

Chapter fifteen: The Afterlife: Near-death Experiences

If there does exist a hidden truth within ghost lore, we will need to investigate the possibility of an afterlife in order to find it. This chapter covers what people have claimed to have experienced in the “afterlife” when near death.

People who have come close to death but are revived to health commonly report having experienced what they believe is the afterlife. Lore has provided us with the blueprint of what is generally experienced in such near-death experiences because, throughout time and throughout all cultures, the masses have reported stories of such that are surprisingly similar. Religious background slightly modifies the interpretation of this experience, but most still report about the same thing: they travel through a tunnel-like structure -- possibly reaching a different, gate-like structure at the end, where they may meet deceased relatives or other enjoyable things -- and feel enveloped in a great sensation of bliss. Commonality in the description of an afterlife appears to make a very strong case for its existence. How can we possibly argue with such evidence?

Before we jump to the conclusion that these descriptions are truly describing the afterlife, we must challenge any unjustified generalizations about the phenomena propagated by lore. For example, we must find out if such experiences only occur near death, if they truly are exclusively near-death experiences. Upon investigation, one will find that this popular assumption is clearly premature. (Morse) Seven other conditions that can facilitate the same experiences are: 1) the consumption of certain drugs (such as mescaline, LSD and psilocybin), 2) epileptic fits, 3) migraine headaches, 4) falling asleep, 5) a meditative state, 6) (in some cases) heavy relaxation, and 7) even putting pressure on both eyeballs. (Frazier; Blackmore (2) p.278) This suggests that the events detailed in a so-called “near-death experience” are the effects of a different cause than death.

In the 1930s Heinrich Kluver of the University of Chicago noted four constants in near-death experiences: they all tell of the tunnel, the spiral, the lattice or grating, and the cobweb. The origin of these constants lies in the anatomical structure of the visual cortex. Jack Cowan, a neurobiologist at the University of Chicago, used the mapping of the functions of the visual cortex to account for the vision of the tunnel. (Cowan) Brain activity is normally kept stable by some cells inhibiting the activity of others. Disinhibition (the reduction of this inhibitory act) yields too much neural activity for the brain to handle. This can occur near death (as the result of a lack of oxygen) or with drugs like LSD, which interfere with inhibition. Cowan uses an analogy with fluid mechanics to argue that disinhibition will induce stripes of activity that move across the visual cortex. Using the mapping of this cortex, it can be shown that stripes of energy in the cortex would appear as concentric rings or spirals to the dying brain. (Frazier; Blackmore p.278)

In the late 80s, the brilliant Susan Blackmore and Tom Troscianko expounded on Cowan’s theory. “The most obvious thing about the representation in the cortex is that there are lots of cells representing the center of the visual field but very few for the edges. This means that you can see small things very clearly in the center, but if they are out at the edges you can not. We took this simple fact as a starting point and used a computer to simulate what would happen when you have gradually increasing electrical noise in the visual cortex.” (Frazier;

Blackmore pp.278-9) The feeling that one is actually traversing through a tunnel is an illusion created by the visual cortex. As the "tunnel" grows in size, it is interpreted by the brain as forward progress; one can compare this interpretation to being a passenger in a car, which is making its way through the end of a dark tunnel.

Let's review, as if we were actually undergoing a near-death experience. At first, everything is black. Suddenly, a very small point of light appears at the very center of our focus (the result of the disinhibition of our photocells.) This grows and grows as our brains gradually inhibit fewer cells. Soon, everything gets white: total disinhibition. Shortly afterwards, the whiteness morphs into a figure that looks like lattice or gating (because of the stripes of activity that the disinhibition creates around the visual cortex), which we may even interpret as a white or pearly gate. Suddenly, everything goes black as this part of the brain finally shuts off.

After this stage, the remaining details are very subjective. "In this state the outside world is no longer real. And what will we imagine when we know we are dying? I am sure for many people it is the world they expect or hope to see. Their minds turn to people they have known who have died before them or the world they hope to enter next. Like the other images that we have been considering, these will seem perfectly real." (Frazier; Blackmore p.282) Remember that only parts of the occipital lobe turned off -- some other partially-working components are still active and are free to independently wander and fill in the dream-like story. Even if there exists only a few seconds in-between the point of blackout and death, we must remember that time is different to the subconscious mind than it is to our conscious minds, which may require several minutes in order to fill in the story. Thoughts fly throughout the brain so quickly, four seconds to a subconscious mind may seem like an hour, and this is the amount of time that the dying person will believe truly elapsed. Entire "conversations" may be remembered as if they were many minutes or even hours long, although it only took the brain a fraction of a second to create the experience and process it into memory. After revival, the events would seem so vivid, one would be more than convinced that it all actually took place, little different than how a hypnopompic dreamer believes.

It seems that nobody truly knows what may lie on the other side, simply because those who have had a near-death experience have had just that -- they never really died. Although they may flat-line, death does not occur for a while -- a time period that is unique to every individual. Lingering energies still exist within the brain, but perhaps not at full force, and perhaps they aren't even strong enough to be recorded by most instruments. If an afterlife does exist, it appears that nobody among the living can tell us about it from experience.