

The ultimate teaching of the near-death experience is love

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Abstract

NDEs (near-death experiences) are presently quite well known by the general public but they still remain a mystery as far as their intrinsic essence and their ultimately meaning are concerned. After a short presentation of the NDE, I analyse three essential features of the near-death experience: the Life review, the Being of light and the new understanding of love generated by this fascinating experience. I address the following aspects of the life review: its deep meaning, the nonjudgmental process it implies, its healing power and visions of the future which often occur during the life review. I then deepen the question who this Being of light might be, the new understanding of love it provides, how it teaches us to love ourselves and others. Furthermore, I discuss an original hypothesis presenting love as a form of energy, the "Love Project" of Charles Flynn and the connection between love and knowledge. The last part of the lecture concerns the belief in afterlife triggered by the near-death experience, the conception of death and existence of an afterlife and, more generally, what we can learn from experiencers concerning death and afterlife.

1) A short presentation of the Near-death experience (NDE)

The near-death experience (NDE) is a phenomenon that occurs, in some cases, at the farthest extremity of life, in a state close to that of death. It is an experience that assumes vital importance for those who emerge from it. The fact that it occurs in the interval between life and death places the NDE somewhere between the real and the transcendental.

In the vast majority of cases, NDEs occur in persons who are in a near-death state, and occasionally, in a comatose state. In very rare instances, however, they may also be experienced by perfectly healthy individuals who have been exposed to an intensely frightening or other highly traumatizing event.

The terms *experiencer* or *NDEr* has been coined by the researcher to designate persons who have undergone a near-death experience. This immediately gives rise to the question of what is meant by "death," which is indeed a difficult concept to define. To oversimplify, we could say that all we know is that human beings exist, and that at a given point, separated from existence by a certain lapse of time, they cease to exist. Yet we know very little about this interim period.

For some years, it was commonly accepted that NDEs occur in about 30% of all near-death instances. The recent study of Dr. Pim van Lommel shows that this percentage was probably exaggerated as he found only 18% of NDEs occurring during clinical death due to cardiac arrest in his sample of 62 patients¹.

The question remains who undergoes an NDE and why. Is there a typical experiencer profile ? Do all persons in a near-death state have an NDE, but only a small part of them remember it ? All these essential questions still remain without answers.

¹ "Near-death experience in survivors of cardiac arrest : a prospective study in the Netherlands". – Pim van Lommel, Ruud van Wees, Vincent Meyers, Ingrid Elfferich. – *The Lancet*, vol. 358, Dec. 15, 2001

Let us recall the stages of a typical near-death experience:

- 1) an **out-of-body experience**: the subject leaves his or her body and views it from an external vantage point, at some distance above it. In a small percentage of cases, this stage is marked by a feeling of disorientation or a brief sensation of distress.
- 2) A passage through a **tunnel**, sometimes accompanied by a sound that is either harmonious and pleasant, or disturbing; an impression of weightlessness and dizzying speed.
- 3) The appearance of a **brilliant light** beckoning at the end of the tunnel
- 4) An encounter with a **being of light**, personifying absolute love
- 5) A feeling of **infinite happiness**, indescribable joy, and profound peace.
- 6) An **encounter with deceased loved ones** or unknown guides.
- 7) A **life review** (a timeless, three-dimensional vision of the significant events in the experiencer's life.
- 8) Access to **absolute knowledge**, which is partially or entirely lost upon returning to life
- 9) The certainty of **being part of a harmonious universal whole**, of having a definite place in it, of belonging to a cosmic oneness, and of understanding its functioning and meaning.
- 10) Various representations symbolizing a limit or **boundary** which, if crossed, would make returning to life impossible
- 11) A voluntary or imposed **return to life**.

It should be noted that one rarely finds all the above-mentioned features in a single near-death experience. Experiencers all describe a nearly identical NDE progression and undergo very similar emotions. We can therefore start with the assumption that these are data that apply to human beings in general and inform us of their reactions when at the extreme edge of existence.

One of the essential components of the NDE, and certainly the most transformative one, concerns the encounter with the being of light. It is described as similar to being immersed in a sea of unconditional love, which engulfs, soothes, and releases; of being instilled with a feeling of absolute safety, like finding shelter from a storm, or returning to the womb. In fact, the picture painted by experiencers is one of all archetypes; it is the quintessence of all symbols.

