

Journal
of
Near-Death Studies

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Reincarnation Beliefs Among Near-Death Experiencers • *Amber D. Wells*

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Announcement

Volume 12, Number 1, Fall 1993



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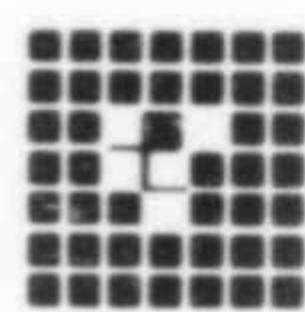
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JOURNAL OF NEAR-DEATH STUDIES (formerly ANABIOSIS) is sponsored by the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS). The Journal publishes articles on near-death experiences and on the empirical effects and theoretical implications of such events, and on such related phenomena as out-of-body experiences, deathbed visions, the experiences of dying persons, comparable experiences occurring under other circumstances, and the implications of such phenomena for our understanding of human consciousness and its relation to the life and death processes. The Journal is committed to an unbiased exploration of these issues, and specifically welcomes a variety of theoretical perspectives and interpretations that are grounded in empirical observation or research.

The **INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR NEAR-DEATH STUDIES** (IANDS) is a world-wide organization of scientists, scholars, near-death experiencers, and the general public, dedicated to the exploration of near-death experiences (NDEs) and their implications. Incorporated as a nonprofit educational and research organization in 1981, IANDS' objectives are to encourage and support research into NDEs and related phenomena; to disseminate knowledge concerning NDEs and their implications; to further the utilization of near-death research by health care and counseling professionals; to form local chapters of near-death experiencers and interested others; to sponsor symposia and conferences on NDEs and related phenomena; and to maintain a library and archives of near-death-related material. Friends of IANDS chapters are affiliated support groups in many cities for NDErs and their families and for health care and counseling professionals to network locally. Information about membership in IANDS can be obtained by writing to IANDS, 638 Prospect Avenue, Hartford, CT 06105-4298.

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Editor's Foreword

This issue's Guest Editorial, by sociologist Craig Lundahl, addresses the matter of applying the insights gleaned from near-death research. Lundahl proposes that just as near-death experiencers seem enriched by lessons learned in their experiences, so too might the general public benefit from these lessons.

Psychology student Amber Wells contributes to this issue an empirical study of changes in beliefs about reincarnation among near-death experiencers. She compares NDErs' reincarnation beliefs with those of control groups, and explores alternative reasons for shifts in belief about reincarnation following an NDE.

Next, sociologist Allan Kellehear provides a sociological interpretation of the classic children's story *The Velveteen Rabbit*. While previous analyses, relying on psychoanalytic insights, have viewed this as a book about separation and loss, Kellehear suggests that the story's major theme is the nature of reality. He sees parallels to the near-death experience in this book's lesson that love transcends death.

In August of 1992 two of the most prominent near-death researchers on opposite sides of the globe published major books with the identical title: *Transformed by the Light*. In the hope of minimizing confusion, we present in this issue reviews of both works. Seattle pediatrician Melvin Morse's book, coauthored with journalist Paul Perry, is reviewed by thanatologist Robert Kastenbaum; while Australian sociologist Cherie Sutherland's book is reviewed by religious scholar John Wren-Lewis.

Finally, in a letter to the editor, NDEr Vincent Luciani urges researchers to focus not on exotic near-death visions, but on the more meaningful changes in NDErs' lives following the experience. We end this issue of the Journal with the Parapsychology Foundation's announcement that their 1993 D. Scott Rogo Award goes to psychologist Justine Owens for her multidimensional analysis of near-death experiences.

Bruce Greyson, M.D.



Guest Editorial

Lessons From Near-Death Experiences for Humanity

Craig R. Lundahl, Ph.D.

Western New Mexico University

ABSTRACT: A considerable amount of information on the aftereffects of near-death experiences (NDEs) has been gathered by researchers and used by practitioners to help NDErs, but the lessons from this information have not been presented for use by the rest of humanity. This essay summarizes nine lessons consistently gleaned from NDEs, which may help motivate humanity to live more in accordance with the messages from NDEs.

The aftereffects of near-death experiences (NDEs) have been described since the commencement of modern near-death studies in 1975 with the publication of Raymond Moody's *Life After Life*. Although most early near-death researchers focused on the phenomenology of the experience, many of those same investigators also observed the aftereffects of the experience, and found that NDErs outwardly showed measurable changes in attitude and behavior toward life that were attributable to the NDE.

Moody (1975) reported that NDErs felt their experiences broadened and deepened their lives, caused them to become more reflective and

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more concerned with philosophical issues, changed their attitude toward physical life, changed their concepts of the mind and its importance, taught them the importance of cultivating love for others, taught them the importance of seeking knowledge, and changed their attitude toward physical death.

Stanislav Grof and Joan Halifax (1977) described a pattern of change in NDErs that included a reduced fear of death, improved well-being, and enhanced meaning in life.

Kenneth Ring (1980) found in his systematic study of the NDE that the typical near-death survivor emerged from the experience with a heightened sense of appreciation for life and a determination to live life to the fullest, with a renewed sense of purpose in living, and as a stronger person who valued love and service to others and no longer felt the material comforts in life were important. He also found that NDErs who reported a core experience became more religious, feared death less or lost their fear of death, and believed more definitely in an afterlife. In a subsequent book, Ring (1984) looked at 14 core NDEs that suggested patterns of spiritual awakening. The value changes induced by these NDEs, according to Ring, included enhanced appreciation of life; concern for others; greater self esteem; nonmaterialism; a quest for greater meaning; and changes in religious orientation that were characterized by greater spirituality, perceived closeness to God, de-emphasis of formal religiosity, universalism, increased belief in life after death, and greater receptivity to Eastern beliefs.

Bruce Greyson and Ian Stevenson (1980), in a study of 78 NDErs, found that most reported attitude changes toward God or religion, self, death, and life and its meaning. Greyson later reported that NDEs decreased suicidal ideation (1983a) and led experiencers to judge values related to material and social success as less important (1983b).

In an analysis of the accounts of 215 survivors of life-threatening danger, Russell Noyes (1980) identified a pattern of favorable attitude changes resulting from NDEs, including a reduced fear of death, a sense of relative invulnerability, a feeling of special importance or destiny, a belief in having received the special favor of God or fate, and a strengthened belief in continued existence. He also found several more elements associated with a heightened awareness of death that resulted from the NDE, including a sense of the preciousness of life, a feeling of urgency and reevaluation of priorities, a less cautious approach to life, and a more passive attitude toward uncontrollable events.

Michael Sabom (1982) found that almost all subjects interviewed in his study viewed their NDE as an important event that had done more

to shape their life goals and attitudes than any other previous experience. Sabom found these NDErs' death anxiety was dramatically reduced or eliminated, and they developed a new fervor for day-to-day living and a new attitude toward death. Their religious views were commonly strengthened by the NDE, and they developed a new personal interest in the caring and loving aspects of human relationships.

Charles Flynn (1982) summarized the attitude and value changes of 21 NDErs as a greatly increased concern for others, a lessened fear of death, an increased belief in an afterlife, an increased religious interest and feeling, and a lessened desire for material success and approval of others. In his subsequent book that described NDE-induced value transformations, he listed those changes as a strong belief that life has inner meaning, a decreased fear of death, an increased belief in an afterlife, a strong desire to love and help others, and an indifference to materialistic and competitive success and status (Flynn, 1986).

George Gallup and William Proctor (1982) reported a variety of NDE aftereffects from the nationwide Gallup Poll. Among these aftereffects were a lessening of fear of death, a strengthening of personal religious beliefs, a heightened perception of life's brevity and a determination to live every moment intensely, a lessening of intimidation by the demands of life, an increased concern about fellow men and women, an increased sensitivity to a place in the world, a feeling of increased control over life, and a desire to sacrifice for others.

Timothy Green and Penelope Friedman (1983) reported that NDErs felt definite changes in values away from materialistic and towards spiritual goals. Their subjects appeared to be more loving and more aware of their relationships with others and more conscious of the meaning and purpose of their lives. Their subjects reported less fear of death or no fear at all, and an unshakable conviction that they would survive physical death.

Steven McLaughlin and Newton Maloney's study of 40 NDErs found an increase in the importance of religion and religious activity (1984). Nina Helene (1984) interviewed 20 Christian NDErs and found their lives were characterized by unusual conversion experiences or deep commitments and life transformations.

Martin Bauer (1985) found that NDEs brought about positive attitude changes in 28 NDErs. Margot Grey (1985) discussed the positive effects of NDEs on attitudes in her book. Elaine Ann Gomez (1986) described the increases in positive values in ten NDErs.

Cherie Sutherland's study of 50 Australian NDErs (1990) found a significant shift away from organized religion and church attendance and towards private informal prayer and meditation, a belief in life

after death, a lack of fear of death, and an attitude against attempting suicide. When Sutherland asked the NDErs the most significant change that resulted from their NDEs, spiritual growth, a loving attitude, knowing God, and inner peace were mentioned as the most meaningful changes by the majority of her subjects.

Melvin Morse, who studied the NDEs of children, found many had no fear of death as a result of their NDEs (Morse and Perry, 1990). One child became very religious, while another told him one could be with God without the rules of religion. The children he interviewed also felt that life was precious and had a purpose. Morse reported that one child spoke frequently in grade school about the need to love one another after his NDE, while other children mentioned acquiring knowledge, and learned that little in life is worth getting upset over, and to be more tolerant of other people's beliefs.

A few individuals have described the aftereffects of their own NDEs. P. M. H. Atwater (1988) believed the major aftereffects were the inability to personalize emotions or feelings, the inability to recognize or comprehend boundaries, difficulty understanding time sense, expanded or enhanced psychic sensitivities, a changed view of physical reality, a different feeling of the physical self, and difficulty with communication and relationships.

A review of these studies and first-person accounts shows they are consistent in their findings about the aftereffects of the NDE; they confirm that they NDE effects changes in the experiencers' values, attitudes, and behavior. This considerable accumulation of information on the aftereffects of the NDE has been utilized in an applied setting for the treatment of NDErs by social workers (Clark, 1984), nurses (Corcoran, 1988; Papowitz, 1986), counselors (Furn, 1987; Greyson and Harris, 1987; Miller, 1987; Noble, 1987; Schaefer, 1988), and health care workers (Walker, 1989). Flynn (1986), a sociologist, has used information on the aftereffects of NDEs in the "Love Project" that he incorporated into his courses to foster unconditional love among his undergraduate students who had not had NDEs.

What we see thus far in the field of near-death studies regarding the aftereffects of the NDE is a collection of information on experiencers' changed values, attitudes, and behavior, information accumulated by researchers and used by practitioners to develop therapeutic approaches for helping NDErs deal with their experiences. What seems to be missing in all of this newly acquired pure and applied knowledge is any transmission of it to society. Are there some basic lessons from the NDE for all people?

