

An Imagined Near Death Experience

So many have written about near death experiences and the visions and revelations that have permanently altered their relation to the world around them. People who have drowned and people who have lain frozen but awake in a coma, people who survived cancer and auto accidents, and resolved to live with greater deliberation, greater awareness and a fuller appreciation that every moment is precious. All this is written. It is all true.

But this story is fiction. I made it up. Why would you bother with the imagined visions about which I write when you've read so little of these firsthand, heartfelt tales of transformation? Of course, I am flattered that you are interested in my little fantasy. But of these recorded histories – do you dismiss them out of hand as illusions of an oxygen-starved brain, not worthy of our study?

It is easy for us who are skeptical, the Logical Positivists, to regard reports of near death experience as having nothing to do with an afterlife and everything to do with what we have been taught (and perhaps what we hope) about an afterlife. Reports of NDEs are regularly dismissed as “just a dream”, (as if the provenance of dreams themselves were fully understood!)

But many people with NDE encounters describe their experience as “more real” than waking reality.

I've experienced so-called 'lucid dreams' in which I've had access to waking consciousness while still in a dream state. In lucid dreams, I knew I was dreaming, and I had the feeling I could control the direction of events in the dream in any way I wanted. It was my dream and I knew it. Well, this wasn't anything like that. For one thing, it didn't feel like it was coming from 'inside my head'. You might say that I knew I *wasn't* dreaming. It was very much something that was 'happening to me'. I didn't control it; it controlled me. The strange thing was that I wasn't frightened by that. I was happy to be taken over, to relinquish control...

All our convictions about reality are mediated through our conscious perceptions. The Logical Positivist tradition puts great stock in the distinction: which experiences derive from sensory encounters of physical reality and which are wholly internal? I would argue that if what we seek is an answer to the question:

Does human consciousness have an existence in its own right independent of our corporeal selves, and specifically the human brain?

...if this question is the root of our interest in NDEs, then to discount mental experiences that may *not* be tied to a physical reality is to beg the question. The answers we seek depend crucially on the relationship between mind and matter, a question on which smarter scientists than we still cannot agree. Moreover, it may be a decisive shortcoming in the Logical Positive perspective that it derives from a 19th century physics that predates the quantum revolution. Quantum physics (at least in the standard “Copenhagen interpretation”) posits wave functions and consciousness as the two independent elements of physical reality. It can only be considered an irony that presentday thinkers who argue most adamantly against any physical reality for our “souls” claim the authority of physical theory for their position.

There's a remarkable similarity of themes that run through independent reports of NDEs. Or is it remarkable at all? Are they really independent, or are they reflections of one reality of the human

condition? Perhaps they merely mirror the extent to which religious dogma concerning the afterlife has infiltrated our unconscious lives. Let's look at some of these themes. Most commonplace is the ubiquitous *white light*. Here's a typical entry:

My fear was transformed to awe, and thence to a deep peace. A great white light opened before me. I walked toward the light and into it, sensing that it was healing, that it was good. I had the feeling that the light enveloped me, that I was dissolving and merging with the light. My individual personhood was fading, but I didn't feel attacked. In fact, I felt more safety, more peace than I have ever known. It was as if all my life I had been lonely, without realizing until now that this is what I wanted.

...since that time it is this feeling of wholeness – feeling isn't the right word – it's a deep conviction of wholeness that has been so central to me ever since. It really goes beyond "conviction" or knowing. I can't explain it.

Is there a message in here that tells us something true about the afterlife experience? Or is this a dream, wholly explainable in terms of the Freudian unconscious and the religious conventions that have informed our expectations about death? We can't know for sure; still there is empirical evidence that can be adduced to weigh in on the question. If conventional religious training is key, we should expect that people's reports of near-death experiences should correlate with their pre-existing personal beliefs about heaven. Catholics will report seeing the Virgin Mary; evangelicals will see angels with lyres, walking on the clouds; Rosicrucians will return with visions of the purple light of Saint Germain; and Buddhists should be more inclined to accounts of reincarnation. Here's an example:

I was a newborn baby, gazing up from my crib. I was able to see the walls of a room, and everything else that was around me, and I understood what I saw and what was there. But I couldn't talk. I couldn't crawl. I couldn't even properly control my limbs. I remember working to figure out what it was I had to do to turn my head...

