

BOOK REVIEW

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Children of the New Millennium: Children's Near-Death Experiences and the Evolution of Humankind, by P. M. H. Atwater. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 1999, 288 pp, \$14.00 pb.

Subtext for Children of the New Millennium, by P. M. H. Atwater. Charlottesville, VA: P. M. H. Atwater. Available from the author at P.O. Box 7691, Charlottesville, VA 22906-7691 or at <www.cinemind.com/atwater>.

P. M. H. Atwater is one of the earlier researchers of the near-death phenomenon no doubt motivated to a large extent by herself having had such an experience. Atwater has authored six books on the subject and had numerous articles appear in *Vital Signs*, the newsletter of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS). In presentations at a number of IANDS conferences, Atwater reported that she feels that of all her books, *Children of the New Millennium* is her most important work to date. Her excitement for the book and its potential to affect mankind is reflected by a quotation from the back cover of the book:

Atwater believes these millennial children—who possess heightened sensory and empathic abilities acquired at birth or as a result of the near-death experience—herald the presence of a new race of people on Earth. This groundbreaking book explores how these special children will dramatically impact the human condition by helping humankind rediscover the spiritual truths needed to survive in our radically changing world.

Also on the back cover is glowing praise for the book by four highly respected writers in the field.

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I have read all of Atwater's earlier books relating to near-death experiences (NDEs) and found them interesting and informative. This book, however, she claimed was different than the others because it was based on empirical research and statistical analysis and was not limited to the reporting of anecdotal accounts of the type which tend to typify NDE books.

I am a professional researcher and therefore anticipated some solid facts and figures into which I could sink my teeth. I have taught research methods and statistical analysis at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in departments of sociology and economics, and for five years was employed by the United States Atomic Energy Commission—now the Department of Energy—as a program evaluator, where I came to appreciate well-designed research. I know that it is difficult to do quality research in areas where the subject matter cannot be observed directly. Near-death research is certainly such an area. I was therefore especially interested in Atwater's research instrument, which was a lengthy questionnaire, and the statistical tool she used to analyze her data, which turned out to be limited to the percentages of individuals who responded in particular ways.

Atwater begins her book by stating:

Children of the new millennium are different from those of any other generation of record. They are unusually smart, even gifted; identify with "alien" existences whether past life-oriented, extraterrestrial, or multidimensional; and they are natural creative intuitives. (p. 1)

Atwater then refers to a number of other researchers to support her conclusion that significant changes in children's intelligence, among other things, are occurring. The other researchers do not state why or how this might be happening, but Atwater believes that she knows why:

Life utilizes random unpredictability to guarantee continuous change and advancement.

Evolution operates the same way in the human family.

Always, sudden changes, quantum leaps in physiology and consciousness, have catapulted the growth and development of humankind beyond that which can be explained. As "missing links" are still standard fare in trying to understand the evolution of our bodies, so, too, are there missing connectors in any attempt to rationalize the evolution of consciousness.

Until now. (p. 7)

Atwater goes on to argue that the missing link is the near-death experience.

In her earlier books, *Coming Back To Life* (1988) and *Beyond the Light* (1994), Atwater wrote about how adults who have had an NDE are transformed by that experience. From this she extrapolates that if adults are changed, then children who have NDEs must also be changed significantly:

This suspicion of mine is based on the interviews *and* observations I have conducted with over 3,000 adult near-death experiences (not counting the significant others I also spoke with), as well as nearly the same number of people who had undergone transformations of consciousness through other means; this research base was expanded by work with 277 child experiencers (about half still youngsters, the rest having reached their teen or adult years). (p. 8)

She suggests how having an NDE impacts children:

... the brain is affected to a greater degree in children than in adults, propelling them into abstractions and learning enhancements as creative expression soars. This marks them as different from their age-mates and at variance with family and social structures. (p. 19)

This is how Atwater describes her research philosophy and strategy:

The protocol I use is that of a police investigator, a skill I learned from my police-officer father (that's why some people call me the gumshoe of near-death). I specialize in interviews *and* observations, cross-checking everything I notice a minimum of four times with different people in different sections of the country, as a way to ensure that any bias I may have as a near-death experiencer will not cloud my perception and that my work is not completely dependent on anecdote. Questionnaires for me are auxiliary, used only to further examine certain aspects of near-death states. (p. 8)

