

## Lessons from the Light

What we can learn from the near-death experience

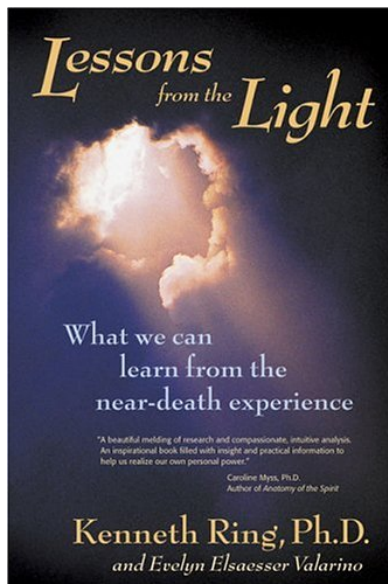
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Unlike many other books on the subject of near-death experiences (NDEs), which are about or by persons who have had these life-changing encounters, *Lessons from the Light* is intended mainly for those who have never had an NDE themselves but who wish to learn from those who have. Obviously, the great majority of persons will never have an NDE as such, but *everyone* can benefit from the lessons that have been thrust upon those individuals.

This book is an effort to place exactly this kind of information at the disposal of its readers by presenting in clear language the practical lessons for living and dying that are to be found from the study of NDEs. Written by one of the foremost authorities on NDEs, Dr. Kenneth Ring, it is a book primarily for persons

who feel their own lives could be enhanced by incorporating the insights stemming from what many people have come to believe is the ultimate spiritual experience of our time. In short, *Lessons from the Light* attempts to give away the fruits of the NDE Tree of Knowledge without having to be crushed beneath its trunk in order to obtain them. Here readers will discover for themselves what others have had nearly to die to learn, and how their own lives can blossom in ways that are typical for persons who have undergone NDEs directly.

Although *Lessons from the Light* recounts many moving stories of NDEs, it is not just another book filled with inspiring testimonies from near-death experiencers but with helpful guidance and practical exercises concerning how readers can make use of this knowledge to live with greater self-insight, self-compassion and concern for others, as well as to be better prepared for death, dying and bereavement. Thus, readers can easily apply what they have learned to their own lives and *absorb and internalize* these lessons from the Light in such a way as to lead to deep personal and spiritual transformation.

*Lessons from the Light*, then, is a treasury of both knowledge about and wisdom now available from the exploration of NDEs, and, as such, a book that at

long last offers for everyone's consumption the sweet fruits of the bountiful harvest near-death experiencers have reaped from their journeys to the Light.

## **Living and Dying in the Light of the Near-Death Experience**

### **Introduction by professor Kenneth Ring**

In the more than twenty years since the publication of Raymond Moody's ground-breaking book, *Life After Life*, much of the world has become familiar, at least superficially, with the phenomenon Moody labelled the near-death experience (NDE). Because of the enormous public interest that was generated by his book, the media were quick to capitalize on its success, and a veritable barrage of talk shows, documentaries, and magazine and newspaper articles on the subject followed in short order. In fact, ever since that initial wave of popular interest in the NDE surfaced, there has effectively been no trough -- the media continue to feed off the NDE with an appetite that shows no sign of satiety while the reading public devours autobiographical accounts of NDEs, such as Betty Eadie's *Embraced by the Light*, with astonishing avidity. Similarly, Hollywood, with its opportunistic fingers resting, as ever, on the pulse of topicality, also helped at the outset to disperse the discoveries about the NDE through such early films as *Resurrection*, *All That Jazz* and *Brainstorm*, and has continued to do so over the years with a spate of other films, including the very popular *Ghost*, *Flatliners* and *Jacob's Ladder*. Thus, thanks largely to the unrelenting efforts of those in the print and visual media, we have now had twenty years of unflagging attention to the reports people give after surviving a near-death crisis. As a result, virtually everyone, it seems, is now generally familiar with the common testimony of these temporary sojourners in the land of death, and their assurance that there is indeed "light at the end of the tunnel" has brought hope and comfort to uncounted millions. Can anyone doubt that, because of all we have learned about the experience of dying from these near-death survivors, their stories, as fanned through the media to all corners of the world, have caused us to look at the face of death anew and recognize it as the image of the Beloved?