2) Life review

The life review, which brings back not only the most significant events – whether happy or traumatic – but also the ordinary episodes of a person's life, is primarily indicative of the immense power of the human memory, which, for the most part, lies buried in the unconscious. Inaccessible during daily waking life, it is nevertheless present and able to be reactivated during the NDE. This life review – a distressing exercise if ever there was one – takes place in the presence of the being of light, who assists the experiencer in understanding his or her good and bad deeds. Interestingly, the subject experiences at this point whatever emotions, joy, or pain his or her words or acts may have produced in others. The experiencer's remorse and guilt feelings are eased by the kindness of the being of light, who points out mistakes in order to help him or her improve, not to punish. This stage of the NDE is once again highly symbolic, for it is linked to the notions of good and evil – one of the fundamental archetypes. The life-review is one of the most important stages of the NDE and, again, highly transformative.

Dr. Bruce Greyson and other researchers who have specially focused on suicide-related NDEs and came to the interesting conclusion that the life review is not as common among people who have

attempted suicide and have NDEs as it is for people who have NDEs in other ways. This is the case perhaps because if they already have done the work to think about their lives and prepare for suicide, they may not need it any more at the moment of their encounter with death.

Another particularity is the fact that children don't have very often life reviews. This might simply be the case because they don't yet have a long life to pass in review.

Meaning of the life review

David Lorimer, an English researcher on NDEs, has explored the questions of the life review and of the panoramic memory. Its importance is not just in the stored information itself, but in the ability to see this information in a holistic way, to see it with the understanding of the whole web of the life that you have led and of how this life has affected others. The meaning of your life does not come just from the experiences in themselves, but from how these experiences are woven together in your specific life pattern. It is a revelation for people to see this during their NDE. And assuming that the NDE is a prelude to what happens at death, then we may say that at death we may have a fuller life review. It seems that everything that is important about us is stored in that information. We can compare this mechanism to a computer, because it is what gives us the output. But what is really important is what we do with the output. We could say that it's a teaching device, that it's the soul's gift to individuals in order to allow them to really understand what life is all about. The life review is an extremely important feature of the NDE. But perhaps the most important one is the feeling of love and that we are all part of that love.

I furthermore believe that the life review and its teaching might be a very strong indication for the survival theory. In this context, and from a purely logical standpoint, it is difficult to see the usefulness of such an exercise, unless from the perspective of a future in which these lessons may be applied.

The life review – a nonjudgmental process

A experiencer explains that *“as I relived my life, there was no judgment being placed on it by anyone. No one pointed a finger at the horrors, or blamed me for any of my mistakes. There was only the overwhelming presence of complete acceptance, total openness, and deepest love”*. Such statements are fairly typical from persons reporting life reviews. Another experiencer put it this way: *“I felt the pain, the joy, the shame of it all, including how others, whose lives I had touched, had felt. Yet never once did the Being condemn me. He just said “You were learning”*.

These elaborations on the nonjudgmental context of the life review enable us to construct a more accurate mental model concerning how its sometimes painful content can be handled without overwhelming stress or guilt. The being of light who seems to regulate this process provides such a sense of compassionate, loving, and understanding concern that the individual can move through even the most difficult events of his or her life with relative equanimity. And even when a person's limits are temporarily exceeded, this wonderfully caring being can still find a way to keep the flame of self-examination from scorching one's soul.

The healing power of the life review

For the experiencer, the life review is not only a personal revelation or an insight into principles of cosmic relevance, but also a *healing*. Not just what you see about yourself, but *how* you come to see and understand it is what heals you of what may be long-standing feelings of inadequacy and patterns of self-defeating behavior. The result is a kind of forgiveness of oneself and others that returns you to your authentic self. Experiencers tell us that the life review “holds all the answers” to one’s life. One of them even said that “*years and years of intense psychoanalysis of the most intense type of external therapy could not have brought me through what I was experiencing rapidly during my near-death experience*”. Another experiencer pointed out that “*as this life review takes place, you have total knowledge. You have the ability to be a psychologist, a psychiatrist, a psychoanalyst, and much more. You are your own spiritual teacher*”.

