
Case Studies

Near-Death Experiences in Children*

by P.M.H. Atwater, Lh.D.

Abstract: First a brief mention is given of historical near-death experiences in children. Then a brief review is given of the author's extensive NDE research of adults and children in other cultures and countries. Finally, a discussion is given of the author's specific research on near-death experiences in children.

Introduction

Since my specialty in near-death experience (NDE) research is one-on-one sessions with experiencers, I can speak little of the phenomenon's historical significance — except to point out the fascinating anomaly that an amazing number of people important to the evolution of humankind could well have had such an episode during their childhood. I discussed this at length in both *Future Memory and Children of the New Millennium*. Some of the notables I came across in only one week of perusing library records were Abraham Lincoln, Mozart, Albert Einstein, Queen Elizabeth I, Edward de Vere/the 17th Earl of Oxford (who most likely is the real Shakespeare), Winston Churchill, Black Elk, and Walter Russell. Either I was possessed of "library luck" that week or there really is a connection between near-death states and possible structural, chemical, and functional shifts that appear to occur in the brain, elevating the individual in appreciable ways. My research leads me to believe the latter.

NDEs in Other Cultures and Countries

I did encounter near-death states in people of other cultures, as I met many who were foreign born or of racial backgrounds quite different than the typical white Judeo-Christian mindset. Of the over 3,000 adult experiencers in my research base, Caucasian Americans, European and Arabic people predominate at 80%, with 20% being of the black race (15% African Americans, 5% divided between Kenya, Haiti, and African Canadians). Of the 277 child experiencers, the mix is: 60% white, 23% Latinos, 12% blacks, and 5% Asian.

There have been excellent studies of NDEs in their native countries, as well as a government study sanctioned in China; but I want to mention the ongoing work by Todd Murphy of child experiencers in Thailand. Early on, he was kind enough to discuss his ideas with me, so I am familiar with his study — a research project that eventually came to confirm or support many of my own observations.

* based on a column by the author in Vital Signs (the newsletter of I.A.N.D.S.).

NDEs in Children

Having this exposure to accounts from a broad range of racial and cultural traditions, enables me to make some "across-the-board" comments — especially about "greeters," who, according to reports, are the first ones met "at death's door." I think you will find this of interest. The terms that follow are those most commonly used by the experiencers themselves.

INITIAL GREETERS MET IN NEAR-DEATH STATES — ranked in the order most frequently encountered:

1. Light beings or bright ones (children generally call them "The People")

2. Angels, with or without wings (can be white, black, or of various skin hues)

3. Deceased loved ones (including relatives not met or known about before who are later verified)

4. God or God's Presence or God's Voice (seldom given a gender by adults, described as an older male by children)

5. Religious figures (usually conform to the predominant religion the experiencer was exposed to, but not always. Jesus has appeared in near-death scenarios of Jewish people; for instance; a Muslim man once told me he was met by Buddha)

6. Animals (most often beloved pets who are deceased, yet there are many of non-pets such as horses, lions, or even chickens, who come as "guides" or to deliver a message) To go a little further with this, most adult experiencers describe God as a powerful, almost blinding sphere of light, that is ecstasy itself. Young children do not use such terms saying instead that God is like a loving father or grandfather.

Over 70% of children's near-death scenarios involve angels. Not that many adults claim this, more like 40% (although adults often use terms like "light beings" or "bright ones" as if they were describing angels) Just who is what and whether or not there is any real difference between these various emissaries cannot be determined solely by near death research.

Children sometimes describe an animal heaven they must visit before they can go to the heaven where people are. And they tend to be explicit about skin tones when talking about any religious figure who visited them. By that I mean, Jesus is seen as a man with tan skin (adults are the ones who usually see Jesus as white); Buddha's skin is more often seen as somewhat yellowish; Mohammed is described as having brown skin (yes, there are little ones who claim they saw Mohammed) Children seldom deviate in their description of such coloring regardless of their own skin tone or cultural exposure; adults do.