Of course, it isn't just the media which have fastened onto these inspiring narratives in order to attract large audiences to their programs and pages. Researchers like myself have been doing the same thing for years, as we have chronicled these accounts, published our statistics and our charts, and striven to understand and explain these extraordinary events. I remember when I was starting out in this field in 1977, in the immediate aftermath of reading Raymond Moody's book, I was mainly curious to determine for myself whether these astonishing reports were on the level. But then, when I started hearing exactly the same kind of stories from my interviewees as Moody had related in *Life After Life*, I became charged with a different desire -- I wanted to make it evident to other scientists and scholars that there was indeed a *phenomenon* here that merited their study and to urge them to investigate it themselves. Of course, others were already on the same track, and by

the time my first NDE book, *Life at Death*, was published in 1980, research to authenticate the NDE was well underway. As scores of researchers from the United States and many other countries published their findings over the next decade, it became abundantly clear that the NDE, as Moody had originally delineated it, was a commonly reported experience and one that had profound and largely very consistent effects on the lives of those who survived it. What was controversial about the NDE was *what to make of it* and how, if at all, to explain it. That controversy continues to this day, but one thing about the NDE is incontrovertible: It happens. Many thousands of persons who have had NDEs have now been interviewed or otherwise studied by researchers, and polls indicate that millions of individuals have probably had NDEs.<sup>1</sup>

After the basic configuration of the NDE had been established, a great deal of the research that was then conducted had to do with documenting *the aftereffects* of NDEs, and there have now been many studies in several countries dealing with the changes that follow in the wake of these experiences.<sup>2</sup> And there were also books, such as Phyllis Atwater's *Coming Back to Life* and Barbara Harris's *Spiritual Awakenings*, that concentrated on the problems that near-death experiencers (NDErs) may have in readjusting to life following their physical recovery. In any case, whether this research was concerned with the nature of the NDE itself, its aftereffects or the difficulties besetting NDErs afterward, the focus was usually and often exclusively on the lives and experiences of the NDErs themselves. Even the popular autobiographical accounts by NDErs that have appeared recently, such as Barbara Harris's *Full Circle*, Betty Eadie's *Embraced by the Light*, and Dannion Brinkley's *Saved by the Light*, continue to shine the spotlight on the author or other NDErs they have met.

This is all understandable enough, but it is gradually becoming clear that this preoccupation with the NDEr has resulted in a certain one-sidedness and perhaps, though inadvertently, a kind of subtle elitism as well. Millions of persons may have had NDEs, but *many* millions who have become interested in the subject have not. Are such persons to remain simply an *audience* for the shows starring, so to speak if not literally, the luminous NDEr? Where is the literature that speaks, not to the needs and circumstances of the NDEr, but to the hunger of the *non-experiencer* to learn and profit from these experiences as well? Most of us, after all -- the great majority in fact -- will never have an NDE as such, but *all of us*, surely, can benefit from the lessons that have been thrust upon those who have. The irony is that while we now have a voluminous literature about the NDE, we have very little that attempts to make this information relevant to the daily lives -- and eventual dying and death -- of persons who have never had an NDE themselves.

This book is an effort to place exactly this kind of information at the disposal of its readers by presenting in clear language the practical lessons for living and dying that are to be found from the study of NDEs. As I have implied, it is a book primarily for those who have not had an NDE but who feel their own lives could be enhanced by incorporating the insights stemming from what many people have come to believe is the ultimate spiritual experience of our time. In short, *Lessons from the Light* attempts to give away the fruits of the NDE Tree of Knowledge without your having to

be crushed beneath its trunk in order to obtain them. In reading this book, then, you will be able to discover for yourself what others have had nearly to die to learn, and you will find that your own life can blossom in ways that are typical for persons who have undergone NDEs directly.

To give some indication of these changes, it is necessary to recall here that the NDE is not only a revelation of the most profound and soul-shattering beauty, but, as I have said, it is also something that has the power to drastically alter and improve the lives of those who are visited by one. For example, we now know that the NDE tends to bring about lasting changes in personal values and beliefs -- NDErs appreciate life more fully, experience increased feelings of self-worth, have a more compassionate regard for others and indeed for all life, develop a heightened ecological sensitivity, and report a decrease in purely materialistic and self-seeking values. Their religious orientation tends to change, too, and becomes more universalistic, inclusive and spiritual in its expression. In most instances, moreover, the fear of death is completely extinguished and a deep-rooted conviction, based on their direct experience, that some form of life after death awaits us becomes unshakable and a source of enormous comfort. In addition, many NDErs say they come to develop powers of higher sense perception, increased psychic ability and intuitive awareness and even the gift of healing. In short, the NDE seems to unleash normally dormant aspects of the human potential for higher consciousness and to increase ones capacity to relate more sensitively to other persons and the world at large.