Rather than simply endorsing the suggestion that the life review is a superior substitute for psychotherapy, we can adopt another perspective. Imagine a therapeutic technique that was *itself* based on an attempt to induce a life review type of experience. Indeed, we do not have simply to imagine such possibilities – they already exist in such approaches as holotropic breathwork and doubtless in other therapeutic modalities as well.

Seeing the future during the life review

The vision of future events is certainly a fascinating phenomenon. Régis Duthéil, late professor of physics and biophysics at the Poitiers School of Medicine in France, has elaborated a very interesting theory which he exposed in my book “*On the other side of life*”². This theory, which he named the *Superluminal hypothesis*, is based on a model in which consciousness is a field of tachyonic or superluminal matter belonging to the true fundamental universe of which our world is merely a subliminal holographic projection. Experiencers frequently report having had the impression of seeing their entire life pass before them. This life panorama takes place at an incredible speed the moment they enter into the world of light. Very often, in this life panorama, past events are intermingled with future events. Many experiencers have witnessed important events of their future and there are many testimonies of that kind like, for example, a woman who viewed herself in the company of her son, at a time in her life when she did not have any children. Others were able to see more or less what their future lives would be like. This seems to indicate that once the light barrier has been crossed, one has total mastery over time and can access a future event as easily as a past one. According to Duthéil, the main characteristic of the superluminal universe is the total instantaneousness of events, given that time no longer flows. Time merges with space, and since one can travel at infinite velocities, it is logical that in moving through space, one also moves through time. Apparently, one can also access the past and future events of other persons, but reports of this kind are much less frequent.

The philosopher Michel Lefeuvre has his specific perspective of the life review: “³Everything that was experienced during mortal life from the successive, ephemeral perspective is concentrated in a momentary flash and illuminated by an irrefutable light. In my opinion, this seems consistent with the profound nature of the human being as a unique spirit. As long as it lives in the flesh, it cannot help but be subjected to the mode of succession, but that is not its deepest truth. When its ties to the world threaten to dissolve, it is normal for the being to once more assume its true nature. This

² Elsaesser-Valarino, Evelyn “*On the other side of life : exploring the phenomenon of the near-death experience*”, New York [etc.] : Plenum Press, cop. 1997 (Collection Insight books), p. 193

³ Ibid, p. 289

occurs in a timeless dimension; however, the out-of-body experience does not occur in a spaceless dimension, since experiencers always watch what is happening from a particular location in space. This vantage point is no longer located in their body, but rather somewhere in the operating room where they are undergoing surgery, for example.... All bodies are located somewhere, whether an office, a conference room, a museum, and so on. The place changes, but the body is always subject to some type of bond, which imposes limits on consciousness and prevents it, among other things, from flying over space and from having a Sirius-like perspective of itself. I therefore see as a possibility that, as it contracts into a momentary flash during the life review, the experiencer's consciousness must acquire a new relationship to space, which enables it to overcome what it usually experiences as the multiplicity and mutual exclusiveness of parts – if I am here, I cannot at the same time be somewhere else. The experiencer's supratemporal consciousness would progress from a condition in which it was subordinate to space, to one in which it was supraspatial”.

3) The Being of light

The Being of light is described as the vision of a dazzlingly beautiful light, personifying total love and absolute understanding, more intense than any earthly light, yet not blinding. The light seems to be infused with powerful symbolic meaning. Communication between the Being of light and the experiencer happens instantaneously and without words. Many experiencers tell us that during their encounter with the Being of light, they had access to total knowledge. Everything becomes evident, comprehensible; all things have meaning and are integrated into a perfect logic. When they come back to life, they seem to retain, if not total knowledge, then at least the calm assurance that everything is all right, complete, and as it should be.

Who is this Being of light ?

I don't think you expect an answer to this question, because, of course, nobody knows. I am convinced that this kind of knowledge will be available only once we will have definitely crossed the border. We can speculate that this being of light is a radiant intelligence. It seems to know everything about you. Maybe it's an aspect of your higher self, but I don't really think that's the case, maybe it's an emanation of God. I think that it is also an energy, but it's more than just energy. It has an energy, but it's an intelligent energy that has wisdom and a knowledge about you. We do not know who this Being of light could be, neither do we know what or who puts up the near-death experience. You can say that the subconscious does it, you can say that the superconsciousness does it, you can say that the Being of light does it. But in any event, the individual is protected and given exactly the information he or she needs in order to be able to see what is required during the near-death experience. This is ultimately as unanswerable as trying to know what the agency behind the experience is. We will have to live with this question and I think it's a good thing that these essential and ultimate questions do not find an answer.