Surely the sharing of such information can only be a positive contribution to the lives of the general population, much as it has been to the

lives of NDErs. Of course, some of the work by near-death researchers such as Moody, Ring, and Morse has been popularized by the mass media, but has the public received a deliberate and concise account of these basic lessons in a straightforward manner, or have they received bits and pieces here and there? Could the public decipher these meanings from the numerous scholarly publications on the subject?

I am not sure we can give a positive answer to either of these questions. I believe we have an obligation to share the meaning of these findings with nonNDErs and with those outside the near-death research and practitioner community. Therefore the purpose of this essay is to outline concisely the major lessons from NDEs for humanity.

Lessons From Near-Death Experiences

An examination of the findings from near-death research and from individual near-death accounts suggests a number of important lessons for humanity. NDEs seem to be telling us all: (1) do not fear death; (2) grow spiritually or religiously; (3) do not take life for granted; (4) love and serve others; (5) each human life has a purpose; (6) there is an afterlife; (7) social position and wealth are not important; (8) do not take your own life; and (9) gain knowledge. An examination of each of these NDE lessons will help clarify them.

Do Not Fear Death

Probably the most frequently mentioned aftereffect of the NDE is the statement, "I lost all fear of death," or, "I am not afraid to die." After the experience, one NDEr flatly stated: "The terror I had of death is gone" (Nelson, 1989, p. 146). Most NDErs report losing their fear of death, and it is reasonable to assume that knowledge of NDEs can help all people to understand the process of death better and to reduce their fear of it as well.

Grow Spiritually or Religiously

Many NDErs become more spiritual or religious after the NDE. Sabom (1982) found that the religious views of persons who experienced an NDE were strengthened, and this was evidenced by a marked increase in formal religious activity or personal commitment. Gallup also described one of the main results of NDEs as a strengthening of

personal religious beliefs (Gallup and Proctor, 1982). Ring (1980) concluded that the NDE is a spiritual experience that can produce spiritual behavior. He differentiated between religious and spiritual by quoting a wise man: "A religious person follows the teaching of his church, whereas a spiritual person follows the guidance of his soul" (Moody and Perry, 1988, p. 127). Perhaps Moody best described the message for spiritual or religious growth when he wrote:

The interesting thing is that after the NDE, the effects seems to be the same: people who weren't overtly religious before the experience say afterward that they do believe in God and have an appreciation for the spiritual, as do the people who believed in God all along.

Both groups emerge with an appreciation of religion that is different from the narrowly defined one established by most churches. They come to realize through this experience that religion is not a matter of one "right" group versus several "wrong" groups. People who undergo an NDE come out of it saying that religion concerns your ability to love—not doctrines and denominations. In short, they think that God is a much more magnanimous being than they previously thought, and that denominations don't count. (Moody and Perry, 1988, p. 68)

Do Not Take Life for Granted

Many NDErs change their attitude or approach toward life after an NDE. They feel life is very precious, and they have an increased appreciation of it. One NDEr wrote:

Life, what a beautiful and precious gift! Why do we take it for granted? I know I did before my accident but not anymore. Each day is beautiful and exciting because I am alive to enjoy it. I love the sunrise, the sunset. I watch the birds as they come to the feeder. I watch the little ants as they carry home their loads. I take each day as it comes. I don't live by hours and minutes or seconds anymore. Just day and night, and I am grateful for each new day. I am so grateful for the little things I can do with my hands, like write my name. (Nelson, 1988, p. 131)

Love and Serve Others

Many NDErs stress the importance in this life of trying to cultivate love for others. Ring states that the basic message that the NDEr comes away with is that knowledge and love are the most important things (Moody and Perry, 1988). Moody pointed out that after the NDE almost all experiencers "say that love is the most important thing in

life. Many say it is why we are here. Most find it the hallmark of happiness and fulfillment, with other values paling beside it" (Moody and Perry, 1988, p. 3). Moody also noted that many people sense, when asked by the "being" during the life review of the NDE what is going on in their hearts, that the simple acts of kindness that come from the heart are the ones that are most important because they are the most sincere.

One NDEr said:

Before the accident I was a very competitive person, always wanting the highest grade, the best job, the most money. I think I'm different now. I think I love and appreciate other people more and have a stronger desire to do things for others. (Nelson, 1988, p. 47)

Another NDEr expressed it this way:

Among other things I learned that the most important thing we can do on this earth is to show consideration, love and kindness to others. There are no bonuses for position alone, nor power and wealth. We are judged by how we treat people, and what we do for others. (Nelson, 1989, p. 153)

Each Human Life has a Purpose

One implication of the findings of near-death research is that each person's life has a purpose. Gallup found that some NDErs felt God had a plan for their lives (Gallup and Proctor, 1982), and Morse noted: "The feeling that there is a purpose to life is one of the results of many childhood NDEs" (Morse and Perry, 1990, p. 155).

Perhaps the point to be made here is best summed up with the words told to one NDEr by someone in the other world, whom she believed was her Father in Heaven, that she would know her mission in life as time went on (Nelson, 1988). This statement implies that all people have a purpose or mission in this earthly life.

There is an Afterlife

For most of the core NDErs in Ring's study (1980), the idea of life after death became not merely highly probable, but a veritable certainty. This statement seems to reflect the findings of a number of near-death researchers. NDEs essentially tell us that we are not

snuffed out of existence by death. As one author pointed out: "This is important because—to a large degree—how we view death determines how we live life" (Nelson, 1988, p. 2). Generally the feelings of NDErs in regard to an afterlife are expressed in this statement: "Because of what had just happened I no longer just believed in an afterlife. I knew for a surety there was life beyond death because I had just been there" (Nelson, 1988, p. 67).

Social Position and Wealth are Not Important

After their NDEs, experiencers become less status conscious and materialistic. Lee Nelson noted a theme that recurs in several of his collected NDE accounts:

Wealth, power, position in the church, even attendance at church meetings didn't seem to matter—only what one did to improve conditions and lighten the burdens of others. Christian service and charity were far ahead of anything else in winning approval and peace for those entering the world of spirits. (1989, p. 12)

One NDEr said:

I also received the strong impression that positions at work, in society and in the church are not important at all. What matters is how we treat people, whether or not we are kind to them and what kind of relationship we build with our families. (Nelson, 1989, p. 21)

Do Not Take Your Own Life

A considerable amount of near-death research indicates that people should not take their own lives. Moody found suicide-related NDEs to be uniformly unpleasant. He quoted one woman as saying, "If you leave here a tormented soul, you will be a tormented soul over there, too" (1975, p. 143).

Ring and Stephen Franklin (1981–82) found a common testimony among suicide attempters they interviewed who had an NDE was that suicide had ceased to be an option. In one suicide-related NDE account, the experiencer was asked by a male voice whether he wanted to return to life, and he stated that he wanted to die. Then the male voice said: "You are breaking my laws to commit suicide. You'll not be with me in heaven—if you die" (Ring, 1980, p. 76).

One of the child NDErs interviewed by Morse saw that some people remained in a void, especially those who had committed suicide (Morse and Perry, 1990). This scene seems to confirm what the male voice told the NDEr interviewed by Ring.

Gain Knowledge

Previously, we noted that Ring had stated that the basic message the NDEr comes away with is that knowledge and love are the most important things (Moody and Perry, 1988). Moody also noted in his first book that many NDErs he spoke with emphasized the importance of seeking knowledge. He wrote: "During their experiences, it was intimated to them that the acquisition of knowledge continues even in the afterlife" (1975, p. 93). Later Moody wrote that NDErs

have newfound respect for knowledge. Some say that this was the result of reviewing their lives. The being of light told them that learning doesn't stop when you die; that knowledge is something you can take with you. Others describe an entire realm of the afterlife that is set aside for the passionate pursuit of knowledge. (Moody and Perry, 1988, p. 35)

One NDEr while in the other world observed that people have their free agency there, just as we do here, and that gaining knowledge was the only way to progress (Crowther, 1967).

Messages from Child NDErs

In addition to these major lessons primarily from adult NDErs, Morse has also listed messages given exclusively to children who had NDEs:

The messages given to these children of the Light are not new or controversial. They are as old as mankind itself and have served as the primary fuel of our great religions:

"Love your neighbor and cherish life."

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

"Clean up your own mess."

"Be the best you can be."

"Contribute to society."

"Be nice, kind, and loving."

These messages have a special urgency for those who have had near-death experiences. Why? Perhaps since the messages came to them at

the point of death, they must be important. (Morse and Perry, 1990, p. 163)

Conclusion

Just as these messages have a special urgency for the NDErs who receive them, shouldn't they also have a special urgency and importance for humanity? Will humanity listen? National surveys in the United States provide a partial answer to this question, if we assume that belief in life after death and in a heaven would make a person receptive to lessons from NDEs. A series of Gallup Polls conducted in 1980-81 found that 67 percent of the general public acknowledged belief in life after death and 71 percent acknowledged belief in heaven (Gallup and Proctor, 1982). Additionally, this information about lessons from NDEs has been gathered through scientific investigations that may make the information more acceptable for some people; science is the official culture in our society and has become, so to speak, the court of last resort in determining what is true.

But will those who listen translate these lessons into correspondingly appropriate behavior? National surveys cannot measure social action; they can only collect self-reports of recalled past action, as in the case of NDEs, or of prospective or hypothetical action. In other words, there is not perfect correspondence between attitudes and behavior:

For instance, much research shows that how people act in an interracial group situation bears little or no relation to how they feel or what they think. The social context in which people find themselves does much to determine their specific responses. (Vander Zanden, 1988, p. 49)

Without having NDEs themselves, what people will do as a result of these important lessons from NDEs I believe goes to the heart of each individual. Perhaps disseminating these messages to the public may help to motivate many to live lives in accordance with the lessons from NDEs.

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Reincarnation Beliefs Among Near-Death Experiencers

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ABSTRACT: Several researchers have found that near-death experiences (NDEs) tend to increase belief in reincarnation. This study was designed to examine the factors underlying this belief shift. I used a questionnaire to compare the tendency toward belief in reincarnation among NDErs, individuals merely interested in NDEs, and a non-experiencer, non-interest control group. In addition, I interviewed 14 NDErs to gain insight into the factors influencing NDErs' beliefs. NDErs' reincarnation belief shift appeared to be due to (a) direct knowledge of reincarnation gained by some NDErs in the NDE itself; (b) knowledge of reincarnation gained through a general psychic awakening following the NDE; or (c) exploration of alternative perceptions of reality following the NDE.

Previous research has indicated that following a near-death experience (NDE), experiencers tend to exhibit a significant shift in their beliefs on a wide range of subjects, including an increased acceptance of others, a significantly greater belief in life after death, and a decreased emphasis on material success (Atwater, 1988; Flynn, 1986; Grey, 1985; Morse and Perry, 1992; Ring, 1984, 1992; Sutherland, 1992). These belief changes have also included a general tendency toward an increased openness to the idea of reincarnation (Gallup and Proctor, 1982; Ring, 1980, 1984, 1992; Sutherland, 1992).

