

The Near Death Experience as Evidence for Life After Death

A dialogue by **Stafford Betty**.

From time to time I ask my students how they feel about life after death. A solid majority say they believe in it, in keeping with most Americans (82% in a recent Gallup poll). I then ask them to imagine how they would feel if I could prove it didn't exist. "But you couldn't," some insist. "I know," I say, "but I want you to imagine I could and *did*." In other words, you actually feel compelled by logic and evidence to stop believing in it. How would you feel then?" Quite a few say they would live life differently, that it's the reward or punishment of an afterlife which keeps them from being complete animals. Others admit they would live the same way, "but without much joy." They add, "I mean, if God doesn't love us enough to keep us in existence beyond one measly life, He doesn't love us enough. Would you let your child be snuffed out forever if you could stop it?" (Good question!) At this point in the conversation, someone – we'll call him an existentialist (he's almost always a male) – usually says life is all the more meaningful and happy because death snuffs us out forever: "If life just keeps going on forever and ever, then it's not that special. It's because it's so fragile and brief that it's so precious." "But wouldn't you rather live on after death if given a choice?" someone usually challenges. "Not really," is often the reply. "You mean you really don't care whether you're immortal or not?" This rebuttal is usually met with a complacent shrug of the shoulders.

But aside from what we might want or prefer, where does the evidence actually point? Does it point to extinction, or does it point to life after death? In this paper I will focus exclusively on the neardeath experience (NDE), and see in which direction the reports of this experience take us.

First a clarification. If an NDE is an experience of a reality and not some sort of hallucination, life after death is strongly implied. Here's why. First, if you can get out of your body and still move about, and see and be aware of yourself as the person you are, then you're not your body. And if you're not your body, then the body's death doesn't mean that you have to die.

This line of reasoning seems clear enough. But what if the NDE is a hallucination? In that case the experience isn't any more valid than a dream, and the NDE fails as evidence of an afterlife. So the question comes down to this: What are the reasons for thinking the NDE is an experience of real things, and what are the countervailing reasons for thinking that it's just a vivid dream, a hallucination? In which direction does an open-minded, evenhanded analysis take us?

I think the evidence is strong for reality and against hallucination. I am going to let Theophilus (Theo) Adams tell you why. Theo, a Professor of Philosophy where I work, will be debating with his prize student, whom we'll call Reggie. Reggie is the skeptic Theo himself once was, and Theo would like to guide the young man in a new direction. While driving back from a philosophy conference they witness a frightening automobile accident. We pick up their conversation shortly after.

Reggie: I wonder if the driver had a neardeath experience.

Theo: You know, these days neardeath researchers speak of the 'feardeath' experience. Once in a while a person who *thinks* he's going to die has a neardeath experience.

Reggie: Really? Is it the same experience?

Theo: Apparently. The same sense of being out of the body, going down a tunnel toward a light, meeting dead relatives, coming into the presence of a Being of Light, reviewing your life – the same. Very suggestive...

Reggie: Why do you say that, Dr Adams?

Theo: *Theo stares pensively ahead for a few seconds, with a pained look on his face:* Reggie, let's conduct an experiment, just you and me. Let's imagine we live in a world with no scriptures and no religious traditions. But let me refine this world a little. Let's imagine that the world's scriptures still exist, but they're regarded by everyone just as you regard them – as mythology. They molder in libraries and museums, studied only by specialists. In other words, they tell us about times past – about what certain people took to be reality a long time ago – just as we regard Greek mythology today. Let's further imagine that all living religion was wiped off the face of the earth by a longstanding regime, ruling the entire world with murderous brutality. No living person has ever practiced a religion, and the last traces of public religion were stamped out two hundred years ago. But now the regime has been overthrown, and all people – billions of them – are free for the first time; free to think new and daring thoughts. And so they begin to listen to their depths, and they begin tiptoeing back to the world of spirit and religion... Here is my question: Three hundred years later – three hundred years after the overthrow of this repressive regime – what would appear in the

world's *new* scriptures? Where would free people allowed to start from scratch after ten generations find hints of transcendence, hints of a divine order of things? What would they write down in *their* scriptures?

Reggie: Probably some nutcase's visions and dreams. The funkier the better.