3) A new understanding of Love

Near-death experiences seem to provide a completely new meaning of love. The being of light and love are intrinsically related, as described by an experiencer: *“As the light came toward me, it came to be a person – yet it wasn't a person. It was a being that radiated. And inside this radiant*

luminous light which had a silver tint to it – white with a silver tint to it – was what looked to be a man... Now, I didn't know exactly who this was, you know, but it was the first person that showed up and I had this feeling that the closer this light got to me, the more awesome and the more pure was this love – this feeling that I would call love... And this enormously bright light seemed almost to cradle me. I just seemed to exist in it and be part of it and be nurtured by it and the feeling just became more and more and more ecstatic and glorious and perfect. And everything about it was – if you took the one thousand best things that ever happened to you in your life and multiplied by a million, maybe you could get closer this feeling, I don't know. But you're just engulfed by it and you begin to know a lot of things”.

Once they were in touch with this being of light or what you could call personified love, then experiencers will never be able to conceive love as just the egoistic and shallow feeling binding you to some persons. It's much more than that, much more powerful, more holistic and much more altruistic.

How you learn to love yourself and others

Plato once said: “Love yourself and others will love you”. That sounds easy but, as a matter of fact, it seems to be one of the most difficult issues we have to deal with. One of the greatest gifts of the Being of light seems to be the self-acceptance experiencers learn while in presence of the Light. Peggy describes in the following words what happened during her NDE⁴: *“I vividly recall the part where the light did what felt like switch on a current of pure, undiluted, concentrated, unconditional love. This love I experienced in the light was so powerful it can't be compared to earthly love, even though earthly love is a much milder version. It's like knowing that the very best love you feel on earth is diluted to about one part per million of the real thing. As this stream of pure love went through me, I felt as if the light was saying simultaneously, “ I love you COMPLETELY and ENTIRELY as you are, BECAUSE YOU ARE”.*

They feel liberated from the tyranny of their own previous judgments about themselves, of the feelings or opinions that others may have had about them, because of the unconditional acceptance that they received from the light. They feel that if the light can accept them with all their faults and shortcomings, then regardless of whatever doubts they may have about themselves, they know that they are an okay person as they are. That is a tremendous liberation. It is not that you would put on airs or think that you are a special person, but you know that you are absolutely okay, that you are loved just the way you are. In a very imperfect way, this is what parents should be able to do for their children – create a sense of unconditional acceptance. God is often thought of as the father, so to the extent that parent or anyone really expresses the love of God, then the child would be able to feel it. We are imperfect beings, but to the degree that some parts of the divinity show through us, to that same degree we will be able to respond to people in an unconditional ways. This is one thing we learn from near-death experience.

Love is also one of the greatest teachings of the life review. People understand why they hurt others and were hurt by others – the unavoidable vicious circle of human relationships. I think for example of a female experiencer who was badly abused when she was young. When she had a life review, she saw her parents and the way they treated her and she understood why they did what they did.

⁴Kenneth Ring and Evelyn Elsaesser-Valarino “Lessons from the light : what we can learn from the near-death experience” Portsmouth New Hampshire : Moment Point Press, 2000, p. 46

She was able to understand and have compassion toward her parents. She could see that even though they treated her in that particular way she could still, with compassion, understand and see who they really were and love them for that, even love them for the danger and harm that they had done to her – not because of it, but in spite of it. So the kind of expanded understanding that you can have in this state is such that you can learn to forgive all the harm that was done to you and see the essential love that might exist between you and somebody who has damaged you.

One of the characteristics of experiencers is their eagerness to help others. They act on the traditional Christian ideals of charity and service to others, not because they feel they have to do it but because they understand that it's the way it is supposed to be. We are here to help others and to express kindness in our relations with others and with all life. It's the natural way to be for them. These individuals are very Christian in their understanding of the value of being charitable and of service to others. They know that service is the natural expression of love. Those who have lived an NDE have what can be called a spiritual conversion and they apply these values in their daily lives ever since.

