehensive glimpse of the afterlife revealed in near-death experiences (NDEs) published to date. Written in an engaging, easy-to-read style by Craig Lundahl and Harold Widdison, two well-known sociologists in the NDE field, the book is much more than this, however. Its ambitious intent is to answer the question, "what is the purpose of life and the meaning of death?" (p. 12). To accomplish this goal, the authors offer eyewitness testimony from the dying concerning souls awaiting incarnation, life on earth, and what happens after death. Seldom has so much of the range of human experience appeared in a mass-market book, and it contains a significant amount of new material. Detailed descriptions of the realm of light introduce many aspects of the afterlife never explicated before.

The book seeks to "enlighten us about the reality, purposes, and meaning of life and death" (p. 11). However, the authors never state that their version of enlightenment, purpose, and meaning comes largely from a single source: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, or Mormons). Mormon ideology permeates the entire book, but identification with this organization is not apparent to the average reader who is the audience for this mass-market book. As much as I respect these researchers' previous work, their affiliation makes a difference, given the reason for writing *The Eternal Journey*. Like controversial NDEr Betty Eadie, Lundahl and Widdison's concealment of their ideological bias is in marked contrast to the straightforward stance of other Mormon

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writers, such as Brent and Wendy Top (1993) and Arvin Gibson (1992). The nature of this bias is particularly relevant in a work purporting to reveal the “reality” about the “meaning of life.” The LDS ideology is so pervasive in the book that it deserves treatment here before the contents of the book can be properly reviewed.

First, both authors are Mormons, a fact omitted from their otherwise rather exhaustively listed qualifications. Rather, their authority as objective scientists is stressed not only in the endnotes but in Melvin Morse’s foreword. Second, the evidence they present is overwhelmingly drawn from Mormon NDEs, a skewed sample never identified as such in the text, and one that is unconventionally obscured in the references. To his credit, Morse alerts readers that, “*The Eternal Journey* is based on the authors’ research of over two hundred years of recorded near-death experiences with some from the Mormon community” (p. xxiv). However, “some” appears to be quite an understatement; of the almost 300 citations, at least 150 were from identifiable Mormon sources, very possibly more. In fact, except for citing mass studies like the Gallup Poll and Kenneth Ring’s research to establish the universality of certain NDE features, the actual number of sources is quite small. Three Mormons—Arvin Gibson, Betty Eadie, and Lee Nelson—account for 93 citations alone. Some chapters come almost exclusively from Mormon records. Finally, the unusual referencing style discourages checking on these sources. Instead of the customary numbered citations in the text matched with numbered endnotes, no citations appear in the text, and the endnotes are not numbered. “Sources for Quoted Material (by order of appearance)” (p. 272) require the reader to guess what constitutes “quoted material,” to count up through anything appearing to be a quote to arrive at a point, and then to count down from the list of citations for that chapter. Without text numbering, the casual reader is unlikely to suspect there are endnotes; for more sophisticated readers, this cumbersome procedure renders accurate referencing very difficult.

Thus, the book, intended as an objective study of representative near-death experiences from the general population conducted by objective scientists, is in fact a tract written by Mormons about mainly Mormon experiences. With the LDS slant in mind, the true value of the book can be more easily assessed, and indeed, it still does have a lot to offer. Morse’s foreword warmly endorses Lundahl and Widdison’s distillation of the cumulative wisdom in this book in way that acknowledges the limitations of the research. Then the book follows a roughly chronological outline, moving from visions of pre-incarnate life to the meaning of

earthly life, death, the afterlife, and the ways in which these threads come together.

The book begins by introducing NDEs and declaring the authors' intent to use these experiences to "enlighten us about the reality, purposes, and meaning of life and death" (p. 12). The authors argue in Chapter 2 for the "reality" of the near-death experience, a concept they do not distinguish from validity. To give Lundahl and Widdison credit, they do not make any unsubstantiated claims, although they skirt rather close in using subtleties of language indistinguishable from reality claims for the average reader. The prevalence of NDEs, their similar features, and the absence of a comprehensive counterexplanation are evidence "for the reality of the NDE" (p. 28). They gloss over differences, suggesting that, for example, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *The Aztec Song of the Dead*, and the Old and New Testament are congruent sources concerning the afterlife. Moreover, they rely heavily on the Gallup Poll (Gallup and Proctor, 1982), claiming that "over 22 million" have had NDEs (p. 14), a figure hardly any researcher credits.

