

## ***Some personal data***

I was born in 1954 in Berne (Switzerland) and have been living close to Geneva for many years. I work at the University of Geneva. For 25 years, I have devoted a large part of my time to study NDEs (Near-death experiences) and write books and articles on the topic. I often give lectures both in and outside of Switzerland and participate at international NDE congresses. For many years, I have been a coordinator of the *Scientific and Medical Network* of Western Switzerland.

## ***My discovery of NDE***

My first encounter with NDE took place in the eighties and it turned out to be decisive both for my convictions and for my activities. Like millions of other readers throughout the world, I discovered NDEs thanks to Moody's book "*Life after Life*" (1979). Immediately, I was aware that these NDE testimonies answered most of my existentialist questions but raised as many new ones. Those accounts which describe this other world, strangely alike ours yet sublimated, inclined me to think that taking them one to one would not do justice to this fascinating phenomenon. Indeed, the following years have taught me that the deeper you get into the study of NDEs, the more they unveil their complexity.

Today, I am convinced that taking NDEs literally would be a mistake. I believe that dying persons get into a dimension which is presented in such a way that they can understand it but which, by nature, is incomprehensible for normal human understanding. I believe that this other world exists, that it is as "real" as ours, but so different from anything that a human being can conceive that it is transposed in images which are familiar to them. In other words, this other dimension adapts to them. NDErs tell us about deceased loved ones who welcomed them and whom they immediately recognized. We can assume that those beings had put on almost earthly appearances without really being so, so that the dying persons could recognise them. They are indeed in the other world, but in a form that dying persons would not be able to understand if they hadn't presented themselves in ways that are familiar to them. But perhaps it is only the *telling* of what they perceived which is human, which has to be human since NDErs are here in flesh and blood to talk to us about it.

In the eighties, one could find many books presenting NDE testimonies and already some scientific books on the subject, but I was missing a multi-disciplinary work which would allow me to deepen my reflection: what interpretation of NDEs would a quantum physicist, a philosopher or a biologist propose? As I couldn't find such a work, I decided to write the book I wanted to read. "*On the Other Side of Life*", which was first published in 1996 in German, mainly contains interviews with professors from different disciplines, preceded by an analytical description of NDEs and their after-effects.

## ***My encounters***



My encounter with **Kenneth Ring** – an American professor of psychology and worldwide renowned NDE researcher – was decisive in many ways. He welcomed me generously in his home close to the University of Connecticut and we taped the longest interview of his long academic career, as he mischievously specified. Indeed, an entire day of interviewing allowed us to make a complete survey of his numerous research studies and investigations and to crystallise his personal conclusions and inmost convictions. This was published in *“On the Other Side of Life”*.

During this sunny summer day, a deep friendship was born which resisted time and distance, as well as an advantageous collaboration which culminated in my participation in his book *“Lessons from the Light”*.

My understanding of NDEs is enriched by fascinating discussions which I have had the privilege for many years to pursue with most eminent NDE researchers. Our frequent encounters in many places of the world, for NDE congresses or common projects, give us each time the pleasure to see each other again. The joyful hours we spend are filled with friendship as much as with a shared passion. Our discussions are stimulating, but what seems essential to me is the fact that we engage ourselves completely, with our hearts, in a lasting and genuine undertaking, motivated by the constant desire to understand NDEs better in order to assist NDErs more efficiently. Moreover, this captivating exploration of NDEs puts us face to face with our human fate and allows us to reflect intensely about our destiny beyond known limits.

I thank all the NDErs who made me the gift of sharing their experience which is so important in their lives. Our encounters are always moving, impressive and edifying. For them, the near-death experience is at the same time a hurtful experience, a promise and a blessing.

It is hurtful, because NDErs must live with great nostalgia of this other dimension and deal with a difficult reintegration of their daily lives. At the same time, it is a promise which takes root in their unshakable conviction that, at the end of their earthly existence, they will be allowed to go back to this better world, and, finally, it is a blessing which gives them a new scale of values and a veritable meaning to their lives. Each time, I let myself be carried along with joy into their intense quest of truth, and, at each new encounter, I am subjugated by their fabulous capacity to love.