The NDE, then, appears to promote the emergence of a type of functioning suggestive of the full human potential that is presumably the birthright of all of us. In a phrase, whenever the blessings of the NDE are fused properly into one's life, the individual comes to exemplify what a highly developed person would be and act like. Indeed, as I have tried to suggest in my earlier books, especially *Heading Toward Omega* and *The Omega Project*, NDErs -- and others who have undergone similar awakenings by other means -- may be the harbingers of humanity's evolution toward higher consciousness. However, even if this is true, it is clearly not enough to wait passively for this evolution to occur. The phenomenon of the NDE, in my view, is not merely an evolutionary catalyst but a *teaching* about life, love and the human potential that all interested persons could draw upon actively now in order to enrich their lives and to hasten their own progress toward enlightenment. This book, therefore, is oriented toward all those who would like to avail themselves of this knowledge, to use it in practical ways in order to live their lives more fully and with a greater awareness of the transcendental possibilities that the moment of death holds for us all.

Most NDErs say that they feel it is their mission to serve others by in some way drawing upon or sharing their experience and its lessons with those who are open to it or who can otherwise benefit from hearing about them. In like fashion, this is what this book will attempt to do. Based on my own twenty year long involvement with this field and my personal acquaintance with hundreds of NDErs, I would like to distill the indispensable essence of these experiences so that their practical value for everyday life may be made relevant for those of us -- the vast majority -- who have not had

NDEs ourselves. In fact, as I will show, *we already have evidence that merely learning about the NDE has effects similar to those reported by NDErs*. This means that the NDE may act like a benign virus, and by exposing yourself to it, you can catch it -- that is, you can experience some of the same benefits as do those who actually have the NDE themselves. Therefore, as we hear from those who have had NDEs and understand more clearly just what they have gained from their encounter with the Light, you, too, will have the opportunity to learn and grow as the NDEr has. The aim of this book, then, is simply to help you make these connections for yourself in order to reap the rewards of NDEs without having to nearly die first to do so.

### *Plan of the Book*

To begin the process of assimilating these NDEs and their implications into your own life, we must begin of course with the experience itself. Accordingly, in the chapter to follow I want to offer you a sampling of a few selected instances of NDEs so that, if necessary, you can be reminded afresh of their incredible and compelling revelations as well as their power to bring about radical and radically positive changes in the individual's life. These examples, all of which will be drawn from previously unpublished research and represent some of the most exceptional cases I have recently encountered, are meant to furnish you with more than merely inspirational testimony, however. They should also begin to suggest to you the kind of life-changing possibilities that may be in store for you simply by reading and reflecting on the contents of this book.

Next, in Chapter Two, I want to begin to make the case for the authenticity of NDEs based on the latest research in the field so that you can be sure that these experiences are the real thing, and not just some kind of elaborate dream, fantasy or hallucination. In this chapter, I will review some of the most persuasive evidence for this proposition, having mainly to do with reports of NDErs in which they appear to see or hear things that they could not possibly perceive through normal means. This body of research will lead us naturally in the succeeding chapter to my own most recent work on NDEs in the blind in which we have been able to show that blind people, *even the congenitally blind*, have visual experiences during their NDEs, some of which pertain to verifiable things of this world (and not just "otherworldly" perceptions).

Then, in Chapter Four, I will continue to make the case for the authenticity of the NDE by drawing on a different line of work altogether in the field of near-death studies by presenting some of the evidence dealing with childhood NDEs, concentrating on instances where NDEs have apparently been experienced by exceptionally young children.

Finally, in chapter Five, the last of these chapters concerned with the authenticity issue, we begin to examine the aftereffects of NDEs. Whatever the nature of NDEs may be, there is no doubt that they are real in their effects on people's lives. In this chapter, then, we will show that there is a consistent psychological profile that typifies

the NDEr afterward. The point of this chapter, however, is to suggest that this common and attractive prototype may be possible for all of us, regardless of whether we have had an NDE or not. What NDErs have become through their encounter with death, we, too, may be, by letting its power work through us vicariously as well as by *actively* applying the lessons of the NDE to our daily lives.