Chapter 3, "Pre-Earth Life and Its Purposes," presents NDE visions of life before incarnation. Here humans work on "personal development and preparation for earth life" (p. 46) in a spirit realm where they volunteer to come to earth, contract with other spirits to have relationships as family or friends, select their mission and station in life, and prepare for the testing of earthly existence. The addition of this kind of information to the near-death literature could be a valuable way of tying in features from other anomalous experiences, such as annunciation visions and pre- and perinatal records (for an overview, see Wade, 1996), so it was gratifying to see the connection made here. But alternative or supporting materials that might have bolstered the case are omitted, perhaps owing to ideological choices. The reader is not told that virtually all the sources in this chapter are Mormons, so he or she might easily infer from the text that it is routine for female NDErs to see spirits they feel impelled to bring into the world as their own children, even at the risk of their own lives. A typical excerpt from a woman whose NDE resulted from near-fatal complications of her third pregnancy states:

"Against the doctor's advice, I became pregnant four more times, losing two of the babies prematurely, coming near death again with another of the pregnancies. I knew that several people I had seen at the end of the tunnel were to be my future children, so I continued getting pregnant until I felt I had brought them into the world." (pp. 41-42)

In the chapter “Earth Life and Its Purposes,” the authors employ the life review and other revelations to show that the purpose of earthly life is to love and serve others, gain knowledge, grow spiritually, and fulfill a personal mission. Although larger studies like Raymond Moody’s and Ring’s are cited, once again the majority of illustrations are Mormon or conservative Christian. Since crosscultural studies exist in this arena—even crosscultural Christian studies, like Carol Zaleski’s (1987)—the concentration of 19th and 20th century evangelical Christian NDEs appears to be an editorial limitation. Additionally research such as Ring’s (1984) consistently shows that NDErs move away from traditional, organized religions toward a more personalized spirituality, so the evangelical Christian narratives presented can hardly be considered representative.

Readers are told that

The family is the basic unit on earth and in the spirit world. This basic unit is formed of unique spirits who elected to join as families in the pre-mortal world . . . [from] commitments made by parents to their children, children to their parents, children to each other, and all family members to more distant relatives. (p. 66–67)

I am not aware of this revealed knowledge in other NDE accounts; certainly the reincarnation and regression literatures indicate quite a different relatedness (Bache, 1990; Gabriel and Gabriel, 1992; TenDam, 1990; Woolger, 1988), leading me to suspect that this conclusion is yet another Mormonism. In the section on the Future of the Earth, Ring’s findings on prophetic visions of cataclysm presented here are supported by accounts from other sources, all predicting increasing turbulence and destruction before a new era of peace and harmony. Ring’s published qualifications (1988) that such visions should not be taken literally have not been incorporated into this book.

Chapter 5 focuses mainly on the painless separation of consciousness from the body, stressing that there is nothing to fear in this transition to another state. In later chapters, however, a number of accounts show that some people do experience fear, bringing to mind Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson’s (1977) research on frightening deathbed visions in India. Such contradictions occur throughout the book, resulting in unqualified statements of certainty in early chapters at odds with both the stories and content of later chapters. Broad generalizations are made on the basis of very few sources, such as the allegation in Chapter 6 that “infants who die are cared for, instructed, and grow. And when their parents’ time comes to die, these children might well

be the ones there to greet their parents" (p. 91), an assertion resting on three citations. Nevertheless, the allegations in this chapter about the different experiences of infants, children, and adults entering the afterlife are very intriguing, and if substantiated by other researchers, would be a valuable addition to the field.

The chapter on the spirit body was one of the most original and thoroughly developed innovations to near-death research. In it, the authors meticulously describe the sense of the body that survives death in terms of its appearance, wholeness, capabilities, and sensory perception. A wider number of sources and considerable illustrative material support the contention that the spirit body resembles the material body, except that it is complete and perfect, with increased sensory, movement, and mental capabilities. The examples provided are unusually uplifting, and the research generally appears to be more universal. All in all, this chapter is one of the greatest contributions of the book.