## ***My approach to NDEs***

In the course of the years, my interest in NDEs has got more intense to the point that, today, it constitutes an important part of my life.

Research into near-death experiences is fascinating on several levels. To begin with, it is a subject that addresses each of us at the innermost level of our beings, for it

concerns an experience that emerges from the very essence of human existence and summons forth our destiny.

Being of complex nature, the near-death experience does not let itself be confined to one single discipline, it concerns many fields of the human reflection and only a multidisciplinary approach allows to study it in its totality.

Psychology is as much concerned as quantum physics, neurology imposes itself to analyse the functioning of the brain at the threshold of death or during clinical death, history allows to disclose the many NDEs which occurred in the past, ethnology demonstrates the amazing similarity of NDEs amongst many peoples of our planet.

NDEs invite us to reflect about fascinating issues like consciousness, memory, and many more. I am persuaded that progress of science will allow us to uncover an important part of the veil hiding the mystery of NDEs, but I am also convinced that the definitive answer is inherent in a certain state of consciousness, associated with the near-death state, which reveals itself only under these conditions.

### ***My analysis of NDEs as a social phenomenon***

Why can NDEs be considered as a **social phenomenon** ?

NDEs are experienced by millions of individuals throughout the world. They trigger a profound transformation in them in a lasting way and change their outlook on the world and society. By their sheer number they constitute a social phenomenon which has many implications.

On a **psychological level**, the after-effects of NDEs evolve with time. First comes the integration of the experience, generally quite difficult, which may stretch over several years. NDErs are often rendered more fragile by the fact that, having come so close to death, they have undergone a major trauma. After their NDE, they often find themselves in a critical physical state, as a result of the illness or accident that led them to the brink of death. The intrinsic incommunicability of NDEs is also a serious problem to them; the desire to share this transcendental experience with family and friends often painfully collides with their incomprehension or incredulity. The nostalgia of what they experienced makes their daily lives dull, the appeal for a new way of living is pressing yet still vague. A psychological assistance by a therapist who is informed about NDEs might be necessary (reentry problem).

Once the process of integration has been achieved, the NDE unfolds the totality of its after-effects. Professor Kenneth Ring described the strength of psychological healing brought along by NDEs in the life of desperate or suicidal individuals (Ring, 1991). Illnesses are better tolerated, psychological troubles such as depression or drug addiction, of which some individuals suffered before their NDE, may disappear. NDErs are more confident. Neurosis or anxiety prior to the near-death experience may also disappear (Schröter-Kunhardt, 1993). Studies demonstrate that none of the individuals who experienced an NDE following a suicide attempt repeated their deed, because they were convinced that their suicide attempt had failed in order to allow them to reorient their lives and find a new meaning to it.

On the level of **psychotherapeutic assistance in general**, NDEs have an important role to play. This is now discussed in the scientific literature. The question of the place of mankind in a more and more dehumanised society, so far away from the values brought along by NDEs, can be discussed in the light of the teaching of NDEs since they offer a new philosophical and spiritual perspective.

Some therapists have used NDEs to fight the suicidal intentions of their patients and have obtained spectacular results (Winkler, 2003).

The changes of personality following NDEs are sometimes compared to an instantaneous and fully successful psychoanalysis, going far beyond the results which can normally be expected through psychotherapies (Schröter-Kunhardt, 1993).

The **social impacts** of NDEs are multiple. NDErs live their new values in a communicative way, their joy of living amazes, their empathy and devotion to others radiate, their trust in life and their conviction that consciousness survives physical death reassure. Studies attest that not only individuals who have undergone an NDE change in the way I enumerated, but that the same phenomenon occurs with individuals who are solely *interested* in NDEs, without having had one themselves. To a certain extent they also show the same value shifts, change their belief systems and adapt their vision of the world. They also lose fear of death and state an increasing belief that there is life after death.