In 1994, I devised a lengthy questionnaire to probe the memories of those who had had a near-death episode as a child. My goal was not only to test recall, but to track the aftereffects throughout various life stages. (p. 10)

When she describes her research population of children who had had a near-death experience, there seems to be a contradiction. On pages 8, 74, and 187 Atwater reports that her study involved 277 children. But on page 10 she writes:

Of the fifty-two people who participated, forty-four had experienced the near-death phenomenon by their fifteenth birthday. The youngest to fill out the questionnaire was twelve, the oldest a seventy-two-year-old who had been pronounced clinically dead at four and a half.

Being a bit confused, I went through her book and counted the number of children whom she identifies by name, date of the experience, nature

of the death, and hometown. I listed each child's name and ages at the time of his or her NDE, and came up with 63 children plus one for whom no age was given. I also noted that several of these children had not had NDEs but NDE-like experiences, which would reduce the sample size of child NDEers even further. Although Atwater clearly writes that she used an in-depth questionnaire as the basis for her analysis, she spends all of page 9 informing the reader how she interviews children. So it is not clear what the basis is for many of the conclusions she makes: the questionnaire, her interviews, or research conducted earlier and reported in her other books. It seemed to me as I read the book that the questionnaire supplied but a small portion of the data in the book, but was used by Atwater to give her conclusions an aura of objectivity and empirical substance.

In Chapter Three, "A New View of Near-Death States," Atwater writes:

Since the brain can be permanently damaged in three to five minutes without sufficient oxygen, it is important to note that one of the striking features of the near-death phenomenon is that *no matter how long the person is dead, there is usually no brain damage once he or she is revived; rather, there is a noticeable brain enhancement.* (p. 52)

This is a remarkable statement, given there is no way that this can be determined by an interview or a questionnaire. Atwater does not supply any evidence for this remarkable claim, such as brain scans or other tests. Is this her own intuitive feeling or is this based on empirical research? Several of my colleagues and I have interviewed a number of people who came back from their NDEs with significant brain damage. It was not the NDE that caused the damage so much as it was the situation that precipitated the "death," which in turn led to the subsequent NDE. Their experiences were viewed as wonderful events, but their health, mental functioning, and cognitive abilities were frequently severely reduced. Also in Chapter Three Atwater makes this observation (pp. 68–69):

A fascinating aspect of this is that as a child's mind begins to shift, his or her intelligence increases. Using questionnaire responses, let's take a look at what I'm implying.

Faculties enhanced, altered, or experienced in multiples	77%
Mind works differently—highly creative and inventive	84%
Significant enhancement of intellect	68%
Drawn to and highly proficient in math/science/history	93%

Professionally employed in math/science/history careers	25%
Unusually gifted with languages	35%
School	
easier after experience	34%
harder afterward or blocked from memory	66%

How any of the above percentages (which is a partial list) document that having an NDE produces an increase in intelligence is not clear.

But now let us consider her method of statistical analysis. Atwater takes percentages derived from her questionnaire and compares them with other groups, such as adults. If she discovers differences between adults and what the children reported, she does much more than just draw inferences; she states unequivocally that the differences reveal something significant.

The type of data a researcher collects limits the type of statistical analyses that can be made. In her case what she has done is to count the numbers of individuals who respond in a specific way, then divide that number by the total number of individuals in the group, which results in a percentage. A percentage is a descriptive statistic. It can help a researcher to identify the characteristics of a specific group, such as the percentage that are women or who are over a specific age. It can also help to contrast two or more groups. But it cannot go much beyond that. Percentages will not tell or even imply what a particular difference means. A different set of statistical tools is needed if a researcher wishes to draw inferences, discover the meaning of differences, or find out if the differences are in any way significant.