It is this belief shift that was the focus of the present study. The question of what precipitates the shift toward belief in reincarnation has not yet been systematically addressed in the literature. In this

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study, I attempted to answer this question and, additionally, to determine if a consistent picture of the purpose and process of reincarnation would emerge from the accounts of near-death experiencers.

Previous researchers such as Kenneth Ring have suggested that near-death experiencers' increased openness toward the idea of reincarnation may be less a factor of the NDE itself than a result of life changes following the experience:

Of course, there is no reason why an NDEr's openness toward reincarnation must stem directly from his NDE. In fact, I am quite convinced that in many cases it is more likely to be a response to an NDEr's reading and other life experiences following an NDE. (Ring, 1984, p. 160)

Ring's study also suggested that belief in or openness to reincarnation among NDErs was often accompanied by a more general endorsement of Eastern religions. This has also been noted in the work of Cherie Sutherland (1992). Other researchers (Twemlow, Gabbard, and Jones, 1982) found a similar shift in religious beliefs among individuals having not near-death experiences but out-of-body experiences. Thus it is possible that the NDE is simply one of many catalysts for an increased openness to reincarnation. In fact, it has been suggested that simply an interest in near-death phenomena can serve as a catalyst for many of the value changes expressed by NDErs, including an increased openness to the idea of reincarnation (K. Ring, personal communication, 1991).

If it is true that the NDE influences individuals' reincarnation beliefs simply by causing them to consider new religions or spiritual ideas, then one would expect that individuals who exhibited an interest in the NDE would also be prompted to undergo a similar belief shift. If, on the other hand, it is something inherent in the NDE itself that leads individuals to consider the possibility of reincarnation, then one would expect that individuals who were merely interested in such phenomena but who had not experienced it themselves would have reincarnation beliefs that differed significantly from those of near-death experiencers and would instead be similar to those of individuals who have no such interest in NDEs.

In this study, questionnaires were used to determine the reincarnation beliefs of a group of NDErs, a group of subjects who were interested in near-death experiences but had not had an NDE, and also a group of subjects who were chosen to represent the general non-experiencer,

non-interest population. Interviews of NDErs were also conducted to gain a deeper insight into the origins and structure of their beliefs concerning reincarnation.

Method

Subjects

There were four separate subject groups employed in this study. The first group, the near-death experimenter interview group (or NDEI group) consisted of 14 near-death experiencers currently residing in the state of Connecticut who were selected from among Ring's files and from individuals who attended Friends of IANDS (International Association for Near-Death Studies) meetings that convene monthly in Farmington, Connecticut. The second group, the near-death experimenter (NDE) group, consisted of 43 near-death experiencers from various locations throughout the United States who responded to a mailed questionnaire regarding their beliefs about reincarnation. These individuals were also selected from among Ring's files. The third group was composed of 34 individuals who have not had a near-death experience, but who indicated an interest in the near-death phenomenon through correspondence with Ring at the University of Connecticut. This group also responded to the mailed reincarnation beliefs questionnaire and will be referred to as the interest group. The fourth and final group consisted of 30 individuals who were approached outside a grocery store in Willimantic, Connecticut, and who agreed to fill out the reincarnation beliefs questionnaire. This group will be referred to as the control group.

Materials

A questionnaire consisting of 16 statements about reincarnation was developed specifically for this study to evaluate respondents' degree of belief in reincarnation. The questionnaires were mailed with a cover letter explaining the nature of the study and requesting the individual's participation was included. The interview schedule used with the NDEI group consisted of questions referring to NDErs' beliefs about reincarnation and the factors that shaped their beliefs (see Appendix). A tape recorder and cassette tapes were used to tape the interviews.

Three of the interviews were not tape recorded because the situation, usually too much background noise, prevented it. These interviews were recorded using paper and pen.

Procedure

Fifty questionnaires were mailed to the near-death experiencer group, of which 29 were returned; while 50 questionnaires were mailed to the near-death interest group, of which 34 were returned.

In addition, 30 individuals who were approached outside a grocery store in Willimantic, Connecticut, agreed to respond to the reincarnation beliefs questionnaire. These subjects were told that I was a student at the University of Connecticut conducting my honors' thesis on the subject of reincarnation, and were asked to fill out a questionnaire regarding their reincarnation beliefs.

The questionnaire consisted of eight statements favorable to the idea of reincarnation and eight statements unfavorable to it, and was designed using a Likert format. The subjects were asked to respond to each statement with a +2 to indicate strong agreement with the statement, a +1 to indicate a tendency toward agreement, a 0 to indicate no opinion, a -1 to indicate a tendency toward disagreement, and a -2 to indicate strong disagreement.

Finally, 14 near-death experiencers from the NDEI group were contacted by phone and interviews were arranged. In the course of each interview, the subject was asked to fill out the reincarnation beliefs questionnaire. Because the NDEI group's mean reincarnation beliefs score did not differ significantly from that of the NDEr questionnaire only group ($t=1.62$, $df=13$; $p < 0.2$), these two groups were combined for the purpose of questionnaire analysis, and are referred to as the NDEr group.

Each subject was then assigned a reincarnation belief score from -32 to +32 by subtracting the sum of their responses against reincarnation from the sum of their responses that were pro-reincarnation. A score of +32 meant that the subject had responded with a +2 to all of the statements considered favorable toward the idea of reincarnation and with a -2 to all of the statements considered unfavorable to the idea and thus constitutes a perfect pro-reincarnation score. A -32 constitutes a perfect score in the other direction. A constant of +32 was then added to each subject's raw score, resulting in scores ranging from 0 to 64.

Analysis

A one-way analysis of variance including Scheffe's post-hoc test was performed on the questionnaire data in addition to a chi-squared test. The interviews were analyzed to answer these questions: How do near-death experiencers feel about reincarnation? Were there any commonalities among their beliefs? Have their beliefs changed since their experience? And if so, what factors led to these changes—was it the experience itself or life changes that took place following the experience? The last two questions of the interview directly addressed this issue.

Results

Questionnaire Data

The mean reincarnation belief score for the NDErs was 46.19; for the NDE interest group the mean was 46.94; and for the non-interest control the mean was 33.09.

An analysis of variance revealed that there was a significant difference among the reincarnation belief scores of the three groups ($F=9.79$; $df=2, 109$; $p<.01$). Further statistical analysis with Scheffe's post-hoc test indicated that no significant difference existed between the reincarnation belief scores of the NDErs and the NDE interest group ($F=0.03$; $df=2, 109$). However, a significant difference was found between the scores of the non-interest control group and both the near-death experience and the near-death interest groups ($F=7.60$; $df=2, 109$; $p<.01$ and $F=7.67$; $df=2, 109$; $p<.01$ respectively).

The range of possible scores from 0 to 64 was divided into thirds, with scores from 0 to 21 representing strong belief that reincarnation does not occur, scores from 22 to 42 representing neutral beliefs, and scores from 43 to 64 representing strong belief in reincarnation. Table 1 shows a breakdown of scores of the three study groups into these three categories. Seventy percent of these NDErs and 71 percent of the NDE interest group indicated a strong belief in reincarnation, while only 30 percent of the control group did so.

A chi-squared test of these data revealed that the reincarnation belief scores for the NDE group and the NDE interest group were significantly more positive than that of the non-interest control group, whose scores tended to fall in the neutral region (chi-squared=78.15;

df=4; $p < .005$). Percentages of subjects in each group who expressed agreement with each statement are listed in Table 2.

Interview Data

NDErs' Belief in Reincarnation. A review of my interview data revealed that 13 of the 14 NDErs either believed in reincarnation or were at least open to the idea. Seven of the NDErs I interviewed did not believe in reincarnation before their experience, but did believe in it afterwards. Four individuals did not believe in reincarnation before their NDE or afterwards. However, although these respondents did not definitely believe in reincarnation, they were at least open to the possibility. Two individuals had considered reincarnation prior to their NDE, but the experience led them to change the way they looked at it; one subject now believed in reincarnation on more of a collective level rather than as an individual process, and the other came to think about reincarnation more seriously and consider it more in depth following his experience. One subject did not believe in reincarnation before her NDE, and the experience had no effect on her views.

No strong common pattern of beliefs about the process or purpose of reincarnation surfaced in my interviews. However, a few commonalities were seen in some of the respondents' answers. No one claimed

Table 1
Belief in reincarnation of NDErs, NDE interest group,
and control group

	<i>NDErs</i> (<i>N</i> =43)	<i>Interest</i> <i>group</i> (<i>N</i> =34)	<i>Control</i> <i>group</i> (<i>N</i> =30)	<i>Total</i> (<i>N</i> =107)
Strong belief in reincarnation (score = 43-64)	30	24	9	63
Neutral belief (score = 22-42)	8	9	15	32
Strong belief that reincarnation does not occur (score = 0-21)	5	1	6	12

Table 2
Percentage of subjects agreeing with each statement on reincarnation belief questionnaire

<i>Questionnaire statement</i>	<i>NDErs (N=43)</i>	<i>Interest Group (N=34)</i>	<i>Control group (N=30)</i>
1. The idea that we live more than once in a physical body makes a great deal of sense to me.	70	71	50
2. Persons who claim to remember past lives are really just fantasizing.	16	9	33
3. The experience of meeting someone for the first time yet feeling that you have "known them before" may well be explained by having known that person in a past life.	74	65	37
4. Lessons that we do not learn in this life will carry over into the next.	65	76	37
5. The doctrine of reincarnation may be comforting to some, but there is no good evidence for it.	23	12	50
6. We only live once.	16	9	40
7. All things are cyclic—therefore, reincarnation is a plausible doctrine when it comes to human life.	33	74	53
8. The idea of reincarnation is just wishful thinking.	7	9	27
9. Certain exceptional talents, such as those of musical prodigy, are probably carryovers from a past life.	53	68	30
10. Reincarnation is just plain bunk.	14	3	20

Table 2 Continued

Questionnaire statement	NDErs (N=43)	Interest Group (N=34)	Control group (N=30)
11. There is a lot of evidence for reincarnation, such as very young children being able to report accurately events of a past life which they couldn't have know about by normal means.	72	82	43
12. When persons claim to remember a past life under hypnosis, it is more likely to be merely the result of their imagination or perhaps something that they read about long ago but have forgotten.	9	12	43
13. Reincarnation makes sense to me because it helps to explain life's injustices.	40	56	23
14. It is no more remarkable that we live more than once than that we live at all.	70	68	57
15. Experiences suggesting reincarnation do occur, but they are likely to have conventional explanations when examined closely.	16	24	57
16. The notion of karma—that one's actions in this life affect one's future lives—is hard to swallow in a modern age like ours.	12	21	47

to have gained any direct understanding of the nature or process of reincarnation during his or her NDE. Three of the 14 respondents, however, claimed a "sense" or "perception" during their experience of having lived before. Only one respondent claimed to have had a past-lives review, in which she re-experienced events from a past life, during an NDE.