We do not need to live an NDE ourselves to learn this lesson, and apply it to our own lives. All we need to do is listen to those who have lived this blissful experience. *"I was shown how much all people are loved"*, Peggy said. *"If they could only know how much they are loved"*⁵ That love is there for all of us, and, once you open to it, it will inevitably lead you to yourself - your real self.

Love as a form of energy

Professor Louis-Marie Vincent expressed an original idea about love in a discussion we had together.⁶ He referred to a statement made by Teilhard de Chardin in "The Phenomenon of Man": he said that love is the most formidable and mysterious form of energy. He obviously meant that in a symbolic sense, but professor Vincent decided to perform a little exercise and take it literally, that is, to conceive of love as an actual form of energy, as understood by physicists. He was quite surprised to find that this led to conclusions what were not all that incoherent. We know that energy generally assumes more or less noble forms. Heat is the most degraded form; it is energy that can no longer serve any useful purpose. The most noble form is light; it can be transformed into electricity, electricity can be transformed into movement, movement into heat, and so on. These transformations are not free; there is a price to pay and that price is the production of entropy. Accordingly, says professor Vincent, we can very well conceive of love as being the highest form of energy, as capable of being transformed into light, electrical energy, mechanical energy and so forth. One may object that love is a human feeling and has no relation to physics. But that remains to be seen ! In order to change heat into electricity, you need a turbine. In order to change electricity into heat, you also need a machine; it's called an electric radiator. Both of these are manufactured by man. So why, asks professor Vincent, couldn't man be the machine needed to transform love into other types of energy ?

Connection of love and knowledge

⁵"Lessons from the Light", p. 53

⁶ "On the other side of life", p. 176

Professor Régis Duthail⁷ assumes that the world of death is indistinguishable from the world of knowledge. He thinks that the superluminal world is characterized by a constant increase in information, order, and harmony, therefore it seems plausible to him that persons who have crossed the light barrier during an NDE are able to perceive this knowledge, and harmony, which characterize the world of death. It is true that a large number of experiencers claim to have had access during their experience to absolute knowledge and feel a deep need for learning following their NDE. As for the connection between love and knowledge, it would seem to be rather logical, since in the superluminal world there is an increase in harmony due to knowledge. Sensations exist in a pure, unfiltered state, and without constraint. They are amplified and come across as an impression of love. This simply brings us back to the teachings of the mystics, who have always associated love and knowledge.

“The Love Project”

Does NDE knowledge lead people to relate in a more loving way one to the other ? This is exactly what the late sociologist Charles Flynn tried to find out and described in this book “After the Beyond”. He called this study “The Love Project”. This undertaking represented Flynn’s attempt to drive home some of the moral lesson of the NDE by asking the students in his sociology class in Miami University of Ohio to make a specific semester-long effort “to relate in a loving manner to someone they wouldn’t otherwise relate to”.⁸ Obviously, Flynn was employing a learning strategy based on a direct imitation of an experiencer’s orientation toward others. Although his courses were not primarily concerned with NDEs, Flynn did lecture about them, emphasizing how such experiences tend to bring about a more loving and compassionate attitude toward other people, and also played videos featuring experiencers. Furthermore, as a guide for the kind of action he was seeking to encourage in his students, Flynn also required them to read a then popular book by Leo Buscaglia “Love”⁹ and showed them videos of Buscaglia’s lectures. Altogether, more than 400 students took part in these “Love Projects”. Flynn evaluated the results of his students’ activities through a combination of questionnaires and personal journals. His findings showed strong evidence that these interactions resulted in an increased sense of compassionate concern for others in general (more than 80 percent of his students reported this effect) as well as greater feelings of their own self-worth (indicated by about 65 percent of these students). Furthermore, these effects tended to persist, though with some diminishment, as shown by a follow-up survey a year later.