In addition, any time a researcher uses percentages, it is desirable to show the number of individuals on which the percentages are based. While Atwater uses the figure 277 in many places, the number of children who actually completed the questionnaire is 44, a fairly small sample size, given that Atwater is referring to the *evolution of humankind* and *helping humankind rediscover the spiritual truths needed to survive*. But even with a small sample, if it is scientifically drawn and is shown to represent all children who have had NDEs and that the only difference between these children and all children is the fact that they had had NDEs while others had not, generalizations drawn could be conceptually useful though inadequate. But I could not find any mention in the book of how these 44 people became the sample. Is it possible that these 44 children are in some critical way(s) different from those

who are not in the sample and that these unique differences are what motivated them to participate in the study? If this is true, then it would be completely inappropriate to make any generalizations beyond her sample of 44.

At the 1999 IANDS conference in Salt Lake City, Atwater made the observation in her presentation on *Children of the New Millennium* that people were becoming less and less willing to participate in studies and share their near-death experiences. This surprised me, as I have not personally found this to be the case. I asked other researchers if they were also seeing a decline in NDErs' willingness to share their experiences and they said that for them it was just the reverse. Puzzled by her observation, I wondered as I read the book if this might not be a significant factor affecting Atwater's research findings. During her presentation, she reported that it took her respondents hours to complete her questionnaire. It is my experience that few people are willing to spend hours filling out a complicated lengthy questionnaire, regardless of the topic, and this might just be why she had trouble getting people to cooperate.

The big problem with the percentages cited above and many others throughout the book is that they were used as evidence that having an NDE changes children in significant ways. For this to be valid, Atwater would have had to know what the children were like before their NDEs to determine if changes had occurred and to what degree. Nowhere in her book could I find any indication that she had a measure of the children's intelligence, physical and emotional well-being, aptitudes, or talents before their NDEs. Further, on examining the reported ages of the children at the time of their NDEs, I discovered that 11 had their NDEs before age 1, 18 before age 2, 30 before age 5, 35 before age 6, 43 before age 8, and 54 before age 12. Only nine were teenagers at the time of their experience. (These are accumulated numbers based on the 63 individuals identified in her book by name, age, manner of death, and hometown.) This being the case, most of her respondents would have been unable to report what they were like before the experience.

Referring back to the percentages cited earlier relating to performance in school—34% reporting that school was easier after experience and 66% that school was harder afterward—more than half her sample was not even old enough to be enrolled in school at the time of their NDE, so they could not have responded to this question. On page 105, Atwater writes, "What follows are more questionnaire results to give

us a deeper look at how these aftereffects impact a child's life." Then she gives the following figures (partial list):

Significant increase in allergies	45%
Became vegetarian	18%
Unusual sensitivity to light	
decreased tolerance	59%
increased tolerance	20%
Electrical sensitivity	52%
Psychic enhancements	
more intuitive	64%
more precognitive	73%
more knowing	48%
more of an active/vivid dream life	66%
Relationship with parents/siblings after	
better	30%
alienated	57%
Immediate response to episode following	
positive	34%
negative	61%

Remember that most of these questionnaires were filled out by individuals who had their NDEs when they were children. However, at the time they filled out the questionnaire they were mature adults. I could find no supportive information in her book such as parents being consulted, or teachers, physicians, or anyone else who might have known the child before the NDE.

It would be impossible for most of the respondents to be able to address these questions and I would suspect that the vast majority did not even try to do so. So, if perhaps half did not complete this segment of the questionnaire, then a statistic of 20% for increased tolerance to light would refer to only two people, from which we could hardly generalize to the whole of society. The book is replete with statistics such as these, which raises serious questions about the validity and reliability of the author's conclusions.

In addition, Atwater asked her respondents to recall an event that occurred, in some cases, many years earlier. There is excellent research documenting that the type of research instrument used to collect data, such as questionnaires or structured interview schedules, can and does have a significant impact on what respondents report. A researcher, if

not extremely careful, can unwittingly influence what is said or recorded. Because Atwater's questionnaire is very lengthy, complex, and comprehensive, it has great potential for influencing in multiple ways what her respondents report.