The Nature of Reincarnation. In response to the question about the general process of reincarnation, four respondents mentioned one consciousness separating into individual souls to be embodied in matter. One respondent took this idea further, to state that reincarnation takes place more on a collective rather than an individual level. In other words, she felt that a collective energy recycles itself through matter and that our sense of individuality is a product of our present incarnation only. One respondent believed that a higher power created a finite number of individual souls, some of which then are placed in human embodiments in order to learn lessons.

A strong minority of respondents, six of 14, saw individual choice as the initiating force behind the reincarnation process. Three other individuals mentioned karmic patterns or ties to other souls as influencing the reincarnation process.

Eight of 14 subjects mentioned learning or enlightenment as the main purpose underlying reincarnation. One respondent said, "The spirit needs to embody itself in matter to experience it and learn. There are karmic patterns to learn lessons and to work spirit in matter." Another commented, "Life itself is a series of learnings. The lessons are universal, the two most important being truth and forgiveness."

Ten of 14 interviewees believed it is possible to remember past lives, while two remained unsure and one saw claims of past life remembrances as most likely the result of fantasy.

Eleven of 14 subjects believed in the concept of karma or at least were open to it. Five of the 11, however, qualified their affirmation with further explanation of their beliefs:

Yes, but not in that sense. We progress at our own rate to reach the light. If you do things that take you away from the light, then you are perpetuating your time here.

[I] don't believe in karma as some people do—that it is pre-destiny. We have karma but we can change it.

Karma is misunderstood; it's not just negative. Everything is karma, even thoughts.

Consequences carry over to some degree, but the emphasis is not so much on the physical act, but more on what is going on inside.

Definitely, but there are no rights or wrongs—it just is. We all have light and dark and we need to balance them out.

When asked what goes on during the period between incarnations, seven subjects mentioned learning as the main activity of the soul. Four mentioned resting, rejuvenation, and/or connecting with God, and one subject indicated that individuals are involved in setting up the circumstances of their next life during this time. When asked if one's personal awareness and sense of personal identity remained intact in the afterlife realm and for how long, two subjects answered affirmatively, one believing that the personality would continue forever and the other unsure as to how long this sense of "self" would remain.

The majority of respondents, however, eight out of 14, gave more qualified endorsements of this proposition. Here are three examples of their responses:

Not intact. The inner quality is there, the inner self remains, but the external aspect that may have seemed very strong is dissolved.

Individuality wasn't the same there. I was the same as everybody and everybody was me.

Your spirit is always you. You are not the personality that you are on earth. In the other realm you are everything, light is everything.

Finally, eight of the 14 respondents said that they felt the cycle of reincarnation would eventually come to an end. They indicated that at this point there would be existence as pure spiritual being and/or a merging with God. One respondent said, "Then you exist as pure spiritual form, as a pure spiritual being." Another responded, "You become an integral part of God. When everyone reaches that point it is nirvana." Two of 14 subjects indicated that the cycle of reincarnation would probably come to an end for earthly embodiments, but that one would continue to incarnate into other realms or dimensions.

Factors Underlying the Shift Toward Belief in Reincarnation. A more definite pattern emerged in the subjects' responses to the question about which factors led to the change in their reincarnation beliefs. Three causes for changes in beliefs in a direction favorable to reincarnation were mentioned.

One cause for this belief shift, for which I found only limited evidence in this study, is direct knowledge imparted during the NDE itself. Three of my 14 interview subjects claimed to have a "sense" that they had lived before during their NDE. For two of my subjects this factor would qualify as the main event influencing their reincarnation beliefs. One subject, however, had several NDEs and also exhibited a significant psychic awakening, involving direct information concerning reincarnation, following her experiences. She claimed to have had a past-lives review during one NDE, but did not indicate which one. Therefore, I do not know which came first: the direct reincarnation knowledge through her psychic awakening, or the past-lives review. Thus, I do not know for certain which was the influencing factor in her belief shift. However, because her post-NDE experiences were so many, so extensive, and obviously so influential in her beliefs, it is more likely these experiences, rather than her NDE past-lives review, that shaped her beliefs, and she is consequently categorized as such.

The second cause for the reincarnation shift was found in events taking place after the NDEs' experience that seemed to be part of a general psychic awakening. This general psychic awakening has been documented by other researchers as well (Greyson, 1983; Ring, 1985). Ring presented this idea as his "spiritual catalyst" hypothesis, which implies that NDEs tend to lead to psychic development. For five of the 14 subjects in this study it was this psychic awakening following their NDE, rather than the experience itself, that provided them with direct knowledge of reincarnation. One subject explained:

Before any of these events, I call mine kind of a two-part event, because I had the NDE in 1979, and then another car accident in 1985 that brought about what I call a kundalini awakening, which is similar to an NDE without the death part of the physical body. So, what happened to me is, before either of these experiences happened I didn't believe in reincarnation at all. . . . After these experiences what one of the things that happened to me was I started getting memories of my own past lives. A lot of times just spontaneously something would trigger it and I'd get this memory, and I see visions, and then I started getting them of other people's lives.

Two other experiencers noted similar phenomena:

This didn't come about from the experience but afterwards, since then. [I've received] messages, my brother-in-law [deceased] had a message . . . that his soul would be reincarnated into my sister's son.

I had ongoing experiences after the near-death experience. In that after process I experienced souls. On one occasion it's like I followed a soul, went through a process with a soul, in how they were reborn, how it came about that they were reborn.

Finally, as the third source of the reincarnation belief shift, the NDE opened the individual up to greater possibilities in his or her perception of reality. It made them more willing to explore a wider range of spiritual possibilities, including reincarnation. This exploration was manifest in the form of reading, discussions with others, and personal reflection. Six of my 14 subjects fell into this category. One respondent said of her NDE: "It opened up a dimension that I never really knew existed." Another commented: "It [his NDE] didn't help me conclude anything, it just threw the doors of possibility wide open." Still another said:

I didn't even know what reincarnation was before I had an NDE. It was afterwards that I was led to find out what it was. Some of the things I'm telling you [about reincarnation] came out in other conversations and some in the reading that I've done, and some just thoughts I've had. And it made total sense to me.

And finally one woman I interviewed said:

[I] hadn't given it [reincarnation] much thought before that [her NDE]. I was brought up in a fairly conventional religion—Catholicism. I was not a particularly practicing Catholic at the time, but more or less hadn't explored much Eastern philosophy. After the experience, I did. I read a great deal of different philosophies, not just Eastern, but all of them, and found that it [reincarnation] was plausible.

Discussion

In this study, 70 percent of the sample of NDErs demonstrated belief in reincarnation. In contrast, a Gallup Poll (Gallup and Proctor, 1982) found that only 23 percent of the general population endorse this belief, while 30 percent of my control group held views favorable to reincarnation. These data confirm the findings of earlier studies with respect to

NDErs' reincarnation beliefs. While I found that the near-death experiencer group exhibited a significantly greater tendency toward belief in reincarnation than my general public sample, I also found that my NDE interest group exhibited beliefs that did not differ significantly from those of the NDErs. These data are consistent with the hypothesis that there is nothing inherent in the near-death experience itself that causes the shift in experiencers' beliefs about reincarnation.

Additionally, my data failed to reveal any consistent pattern among NDErs' beliefs about the purpose or process of reincarnation. There were, as I already noted, many similarities, but no one "truth" emerged. Furthermore, the beliefs expressed by the NDErs in my study are not unique; they tended to follow the standard view of reincarnation as expressed in much of the New Age literature. By way of example, the following excerpts taken from Irving S. Cooper's book, *Reincarnation: A Hope of the World* (1979), are representative of this view and are quite similar to many of the statements made by my NDEI sample:

The chief purpose of reincarnation is education. To this end we are born again and again on earth, not because of any external pressure, but because we, as souls, desire to grow. (p. 14)

It is a universal process, and prevails not only in the human kingdom but throughout the whole of nature. Whenever we find a living form, the consciousness of that form is also evolving, using temporarily for that purpose the physical form in order that it may gain physical experience. (p. 19)

In each incarnation we have a different physical body, a different name, and may have different souls acting as parents, but these changes do not in the slightest imperil our individuality. (p. 24)

Reincarnation is not an endless process, and when we have learned the lessons taught in the World-School we return no more to physical incarnation unless we come back of our own accord to act as Teachers of humanity or as Helpers in the glorious plan of evolution. (p. 47)

With respect to the question of what in fact underlies the reincarnation belief shift, I can offer three possibilities suggested by my data, but which would require further research to verify. First, in some cases, it does seem to be the NDE itself that influences one's reincarnation views. Although I did not find extensive evidence for this in my study, it has been documented by other researchers (Morse and Perry, 1992; Ring, 1985). In those cases, individuals claimed to have received direct

knowledge of reincarnation during the NDE itself. An example of this type of knowledge can be seen in a letter written to Ring by John Robinson:

It is a matter of personal knowledge from what the Being with whom I spoke during my NDE told me about my older son, that he had had 14 incarnations in female physical bodies previous to the life he has just had.

Ring has also heard testimony of this kind of direct knowledge in some of his interviews. One NDEr, whose account is recorded in Ring's audiotape archives, commented:

My whole life went before me of things I have done and haven't done, but not just of this one lifetime, but of all the lifetimes. I know for a fact there is reincarnation. This is an absolute. I was shown all those lives and how I had overcome some of the things I had done in other lives. There was still some things to be corrected.

Another NDEr whose testimony is included in Ring's audiotape archives gave this account:

I had a lot of questions, and I wanted to know what they [light beings she encountered in her NDE] were doing—why are you just kind of milling around here? And someone stepped forward . . . it wasn't just one . . . I got information from a number of them . . . that they were all waiting for reincarnation.

Additionally, in a case documented by Melvin Morse, a girl who had her NDE when she nearly drowned at the age of 7 reported seeing during her experience two adults waiting to be reborn (Morse, 1983).

Second, some NDErs may gain direct knowledge of reincarnation through other psychic or mystical experiences following their NDE. In this way, the NDE becomes a catalyst for openness to reincarnation through its ability to propel the experiencer into a general psychic awakening.

Finally, for other NDErs their experience serves mainly to spark their interest in various "New Age" phenomena that leads to often extensive outside reading and research. It makes sense that when one becomes open to the idea of life after death, the idea of life after life becomes much more plausible.

The fact that my NDE interest group exhibited reincarnation belief scores so similar to those of my NDE sample can be explained by two hypotheses. First, it is possible that some of my NDE interest subjects may have gained direct knowledge of reincarnation through other psychic or mystical experiences even though they have not had an NDE. Second, my NDE interest group may be very similar to those in my NDE sample who were prompted to explore "New Age" material following their experience. Both groups became interested in the near-death phenomenon, one group through direct experience and the other through unspecified means, and thus were led to explore the concept of reincarnation. My study is limited by the fact that I have no data on the factors influencing the beliefs of the subjects in the NDE interest group.

