

Guest Editorial

Avoiding the Columbus Confusion: An Ockhamish View of Near-Death Research

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ABSTRACT: The positive aftereffects of near-death experiences (NDEs) are sometimes regarded as due to the possibility that they may be "visions of the beyond." But that notion could be a serious misconception, similar to what I call the "Columbus Confusion." Five hundred years ago, Christopher Columbus's belief that he had found a new route to India prevented him from realizing that he had discovered a new continent. Likewise, contemporary belief that NDEs are glimpses of an afterlife may prevent us from realizing their more profound nature. Belief in an afterlife has not historically brought humanity a high quality of life, but NDEs seem reliably to do so, and may offer important clues about why the expanded vitality, the "eternity-consciousness," of the mystics is commonly blocked. Those clues are obscured by popular emphasis on that minority of NDEs that resemble otherworld journeys.

One regrettable outcome of Christopher Columbus's famous trip 500 years ago was that the native peoples of the American continent have been saddled ever since with the name "Indians," because Columbus set out to find a round-the-world route to India and didn't realize he'd actually ended up on a whole new continent. This is a kind of error

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against which scientists in any field need to be particularly on guard: the error of seeing what we expect to see and unconsciously ignoring or discounting evidence that doesn't fit. In the hope that giving this error a name might help us avoid it, I suggest we call it the Columbus Confusion.

Tales of wonderful deathbed visions have been part of popular folklore since time immemorial, but until quite recently reports of people reviving miraculously after being given up for dead and claiming to have experienced other dimensions of reality were the stuff of legend, superstition, and religious propaganda. In the early years of this century psychical researchers tried to analyze as many firsthand accounts as they could find (Barrett, 1926; Myers, 1903), but for mainstream science and educated public opinion this was very much a fringe activity, more concerned with bolstering declining religious faith in immortality than learning new facts about human existence. Since World War II however the miracles of medical science itself have made such occurrences almost commonplace. A Gallup Poll in the early 1980s estimated that in America, about 15 percent of the population had been resuscitated from the very brink of death, and about a third of those reported experiencing something more than trauma or blank unconsciousness (Gallup and Proctor, 1982).

Individual descriptions vary widely, but expressions like "something heavenly" were a common denominator in many cases, often with the adjective "indescribable" attached. As a result of this increase in new cases, even skeptical scientists have been induced to investigate what might be happening on these occasions. And one of the first things to emerge, as physicians, surgeons, psychologists, and other professionals began taking the subject seriously, was that very large numbers of such experiences have gone unrecorded even in the quite recent past because skeptical medical authorities dismissed them as hallucinations produced by the brain under stress or by the drugs used in surgery. Indeed, many people have admitted to keeping quiet about their experiences for fear of being thought crazy.

However, detailed questioning by sympathetic observers has found no evidence of craziness in the vast majority of cases. On the contrary, near-death experiences (NDEs) generally leave the experiencers better able to cope creatively with life than they were beforehand. Anxiety in general and fear of death in particular are dramatically reduced or even abolished by the experience, and along with them such everyday symptoms of anxiety as boredom, restlessness, competitiveness, compulsive acquisitiveness, and aggression. And these are not just matters of personal testimony; psychologists Kenneth Ring (1984) and Margot

Grey (1985) have actually carried out batteries of psychological tests to confirm these positive characteristics of post-NDE lives.

Fantasies due to brain aberration do not produce effects like these, nor do any drugs; and NDEs often occur without any drug having been given. Yet the changes cannot be explained away as simply *joi de vivre* after a close shave, because they aren't reported on this scale by the larger group of survivors who recall no special experiences near death. Indeed, such people often have *greater* fear of dying precisely because the narrow escape has made them value life more (Sabom, 1982).