If this story had come from a Tibetan Buddhist after lifelong indoctrination into the dogma of reincarnation, you would say, "Aha! – Just as I imagined." But in fact this NDE was reported by Sr Mary Joseph, a Carmelite nun, while recovering from heart surgery.

There is a striking absence of fear in any of these accounts. This so deeply contradicts our intuition about human psychology that it cries out for an explanation. Terror is what most people feel in facing the thought of their own death. Terror is an affliction that keeps even healthy people awake at night, imagining that they might have a fatal disease, and terror is what we have all felt in those moments when accident (or an attacker!) threatened our lives. What does it mean that so many people come back from a place beyond fear, and report feelings of peace and wellbeing? How do we account for the stark fact that in so few of such accounts (none, in fact, to my knowledge) does fear figure prominently?

Nor do we hear accounts of Christian Hell, with its sulfurous climate and fiery pits. Is it fair to take this as evidence that NDE's are a real and novel perception, not a fantasy derived from doctrines previously learned? On their death beds, does no one fear the torment of Hell? Could the reason be as simple as the human capacity for self-delusion: perhaps it is true that the most nefarious and sinister of human demons still believes in his heart of hearts that what he does is

necessary and justified, that he has worked all his life to forestall a greater evil? Alternatively, does this absence of infernal visions add to the credibility of NDEs as a glimpse into something real?

Many NDEers described being able to feel other people's feelings. Herein we may avail ourselves of another opportunity for testing the Positivist explanation: is there any correlation between NDEers' reports of vicarious feelings and the accounts of those others whose sentiments they claimed to experience? The words of a 55-year-old woman named Rose:

When I awoke [from a protracted coma], I knew that John didn't love me, that he had never loved me. I was not angry about this. I was sure of it. I knew there was another woman, and I knew that her name was Carla, and I accepted this...

Of course it turned out that there *was* another woman, and indeed her name was Carla. Did Rose's NDE reveal a reality by putting her in direct contact with her husband's unexpressed thoughts? Or, should we explain the case more conventionally, by positing that there was plenty of evidence for this affair prior to Rose's illness, which she chose at the time to suppress in her subconscious. The story is suggestive, but it proves nothing.

I've promised you a perfectly fictional, made-up account of an NDE, and you've been waiting patiently. You've slogged through philosophy and sociology – you're entitled to a good story, and you shall have it.

After 12 hours of indescribable pain, a whole-body explosion that transcends my ability to imagine manufactured or inflicted tortures, a feeling that every square inch of muscle, every nerve cell was crying out with the maximum volume that it was programmed to carry...after 12 hours of such experience (a time, incidentally, during which there was not a single millisecond in which I entertained the thought, "I wish I were dead", though I thought continually, "this is more than I can bear; I can live no longer," – after 12 such hours each minute of which included more pain than I had known in a lifetime, I began to experience the relief of the decompression chamber. Enough relief to collapse in exhaustion. Blessed sleep.

Three days have passed now, and I am still in the hospital but out of the DC, out of the ICU and sufficiently coherent now to write. This must be my first business: to tell the story from the inside out. To remember and record all that I thought and felt during those minutes, before I can even think about moving on.

I have always been a slow breather. Peter and I were exploring the sulfur vents 80 meters below the Pacific, 40 km off the coast of Maui. A tank doesn't last so long at 80 meters as it does at 40, and by the time we had finished the cautious and gradual decent, it felt to me that we had no time to explore. I was breathing slowly. I remember shivering under my dry suit. The taste of sulfur in the water. The eerie blackness in contrast to the reflected glow from my headlamp that glistened round about me.

Peter signaled he had reached his reserve air supply. Time to start upward. Simultaneously, I saw it. In this blackness, with no photosynthesis and only the sulfur vent for energy, we should have nothing but archaea. Tube worms protruding from the rocks of the ocean floor, probing the

sea with their phallic outlines. But this was different. Closer to an octopus than anything, but not like any octopus I'd ever seen. I doubted, in fact, that it was *mollusca*. It was all head (no eyes) with appendages arranged as if from the faces of a regular dodecahedron. It was the symmetry of the creature that told me immediately, never have I seen an animal like this.