The implication of the transformations that come from NDEs can be looked at not only as an experience of individual transformation but as a collective mass phenomenon. NDEs appear to be occurring on a massive scale to millions of people across the world who have had this kind of experience or will have it in the future, partly thanks to modern resuscitation techniques which become more and more sophisticated. In this sense, we have coined the term of the “NDE as a benign virus” (Ring and Elsaesser-Valarino, 1998).

The question might be raised if and how NDEs can play a role in palliative care as people end their lives both for those who wish to die gracefully and for those who are bereaved. This “application” of NDE is the purpose of my new book “*Talking with Angel about illness, death and survival*”. For dealing with the grief of bereavement, NDEs can be of significant help as they propose a new perspective of death and therefore can bring genuine comfort.

The **socio-political aspect** of NDEs is seldom mentioned but in my opinion it should be. In a certain way, NDEs are subversive because they offer a completely new scale of values very different from those dominating our materialistic civilisations. They are subversive because they contradict the post modern paradigm. They give a new perspective of life and suggest that, perhaps, it is not as arbitrary or as absurd as many post modern thinkers feel it is. In this respect, NDE gives rise to a wholly different set of values for living than those that currently dominate our culture. It suggests that perhaps some of the teachings of the spiritual traditions and the universal parts of religious traditions still have relevance in these times after all.

Many people may have a difficult time relating to the NDE from the standpoint of modern consciousness precisely because it does not seem in accord with current ways of thinking and acting. But the fact that NDEs persist as a phenomenon, a phenomenon that is gaining increasing interest, suggests that we will see a change in some of these post modern worldviews and re-incorporate the spiritual dimension (Ring and Elsaesser-Valarino, 1997).

The **neurological aspect** is important as it raises fundamental questions. Are NDEs produced by the brain or is the brain only a “receiving station” passing on what took place during the NDE, while a person was unconscious or clinically dead? The medical paradigm according to which consciousness (spirit) is necessarily a function of the brain is thus questioned. Cardiologist Pim van Lommel declares that “it is still an *unproven assumption* that consciousness and memories emerge from brain function, because until now there is no scientific evidence for neural correlates of all aspects of subjective experience.” (Pim van Lommel, 2004).

New neurophysiological models are beginning to emerge. It is probable that spiritual experiences such as NDEs are at the origin of the awareness of the sacred and the constitution of religions.

**Medicine** is concerned with the amazing healing abilities which sometimes emerge after a near-death experience. These gifts appear slowly, often over a period of many years. For the time being, we have little scientific research and only sparse statistical evidence. Dr. Cherie Sutherland analysed intuition (60% before NDE versus 95% after) and healing abilities (8% before NDE versus 70% after) (Sutherland, 1989). The notion of recovery is considered under a much wider angle by these NDErs, they associate a positive attitude towards life with the simple improvement of the physical state. These healing abilities are of two types: emotional healing, based on the belief that consciousness survives physical death, the loss of fear of death, empathy, emotions, intuition and love; and physical healing, mostly achieved by the placing on of hands which permits the transfer of energy, visualisation and prayer (Long, 2005).

As far as I am concerned, I believe that all human beings have the potential for these healing abilities, but they are normally dormant. All it needs to activate them is to have one’s consciousness expanded such as that which occurs during a near-death experience.

Some spontaneous, almost miraculous, recoveries have been attested following near-death experiences. No scientific research has been done as far as I know to analyze these cases, but the concerned individuals are convinced that they have been “healed by the being of light”. These consequences of NDEs, still quite mysterious, open promising perspectives and deal more generally with the question of the action of mind over matter.

