

Religion and Science: the Emerging Relationship

The Mystery of Consciousness

Part IX



In the previous article I discussed the study of human consciousness and how current studies are posing a formidable challenge to the materialist understanding of human consciousness as solely the product of the brain. We began to examine the study of Pim von Lommel, MD. In the study of hundreds of near death cases he has come across in his work as a cardiologist he was led to conclude that the brain *is not* the origin and center of consciousness, rather, it is a receiver of the of the *mind*, which is non-material and exists in a transcendent, non-local realm. Perhaps we would be better served if we examined what is typical of Near Death Experiences and why has this phenomenon provoked so much discussion and scientific studies in the last two decades.

The Near-Death Experience (NDE) is typified by a number of characteristics or features explicated in the previous article of this series. The first characteristic that I discussed was the *out of body experience*, or OBE. Many people have an OBE without any additional features listed in the previous article. I will now turn toward those additional features of a NDE that many people report having experienced as a result of clinical death.

Ineffability, Peace, Light and Unconditional Love

The person who has had a NDE will often try to explain the event in a number of ways using highly symbolic language. The reason they give for this use of symbolic language is that the experience cannot be expressed in common human language. The sense of peace and security that the person has in a positive NDE is beyond human words. The same is the case with the experience of the *light*. Many describe being drawn rapidly toward a dazzling light that emits pure and unconditional love. Many describe it as a personal being. Some describe the *light* as God, Jesus, Buddha or some powerful spiritual being. Also, it seems that persons that come from a particular religious tradition will usually experience the *light* as someone important in their religious tradition. For Christians, it is common to have people state that they saw Jesus. For Catholics who have had a NDE, many state that they have seen Mary and Jesus. For those people that are of another religious tradition, they tell of being met by someone they feel to be holy. It is not that Jesus and Mary do not want to appear to other people of other traditions, says Dr.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, but that people are given what they need at the time.¹ This raises a particular challenge and opportunity for deacons to confront when they come to grips with the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and Christian eschatology—which we will discuss later.



(Dr. Kubler-Ross)

Those people who have had a *heavenly* or positive NDE speak of God’s unconditional love for them, all people, and creation. This unconditional love wants only the best for us and wants us to use our time on earth for the purposes of loving and learning all we can. The NDE can, and often does, lead to dramatic life changes in the lives of those who have had one. For instance, a former organized crime member turned his life around to help troubled young people get their lives back in order; a multi-millionaire gave away his riches to become a counselor for the grieving; and people obsessed with power over others become more concerned with service to others. All of these changes happened because these people were convinced, by virtue of their NDE, that the center of all reality is the unconditional love and acceptance of God—an understanding of God and life at the heart of our Christian faith.

“Before I was living for material things....Before I was conscious of only me, what I wanted....I went from a person who was selfish, empty, vain, completely vain, frightened of life, of living, of death, of anything and everything to...a real sense of freedom in my inmost being, a complete sense of knowledge with God; I’ve grown to really know what love is in a universal sense, and I’m still growing in that area...”²

The Tunnel and the Light

Many people, though not all, speak of leaving the physical body and journeying through a dark tunnel toward a small pinpoint of light that grows larger as they journey through the tunnel. Many researches understand the *tunnel experience* to represent some sort of transition that results in the person meeting up with and being immersed in the “light.” In his book, **The Truth in the Light**, Dr. Peter Fenwick, of the United Kingdom, relays a story of a woman named Jean and her NDE

“I recall floating in a very bright tunnel. Everything seemed so calm and peaceful. At the end of the tunnel my father, who had died three years previously, was holding out his hand and calling me to come.”

“As I said, the feeling of calmness was indescribable. I heard music and there was a beautiful smell.... I remember the doctor removing the cotton wool plug. When I later

saw this doctor I told him everything. Although he seemed rather shocked at my story, he had no explanation as to how I knew so much about the events of the previous night.”

“Like most people I had a tremendous fear of death. Now, believe me, it’s the last thing I want, but I have lost my fear of the unknown because I truly believe I have had a preview.” 3

The NDE of Jean contains many of the typical features of a NDE. Her experience of being out of the physical body, her ability to see what was happening around her while clinically dead, her going through a tunnel, meeting the light, and meeting a deceased relative is typical of many NDE accounts. I recall a similar account rendered by my great grandmother just before her death. She described being in heaven and seeing Mary and Jesus and how beautiful it all was. In describing this to the family she wore a most ecstatic smile, and her eyes glistened with the joy of an excited child. Coming from a strong Catholic tradition the members of the family were impressed by what she described but they did not know what to make of her account. This reaction among family members is understandable, and is one that those who have had a NDE have to deal with in explaining what happened to them. Some NDErs are afraid to tell others about their experience for fear of being ridiculed or thought to be *crazy*. When the family avoids dealing with the NDE of one of the family members it can cause great strain on family relationships. In such a situation, the deacon can minister to the family to help the members of the family understand what the person who has had the NDE is going through and what they need at this challenging time in life.



The NDE accounts that many people speak about are not a new phenomenon. Throughout history there have been accounts of people who have had an *otherworldly journey*. In Plato’s, **Republic**, a soldier from Er comes back from death to describe his *otherworldly journey*. St. Paul speaks of a man that was in the *third heaven* and returned but was not allowed to speak of the experience (II Cor. 12:1-4). There are many such

accounts from other times and places in human history. What makes our time unique is the frequency of these reports, due in part, to the modern medical means of bringing people back from clinical death.

The Panoramic Life Review

One of the more intriguing elements of the NDE is the *life review*. A significant number of those who have had a NDE speak of having a total review of their lives shown to them in a three-dimensional format. It is not unusual for many of these people to speak of seeing and experiencing every thought and every action of their lives and how it impacted on others and the world around them. Moreover, some of those that have had a NDE speak of feeling the effects of their thoughts and actions from the perspective of those they loved or hurt. In his book entitled, **Lessons from the Light**, Dr. Kenneth Ring relays one such account given by a woman named Minette:

“No matter what I did to any person—what that action might be, good or bad—that action would react not only upon me but also on others around me. I knew that every action was its own reaction. What we do for or against another, we do to ourselves. I fully understood what Jesus meant when He said, *As ye do it unto the least of these, you do it unto me.*”⁴

This *life review* seems to serve as an experience of “judgment.” This judgment, say NDErs is not God passing judgment on a person but the person judging themselves in the light of the truth and love of God. Furthermore, despite the difficulty of seeing how one hurt others, those that have had the *life review* experience tell us that they were forgiven and had to accept forgiving themselves if they were to grow spiritually. The *life review* seems to function as a lesson and a corrective experience that helps a person to make sure that his or her life is centered on living a life of unconditional acceptance and love for others, the self and creation.

These types of experiences, combined with the findings of quantum physics, are generating a new model of the mind/brain relationship that is leading to a new kind of science that recognizing that there is a dimension to reality that transcends the physio-chemical reality of our world. While the mind and brain are intimately related they cannot be identified as one and the same. That is where science is heading and we will continue to hear of this change in science once the scientific community and religious community can better understand and absorb the emerging paradigm for a relationship between religion and science.

Notes

¹ Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, *Life After Death* (Sounds True CDs) 2006.

2 Kenneth Ring, *Heading Toward Omega: In Search of the Meaning of the Near-Death Experience* (New York: William Morrow, 1984), p. 144.

3 Dr. Peter Fenwick, *The Truth in the Light* (New York: Berkley Books, 1995), p. 33.

4 Kenneth Ring, *Lessons from the Light: What We Can Learn from the Near-Death Experience* (Needham, MA.: Moment Point Press, 1998), p. 162.