Love is there for all of us

Of all teachings in the world, the greatest is love. And of all the lessons of the NDE, none is greater than the importance, indeed the primacy, of love. And what the NDE teaches about love is that everything is love, and is made of love, and comes from love. Peggy put this discovery during her NDE in the following words: *“This light told me everything was love, and I mean everything ! I had always felt love was just a human emotion people felt from time to time, never in my wildest dreams I was thinking it was literally EVERYTHING !”*¹⁰

Since we are part of everything, we, too, are conceived in and by love. Love, therefore, is our true nature. And, yet, why do so many of us fail to experience this love in our lives and even come to feel so unlovingly toward ourselves at times ? Why do we have such difficulty connecting to this core of love or even believing that it exists within us ? What keeps us so estranged from the essence

⁷ “On the other side of life”, p. 217

⁸ Charles Flynn “After the beyond” (Englewood Cliffs, NJ : Prentice-Hall, 1986), p. 7

⁹ Leo Buscaglia “Love” (New York : Fawcett, 1982)

¹⁰ “Lessons from the light”, p. 187

of what we are ? If we accept the truth of the NDE's chief revelation, it can only be that we have lost touch with the Source. Existentially, we have fallen out of love and have forgotten our true home. But the teachings of the NDE now come to remind us, to reconnect us to the Source, and to restore us into the arms of love.

4) Death and Afterlife

Belief in afterlife

Two main characteristics can be found in a huge majority, I think I even could say in all experiencers: a total absence of fear of death and a strong belief in an afterlife. One of the main reasons why people have these strong convictions might be linked to the out-of-body experience. The fact that one could find oneself separated from the physical body probably carries a lot of weight in itself. What is striking about the testimonies of experiencers is not merely their unanimity of opinion but the tone of absolute certitude that pervades them. In these statements, we find not just a conventional expression of belief in an afterlife but an unshakable assertion of a spiritual truth that has apparently been unmistakably apprehended in and through the Being of light. We see here the power of the NDE, not just to compel belief in an afterlife, but seemingly to confer a kind of *knowledge* that from a subjective point of view is incontrovertible. The typical experiencer knows without question that life is not a dead end but continues in an exalted form after the physical body has finally ceased to function. Various statistical surveys that have been conducted by a number of researchers since the early 1980 attest this phenomenon. One of the earliest studies was carried out by the cardiologists Michael Sabom and published in his book "Recollections of death"¹¹ in 1982. There, he reported that of his sample of 61 experiencers, 47, or 77 percent, said that their NDE had led to an increase in their belief in life after death. Kenneth Ring in his book "The Omega Project"¹² found that 86 percent of his 74 experiencers likewise professed an increase in belief in life after death following their experience. Similarly, in a more recent study of 51 experiencers, Cassandra Musgrave stated that whereas only 22 percent of her sample "definitely believed" in life after death before their NDE, fully 92 percent of her sample asserted that they "definitely believed" afterward¹³. Furthermore, perhaps the most compelling set of findings was provided several years ago by the Australian NDE researcher, Cherie Sutherland. In her study¹⁴, based on 50 Australian experiencers, she found that prior to their NDE, belief in life after death was essentially a "fifty-fifty" proposition; in other words, about half of her sample were believers, whereas the others either were not, or, in a few cases, had formed no opinion on the question. Afterward, there was not a single experiencer who did not believe in some form of life after death !

Conception of death and existence of afterlife

Experiencers often tell us that there is no such thing as death, what we call life is only a prelude to true life, what we do here carries over to what we are there. They are convinced that there is only a discontinuity, but no end, no annihilation, just a transition. Therefore, what we do here has

¹¹ Michael B. Sabom "Recollections of death : a medical investigation", New York : Harper and Row, 1982

¹² Ring, Kenneth "The Omega Project : near-death experiences, UFO encounters and mind at large", New York : William Morrow, 1992

¹³ Cassandra Musgrave "The near-death experience : a study of transformation". IN Journal of dear-death studies, 15(3), 1997, p. 194

¹⁴ Cherie Sutherland "Transformed by the light", New York : Bantam, 1992

enduring significance, because it does not cease when we cease bodily, it continues. Everything that we do, everything that we create, the love we feel and give, all our actions continue to find a home in some place, beyond death. This gives us a different perspective of life and, indeed, it gives a sense to our lives !

Experiencers are convinced that there is an existence after bodily death, but they don't give us a description of how this existence would look like. They are usually very cautious about this subject. They say that they don't know exactly what life afterward will be, but they know that it will be beautiful, and that they will be happy there. Or they say that they know that it's something beyond the power of their imagination to conceive, even having had this experience.