Future research would be well directed towards determining what it is about an interest in near-death experiences that promotes an openness to reincarnation, or if in fact both the interest in NDEs and openness to reincarnation are the result of some other factor or occurrence. Using a larger, more randomly assigned subject pool would also help to strengthen the findings.

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Appendix

Interview schedule for NDE and Reincarnation Study

In this interview, I'd like to ask you some questions about your beliefs concerning reincarnation—the idea that we live more than one life in a physical body.

First, however, I'd like to ask you whether your own near-death experience gave you any insights into this matter of reincarnation. Did anything in your NDE itself touch on this question, and if so, what exactly was it? [Pause for answer]

Some people say that during their NDE they had a "life review" in which various events of their life are seen again, usually in a very vivid way. A few people, however, say that they seem to see events from their "past lives" as well. Did this kind of "past lives" review happen to you during your NDE? [If yes, as respondent to elaborate]

Sometimes people say that during their NDE they were given a kind of direct understanding of the general process of reincarnation. Did anything like this happen to you during your NDE? [If yes, ask respondent to elaborate]

Occasionally, near-death experiencers report that during their NDE they appeared to see "souls waiting to be reborn". Did you glimpse anything like this? [If yes, ask respondent to elaborate]

OK, in this next part of the interview, I'd like to ask you some questions having to do with your views about reincarnation. If you yourself believe in reincarnation, or are inclined to, or are even open to the possibility that reincarnation might be true, I have one set of questions I'd like to ask you. If, however, you do not believe in reincarnation or have never given much thought to it, then I have another set for you. Which set of questions would be appropriate for you? [Wait for

respondent to clarify his/her status. If respondent is not a believer in reincarnation or hasn't thought about it, give him/her the Reincarnation Questionnaire to fill out. In that case, simply wait for that to be done before concluding the interview by asking respondent the last set of questions concerning changes in his/her views about reincarnation since his/her NDE]

[Interview continues thus for respondents who are open to or believe in reincarnation]

My first question is a very general one: (1) In your view, what is the process of reincarnation? In short, how does it work? [For this and all questions that follow in this series, allow plenty of time for respondent to elaborate, and encourage further elaboration if necessary]

(2) What initiates the process that leads the individual to reincarnate into another body?

(3) Does the individual have a choice about whether to reincarnate? If so, what factors affect that choice? Does anyone outside the individual guide the individual here?

(4) Why does a person reincarnate? That is, is there a general purpose that underlies reincarnation? Or does it differ from individual to individual?

(5) In your view, does an individual about to reincarnate choose his/her parents, the general circumstances of his/her life, etc., or is that determined by factors outside the person's own control?

(6) When does the person's soul enter the body? Does this vary?

(7) Once "in", can the soul occasionally "go out" again at or around the time of birth?

(8) Some people claim to be able to remember past lives. Do you think this is possible?

(9) Do you believe in the concept of karma—the idea that whatever we do has consequences, and that these consequences can carry over from one life to another? [If yes, then:] How does this tie in for you with the concept of reincarnation?

(10) When you die, what in general terms do you think happens afterward?

(11) If there is a period between lives, what goes on during that interval?

(12) Do you think that there is any kind of a "life review and assessment" during this interval? [If so, then:] How is it related, if at all, to one's eventual next life?

(13) Does the individual's personal awareness and sense of personal identity remain intact in the afterlife realm? For how long?

(14) What happens to that personality after the individual begins the process of reincarnation? Does it in some sense continue to exist or does it simply cease as an independent entity?

(15) Does the cycle of reincarnation for a given individual ever come to an end? [If yes, then:] What brings it to an end? What happens to the individual then?

Thank you for taking the time to answer all these questions of mine. Before we conclude this interview, though, I have just a few more things to ask you about reincarnation.

The first is very straightforward and won't take you long. I have a brief questionnaire that I'd like you to fill out for me now. It simply lists a series of statements about reincarnation and asks you merely to indicate whether you agree or disagree with these statements. It will just take a few more minutes of your time. [Give respondent questionnaire, and wait for him/her to finish]

My last set of questions—and there are just a few of them—have to do with some of the factors that may have shaped your beliefs about reincarnation. [These questions are to be asked of both the believers in reincarnation and those who indicated at the beginning of the interview that they did not believe in reincarnation or hadn't thought about it]

First, have your views about reincarnation changed since your NDE? [If yes, then:] How so, and what brought about these changes? Do you think it was the experience itself or was it the result of life changes after the experience? For example, new religions you may have explored, groups you've joined, workshops you've taken, books you've read, etc.? [Have respondent elaborate freely, and follow up to clarify the sources which have influenced the respondent's beliefs and understanding about reincarnation]

Well, that concludes my interview, [respondent's name]. Thank you so much again for taking the time to answer my questions so thoughtfully. Now, can I answer any questions for you about my project? [Engage the respondent as much as he/she would care to concerning the research, what has been learned so far, etc.]

Death and Renewal in *The Velveteen Rabbit*: A Sociological Reading

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ABSTRACT: This article provides a sociological interpretation of *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Williams, 1922) critical of recent materialist and psychoanalytic readings. I argue that this children's story exemplifies the use of a non-materialist idea of death to suggest other themes about love and life, and discuss implications for near-death research.

Stories about personal survival over death attract interesting reactions in academic circles. But despite the widespread curiosity that those tales elicit, the predictability of the explanation often generated must impress even the most casual observer. From a diversity of disciplinary sources, from anthropology to semiotics to psychiatry, the epistemological assumptions that drive many of those explanations have a remarkable sameness to them. To cite a representative view, Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (1982) argued that the themes of rebirth and tales of the afterlife in the context of death "deny the finality of death."

That materialist claim concerning the "finality" of death is assumed to be, and is so often presented as, a culturally neutral one. Consequently, those who resist the claim or who choose to believe otherwise are viewed as "religionists" of one persuasion or another or, alternatively, as troubled psyches. If religion or ignorance is not the explanation for this deviance, then a theory of unconscious defense mechanism such as denial or wish fulfillment can provide another explanation (Lorimer, 1990). The effect of this style of academic discourse is the lasting impression of an academy unable to free itself

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from its nineteenth-century reaction to religious ideas. Nowhere is this psychoanalyzing tendency more clearly evident today than in social and literary explanations of death and loss in children's stories, as for example in the writings of Bruno Bettelheim (1978) and Margaret and Michael Rustin (1987).

My goal in this essay is to provide an alternative reading to a children's story that celebrates images of death and incorporate ideas of renewal. I have chosen *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Williams, 1922) as my case example for two reasons. First, this story contains a famous portrayal of these themes of death and renewal, and interestingly, the actual images described are strikingly similar to the near-death experience. Second, the academic story of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, a recent development that includes attempts by some critics to substitute psychoanalysis for narrative analysis, raises certain implications for near-death studies that are worth closer scrutiny. The purpose behind this goal is to demonstrate that ideas about death which encompass personal survival are not better understood when analyzed in terms of psychoanalytic defense theory. Indeed, the habitual application of this framework to all manner of death imagery becomes a reductionist practice that restricts rather than enhances our understanding of different cultural meanings of death.

The Velveteen Rabbit has attracted its share of psychoanalysis for its refusal to acknowledge "the finality of death": the rabbit's death scene fails to result in the obliteration of the rabbit's life. The fact that the rabbit's death does not conform to the materialist view of death led critic Steven Daniels (1990) to complain the *The Velveteen Rabbit's* image of death is "phoney," and prompted him to channel the analysis into a study of the psychodynamics of defense, motive, and symbol. I argue that this approach is both unnecessary and decontextualizing.

The theme of renewal and survival in the face of death is a necessary narrative device for the support it gives to more important themes, at least for young readers. These broader themes speak to the mutual interdependence of relationships and the triumph of love in the face of change and transformation in life, particularly in the context of growing up.

In support of this argument I organize the paper along the following lines. First I will provide a brief summary of the story of *The Velveteen Rabbit*. This will be followed by a discussion of the recent critical concern over its images of death and renewal. I will then provide an alternative reading of the images and will argue that this interpretation is consistent and more in keeping with the spirit and values of the narra-

tive as a whole. The final part of the essay will sketch some implications of this exercise for other interest areas within near-death studies.

The Story of *The Velveteen Rabbit*

The Velveteen Rabbit appeared in 1922 under the pen of Margery Williams. Accompanied by the charming lithographs of William Nicholson, *The Velveteen Rabbit* quickly assumed the status of a children's story classic (Stott, 1984). In 1971 it was the winner of the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award and in the 1980s when the copyright ran out in the United States, several new editions with different illustrations appeared (Weales, 1983). Its popularity was so great at one time that one reviewer described it as having "become a cult in the United States" (Fisher, 1971), noting that parts of the book were regularly quoted in sermons.

In this simple story written for children between the ages of 5 to 9, the Velveteen Rabbit begins his life in the story as a gift inside a boy's Christmas stocking. After the initial excitement of receiving the rabbit, the Boy moves his interest to other toys found among the chaos of the Christmas paraphernalia. For a long time after that first day the Rabbit lives forgotten, with other neglected toys, in either the toy cupboard or on the nursery floor.

He is befriended by an old Skin Horse. Deep into the long, silent nights the Skin Horse and the Velveteen Rabbit hold long conversations. The most critical discussion, from the story's point of view, is the following oft quoted exchange:

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse.

"You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand." (Williams, 1922, pp. 16-17)

Not long after this exchange, the Boy takes the Velveteen Rabbit to bed with him after being unable to locate his regular toy companion. From then onwards, the story follows the growing relationship and mutual attachment of the Boy and his Rabbit through the various seasons of their friendship. Throughout this narrative the story is told from the Rabbit's point of view. On three further occasions the question of what is real emerges in one way or another in the story.

On the first of these occasions the Boy is unable to retire to bed without the Rabbit, which is accidentally left on the lawn outside. On returning the Rabbit to the Boy, Nana expresses her incredulity at "all that fuss" over a toy, to which the Boy retorts, "You mustn't say that. He isn't a toy. He's REAL!" (p. 24).

On the second occasion, the Rabbit is propped up in the garden somewhere and is visited by two wild rabbits. They are at first curious, and quietly and cautiously move closer to the Velveteen Rabbit to inspect him. Then follows a series of exchanges between the wild rabbits and the Velveteen Rabbit. The conversation ends when one of the wild rabbits comments, "He doesn't smell right! . . . He isn't a rabbit at all! He isn't real!" (p. 30).

In the final part of the story, the Boy is stricken with scarlet fever for many weeks and is bedridden with the Rabbit by his side. When he is finally well enough to leave his bed, the doctor and Nana conspire to dispose of the Rabbit because now this toy was "a mass of scarlet fever germs!" (p. 34). The Velveteen Rabbit is replaced with a new rabbit toy but the story of the Velveteen Rabbit does not end here. The Velveteen Rabbit is stuffed into a sack by the garden shed in preparation to be burned. That night, alone and in grief, the Rabbit reviews all the good times he had with the Boy. At this point the final question concerning the nature of real is asked:

"Of what use was it to be loved and lose one's beauty and become Real if it all ended like this? And a tear, a real tear, trickled down his shabby velvet nose and fell to the ground" (p. 37).