Not included in her book, but available from Atwater's website, is a "Subtext" that includes a 23-page document entitled "Appendix II: Research Methodology." In this appendix she includes her questionnaire and a lengthy description of her interviewing technique and research philosophy. For example she describes how she encourages her subjects, through subtle body language, to say more. But even the subtlest motions can also encourage respondents to give the researcher what they think he or she wants to hear. This may or may not reflect what happened. Right after the questionnaire she includes a segment titled "Additional Thoughts About Research." She writes:

I do not use the standard double-blind/control group method most professionals do in my research of near-death states, because I don't trust it. [Reviewer's note: I cannot imagine how any NDE researcher *could* use a double-blind technique, which would require that the subject not know whether he or she had had an NDE.] Initial screening based on this standard style, whether in person or by mail, is dependent upon questions that use the terms in advance of the experiencer's response and "lead" in the sense of how certain questions tend to inspire certain answers. (p. 16)

In legal terms, this is known as "leading the witness." To avoid this, researchers do not ask respondents if they saw, felt, or did something. Instead, the researcher lets the respondents tell the researcher what they saw, felt, or did. Some respondents, trying to be helpful, will give the answers they think you are looking for. In addition, some respondents will give answers to questions that do not apply to them. In political polls, for example, researchers have inserted in questionnaires the name of a fictitious candidate. When asked if the respondent has ever heard of the candidate and various questions about the candidate, a considerable number of respondents will reply that they have not only heard of the fictitious candidate, but they are definitely going to vote for him or her. On pages 2 and 3 of Atwater's "Appendix II: Research Methodology," referring again to police work as an example, she writes:

In [an investigation of] a car accident, you cannot mention "car" until the witness does. Hence, when interviewing near-death survivors, I would never say "light" or "dark" or anything else unless they first used the term.

Upon examining Atwater's questionnaire, it is clear that she violates these principle she says are important in her interviewing. Apparently Atwater does not believe that questionnaires pose the same problems for bias as do interviews. This assumption is very dangerous, as it has been documented repeatedly that how questions are worded in a questionnaire can introduce significant bias. A few examples of questions from her questionnaire (pp. 14–15 of Appendix II) illustrate their significant potential to bias respondents' answers:

- Did your mind work differently afterward? Explain if yes.
- Was there any difference in your faculties? Explain if yes.
- Did your intelligence level change? Explain if yes.
- Did the affect [sic] of light change afterwards? Sunshine? Explain if yes.
- Did the affect [sic] of sound change afterwards? Music? Explain if yes.
- Did your energy affect electricity or electronic equipment? Explain.
- Was there any difference in your physical body and how it functions, or in your appearance, afterwards? Explain if yes.
- Did your experience in school and with your teachers/coaches change afterward? Explain if yes.
- What was your health like afterward and in the years that followed?
- What was your spiritual/religious experience like afterward?
- How do you handle stress, conflicts, negativity?

While these are the most blatant, each and every item in the questionnaire is leading and suggestive. Given that most of the respondents were under six at the time they had their experience, and that they were relying on memory, it is possible that the questionnaire could elicit responses that were a mixture of NDE-related effects, subsequent events, and suggestion. In the questionnaire section titled "Aftereffects," the respondent is asked (p. 13 of Appendix II):

- Did manifestations from or because of your experience continue to occur afterwards (like sudden or continued "visitations," unusual lights, voices, haunting, vivid replays of the event, etc.)?

This leading question with its list of suggested answers could stimulate diverse reactions in respondents. For example, "sudden" to one individual might not mean the same thing as it does to someone else. Of individuals who have had similar experiences, one might respond affirmatively while another would move to the next question. It would be very difficult to answer this question and screen out the influence of the questionnaire itself.

It is also clear that the respondents' age (85 percent younger than 13), education, social experience, and cultural backgrounds cannot help but

have significant implications for what they thought the questions were asking. Nowhere could I find any mention of why these questions were selected or whether they were tested for validity or reliability. Other than stating that she sent out a questionnaire that took an “inordinate length of time to complete,” Atwater did not discuss how the data were analyzed for meaning and relevance.