So are NDEs glimpses of a nonmaterial life beyond the grave, as the religious propagandists of old and the psychical researchers of the early 20th century believed? Some reports certainly sound like that, and they are the ones that have attracted the most media attention, some of it very sensational. A recent example was the movie *Flatliners* (Schumacher, 1990), in which a group of medical students were portrayed as deliberately playing dice with death in the hope of catching a glimpse of the beyond when the line on the brainwave monitor goes flat.

Two special kinds of NDE have received the most attention from this point of view, from serious commentators as well as sensationalists, and even from many professional researchers. One is the out-of-body experience (OBE), in which the person seems to float out of his or her body and watch what is happening from a few feet above, and sometimes observes events at a distance that could not be known by any physical means, suggesting that consciousness is not tied to the brain. The other is the experience of traveling through a dark tunnel to a wonderful realm of light, sometimes followed by a meeting with long-deceased relatives and/or a supernatural being, in which the experimenter is offered a choice of remaining in the heavenly place or going back to the body, or perhaps is ordered to go back because his or her work is not yet done. This second kind of NDE has become so much a part of the popular mythology over the past decade that the Monty Python comedy team incorporated it almost casually into their satiric movie *The Meaning of Life* (Jones, 1983), the heaven at the tunnel's end in this case being a luxury hotel with a Hollywood-style Star-Spangled Christmas Cabaret perpetually in progress.

But a careful study of near-death literature shows that experiences of those two types occur only in a minority of reports. I suggest that they have received disproportionate attention precisely because of the Columbus Confusion, much as Columbus himself might have given disproportionate attention to a few American natives who happened to

like drawings he had seen of real Indians, ignoring the others who looked quite different. Just as European history at the end of the 15th century gave Columbus a mindset toward India rather than a new continent, so our history prepares us to believe that if death is not just blind, meaningless, and tragic extinction, there must be a nonphysical self or soul that survives bodily death in some nonearthly realm. And just as most native Americans do not look like Indians, so too most NDEs do not look like glimpses of an immaterial soul or another world. In fact, as I shall suggest in a moment, there is quite another possibility that I personally find far more exciting.

To begin with, most NDEs do not involve visions at all. Experiencers use expressions like "indescribably blissful peace" or "a kind of dreamless depth that somehow wasn't unconscious" or "an incredible sense of sinking into pure timeless love"; yet these experiencers' lives are still changed in positive ways and they still lose their fear of death. I speak with firsthand authority here, since I had just such an NDE myself when I nearly died from severe poisoning in 1983, and what's more, the indescribably blissful peace has remained with me ever since, somehow removing all fear of death even though I on the whole do not think I shall survive it (Wren-Lewis, 1985).

But even among those NDE reports that do involve visions, the great majority could not be literal glimpses of the undiscovered country beyond the grave for the simple reason that they contradict each other in significant ways. Some, for example, depict the heavenly landscape as a pastoral scene, others as an insubstantial cloudy space, others as a science-fiction-style Celestial City, and still others as human scenes almost justifying the Monty Python spoof. The long-dead relatives encountered in certain much-publicized experiences sometimes appear the age they were when they themselves died, sometimes as the age they would have been had they lived on, sometimes miraculously rejuvenated, and sometimes totally transfigured into shining angelic forms that are nevertheless somehow recognizable. A minority of modern NDEs include visions of hellish regions, reminiscent of the tales from medieval times of souls being given guided tours of hell and purgatory; yet the majority of modern visions are notably devoid of any such hellish elements, even though the experiencers in many cases had hardly led saintly lives.

In fact, serious consideration of all the evidence suggests that play of imagination must be responsible for most near-death visions, and hence probably for all. On the same principle, for every OBE that looks like an accurate psychic perception of real physical events, there are dozens that are quite plainly plays of imagination, since they involve

definite non-events. A dramatic example of the role of imagination in near-death visions was the experience of Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (1961).

When he nearly died in 1944—long before the term NDE had been coined—Jung seemed to leave his body and soar not just a few feet up but about a thousand miles into space, where he had a view of the earth that at that time no human eye had ever seen, though astronauts have done so since. One might say that it was a psychic perception befitting a man of global stature, such as Jung felt himself to be. But he also encountered an asteroid-like rock with a Hindu temple carved into it, complete with a swami sitting in lotus posture amidst flickering oil lamps—objects that certainly do not exist a thousand miles above the earth.