Let us listen to the testimony of an experiencer¹⁵. *"I know there is life after death! Nobody can shake my belief. I have no doubt – it's peaceful and nothing to be feared. I don't know what's beyond what I experienced, but it's plenty for me.. I only know that death is not to be feared, only dying. Upon entering that light... the atmosphere, the energy, it's total pure energy, it's total knowledge, it's total love – everything about it is definitely the afterlife, if you will... Our identity will continue to be – in a greater way. Friends will not be lost to you. You will know a beauty and peace and love and that loving light that encompasses and fills you is God. This experience was a blessing to me because I know with certainty that there is a separation of body and soul, and there is life after death. Yes, there is an afterlife ! More beautiful than anything we can begin to imagine. Once you know it, there is nothing that can equal it. You just know!"*

Do religious feelings prior to NDE influence the experience ?

One could suppose that believers should have more probabilities to live a near-death experience than others. As a matter of fact, this is not the case. What a person believes about life after death, about God, what his religious views are make no difference with respect to the likelihood of having a near-death experience. Those who are not religious, who are atheists or agnostics or sceptics are just as likely to have the experience. What the experiencer creates is not faith afterwards but a knowledge of what is, a knowledge that there is a spiritual dimension to the universe. There is a famous film of Carl Jung, who himself had an NDE, where he is being interviewed, and he is asked whether he believes in God; he pauses and then he says that he doesn't believe, but that he knows, he's had the direct experience. This is generally what experiencers say, regardless of what they believed before, they know afterward that the spiritual reality is there and they cannot deny it. They don't care what others think; they know that it's true for them. And so for the experiencers, it creates not a faith, because faith is something you have to accept, but it creates a deep inner knowledge based on direct experience.

What we can learn from experiencers concerning death and afterlife

Belief in the survival of consciousness has always been an act of faith and the very essence of all great religions. It seems to me that, thanks to the accounts of experiencers, there is now another, more empirical way – and one requiring less personal effort – to corroborate this ancestral idea.

Experiencers tell us that in many ways, the experience of death is the opposite from the appearance of death. What we see when we observe a dying person is a half-truth, as it leaves out something very important. It leaves out the interior part of the experience. Joseph Campbell says something to

¹⁵“Lessons from the light”, p. 275

the effect that seen from afar, death is a horrifying spectre, but seen up close, it has the face of the beloved. It's the face of the all-embracing, all-accepting beloved. That's what we don't see when we look at death from the outside perspective of the spectator. When we experience the process of death, then death, which has seemed like an enemy before, becomes a welcoming friend. So we need to have a full understanding of death and of what death has to teach us, not only about death but also about life. We can't deny the physical side of death, which is ugly, degrading and often hideous. But we can't let that facet of death blind us to the interior, beautiful, and sublime side of death. That's what experiencers teach us. People interested in NDE and who become absorbed in it often show the same kind of value shifts – shifts in belief systems, in how they view the world – as experiencers. Like them, they show a loss of the fear of death and an increased conviction that there is some sort of existence after death.

Do experiencers tell us something concrete about how the afterlife could look like ? As a matter of fact, I don't think so. They are convinced by the existence of an afterlife but unable to describe it – and quite happy with that. They are convinced that this existence will be blissful, and that's all they need to know. We can imagine that the individual's journey after death must eventually depart from the common story line we know so well from NDE testimonies. That story begins with the vision of the Being of light, and then, presumably after the life review and other standard features of the NDE, must of necessity devolve into the further particularities of each person's own afterdeath journey, which the NDE alone is insufficient to predict. The vocabulary of experiencers is not always easy for us to understand. It frequently sound exaggerated, too many superlatives are used and we might even have difficulties to fully believe them. Experiencers, on the other hand, explain that they lack the right words, that no words are powerful enough to describe the blissfulness of their experience. Personally, I believe that the *essence* of these experiences transcends all linguistic or imagistic representations that might be available to us in states of ordinary waking consciousness. Therefore, in trying to conceive of the afterdeath state too finely, we court the danger of transforming an experience full of symbolic shadings and redolent with flashes of higher consciousness into something that is too literal, banal, or otherwise full of conventional stereotyped imagery.