Atwater writes, “Empirical research can be conducted utilizing a number of different approaches, and I count mine as one of them.” She then goes on to state, “If we are ever to understand the near-death phenomenon, we must examine it from three hundred and sixty degrees. Anything less is unacceptable” (Appendix II, p. 18). I agree with her completely. There are many research strategies, techniques, and approaches. Each of them could reveal a piece of the NDE puzzle. But we must make sure we are not forcing pieces into the puzzle where they do not fit. Empirical research—by which I assume she means collecting multiple cases, counting numbers, and analyzing statistically—is just one research strategy, which is no more valid than other techniques. Even given that the research instrument used to collect data has been proven to be reliable and valid, to be able to generalize from the sample from which the data had been gathered to a larger population, one must establish that the sample is representative of the target population. If it is not, then all you can speak about is the sample itself.

Atwater’s discussion of where her research population came from suggests that serious problems with bias could have occurred. She states that many of her subjects were attendees at her talks, or they sought her out, or they responded to her advertisements in national publications. It is possible that those individuals who sought her out could be systematically different from those who did not. To eliminate this possibility, she would have needed to demonstrate that her sample of 44 was not different from the general population in any significant way(s). From what was described in her book and subtext, I could find no place where she attempted to do this. Therefore, any generalizations made beyond the sample of 44 are not justified.

In Atwater’s latest book, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Near-Death Experiences* (Atwater and Morgan, 2000), she writes that adults tend to remember their NDEs but children tend to forget them:

Children are six times more likely than adults to ignore, block, forget, or tuck away their near-death episodes. Many never have recall, even though they currently display the full profile of aftereffects and have throughout their lives. (p. 127)

If this is, in fact, true, then those who completed her questionnaire could not be representative of child NDErs in general, in that Atwater's subjects appear to recall how their experience affected them in considerable detail. If most child NDErs do not recall their NDEs, how would they know about their aftereffects? There appears to be a serious question here.

It is not clear to me from Atwater's book why an NDE-initiated evolution of humanity waited until the turn of the 21st century to make an impact. Why would these super children be showing up only now? If the NDE has significantly transforming implications for children, this evolution has been going on as long as humanity has existed and children have been having NDEs. Being an avid researcher on NDEs, I have read numerous accounts of children's near-death experiences, which took place over the past 100 years. It is not a new phenomenon. Is the title of Atwater's book just a catchy phrase to cash in on the new millennial craze or is there actually a significant NDE-induced evolution occurring? Only a well-designed, long-term, longitudinal study could address this question.

Another problem with Atwater's book is that she rarely makes qualifying comments such as "I think . . .," "It is possible . . .," or "The data suggest . . ." In her writings and speaking engagements she makes definite statements that leave no room for differing opinions or differing interpretations of the data. There is clearly no question in her mind that NDEs cause major transformations in children—and she could be right. But to assume that these relatively rare transformations can have a definite effect on the evolution of the whole of humanity is a considerable leap.

Whether or not Atwater's claims are valid, the methodology she used to collect and analyze her data are too flawed to be used as evidence for several reasons. First, the data reported in her book are taken from self-reports of child experiencers, the majority of whom were younger than 6 years old at the time of their experience, too young to be able to provide much of the data she requested and reports. Second, in order to determine if having an NDE impacts the experiencer, the researcher would have to have some data on what the experiencer was like prior to the experience. This information was not available, and therefore there are no data that can support the conclusion that changes occurred. Third, there are no independent observations verifying that changes did occur. Fourth, no evidence was provided that her research instrument was valid or reliable. Fifth, the basis for all her statistics was not shown.

Sixth, the statistical methods used were inappropriate. Seventh, the sample size was very small, diverse, and inadequate.

In summary, *Children of the New Millennium* makes major claims that have no empirical support, at least from the research as reported in the book. What Atwater has is a series of intriguing but untested hypotheses. The book's only contributions to the field of near-death studies are some anecdotal experiences that have not appeared in Atwater's other books and the provocative issues it raises that could be the basis for further research.

There is no question that Atwater is extremely excited by the implications of the near-death experience for the individual, for humanity in general, and particularly for children. But it appears that her enthusiasm, personal beliefs, and expectations formed the basis for this book rather than good, solid research.

References

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