I pointed it out to Peter, but Peter had other things on his mind. He wanted to go up. I still had plenty of air – seven, maybe ten minutes before I'd have to begin the ascent. Once before in eight years of diving together I had asked Peter to return without me. Rules only a thoroughly-seasoned diver would dare to break. I signaled that I'd meet him up there within 5 minutes. Peter started the ascent, his headlamp twinkling in the black; I remained below to ogle at my find.

My regulator was the last thing I was thinking about, but breath has an immediacy about it, and when the air wouldn't come, it jolted my attention right away. Instinctively, I pulled open the supplemental air supply. But nothing happened. No – there was still air in the tank, but it wasn't coming through the hose. I was 80 meters down, and I didn't even have a lungful of air. I was terrified. Overcome. Desperate. I ripped the regulator off the top of the tank and a plume of compressed air burst out into the water. I tried to catch some – maybe I got a mouthful. 80 meters. I can swim perhaps 40 meters underwater, after hyperventilating and filling my lungs to the brim. 80 meters! Still – I dropped the tank, unhooked the weight belt. With the dry suit, I would be buoyant. If I popped unconscious from the surface, even unconscious, perhaps Peter would see me floating on the surface. Perhaps he would be able to maneuver my body into the boat...

It must have been seconds, not minutes in which all this passed by. It's true that the mind is capable of covering vast stretches of ground when we are in extremis. I now find it completely believable, the cliché about a whole life passing before you.

Then I realized the tank hose was tangled about my arm and leg. I was both panicked and fading mentally, in my last moment of consciousness, I knew. If I did not untangle the hose, there was no buoyancy, no chance of regaining the surface in any condition. I had no will now, just raw terror...

It was in the next moment that I finally allowed myself the luxury to consider the possibility that I really was about to die. Clarity overcame hope, as I accepted death. I passed out, still tangled in the regulator hose and tank harness.

I have no recollection of what happened in this world during the time from that moment until I awoke onboard the skiff, groggy and in agonizing pain. But I carry with me a memory from somewhere else that filled that time.

I was a tourist, visiting the life I had lived, and more. Travel was as effortless as thought. I went immediately to the reef, the red fans and striped boxfish, the feeling of another world. I swam in a cold mountain lake, looking up at magnificent silhouettes of jagged rock. The Himalayas, I thought. I had never been to the Himalayas while alive, but now I traveled there instantly, and they took my breath away. Unspeakably majestic. I looked down from tall cliffs and saw foamy crescents of brine come crashing down upon the rocky shore. As I saw each of these places, I knew it was the last time. They filled me up, and I needed no more.

I was there again, passing the milestones, reliving all the best times. Wobbling along on a two-wheeler. My first glimpse of what calculus is good for. The ecstasy of a kiss...

Wedding to Cara. Nellie's birth. I felt more distant now: I could see and even touch them, but they didn't know I was there. Already I was a ghost, and I knew I was seeing them for the last time. Peace. There were no regrets. I knew their lives would continue to open, to fill and to empty out and fill again, over and over after I left... after I was gone...

All were sweet visits, and departures untinged by sadness. I had already released them. But then I was back in the depths, gazing on the un-mollusc with dodecahedral symmetry. I was overcome now by a quite different feeling. It was curiosity, it was mystery. I wanted to know. What was this creature? How many creatures, equally strange, roamed undiscovered in unvisited corners of the Earth and its oceans? What new views of nature's workings would be revealed, of ecology and the relationship of life to life? Of physics, astronomy, man's place in the cosmos?

And what life forms waited to be discovered a short rocket-ride away, right in our corner of the galaxy? What might we teach them, and what did they know that we knew not yet?

With each question the curiosity grew more powerful. I wanted to know. I wanted to discover, and to be around for others' discoveries. I wanted to understand. In that moment, I knew that nature's mysteries were infinite, that there would always be more wonders, more discoveries, an avalanche of science. I also knew I was not finished. The determination to learn, to discover was more than uncomfortable – it was fierce. I was not ready to leave. I would fight to learn what I could. I would renew my struggle. I would live, and I would discover.

Something there is that is immortal, and I am part of it.