This brings us to the Chapters Six and Seven, in which we will begin in earnest to make the kind of connections necessary to absorb the implications of the NDE so that this knowledge can be of direct practical value to us. Toward this end, these two chapters will consider one of the most remarkable features of the NDE, the life review -- that panoramic playback of virtually everything that has ever happened in one's life -- together with a number of illustrations of this still under-appreciated aspect of NDEs from interviews with those who have witnessed this astonishing phenomenon themselves. In my experience as a teacher and workshop leader, the lessons to be derived from this facet of the NDE can be dramatically and permanently life-altering for those who take the trouble to reflect on them, and this chapter will provide exercises for you to do just that.

Chapter Eight will deal with another important lesson of the NDE, that pertaining to self-acceptance, and again I have collected a mass of impressive testimony on the subject whose personal relevance for your own life I will make clear.

Chapter Nine will highlight the shift in certain values and beliefs that come about in the wake of the NDE, for example, on the importance (and indeed primacy) of love, service, reverence for life, and on life after death. To make the connections for you personally here, this chapter will also present some of the evidence I alluded to earlier on the impact of information about NDEs on those who haven't had one. I do this of course in order to show how pondering on and actively using the material I describe in this chapter can be of direct benefit to you by helping to bring about the very same shifts in values, beliefs and behavior reported by NDErs.

At this point, in Chapter Ten, I move into issues having to do with the higher human potentials that seem to be evoked by NDEs, particularly those having to do with the emergence of healing gifts. I will give some examples and cite some of the research that suggests that the NDE stimulates the development of healing abilities and also confers a state of expanded mental awareness on the individual. I will also discuss the Light as a healing force in its own right and offer some cases in which the NDE seems to have mended broken lives and set them on a course so as to fulfil an individual's initial promise. Because these effects need not be limited to those who have undergone NDEs, a key feature of this chapter is a discussion of how you may use this information to help in understanding the dynamics of illness and promote both physical and spiritual healing in your own life.

Having considered the lessons of the NDE for everyday life and the realization of one's human potential, it will be time next to delve into the still deeply unsettling matter of death itself. In fact, however, I mean to argue in Chapter Eleven that two decades of research on the NDE have helped to bring about an undeniable revisioning of our understanding of the moment of death and, by implication, what

may follow it. Images of light, and indeed the oft-mentioned being of light itself, have come increasingly to eclipse the traditional figure of death, the grim reaper, whose forbidding specter has haunted the Western psyche for hundreds of years. Now, the hooded man of the scythe is in full retreat, and those facing their imminent death have instead much more comforting and hopeful notions of death to contemplate -- thanks largely to the publicity that NDE research has received ever since its inception in the mid-1970s.

In this chapter, I will take a look at how this information has already begun to affect care and preparation of the dying -- in nursing homes, hospices, hospitals and chaplain's offices. I will also describe new studies dealing with the impact of information about NDEs on senior citizens, the bereaved and those who have received some kind of a terminal diagnosis. In this connection, I will draw on a great deal of testimony that has been sent to me by bereaved persons (particularly by mothers who have suffered the loss of a child) and by patients dying of AIDS that will demonstrate how incredibly helpful the provision of information about NDEs has been to those who have had an immediate concern with the emotional consequences or threat of death. This chapter will also assist you to prepare for your own death by enabling you to eliminate unnecessary fears about what happens at death -- just as NDErs themselves have lost their fear of death forever through their own NDEs.

Discussing the preparation for and the event of death itself naturally raises the prospect of what happens following the cessation of all biological function, which is the subject of Chapter Twelve. Although no living person, however wise, can speak with certainty on this question, many NDErs nevertheless speak with great certitude on this point and, as a group, are convinced, almost absolutely, that some kind of post-mortem existence awaits us all. Furthermore, studies have shown that their opinions are contagious and also inspire a greater belief in life after death in those persons who have a chance to listen to the views of NDErs.