Theo: You might be right! But I'm more optimistic. Assuming that technology hadn't been destroyed during the revolution, large numbers of people will be brought back from the edge of death with medical technology, just as they are now. And many of them will have neardeath experiences. What they report will provide a more convincing and inspiring glimpse into the Big Picture than the visions of your nutcase.
No comparison. The NDE will be a source for any future scripture.

Reggie: That would be pretty cool, I guess. But personally – as you know – I don't necessarily take NDEs at face value. They might simply be hallucinations, for instance.

Theo: Even if they are – and I don't think that they are – they'd still be a huge improvement over much of what passes for scripture today. NDErs who've had the full-blown experience – especially if they merged with the intimately knowing, loving Light – tell us that the main purpose of life is to grow in love, and a secondary one is to grow in knowledge and wisdom. They come out of their experience deeply changed, eager to accept the challenge, exhilarated by the second chance they've been given. And there's nothing clubby about NDErs. They don't talk like they're better than others, or more saved, or favored by God. They're just heralds of hope for a world that's lost its way – the modern equivalent of angels. They strike me not as proud but humble – like the saints of past ages whose close brush with God made them permanently modest. Reggie, when my faith crumbled many years ago, more than anything else, it was the NDE literature that showed me a way out of my despair. You can't imagine my excitement when I caught my first whiff of it.

Reggie: I'm happy for you, I really am. But I still don't see why you take these visions at face value. They might be inspiring, and I'm sure they are; but they equally might not be real. And if they're not telling the truth, I'd rather not have anything to do with them, no matter how good they make me feel.

Theo: Nor would I. But if they are real – if there is even a fair chance that they are – wouldn't you think it worth your while to look into them?

Reggie: Well, sure, but – Theo: Then why don't you?

Reggie: I read about them in your class last year.

Theo: But not since?

Reggie: No.

The car is quiet for a few moments as Theo drives along, patiently waiting for Reggie to speak.

Reggie: I guess I think they probably are just hallucinations. Or maybe I'm just not that interested in looking into the question. And that's my fault.

Theo: With a big smile.

Nah, you're just twenty-three. No fault in that! But, if you'll permit me, I'll tell you why I don't think they're hallucinations. Are you game?

Reggie: Sure.

Theo: You know the first reason already. NDEs are all strangely similar. Why should an old black man from Baptist Alabama have roughly the same experience as a gay atheist from Madrid, or a Mormon housewife from Idaho? If they were *hallucinating*, wouldn't their hallucinations be radically different?

People's hallucinations are based on their memories and expectations. But these characters don't have similar memories and expectations. They come from very different worlds. So how do you account for the similarity of their experience? The only way to do it is to assume that they've entered into a real world – a world equally surprising to all three. Does that make sense?

Reggie: Yeah, but there's another explanation.

Theo: The one I taught you in class?

Reggie: No one would accuse you of being one-sided, I grant you. But maybe you did too good a job. You said that maybe at the moment of death the brain screams out a protest against its own imminent extinction. It contains material deep in the right temporal lobe that can explode into experience if provoked. And looking into death is the

provoker. And since we're all part of the same human family, our brains are all coded the same basic way, regardless of background and experience. It's a species thing. That would explain the similarities of the NDEs. We're all programmed to hallucinate the same basic thing because we're all members of the same species.

Theo: Let me complete your argument, Reggie. Neurologists have probed the right temporal lobe of the brain, and by doing so have artificially stimulated some of the features of the NDE, especially the sense of being out-of-body. Navy pilots in training sometimes report experiencing being out of their bodies when they pass out during highG training. But none of these people have ever experienced anything like the intimately loving Being of Light, the most amazing part of the NDE. My suspicion is that, in the cases I just mentioned, the self, or soul, or psyche – call it what you will – is artificially 'loosened' from its usual place in the body without being detached, and given a very brief and shallow introduction to the world we enter at death. Nevertheless, you give a good argument – indeed the best that a materialist can give. Hopefully you're not going to talk about drugs now.

Reggie: No, no, that's lame. We all know there are plenty of NDErs who aren't in hospitals or on drugs of any kind. I won't bother you with that trash.

Theo: Well, let me give you a little more to chew on. Actually a lot more. Did you know that NDErs don't have rapid-eye movement when they're having their vivid experiences? REM is always found when we dream – as you know. Look at someone sleeping, and if her eyes are fluttering, you can be sure she's dreaming. If they're not, you can be sure she's not dreaming. Every psychologist knows that. So what does that tell you?