**Quantum physics** could be associated with the study of NDEs. Indeed, numerous physicists agree that NDEs resemble a quantum phenomenon. Several models have already been developed. I will mention only the one of Régis Duthéil (medical doctor and professor of Physics and Biophysics) mentioned in “*On the Other Side of Life*”. His hypothesis is based on a model in which consciousness is a field of tachyonic

matter, which he names “superluminal”, belonging to the true fundamental universe, of which our world is merely a subluminal holographic projection. He states that, mathematically speaking, the existence of another universe, another superluminal space-time, and only one, is a definite possibility. The interface between these two universes would be what relativists refer to as the light cone on whose surface light, photons, and other particles that travel at the speed of light are propagated. The boundary between these two universes would be a common area, probably composed of photons. Dutheil has developed a model in which photons are presumed to consist of one subluminal and one superluminal component. In his hypothesis, the NDE would be the human, or living being’s, passage from the subluminal to the superluminal world. Several phases would characterize this passage. The passage through the dark tunnel would correspond, according to him, to the crossing of the light barrier. He believes that, at the precise moment of the passage, the partial consciousness of the person in the process of dying who is experiencing an NDE, passes through the light barrier and is filled with particles travelling at the speed of light – hence, with photons. The NDEr him- or herself would become light and perceive everything around as darkness, which would explain the impression of a dark tunnel. His hypothesis proposes explanations for other aspects of the near-death experience but it is not opportune to expose them here (Dutheil and Elsaesser-Valarino, 1999).

**Philosophy:** Michel Lefeuvre, professor of Philosophy of Science, tries to give an ontological state – a state of truth – to the near-death experience and, by doing so, to integrate it into a general theory of consciousness. Making a parallel with the madeleine of Proust he says: “what interest me here is not so much the explicit judgment – which is nevertheless the mark of a mind, for only a mind can compare, discern, and judge – but rather the fact that the brain has so little importance at the moment consciousness comes into full contact with itself, its spirituality, its internal essence. For what usually separates consciousness from itself – the materiality of things, the density of events, and the space-time of the world – is somehow abolished. It is even as if the brain’s suspended activity allowed consciousness to reach itself in the fullness of its being; this explains the impression of release and expansion during that isolated moment of intense pleasure that Proust describes”. He concludes our dialogue (published in “*On the Other Side of Life*”) with these words: “Death and birth are the two sides of the same mystery, since at birth the spirit mysteriously incarnates in the flesh and at death disincarnates just as mysteriously. Incorporation and decorporation are equally difficult to imagine – incorporation nevertheless did occur. And it is the near-death experience that offers us a perspective on decorporation”. (Lefeuvre and Elsaesser-Valarino, 1999)

### ***My new book “Talking with Angel about illness, death and survival”***

I wrote “*Talking with Angel about illness, death and survival*” with the aim and the desire to make the findings of recent NDE research accessible and profitable to those who are facing a major life crisis.

At first sight, “*Talking with Angel about illness, death and survival*” is the story of a young girl, told in the first person, who has contracted a serious disease. The reader

is in the mind of the narrator, the young girl, and enters her mind stream, her thoughts and feelings, as her illness develops. She draws him into her illness and its vicissitudes, and thus it is that he finds himself sharing her journey and becoming intimately connected with her – and with the people in her life. Ultimately, her anguish becomes the reader's own – but so, too, are the things she learns during the course of her struggle to understand and come to terms with what has happened to her. And these insights, the knowledge that comes to her, the reader comes to see are the most important things. At the beginning of the story, she is seemingly quite ordinary, but as her illness progresses, so does she – in her knowledge, in the depth of her character, and, ultimately, in the profound degree of spiritual wisdom she attains thanks to her doll *Angel* who talks to her during nightly conversations and also thanks to a companion of misfortune who tells her about his near-death experience.

Scientific research of NDEs is far from complete but already permits some “practical applications” or, more modestly, it invites us to share the beauty and the teachings of this transcendental experience with those who seem to be able to benefit from it in a concrete and immediate way. Apart from being an intellectual challenge, the knowledge we now hold of the phenomenology and the consequences of near-death experiences should help persons who are more immediately facing the limits of human existence.

The new perspectives NDEs open, the softer conception of death they suggest, the hope they locate beyond known limits, should be at the disposition – if they so wish – of the ill and the terminally ill, the bereaved and, more generally, of everybody who is sensitive to the finality of the human destiny.