From the spot where the tear fell grows a flower, and inside that flower appears a being of gold and pearl perfection, the nursery Magic Fairy. This Fairy takes care of all the playthings that have been loved but are no longer needed by children. The Velveteen Rabbit is transformed into a wild rabbit and is taken to Rabbitland to join all the other wild rabbits "to live . . . for ever and ever" (p. 40).

Critics' Responses to the Book

The above ending has been the focus of some very disappointed criticism, mainly from Faith McNulty (1982) and Gerald Weales (1983). McNulty (1982) described the message conveyed by this ending as "sad," "sleazy," and "false as a three dollar bill." McNulty criticized the story for not providing ideas about positive ways of meeting the "tragedy of lost love and betrayal (without) letting the heart break" (p. 180).

Continuing in this vein Weales (1983) wondered why the Rabbit's magical reward did not extend to his old friend the Skin Horse, a point also noted by Daniels (1990) and described as an "inconsistency." Weales also regarded the ending as a transformation brought about by self-pity rather than the power of love. Daniels (1990), pondering these complaints, offered psychoanalysis, "in particular Melanie Klein's theories," as a way of "confronting the question at the heart of the story" (pp. 17-18). The question Daniels argued to be at the heart of the story is ironically the last one described at the end of the story: "Of what use was it to be loved . . . and become Real if it all ended like this?" By focusing on this as the central question of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, Daniels was able to argue that the story is about the "ambivalence toward separation," a burden resolved only through "idealization." Idealization in the form of the Fairy is viewed as a defense mechanism, one way of resolving "the persecutory anxiety involved in feeling oneself abandoned by the all-important person" (p. 27). The story of *The Velveteen Rabbit* was argued by Daniels to be an analogy for the inner life of infants or children. Furthermore, he argued that the Kleinian interpretation is a "standard against which the question it poses can be best understood" (p. 27).

There are several problems with these views. To begin with Daniels's final comment, there are no definitive standards in the semiotic arts

save those agreed to by consenting like-minded readers. As Ann Game (1991, p. 5) argued, textual analysis should not be understood as simply "representation but as itself a writing or discursive practice." In other words, interpretations can be seen as another way of reading or telling the story and these are subject to the particular cultural characteristics of audience and readership.

The Kleinian interpretation is rather esoteric as a reading and therefore may not resonate with audiences outside psychoanalytic circles. This does not of course invalidate the interpretation, but it does suggest that the matter of which frameworks are best able to understand the central question of the story might still be yet to be settled. There are two further reasons for suggesting this.

First, the psychoanalytic reading does not identify or explore simpler social and moral themes, even if only to connect these themes to the defensive ones of a Kleinian interpretation. And yet these simpler social themes may be more accessible to the emotional sensibilities of young readers. In this way these themes may be more influential in the receiving and shaping of the inner thoughts and feelings of young readers.

Second, the question that Daniels argued to be at the "heart" of the story is, I believe, not the central one at all. On the contrary, the question asked by the Rabbit during that dark night in a sack should be seen in a support role to the story's overall theme. If seen in that context, the story is also not about the "ambivalence of separation." These points tend to erode the credibility and therefore the persuasive power of a psychoanalytic interpretation of death and renewal in the story of *The Velveteen Rabbit*. In support of these observations I will first discuss what I believe to be the central question of the story. I will then move on to identify how the Rabbit's death scene continues and extends the main theme and, in the context of that discussion, will address the other concerns of McNulty (1982) and Weales (1983).

A Sociological Reading

The Central Question of the Story

The central question of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, around which both the plot and the recurring symbols revolve, is "What is real?" This question causes the only prolonged verbal exchange in the book, between the Velveteen Rabbit and the old Skin Horse. Furthermore, this question is further developed in exchanges between Nana and the Boy, the wild

rabbits and the Velveteen Rabbit, and, of course, in the scene toward the end between the Rabbit and the nursery Magic Fairy.

In the first major treatment of this question, the Skin Horse is careful to point out to the Rabbit that "real" has nothing to do with having "proper insides." It is not therefore an issue of biological or mechanical authenticity. It is not about composition, make-up, or even pedigree in any absolute and reductionist sense. Rather real is "What happens to you," in other words, how you are changed by interaction with others. It is the perceived enjoyment and exchange of affections, the wear and tear, literally, of social interaction that sets in place the process of change. Real is actually a social and physical process of change that can transform a toy into a friend, from simple object to a prized play relation. And as that friendship develops the material wear on those toys becomes the measure of a toy's social value.

This idea of real as the social construction of identity through friendship is further developed in the exchange between Nana and the Boy. When the Boy asks Nana to refrain from referring to the Rabbit as simply a toy and vehemently asserts its real-ness, he is reaffirming this social relationship between two social identities, himself and the Rabbit. Real means "loved" or "precious." It means "real to me and for my purposes." The Boy's relationship with the Rabbit fulfills all the vital functions of friendship and is therefore for all intents and purposes real, that is, socially real.

The Boy's reality then, is a social reality defined by attachment. This is a bond cemented and maintained by the shared experiences of companionship, a companionship believed to be reciprocal. Besides this reality, the material reality of the world is not reality at all, at least not for the boy.

The Gardens of Play are stages, and the wild rabbits are part of that stage as props and scene pieces, but they do not constitute the real action, which follows the Boy's ideas in a social world that the Boy creates. Part of the exchange with the wild rabbits about what is real is revealing here:

"Why don't you get up and play with us?" one of them asked.

"I don't feel like it," said the Rabbit, for he didn't want to explain that he had no clockwork.

"Ho!" said the furry rabbit. "It's as easy as anything." And he gave a big hop sideways and stood on his hind legs.

"I don't believe you can!" he said.

"I can!" said the little Rabbit, "I can jump higher than anything!" He meant when the Boy threw him, but of course he didn't want to say so. (pp. 28-29)

These wild rabbits appear to be a major contrast to the social reality of the Velveteen Rabbit until one realizes that, their biological appearance notwithstanding, these rabbits talk. The poetic license taken in this respect further highlights that the world of the Boy and his Rabbit is a socially constructed world in every major respect. This is not an ontologically inferior world, because like our own empirical world, the material is necessary—but not the authoritative blocks with which we build our meanings. Furthermore, the subtle emphasis on the social nature of things becomes an increasingly important perspective, which is developed to complement and support the story's unfolding theme.

The final exchange concerning the nature of what is real is between the Fairy and the Rabbit. The Velveteen Rabbit was real to the Boy but now would be made "real to everyone." But did the Fairy mean real as the biologically real wild rabbits, or real as in the Boy's and Skin Horse's meaning? Initially the evidence appears conflicting.

On the one hand, Rabbitland seems to be the place where all the wild rabbits live and play. The actual final scene describes the Velveteen Rabbit, now a wild rabbit, visiting the Boy from a distance. They exchange looks in this final scene and the Boy, just for a moment, is reminded of his old Velveteen Rabbit from the markings on the real rabbit he sees.

On the other hand, the Velveteen Rabbit is meant "to live . . . for ever and ever" with them. If they are biologically real wild rabbits, "for ever and ever" amounts to about eighteen months (Lockley, 1965). This hardly amounts to immortality. This suggests that "Rabbitland" has similar features to an actual biological rabbit culture, but in fact departing from it in important ways. Similar to the Spiritualist's Summerland, then, here is a transformation of some aspects of shape and function but preservation, or at least remnant persistence, of others.

Once again, then, the physical shape and form of things play only a minor role in the social construction of their meaning and value for all the participants. Far more important are the processes of identity construction and transformation derived from love than the substance of any single event, such as hurt, death, discomfort, or inherited characteristic, such as polished eyes or shiny fur. The Fairy's attitude to what

is real, then, seems consistent with those asserted by the Boy and the Skin Horse earlier in the story, and also in the spirit of the images of biologically real rabbits that talk. The Velveteen Rabbit becomes "real to everyone" only insofar as the wild rabbits themselves are understood to be real in Williams's sociable, chatty, but anthropomorphic portrayal. More than this, though, the Velveteen Rabbit will also become socially real to the readers and listeners of the story. When boys and girls encounter biologically real rabbits in the future, each may ask: whose rabbit do I see before me now? Which boy or girl has made this rabbit real? The relationship between animals and children is no longer viewed merely in biological terms but more importantly in social ones. And so it is in the pursuit of the question "What is real?" in each of these major scenes that the main narrative energies are absorbed and dedicated.

The death scene is the final dramatic and supporting contribution to this question of what is real. This scene amounts to a tale of personal survival and rebirth for the Rabbit. Death in this story is not presented as the final triumph of loss and despair over attachment and love, but rather the final evidence that loss and despair are unable to surmount what was not theirs to surmount in the first place. In this respect the narrative reality of *The Velveteen Rabbit* is not the triumph of a materialist theory of existence, which exemplifies the inevitable competitive edge death has over all life (Freud, 1961). And perhaps it is this departure from conventional psychoanalytic wisdom that attracts so much suspicion and disappointment from those so inclined.

Instead, Williams's message is for children *not* to be seduced by the confusing and irregular appearance of love and loss in life. They are encouraged to realize that love and loss are constant riding companions in the rough and tumble of life's unpredictable splendor. It is not loss that is triumphant but rather the love that can emerge from, and triumph over, the complex and unpredictable nature of life's changing fortunes.

For example, at the beginning of the story we witness the attachment between the Boy and the Rabbit on Christmas morning. Loss follows some hours after as the Boy's interests move on to other toys. This absence lasts a long time and leads to the friendship between the Rabbit and the old Skin Horse. This friendship, in turn, ends when the next period of attachment begins with the Boy. The initiative gained by this attachment is the centerpiece of the story itself and is overtaken by loss only after the scarlet fever incident. At this point, the death or separation scene toward the end of the story should now, in this con-

text, be read not as "idealization" or "denial" but as a narrative device. But this device does not support some simple biological conception of life that, as I have argued above, is never shared by the main players anyway. Rather a concept is developed of an existence where change and transformation are paramount and integral to both the story and, indeed, life itself.

The story in general then impels its young readers and listeners to treat all their toys as socially real and to care for them. The story's images suggest that toys are dependent and vulnerable creatures—like children themselves. The toys eventually change to become almost unrecognizable from their original selves—again, like growing children themselves. The exhortation is to care for each other, to show kindness and affection, until that time when everyone becomes real. Children become socially real when they grow up to be adults and toy rabbits become real when they lose their shape and are no longer required as playthings.