From these considerations, it is but a small leap to the issue of the core spiritual and metaphysical teachings that derive from an immersion in the Light of the NDE since according to NDErs, *all* knowledge is encoded in that Light. Therefore, being in the Light and becoming one with it makes this total knowledge accessible to these experiencers, and through them, to us. A highlight of chapter Thirteen will be a set of previously unpublished cases that represent *full* or *complete* NDEs. Of course, most NDEs in the literature are fragments, however complex, of the experience of dying and don't reveal the whole story. Some cases I have gathered in recent years, on the other hand, suggest that the complete NDE always involves an encounter with a *second* light. These examples are among the most profound and startling of any NDEs that have come my way since beginning my research, and if you can absorb their implications fully, your own faith in the unutterable radiant Love that seems to permeate our universe will be strengthened immeasurably. This chapter, then, represents the pinnacle of knowledge available to the NDEr -- the ultimate lessons of the Light.

But this culmination will not represent the conclusion of the book itself. Instead, in chapter Fourteen, we descend from the sublime splendors of the NDE empyrean

to the world of everyday reality where the real test of this NDE-based knowledge is to be found. The theme of this short chapter, therefore, will be that all of us may and must learn from an experience that of necessity can occur only for a minority of persons (however large). Rather than reviewing the insights already provided in this book, this chapter will encourage you to make use of specific resources for deepening and internalizing the lessons that were meant to be gleaned in the previous chapters. In a special appendix to follow, then, further readings, audio cassettes and video tapes, NDE support groups, organizations oriented to NDEs and their implications, conferences, and the names and addresses of NDErs willing to be contacted, will all be provided toward this end, including all available Internet resources. In all these ways, it is my hope that you will continue to be able to draw on the near-death experience so as to enrich your own life, and that, through your own effort, its benefits will be spread to many others. It is in this manner that humanity's unquenchable yearning for a fully enlightened consciousness and ultimately the reclamation of our endangered planet will be hastened.

### *A Concluding Personal Word*

As I have indicated, I have been exploring the world of NDEs for fully two decades now during which time I have been primarily a teacher and a researcher. But in all this time, I have never ceased to be a student of the phenomenon that has fascinated and enthralled me all these years, and it was obvious at the start of my inquiry that the NDErs that I had already met and would continue to meet along the way would be my own teachers. Indeed they have been, and I have learned immeasurably from recording and meditating on their words and insights.

Having written three previous books dealing largely with NDEs, I felt I had concluded my work in this field and was ripe to move on to other areas. After all, what more was there really for me to say that wasn't already mentioned in one of my books or many articles on the NDE? What could I hope to contribute that was new or hadn't been better expressed by others?

Reflecting on this one day, it occurred to me that what I would really like to do is to try to give to others something of what had been given to me so generously by the NDErs I had come to know during the course of my work. Not just to present more research findings as such, as I had in my previous books, but to offer up as a gift to be used in everyday life that priceless wisdom that can be found from listening to and watching the actions of some of these people. In effect, to give away the NDE, to scatter its teachings wherever there is the hope of finding receptive soil for them to take root.

You are my field. I have come with my seeds, passed along to me by others, to see if I can implant them in you. All I can do, however, is to lay them gently upon you. You must, if you wish them to grow, nourish them yourself and see whether they will prosper under your care. If something is to be reaped in the end, it will take your effort, too.

For now, I can only wish you a bountiful harvest.

But in the beginning is the seed, and the seed is made of Light. May it dazzle you as it enters.

1. One widely cited survey carried out by the Gallup organization in the early 1980s, for example, suggests that among the adult population of the United States alone as many as *eight million* persons may have had this experience. For a discussion of these findings, see the book by George Gallup, Jr., *Adventures in Immortality*.
2. In the United States, the best known of these investigations are to be found in my own books, *Heading Toward Omega* and *The Omega Project*, and in such works as Charles Flynn's *After the Beyond*, Phyllis Atwater's *Coming Back to Life*, and Melvin Morse's *Transformed by the Light*. In England, Margot Grey was the first to examine this issue in her book, *Return from Death*. In Australia, there are the books by Cherie Sutherland, *Transformed by the Light* and *Within the Light*. Finally, there is a recent report of these effects in Italy in the article "Extrasomatic Emotions" by Emilio Tiberi.

## **FOREWORD TO “*Lessons from the Light*”**

**by Professor Bruce Greyson**

If any one person can claim to be an authority on near-death experiences (NDEs) without having had one, that person must surely be Kenneth Ring. After Raymond Moody sowed the seeds of modern near-death research by coining the term "NDE" in his 1975 *Life After Life*, it was Ken who watered and nurtured them till they grew into a self-sustaining phenomenon. It was Ken who was the first president of that band of scattered researchers who formed the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) 20 years ago. It was Ken's office at the University of Connecticut that housed the organizations volunteers, phones, and growing archives for its precarious first decade. And it was Ken who founded the only scholarly journal for near-death studies and organized symposia on NDEs at annual meetings of mainstream academic societies.