There is another greeter, though, who is sometimes encountered — a living person — more commonly reported by children than by adults. This may be a favorite teacher, the kid down the block, friends, or relatives. Does this fact call into question the validity of near-death imag

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ery? No, and here's why. In every case I have thus far investigated where this occurred, the living greeter did not remain in the scenario any longer than it took to alert or relax the experiencer. Once that happened, the living greeter disappeared and imagery more common to near-death states emerged. . . as the episode deepened. It is almost as if the sole purpose of living greeters is to ensure the continuance of the episode so that it can become more meaningful. They don't "stick around" like other greeters usually do.

While speaking of greeters, I also want to address this curious observation: living experiencers are often met by a "critical or caring" parental-type of being, seldom biologically related to them, but almost always someone the child recognizes as an authority figure they must respect (religious or otherwise). This being instructs or lectures the child on behavior and what must be done to fulfill the reason for his or her birth. These instructions or lectures can be quite stern and involve incidents where the child is judged on his or her progress toward the goal. If a tribunal is present, it is not unusual for the "judges" to be animals rather than people.

This curiosity is rather typical of near-death cases from children residing in Asia (Todd Murphy discovered a number of them), with indigenous societies and Third World nations. But I have also found them with youngsters from well-educated families in Europe and the United States.

Although many "parental" greeters are gentle and loving, some are rather fearful and threaten the child with punishment if he or she does not obey.

One of these cases in the U.S. involved a nine-day-old infant who "died" during surgery for a serious staph infection and abscess. I had intended to include it in *Children of the New Millennium*, but the account was somehow lost during rewrites and is only mentioned in brief on page 70, and even there in error (at "age nine" should read "nine days of age"). I have since apologized to Judith Werner, the experiencer involved. However, thanks to the generosity of Barbara Rommer, M.D., this account will at last be published—in the addendum to the second printing of Barbara's book, *Blessing in Disguise* (Llewellyn, 2000).

Judith's scenario involved being surrounded by white-robed figures devoid of emotion, a huge light which glared from above, and a heavy voice called "Inner Stranger" that sounded like a critical and demanding parental authority. The drawing she did of this scene looks like the typical layout of the average medical operating room complete with nurses and surgeons. Still, if you put yourself into the mind of one so young, the white-clad figures easily become evil giants, the light a torture device, and her subsequent treatments (also shown in the drawing) akin to ongoing punishment.

Once verbal, Judith told her parents about the incident and about Inner Stranger and the threats made ("obey me or you will die"). They

"pooh-poohed" her story, and so did everyone else she told it too. She then repressed the experience until, when at age twenty-eight, she had a near-death-like episode that explained what had happened to her when she was nine days old. The closure that resulted enabled her to understand lingering childhood fears and angers, and begin the process of turning her life around in a positive manner.

Any discussion of this case must address the question: how could an infant only nine days old remember surgical details, respond to and retain the words of a threatening male — throughout her entire life? Today, Judith speaks well of Inner Stranger, acknowledging that, although frightening to begin with, his advice has proved to be invaluable over time.

Black Elk, the famous Lakota Sioux medicine man, had a similar encounter during his childhood near-death state in the sense that the wise ones who came to him were stern "parental-type elders."

Comparing the kind of accounts we have become accustomed to with those from other cultures and other time frames in history, helps us to enlarge our perspective of the human mind and of life and death.

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An Atheist and the Loch Ness Monster

An atheist was spending a quiet day fishing when suddenly his boat was attacked by the Loch Ness monster. In one easy flip, the beast tossed him and his boat high into the air. Then it opened its mouth to swallow both. As the man sailed head over heels, he cried out, "Oh, my God! Help me!" At once, the ferocious attack scene froze in place, and as the atheist hung in mid-air, a booming voice came down from the clouds, "I thought you didn't believe in Me!" "Come on God, give me a break!!" the man pleaded. "Two minutes ago I didn't believe in the Loch Ness monster either!"

— Submitted by Dr. Barbara Rommer