Reggie: That's pretty interesting. But are hallucinations and dreams the same thing?

Theo: A hallucination is the most vivid kind of dream. If a dream is a four on the Richter Scale, a hallucination is an eight. Those eyelids should be singing! But they're not. And that tells me that the NDE is not a hallucination. A lot of NDErs have had hallucinations at some previous time in their lives, by the way – and they all say they're definitely not hallucinating during their NDE. And they're the experts. We should be listening to them!

Reggie: Yeah. But they could be mistaken.

Theo: Yes – but not likely, I'd say. Especially when you take into account the latest research on *blind* NDErs. This gets downright hardcore scientific. For a long time NDE researchers theorized that if a blind NDEr really were out of her body with its blind eyes, then she would be able to see for the first time. A study of blind NDErs was done a few years ago, and the theory panned out. People blind from birth experienced vision for the first time during their NDEs. When you get a chance, Reggie, check out a book called *Mindsight* by Kenneth Ring, the NDE researcher at the University of Connecticut. The whole story is told there. If you can tell me how people blind from birth can hallucinate a visual world during an NDE, and report the same things that we see, I'll take you and Christina to the best restaurant in town.

Reggie: You already did that when I got the fellowship! Anyway, you've got me over a barrel this time.

Theo: And then there's the best evidence of all. Are you ready for the climax?

Reggie: Oh yes.

Theo: Many NDErs see things while out of their body that are actually going on. A man might take an 'astral trip' to see his sister and later report what she was doing and wearing at the time – a report later verified by the surprised sister, who wonders how he knew. Or a child might describe in detail, and with impressive accuracy, what happened when her body was being resuscitated while she, out of her body, watched from the ceiling of her hospital room. Such anecdotes are routine in NDE literature. One study even compared what NDErs saw when their bodies were being resuscitated, to a control group of patients asked to describe what they *thought* happened during a typical resuscitation. None of the NDErs made mistakes, while almost everybody in the control group made major mistakes. If NDEs were merely hallucinations, where could all this true information come from? There's no materialist explanation that makes sense. Keep in mind that NDErs are comatose and usually clinically dead when they're having their out-of-body experience.

Reggie: That's a pretty good argument, I have to admit.

Theo: Of course there's the possibility that all this information comes from some super stimulated ESP ability. But materialists typically don't want to touch ESP either. It's almost as mysterious as the NDE itself, and just as unsavory to them.

Reggie: So you're saying that because it's quite hard to explain away the NDE as a delusion, therefore the great stuff that NDErs are always talking about deserves to be taken at face value.

Theo: That's pretty much what I am saying.

Reggie: Where is God in all this?

Theo: That's trickier. It depends on what you mean by God. No one has ever reported seeing a being who was omnipotent and omniscient sitting on a throne. No one has ever met some infinite substance with a name tag that said 'God' on it. Many have seen and even merged with the so-called 'Being of Light', and many have thought it was God. But just as many have called it an angel or some advanced soul, or even something we ourselves are destined someday to become. And that's not quite God! What's going on here is that different people are transferring their spiritual biases onto the formless Being of Light. What they actually see or merge with is a shapeless Light which is unmistakably personal and filled with a stupendous love and knowledge of them. They feel totally blissful in its presence and do not want ever to leave it. But when they do, as they must if they don't die, they feel that life is precious and that they are under some new mandate not to waste time any longer on trivial things. They've been singed by that wonderfully loving Light, and they bear its mark for the rest of their lives. Oh how I envy them sometimes! But *God*? You be the judge.

Reggie: But you'll want to grant, I think, that any future scripture would have quite a bit to say about God. And if the NDE doesn't quite reach that high, where do we look?

Theo: Don't underestimate the NDE, Reggie. It shows us that there is something much more evolved than we are – even if we can't agree on its nature. And that's good news! For isn't it reasonable to think that just as there are more evolved beings than we are, there are also more evolved beings than the Being of Light itself? But let's not get hung up at the moment on what it might be. We're talking about possible sources of inspiration for a future religion. The NDE is only one of many.

Reggie: You make it sound pretty plausible, but I'm still not convinced. I just can't believe we can have experiences outside our body. NDErs say they can see while out of their bodies. How? How can someone see without eyes? It just doesn't make sense. We must be overlooking something.