If anyone has interviewed more NDErs than Ken -- and I don't know that anyone has -- then surely no one has done it with the depth, open-mindedness, and insight as he. For many years, Ken's home was known to experiencers across the country as "The Near-Death Hotel," where itinerant NDErs trying to rediscover their place in this world could and did "drop by" and end up staying however long it took. And each one to whom Ken opened his home in return opened his or her heart and added to Ken's growing comprehension of the true essence of the NDE. No other researcher has been able to meld the large-scale controlled study with the passionate friendships, the philosophical theories with the intuitive understandings, the command of the scholarly literature with the personal stories. And more importantly, no other researcher has been able to transmit to the rest of us the true meaning and impact of near-death phenomena for our planet.

In 1980, when America was beginning to question the validity of five years of near-death anecdotes, Ken came to our rescue with the first legitimate scientific study of NDEs in his *Life At Death*. Then after four more years of debates as to whether there might be no more to these remarkable phenomena than just a fleeting, if beautiful, hallucination, it was Ken again who, in his *Heading Toward Omega*, produced the first comprehensive study of its aftereffects, the profound and long-lasting changes it wreaks on the lives of experiencers. Now, after a quarter century of Amazing Stories From the Brink of Death, after so many talk-show panels and sitcom parodies and neurochemical "explanations" that even Hollywood studios and paperback publishers are getting sated, we find ourselves asking about NDEs, "So what?" And once again it is Ken Ring who guides us toward the answer. And the answer this social scientist has come up with is a message of meaning, of purpose, and of love -- more what one might expect from a theologian than from a scientist.

Ken dares to write frankly in these pages about the meaning of NDEs, inferring teleological conclusions from his empirical studies. In violating the scientific taboo against mentioning such concepts as meaning and purpose, Ken honestly confronts a topic most scientists pretend plays no role in their thinking. As the biologist Ernest William von Bruck put it more than a hundred years ago, "Teleology is a lady without

whom no biologist can live. Yet he is ashamed to show himself with her in public." In raising these issues, Ken also makes us question the proper role of science and scientists in the exploration of the universe -- and of the proper role of romance in the practice of science. Do scientists ply their trade just to enhance our ability to mold or control our environment, or is it to help us unravel the questions of meaning and purpose in the universe? The autobiographical writings of our greatest scientists make it clear that what motivates them to do science is in fact the quest for meaning.

While Ken's previous books focused on NDErs, this one speaks to the non-experiencer, to those of us who feel our lives and our society could be enhanced by sharing in the fruits of the NDE. Ken presents practical lessons he has learned from NDErs and guides the reader through experiential exercises in straightforward language, with ample support both from evidence from NDErs' lives and from the scholarly literature. The consistent psychological changes that he had previously documented in NDErs, he argues here, are reachable by all of us. Indeed, he argues, the true test of the value of whatever wisdom NDErs acquire is in its translation into everyday life. Most of us are familiar with the truisms of the NDE, and many of us give lip service to them: that death is not fearsome, that life continues beyond, that love is more important than material possessions, that everything happens for a reason. But what would we be like, what would the world be like, if we all really lived according to these precepts, if they were not mere bromides for us but living truths?

Can reading this book possibly help? Can readers really acquire the fruits of the NDE without actually experiencing one? Ken argues persuasively that they can and he supports that belief with evidence from the classes he taught on NDEs at the University of Connecticut, and from the late Charles Flynn's "Love Project" for his students at Miami University of Ohio. As Ken has documented, learning about NDEs and their effects can indeed inspire similar changes in others. He writes of these effects as a "benign virus" that one can catch from NDErs -- or from others similarly infected. I have met some of his students, and can attest to the fact they had indeed caught the NDE virus and were profoundly and permanently changed by it. But for you, the readers, this book is proof in itself that one can be transformed by learning about NDEs. This book is Ken's testament to his own transformation; it is his selfless gift to humanity. Since catching the benign virus of the NDE, Ken has become one of those scientists who are no longer ashamed to show themselves in public with their mistress. He argues here that the lessons from the light are not meant for NDErs alone, but are given to experiencers so that they can come back and infect others with this virus.