The comparatively complex idea that becomes essential to convey to young readers at this point is the intrinsic and inevitable involvement of everyone in this process. Love, and the care and kindness that are its hallmarks, do not guard against loss and death. Love paradoxically creates these other experiences. Without attachment it is loss that cannot exist, and without love it is death that has no dominion. This is why becoming "real" does not happen very often "to people who break easy, or who have sharp edges, and who have to be carefully kept."

The Continuing Theme

To convey this theme one final and impressive time, the Velveteen Rabbit undergoes a death that has remarkable similarities to our understanding of the near-death experience (NDE). Death begins with the final separation from the Boy. The Rabbit is stuffed into a dark sack, a symbol coincidentally used by Leo Tolstoy to convey the onset of death (Tolstoy, 1960). Re-emerging from that sack, the Velveteen Rabbit reviews his life and all his major social events and relationships. He then encounters a special being in the form of a Fairy and is taken to another place and another life. Here the world is both different and similar to his former world but a place where immortality reigns. Daniels (1990) and Weales (1983) before him implied that this is an ending not shared by the Skin Horse. However, there is no evidence to be found anywhere in the story that the Skin Horse was at the end of

its use. After all, the Skin Horse lived in the nursery with other toys, perhaps forgotten but not discarded. The Velveteen Rabbit, on the other hand, faced death by incineration the next morning. This eventuality was carefully created and described for the Rabbit's unique role in the story as the Boy's favorite toy.

The death narrative in the final part of the story continues the theme of the triumph of love in the face of the unpredictable nature of events. In that context, Williams's death scene is a device that supports her philosophy of life. (This is not a surprise given our knowledge of her family's tendency to move so frequently during her childhood [Ferris, 1952].) But Williams had not made the death scene thematically central. As a plot climax it has always played a support role to the social and poetic theme developed throughout the rest of the story. How does this death scene, highlighting the problem of loss, actually privilege the theme of love as developed by the story so far?

First, the feelings of loss experienced by the Rabbit are actually a consequence of his love for the Boy, a love that pines and despairs at the prospect of permanent separation. The appearance of the Fairy, in its turn, is actually a consequence of the Boy's love since, according to the Fairy's own account, she only takes "care of all the playthings that [children] have loved" (p. 38). Love, therefore, and particularly the fate of love when confronted by loss, is the concern that is privileged in the interaction between the Fairy and the Rabbit.

Second, both the Fairy and Rabbitland as images of death and renewal deliver an important message that celebrates the general theme of the book: that love can triumph over loss. Love does not diminish with change but can continue in transformed ways in spite of it. This is because both children and their toys live on as memories and dreams, the past a living social presence and influence on the present.

In this context Rabbitland demonstrates the importance of the *social* rather than material nature of love one more time. It continues the theme that love's heart does not miss a beat even if "most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in your joints and very shabby" (p. 17). In other words, neither age nor death, as material appearances that can deceive, should be permitted to define the limits of emotional and social attachment.

Finally, the portrayal of Rabbitland as an empirically real place has parallels with retelling NDE accounts. Carol Zaleski (1987) argued that such portrayals help listeners and readers connect future possibilities with present circumstances and actions in one's imagination. This facilitates the shaping of present priorities and attitudes, and this

is exactly the desire of many storytellers, including Williams. The existence of Rabbitland, then, is a narrative device that helps young readers understand through their imagination how love might cope in the context of loss.

The message that love is a social relationship where material conditions are not necessarily determining factors is a message first told by the Skin Horse in the nursery. And it is this message, in this final form, that makes the death scene after all a convincing narrative about the power of love and not, as Daniels (1990) argued, about separation.

This message encourages the development of a more sophisticated idea about relationships that can facilitate a personal ability to transcend loss. This is because, as Williams reminds us, love enables our attachments to stay on with us as living influences on our thoughts, feelings, and actions. This is no denial of death but rather a moving beyond it, a refusal to be defined and immobilized by it. Objects and experiences are personalized through the processes of attachment, and this in turn creates the intellectual and emotional reality of social life. The importance of this principle is echoed by Williams herself when she remarks that "It is through imagination that a child makes his most significant contacts with the world around him, that he learns tolerance, pity, understanding and the Love of all created beings" (quoted in Stott, 1984, p. 34).

It is true that the idea of loss has a presence, but it is neither the final nor the dominating theme of the story. This is because, as I have argued, its narrative context is the transforming power of love and its survival and even triumph in the face of personal and social change. McNulty (1982) was therefore incorrect when she complained that "the book gives no hint that there is any way to meet the tragedy of lost love and betrayal." To put the matter rather simply, no love was lost in the story of *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Furthermore, there was no betrayal either, certainly not from that "all important person," the Boy.

Although the Rabbit was discarded by the Boy's guardians and not, it should be well noted, by the Boy himself, the love between them continues on in both their subsequent lives and memories. Therefore the story's theme is not about the "ambivalence of separation" (Daniels, 1990) but rather the robust ability of love to transcend separation, even in death.

Nor is the final transformation of the rabbit brought about by "self-pity," as Weales asserted. Rather the author shows, and shows consistently, that the love between the Boy and his Rabbit does not simply

die with the material presence of one of them. This is not a case of out-of-sight and out-of-mind. Rabbitland is a "life after death" for the Rabbit, and this encourages young readers to entertain the social presence and influence of a relationship long after its material existence has come to an end.

Acknowledging the ongoing fertile influence of past relationships on the life of present ones is not an easy personal exercise for most adults, let alone children. The near-death imagery of the death scene facilitates an empathy for those social but invisible influences in all our lives. Far from being motivated by self-pity, the images of death and renewal are an inspired set of images drawn for a specific pedagogic purpose. This purpose is to provide effective and imaginative support for the story's final message, that real love continues even when the beloved is taken away.

And so continuing toward that end Williams wrote, using the seasonal language of the grieving heart:

Autumn passed and Winter, and in the Spring, when the days grew warm and sunny, the Boy went out to play in the wood behind the house. And while he was playing, two rabbits crept out from the bracken and peeped at him. One of them was brown all over, but the other had strange markings under his fur, as though long ago he had been spotted, and the spots still showed through. And about his little soft nose and his round black eyes there was something familiar, so that the Boy thought to himself:

"Why, he looks just like my old Bunny that was lost when I had scarlet fever!"

But he never knew that it really was his own Bunny come back to look at the child who had first helped him to be Real. (p.44)

Implications for Near-Death Studies

Examining images of death and near-death in children's literature has several implications that differ somewhat from similar exercises with adult fiction (see for example Flynn, 1984; Straight, 1984; Wren-Lewis, 1986).

First, many social and literary commentators on children's literature, as we have seen in the present case study, are concerned when images of death turn into tales of rebirth. Drawing on materialist ideas

about death, and having tolerance for little else, these reviewers look to a psychoanalytic theory for an explanation. But that reaction and writing itself, through its own failure to grasp a plurality of ideas about death, overlooks the opportunity to explore cultural meanings of death different from their own. This psychoanalytic response is ethnocentric and renders problematic any concept of death associated with ideas of survival and rebirth. On these different notions of death are conferred a deviant status, a status which is at once both social and psychological.

That process, I believe, sells short the importance of understanding what death means to different people in different times and places with different social experiences of it. A sociological reading of *The Velveteen Rabbit* reveals the value of providing alternative models to psychoanalytic ones that portray death as annihilating and final. Unlike Freud's medical view of death as winner-takes-all (Freud, 1961), symbolic representations or social experiences of death are always context dependent. This is because sociological readings can assume that meaningful understandings of death derive from their logical relationship to other meanings that emerge from the context of a society or story. Images of death in *The Velveteen Rabbit* should be understood in terms of their narrative context. Concepts of death in psychoanalytic discourse should be seen in their historical and political context. And as Kenneth Ring (1991) has recently argued, personal NDEs should be read in their biographical context in much the same way that Zaleski (1987) viewed the public discourse about NDEs in the context of religious history. In that epistemology, no meaning of death need foreclose on another, whatever scientific rhetoric is used to justify and rationalize such a monopoly.

Because tales of rebirth in the face of death are commonly subject to the analytical dominance of materialist and psychoanalytic paradigms, at least in the social sciences, it is an important, critical task to provide alternative readings. This is because as Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984, p. 81) argued, the social and intellectual value of such rewriting and retelling helps "invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented." And that exercise in turn opens up intellectual spaces where we can entertain and examine, with a range of methodological tools, the plurality of ideas about death that is part of our diverse human inheritance.

Second, Melvin Morse (1990) has recently demonstrated how childhood NDEs are strikingly similar to adult versions. He suggests that,

since children are not fully socialized creatures, this may mean that cultural conditioning plays a minimal or no role in the NDE. Aside from the methodological problems of retrospective recall in many of these cases, the conclusion is perhaps premature for another reason. Children do not experience socialization suddenly, despite the desperate wishes of their parents. Socialization is incremental and gradual, dependent as it is on processes of physical and social development. The similarity of childhood NDEs to adult versions does not suggest that cultural conditioning is unimportant. Rather this finding could just as readily be interpreted as evidence that such conditioning penetrates rather early.

We can see that *The Velveteen Rabbit*, a story for children between the ages of 5 and 9, contains many of the classic images of the NDE. This story however, is not unique in these respects. In the *Wizard of Oz* (Baum, 1987), for example, Dorothy is transported inside the tunnel of a tornado to another place where she meets the "good witch of the east." In Lewis Carroll's (1965) *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice begins her adventure by a long fall down a dark rabbit hole. Children's literature is replete with tunnels, extraordinary beings, life reviews, flying experiences, and tales of reunion (Greene, 1992).

At least in the literate circles of industrialized nations, children have a wealth of imagery to draw upon to help them make sense of everyday and out-of-the-ordinary social experiences. These stories like those of *The Velveteen Rabbit* have a long history and they are read by or to children of very early ages. I do not argue in any reductionist way that childhood NDEs then are merely a product of these fantasies. But I do draw attention to the fact that children's stories can provide one source of cultural imagery (and there may be others) that might assist children in making sense of the NDEs.

Without some cultural materials it is doubtful that anyone, children or adults, would be able to communicate even minimally, let alone make personal sense of, foreign experiences such as the NDE. Individuals of any age are not culturally neutral beings. Therefore the descriptive narratives of NDEs should be understood in terms of the language of that communication, a point already discussed at some length by Zaleski (1987).