The next chapter on the location of the afterlife seems somewhat more speculative, and it is hard not to make comparisons with Zaleski's work (1987) concerning the impact of culture on NDEs, as Lundahl and Widdison not only maintain that the spirit world is "located right here on our physical earth" but in another dimension, and that it is "segmented into spheres organized around qualities of love, service, and personal preparedness" (p. 139). The presentation of these levels deviates significantly from the original division into "Cities of Light" and the "Realm of Bewildered Spirits" identified by nonMormon sources, such as Moody (1977) and George Ritchie (1991), although it is reminiscent of the influence of Dante and others on the Western Christian tradition.

Following chapters offer a wealth of new material fleshing out the spiritual realm: topology; descriptions of animal, plant, and insect life; pastoral and city lifestyle; work; administration; clothing; social roles; architecture and layouts of the cities; and travel between the cities. The authors have done an unusually fine level of qualitative analysis of near-death research to discover these findings, and in some cases have incorporated data from many sources. This innovative contribution suggests rich avenues for further research, especially in cross-cultural contexts. The authors' findings that the activities in the realm of light focus on keeping genealogical records (why, given the known relationships of families there?), missionary work (to whom?), performing in choirs and musical organizations, administrative record keeping, and so forth, may reflect a strong Mormon cultural overlay that might well be absent from other records. In this vein, I was surprised to note that

“there is no ‘menial’ work in the spirit world” (p. 189), yet people sweep streets, and women can expect to cook, perform other kitchen duties, weave cloth, and make clothing. Readers are also told that “Activities in the spirit world are tightly controlled” (p. 191) by restrictive guards, elders, and administrators.

The authors provide a deeper treatment of the beings of light, called angels, than do other researchers. “The designation ‘angel’ has been assigned to any being that emanates light, wears clothing that dazzles the eye, or possesses qualities thought of as being angelic” (p. 199). Distinctions between beings of light presumed to be holy personages, such as Christ, radiant deceased humans, and “angels” were not clear to me from the data, but the authors seek to categorize angels by their activities (protection, guardianship, warning, guidance, escorting, bearing arms, delivering messages) and characteristics. These sections draw heavily on deathbed visions as well as NDEs, as well as the popular literature on angels concerning miraculous rescues from threatening situations.

Chapter 14 is devoted to the Realm of Bewildered Spirits, or frightening NDEs, based on studies they cite by Maurice Rawlings (1978), Bruce Greyson and Nancy Evans Bush (1992), George Gallup (Gallup and Proctor, 1982), and Mormon experiencers. Accounts supporting traditional Christian views of hell and Satan are given prominence; Don Brubaker’s story constitutes about one-fourth of this chapter.

In the final chapters, the major themes come together. In an anti-abortion, anti-planned-pregnancy stance, readers are told, “Some people saw spirit children who appeared to be sad and were informed that their sadness was due to the plans of their prospective parents to stop having children or not to have any children” (p. 244), such as one mother of ten. I found myself wondering if this was a tract or representative NDE finding. Other reincarnation traditions, such as Tibetan philosophy (Maiden and Farwell, 1997), present very different views, as does the perinatal literature (Gabriel and Gabriel, 1992; Wambach, 1981); none of these is mentioned. In revisiting the life review and its impact on how people conduct their earthly lives, Ritchie and Emanuel Swedenborg are brought in as authorities on the dangers of addiction to tobacco and alcohol and of “adultery and whoredom” (p. 258), in addition to various sources warning about suicide and other transgressions important in Christian traditions. The rest of the life review material is much more representative of other near-death research.

At the end, the authors reveal their religious orientation when they write, “In essence, this *body of scientific data* provides what appears

to be newly discovered, or possibly rediscovered, *truth*" (p. 266, italics added). I have no quibble with the inspirational message that "living a better life will improve our situation in death" (p. 267), that "all life has meaning, that we all have some purpose for being on earth, and that death does not destroy us or our relationships" (p. 268), or that "most important in life and death is love" (p. 268). These uplifting sentiments radiate from all near-death studies, and they shine from this book, as well. What I do question is their presentation as "scientific truth" in a work whose proselytizing ideology is never straightforwardly acknowledged.

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