

BOOK REVIEW

After: A Doctor Explores What Near-Death Experiences Reveal about Life and Beyond by Bruce Greyson. St. Martin's Essentials, 2021. 261 pp.

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After portrays the epic journey of a true skeptic who chose to follow the data rather than reject seemingly fantastical accounts from his patients. It is an account of transformation while maintaining a thoughtful balance accommodating both spiritual and material worldviews. Spurred on by serendipitous events, uniquely Greyson has spent more than four decades chasing the previously inexplicable, and gossamer-like, but tantalizing glimpses of what was reported to be the continuation of consciousness beyond physical existence.

There have been a number of compelling books describing detailed accounts of those who pierced the veil and returned to report on it. In *Proof of Heaven*, Dr. Eben Alexander, a neurosurgeon with over two decades of experience, first related his extensive interactions in the nether realms while suffering from gram-negative meningitis; a condition from which he was not expected to survive. Dr. Mary Neal, incredibly was revived after more than 30 minutes submerged in the raging waters in the Los Rios region in southern Chile. Writing *To Heaven and Back*, similarly, she reported events that can only be described as miracles and extracorporeal encounters with heavenly deities. While discarnate, she was provided accurate information of events that tragically would come to pass, thus substantiating the validity of that experience.

Those books, and many others, provide insightful details into often dramatic experiences. What Greyson brings to the table is more than four decades of intensive research and examination of thousands

of reported near-death experiences (NDEs), the breadth and depth of which are unparalleled.

For Greyson, when a young aspiring psychiatrist, the adventure began with a serendipitous encounter with a patient who had attempted suicide. Initially, he had seen the comatose patient in the emergency room. It was his follow-up discussion that shocked him. That patient, Holly, told him that she recognized Greyson from a conversation he had conducted with her roommate located some distance from the patient's room. Logically, he knew that it would have been impossible for the unconscious patient to have seen or overheard the discussion. Yet, here she was providing accurate details of that conversation.

Throughout the book Greyson artfully dissects the claims made by skeptics who, materialistically-oriented, reject the notion of NDEs out of hand. One of the most common explanations by such doubters is that the NDEs must be hallucinations. A number of studies have proven that not to be the case. Oft cited by experiencers is that they were out of their bodies (OBE) and able to observe their immediate surroundings. To that end, Greyson cites the study of OBE by Professor Jan Holden in which she found that 92 percent of the reports were totally accurate, 6 percent contained some error, and only 1 percent could be determined to be totally wrong. Given the known fallibilities of human memory, that is an outstanding track record. Anoxia, or lack of oxygen, is often cited as a precipitant of hallucinations. Amazingly, studies have shown that those reporting NDEs actually have an increase in oxygen levels during those events.

Among the critical issues addressed is that of the accuracy of reporting of NDEs by patients who are rightfully concerned about how their mental health will be perceived by medical staff. This points to cases in which interviews conducted over time often reveal substantial details that were previously withheld. When asked, patients have indicated that they were concerned about the reception even after previous discussions were accepted in a positive manner. Patients who have experienced NDEs become quite adept at discerning the amount of detail that their interviewers can entertain, and adjust their responses accordingly. It is reasonable to assume that there is a substantial amount of information that has not been relayed to researchers because of these concerns. Greyson notes that the reluctance to share information is fully justified

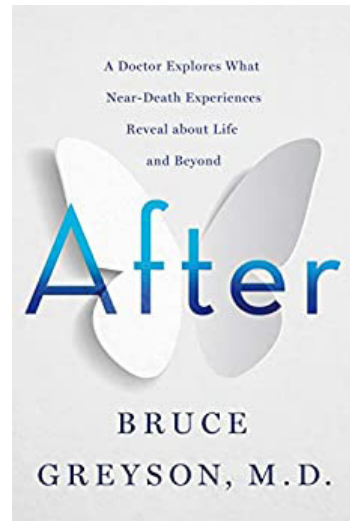
as many patients have been greeted with skepticism, as in some cases drugs are prescribed with the intent to suppress perceived hallucinations. Hopefully, the medical community is becoming more aware of such experiences are less likely to reject such reports.

In *After*, the topics of religion are discussed in fair detail, especially those relating to experiences that are perceived to relate to Heaven and Hell from a Christian perspective. Since Christianity is only one of many religious orientations, questions that arise as to the experiences of those who come from predominantly Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, or even atheistic backgrounds. Then too there is the question of interaction with discarnate entities or deities. Raised are the concepts of meeting the Christian Jesus, interactions with God, an omnipotent supreme being, or other notions of ineffable experiences beyond human ability to comprehend.

On a more understandable level, he describes reports of individuals who have met with deceased relatives which is reportedly a relatively common experience. Of even more interest, are the observations of interaction with deceased individuals whose death was not known to the patient at the time of the NDE yet later verified.

Readers will find there is substantial discussion regarding the perennial conundrum regarding the brain and the mind. It is noted that the Greek physician Hippocrates was involved in similar thought more than 2000 years ago. Those experiencing NDEs decidedly come down on the side of that the mind is separate from the brain and seems to act as a modulator of thoughts. Included is an interesting quote from Dr. Larry Dossey who stated, "We are conscious not because of the brain but in spite of it."

Greyson covers many aspects of the NDE reports. Best known are the feelings of peace and tranquility that are often relayed by the patients. But there are other concerns as well. Some of those



experiences are decidedly negative at the time but will usually provide some resolution. Then he addresses the other aspects of the process of reintegration into the lives of friends and family. Some of them neither want to accept the incredible stories that the experiencer relates, nor understand that the NDE may have had profound impact on that person resulting in significant changes in their personality. Given NDEs usually happen precipitously, when the experiencer attempts to relate ineffable circumstances, it can create considerable stress in their previously existing relationships. While mommy may have just had a conversation with God, her young children are likely to be more interested in dinner. The potential for conflict is obvious. It is also worth noting that the full impact of the NDE may take considerable processing over a period of weeks, months, and even years.

Of course, Greyson raises questions that remain unanswered and possibly are unanswerable. Why is there such variance in the reports? Why do only a few people have these experiences even though many other people under comparable circumstances do not report similar events? Why do some patients with severely diminished cognitive capability suddenly have short periods of lucidity shortly before death? Can continuation of consciousness beyond physical death be scientifically proven?

To that last question, Greyson in the final chapter lists a series of lessons to be learned from NDEs. Acknowledging there may be other explanations derived later, he states, “. . . but until then, some form of continued consciousness after death seems to be the most plausible working model.” Clearly, a most important aspect of NDEs is the *reduction in fear of death*, as reported by both those who have experienced such events, as well as those who learn about them.

For truth in advertising, readers should know that I have known Bruce Greyson personally for nearly 40 years and consider him both a friend and one of the best researchers in the field. We are both past presidents of IANDS and have come a long way in our understanding of the complexity and importance of NDEs to the patients experiencing them, to the medical community, and to the public in general.

The bottom line is that Bruce Greyson's *After* is one of the most important books on near-death experience studies that has ever been published. It is highly recommended reading for all members of the SSE.