Theo: Ah, now I see your difficulty. Perhaps I need to be clearer here. When NDErs say they're out of their body, they mean they're out of their old damaged, sick, *physical* body. If you ask them if they had a sense of being embodied *in something* while having their NDE, most will tell you yes. Unfortunately for us, they're more interested in other things than what kind of new body they're moving around in! We can only guess what its nature might be. But one thing I'm pretty sure of – it has eyes, good eyes. If it didn't, it couldn't see – I'm with you completely on that point. But St Paul, for example, spoke of a 'spiritual body'; and India's scriptures are full of descriptions of 'ethereal' bodies – just another word for the same thing.

And these bodies are much superior to ours, they tell us. These are the bodies, I suspect, we'll be moving around in when we die. Reggie, I promise you: If I have a neardeath experience, I'll pay attention to what kind of body I have, and I'll report back to you. And if you have one, you report back to me. Is that a deal?

Reggie: That's a deal, Dr Adams.

Please don't get the idea that I think the foregoing conversation is conclusive. Strictly speaking, all it shows is that there are very good reasons to think we are not our physical bodies and that our sense of self is not diminished or dimmed just because we are out of our physical body. But will we continue to exist if our body actually died? If so, for how long? And what kind of experience would await us five minutes after death? An hour after death? A year? A hundred years? A million years? Ten trillion years?

The NDE doesn't tell us that – it typically only covers the first minute or so.

I'm betting that we continue to exist after our body dies. Why shouldn't we? Our experience free of the body is completely different from what it was just moments before. We don't suffer, we're not sick, and if we're blind we see. Obviously we're still connected to the body in some way, or we'd never get back to it when the NDE ended. But there is nothing about the experience to suggest we are identical with that damaged or sick body. Quite the contrary. Furthermore, most NDE veterans report that they now have a complete absence of a fear of death. They are confident death is not the end and that a better world awaits them. One of my colleagues, a history professor who described himself as a 'wishy-washy Methodist' and a skeptic on the question of life after death before his heart attack, had an undeveloped NDE, involving only an out-of-body experience. When I asked him if he now believed in life after death based on it, he answered, "No, I don't believe it. I *know* it." And as Theo said, I can't see why we shouldn't take these people at their word – they're the experts, not us. Yes, they *could* be wrong, but why *should* they be? Many were not religious before their NDE. Some were agnostic, or even atheistic. Some, especially children involved in accidents, had never given death a thought. So it's hard to argue that they are all victims of wishfulfilment. Moreover, NDErs who have had a developed experience (i.e., of the Light) are profoundly changed. Atheists are no longer atheistic. Drifters suddenly have a powerful sense of purpose and meaning. Narrow-minded fundamentalists burst the manacles of their religious bigotry. Do hallucinations have that kind of power? Anyone who's had one knows they don't. They're quickly recognized for what they are. They change nothing fundamental about one's beliefs. They are never the one event that *changed everything*.

One other consideration argues against the hallucination hypothesis. NDErs often see spirits while out of body. These spirits have one trait in common: They have died. NDErs don't report meeting their living grandparents; they meet the deceased ones who come to greet them. Anyone who knows how hallucinations work would be hard-pressed to explain this aspect of the NDE, since hallucinations are as crazy as dreams. They are utterly unpredictable. If the spirits seen during an NDE were hallucinations, they would just as likely be living as dead grandparents. Hallucinations don't keep track of the obituaries!

The fact that those we call 'the dead' come to greet us when we're on the brink of death argues forcefully for the reality of spirits. NDErs themselves express no doubt on this matter, by the way.

I don't want to pretend the NDE phenomenon *proves* life after death. But it surely makes it seem probable. How *probable*? Eighty percent? Ninety percent? Ninety-eight percent? I'd say, probable enough to bank on. NDE reports alone have taken away most of my fear of death. It's a stick that's hard to break.

There are six other sticks: apparitions, mediumistic phenomena, poltergeist phenomena, apparent possession by earthbound spirits, reincarnation cases, and deathbed visions that are not NDEs. Together with the NDE, they make up the Big Seven. When you bundle these seven sticks together, the case for spiritual existence, and hence life after death, is almost unbreakable.

© Prof. Stafford Betty 2006

Lewis Stafford Betty is Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at California State University, Bakersfield.