Ken's thesis has not been as warmly received as one might expect, even from theologians for whom it should be a familiar one. Some of his critics have warned that the allure of NDEs is that they compete with Biblical religion, that they point the way toward a moral code and spirituality more consistent than our Judaeo-Christian tradition is with America's New Age mentality. But a funny thing happened on the way to the New Age: The road took a subtle turn that led us back home to our roots, to the Golden Rule that "all things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them" (Matthew 7:12), and to Jesus' admonition that "inasmuch as ye

have done it unto to least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40).

Some theologians have argued that because NDEs tend to replace the Grim Reaper with the Being of Light as the embodiment of death -- a Being of Light that seems to love born-again Christians, practicing Buddhists, and atheistic sinners unconditionally -- their alluring visions must be Satanic rather than divine. How can we discern whether NDEs are truly blessed by divine light or deceived by the Prince of Darkness? No less an authority than Jesus gave us the methodology when he said, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20). As Ken shows us so eloquently in this book, the fruits of the NDE are compassion, humility, honesty, altruism, and love even for those who appear unlovable.

But if NDEs merely reinforce Biblical precepts, why do we need them? What do they -- and this book -- add to the message of the Gospels? Quite simply, it is the difference between hearing the word and experiencing **it** first-hand. For NDEs, the Golden Rule is no longer just a commandment one is taught to obey, but rather an indisputable law of nature, as inevitable as gravity. They know it is the way the universe works because they have experienced it first-hand in suffering directly the effects of their actions upon others. Though they do not feel punished or judged for their prior misdeeds, they do receive back as part of their life review everything they have ever given out, measure for measure.

Theologians of a different stripe have decried NDEs for holding out the false promise of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship* called "cheap grace," the unconditional forgiveness of sins without any required contrition. "Cheap grace," wrote Bonhoeffer, "is the deadly enemy of the Church." But is that in fact what NDEs promise, or is that a misreading of their message? The promise of "cheap grace" may well be part of what has attracted to the NDE much of the public fascination with the phenomenon, but in reality the grace that is bestowed upon NDEs comes hand in hand with a very costly discipleship. The unconditional love NDEs report in their experiences does not by any means gloss over their sins or excuse their future behavior. Quite to the contrary, NDEs experience first-hand in their NDEs the painful consequences of their sinful behavior, and return to earthly life as confirmed disciples, who understand from their own experience that their behavior does indeed matter far more than they could have imagined. NDEs do not come back with a sense that they are perfect beings as they are now, but rather with the first-hand knowledge of how they must act to work toward perfection. They return not to bask in the reflected glory of amazing grace, but committed to living the Golden Rule and carrying out the work of a higher power, often at great emotional as well as material sacrifice. There is nothing cheap about this grace. It is, indeed, the costly grace that Bonhoeffer wrote is inseparable from discipleship. Far from encouraging indiscriminate behavior, the unconditional love NDEs experience confers on them the self-esteem, courage, and self-knowledge to bring about the kind of life changes demanded of disciples.

But if NDEs do not sell cheap grace, then does this book? Reading this book may be less hazardous than coming close to death or inducing a cardiac arrest, as

the medical students did in the movie "Flatliner," but is not without danger. Its purpose is to change you, and to inspire you to change your world; and those are neither easy nor safe endeavors. Bonhoeffer was right that true grace cannot come cheaply. What Ken offers in this book is not an easy road to grace but rather a map of discipleship, a plot of the course we must follow to work toward grace. Whether you choose to take that course is up to you, and it is not by any means an easy one. But as Ken shows in these pages, it comes highly recommended.

Ken might have stopped after his three descriptive books on NDEs, and still be acknowledged as our foremost scientific authority on the subject. But he did not stop there, because that would have been failing to fulfill his responsibility. The purpose of his scientific explorations of NDEs -- indeed, the purpose of all scientific exploration -- is to lay the groundwork for plausible speculation about meaning and purpose. Ken, having been infected by his benign virus and having become what he calls a "near-death experiencer, once removed," was driven to discipleship. As surely as his NDEr friends and research subjects were given a great gift in their experiences, and as surely as they in turn gave a great gift to Ken, so too does Ken now give to you what he has received. This book is his contribution to the work of a higher power. It is Ken's hope, and mine, that every reader of this book will become similarly infected.

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Charlottesville, VA  
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