But to say that an experience involves play of imagination is not to say that the experience itself is unreal. Judging by its effects on people's lives, the experience of indescribable peace, deep happiness, and wonder that is common to almost all NDEs, visionary or nonvisionary, seems very real indeed, something we need to learn as much about as we can. And this is where the Columbus Confusion could deprive us of an exciting and truly revolutionary discovery. If we equate the wonderful intensity of feeling in NDEs with a glimpse of some other world and explain experiences like mine as cases where the glimpse was incomplete or repressed by the mind, then the implication is that such intense peace and happiness are not appropriate to *this* world.

But if, on the other hand, we take a less metaphysical view, what some people might even consider a materialist view, and think of NDEs as related to some basic function of consciousness or of the brain that emerges when the individual is cut off from ordinary activity in deep coma, then it is possible that this marvelous intensity of satisfaction might be available at other times too, without our coming close to death. Perhaps it could even be available all through life. My own experience of the wonderful sense of mystical consciousness continuing after I came round suggests this possibility, and my personal research interest is to find out everything I can about the precise mechanics, psychological or biological, of that extraordinary consciousness change I underwent when poisoned in 1983.

I have no objections to researchers exploring the possibility that consciousness can range beyond the brain, for example by seeking cases of NDErs coming back with paranormal information from some distant place beyond any explanation in terms of coincidence. Nor do I have any particular skepticism toward the possibility of consciousness

surviving bodily death. But such research, if successful, would be like Columbus actually reaching India by sailing west: we already know what the destination would look like, because belief in life after death is as old as the hills, and until recently it was for most people an absolutely firm belief.

I don't find the prospect of proving life after death exciting at all, because the quality of human life wasn't much different when people held that belief than it is now; in fact, it may have been a good deal worse, so much so that Shakespeare's Hamlet regarded the prospect of life continuing into the undiscovered country as more of a threat than a hope. So indeed did the founders and major teachers of our great religions. They all say, in one way or another, that without a radical change of consciousness from the ordinary anxiety-ridden state of this world, continuation of life beyond the grave would be more like hell than heaven. But mystics who claim to have experienced such a shift of consciousness say it has a quality of timelessness that makes survival a secondary matter. There is a dimension of value, of aliveness, in consciousness itself that makes every moment of living an occasion for satisfaction even in the most adverse circumstances, a dimension called eternity, something quite distinct from immortality with which it is often confused.

Now even if there were no more to NDEs than the revelation that dying can be the ultimate mystical trip rather than an occasion for dread and sorrow, it would still carry more importance for humanity than anything Columbus discovered. It would justify urgent research, for instance, on why NDEs happen to some people and not others, and on whether there is any way to make them universal, since we all die. But the research I would like to see goes even further than that. Mystical trips have been regarded as supernatural, but the most conspicuous thing about the deep happiness that's been with me since my NDE is that it is completely and utterly natural, despite its wondrousness. So as I now see it, the critical question is not "How can weak and sinful mortals ever hope to attain such happiness?" but "Why isn't everyone in it all the time?" And perhaps the clue is the very fact that it does come, to ordinary people like myself with no previous interest in mysticism, at the close approach of death.

My hypothesis is that the survival instinct in our species has become hyperactive, so that unlike the lilies of the field we don't live towards the future naturally but get so bogged down in anxious concern for the morrow that we miss out on the deep eternal quality of life in each present moment. For some people at least, this spell is broken as they approach death, and they return to life with the survival instinct

functioning at a far more gentle level that is actually, in my experience, more efficient than before. My hope for future near-death research is that it may point us toward less drastic ways of breaking the spell and healing the soul. If that could happen I'd be prepared to let the possibility of immortality take care of itself.

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