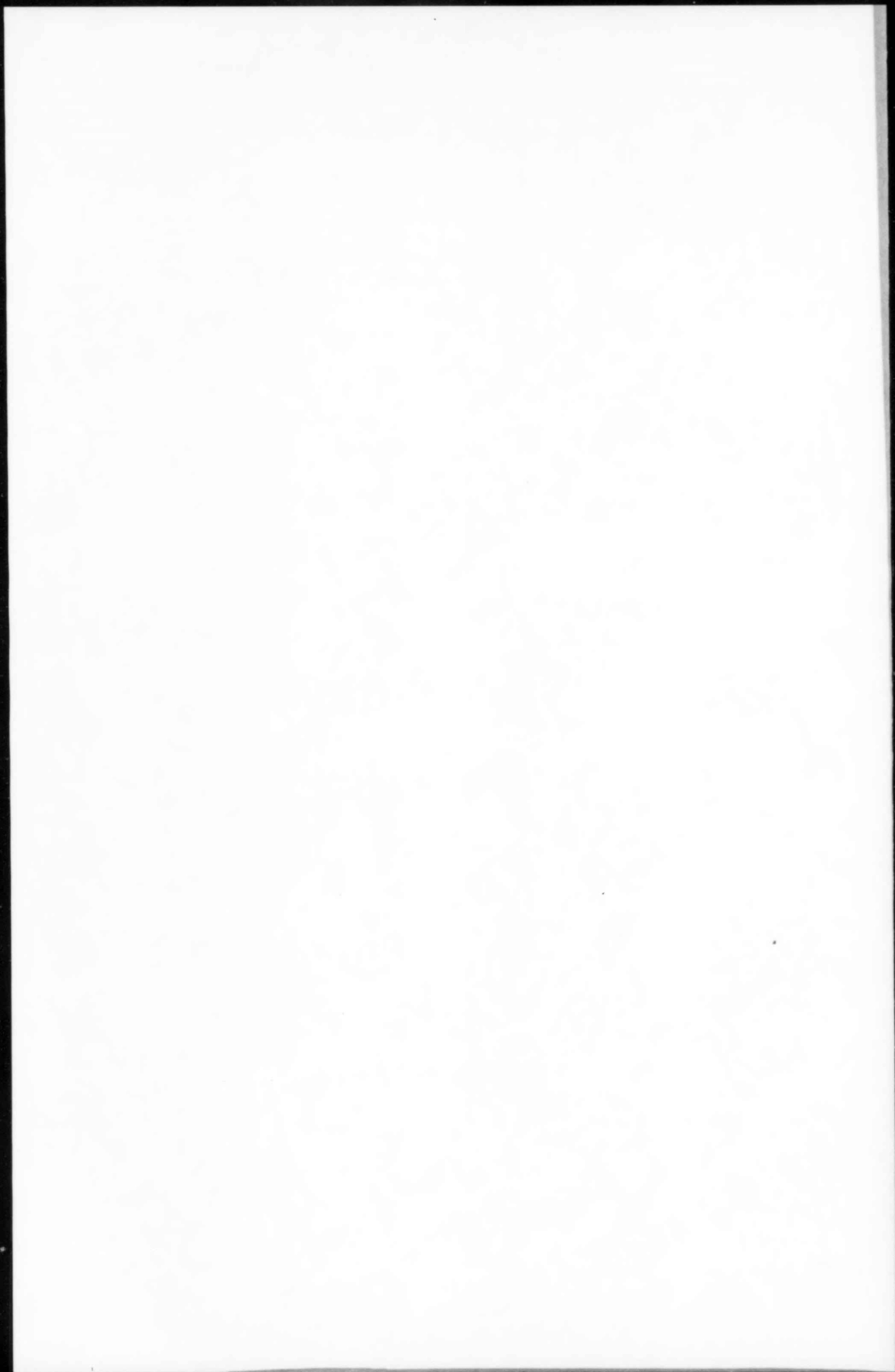
In that same work Zaleski (1987, p. 191) argued that "When one judges a symbol, one cannot say whether it is true or false, but only whether it is vital or weak" and this depends on "their capacity to evoke a sense of relationship." Few of the millions of readers who have

read or heard the story of *The Velveteen Rabbit* since its appearance in 1922 accept the literal meaning of Rabbitland. But even fewer would argue against the social message of the story. Those of us who do not believe that love can triumph over loss wish nevertheless that it could. And that very desire to look again at the universal mystery of love and death continues to breathe new life into the story of *The Velveteen Rabbit* and to ensure that our relationship to tales of rebirth, of transcendence of death, remain vital and relevant.

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BOOK REVIEW

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Transformed by the Light: The Powerful Effect of Near-Death Experiences on People's Lives, by Melvin Morse, M. D., with Paul Perry. New York: Villard Books, 1992, 247pp, \$20.00

The stories keep coming. Much of this book is devoted to reports of near-death experiences (NDEs) that add to the already impressive cache of such experiences that have accumulated since Raymond Moody (1975) showed the way. Perhaps enough time has passed since NDEs first captured attention to raise such related questions as: (a) Do we have anything other than stories?, (b) Do stories provide an adequate basis for establishing the nature and meaning of NDEs?, and (c) Has the desire to use NDEs as a source of inspiration and transformation raced ahead of the desire to study the phenomena in a critical and sophisticated manner?

Melvin Morse is well aware that it is no longer sufficient merely to pass along another batch of NDE reports. He has taken up the challenge of examining the possible effect of NDEs on the survivors' lives. In particular, Morse interested himself in a set of hypotheses that propose that having and surviving an NDE results in lowered death anxiety, greater zest for life, heightened psychic abilities, and a higher level of intelligence. The "*Transformed*" in the title of this book would seem to be well justified if these hypotheses could be confirmed. Morse also attempts to explain the "how" of the transformation—this is where "*The Light*" comes in. The title, then, is more than rhetoric.

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It is also Morse's intention to base his conclusions upon a substantial research effort. At several points he calls attention to the need for systematic research as distinguished from simply collecting anecdotal material. His Transformations Study involved interviews with 100 adults who had reported NDEs, and 50 people in each of 5 comparison groups. Data for all of the participants included a lifestyle profile, medical and psychiatric history, religious and spiritual profile, family bonding and rating scale, and eight psychometric-type scales. (This information is presented in the Appendix.)

Unfortunately, intention and fulfillment soon part company. The author's enjoyment in recounting stories and incidents and his enthusiasm for the upbeat implications of his conclusions pretty much overwhelms the scientific mission. That this book quickly becomes a good news/inspirational tract is not of itself a cause for concern: perhaps some readers will indeed feel better about life and death after an hour or two with *Transformed by the Light*. It is disconcerting, however, when a research intent has been announced, some methodology and statistics introduced, and conclusions offered as though verified. Let me give some examples:

"*In honesty, Dr. Morse, I don't think the experience has changed me at all.*" This is the opening sentence (p. 3). Donna had just finished telling of the night, three years ago, when she had almost died. The interviewer-author did not accept Donna's statement at face value. Why? "Although no one had conducted a study to examine the actual transformations that occur, I was certain from my own experiences that every person who has an NDE is transformed in some way" (p. 6). After further questioning, Donna brought out additional details of her life after the NDE. "So it looks like your near-death experience *has* changed things for you," I said. She laughed and acknowledged that it had. Donna, like all the others, had been transformed" (p. 9).

This opening episode is a microcosm of the book. Morse already knew the answers before he started. He did not really have to test a set of hypotheses about the transforming effects of NDEs; he simply needed to extract supportive information from his interviewees. He is quick to pounce on reports that are consistent with the transformation hypotheses. The interview interactions seem more than friendly to the hypotheses: not neutral, let alone, critical.

Although the author and his assistants went to the trouble of conducting a large number of interviews, many of the cases reported in this book came from casual contacts outside of the research frame. These were good stories that he wanted to pass along. Good stories are

appreciated, but one wonders why the focus was not kept on the interviews that are offered as the data base for his conclusions.

The set of transformation hypotheses seems to be comprised of two subsets. One subset appears to be primarily attitudinal: decreased death anxiety and greater zest for life. It would not much strain one's credibility to learn that death anxiety and zest for life might be influenced by a powerful life experience. The other subset offers a more formidable challenge. We are now dealing with abilities as distinguished from attitudes. There is an enormous literature on the conceptualization, operationalization, and assessment of intellectual functioning. All the problems inherent in measuring "intelligence" are exacerbated by attempts to detect significant changes as the result of a particular experience (such as an educational program, nutritional enrichment, or environment stimulation). Experts in the field often disagree with each other on whether in fact such changes have occurred in sophisticated large-scale studies.

With "psychic abilities" we enter a far more difficult realm. Hardly anybody doubts that people do have intellectual abilities, although there are differing approaches to conceptualization and measurement. After more than a century of research, however, opinions are sharply divided regarding the existence of psychic abilities. As of today, believers in psychic abilities remain hard pressed to answer C. E. M. Hansel (1989) and other severe critics. The point here is not the actual existence or non-existence of psychic or paranormal abilities. It is, rather, the undeniable fact that it has been difficult to establish the existence of these abilities to the satisfaction of the general scientific community even when much care and ingenuity has been invested in research efforts.

Morse offers a few anecdotes, but no data that bear directly on the hypotheses that intelligence and psychic abilities increase as the result of NDEs. This glossing-over of the difficulties involved in assessing intellectual and psychic abilities—and their possible enhancement as attributed to a specific cause—does not strengthen the book's credibility.

Cause-and-effect relationships are asserted where no such relationships can be confirmed by the data. For example, "The significance of these results is that visions of light or near-death experiences result in lowered death anxiety" (p. 224). Actually, his data do not show that anything resulted in anything else. Morse presents the mean scores on the Templer Death Anxiety Scale for each of his study groups. There are no before-after (NDE) data for any group, so one cannot actually

speaking of change. Furthermore, the means by themselves do not provide adequate information (no standard deviations or other measures of variance are provided, and no statistical tests of possible group differences). Even had the research design been more appropriate to causal inference, there would still be no data demonstrating that the experience of light was the operative event. The actual findings (or nonfindings) here are not the most important thing. What is of prime concern is the willingness to offer a cause-and-effect conclusion from a data base that is inappropriate to the purpose. Am I being "picky"? That depends on whether or not one is inclined to take seriously this book's claim to have proven scientifically a set of significant changes as a result of NDEs (and to then use this as a foundation for a set of explanations).

The NDE transformation is explained through a theory whose major components include phenomena said to occur in the right temporal lobe and changes thought to take place in the individual's electromagnetic field. These transforming or healing actions are said to be accompanied by a sensation of vivid and intense light. According to Morse, this experience of light is distinctive and perhaps unique in that it does not originate or have its physiological basis in the right temporal lobe, nor in any other region of the brain. And what is this light? Essentially it is "The Glow of God" (as one chapter is entitled). And it is this light that transforms.

Here is certainly an enticing theory. The problem is that it is presented not as creative speculation, but as proven through the author's research. The author states that he has documented right temporal lobe involvement in all of the NDE phenomena with the exception of the light. None of his temporal lobe studies are reported or referenced in this book. I did have on hand his article in this Journal in which a neurophysiological explanatory model is offered for NDEs (Morse, Venecia, and Milstein, 1989). This is a fascinating paper that I enjoyed having the occasion to re-read. He does not report any data of his own in this paper, however, and the two references to his work are to papers dealing with NDE reports and correlates, not temporal lobe function. It is difficult to understand how such a challenging and complex theory could be presented in such a casual and unsupported manner in a book intended to provide a scientific basis for the understanding of NDE effects.

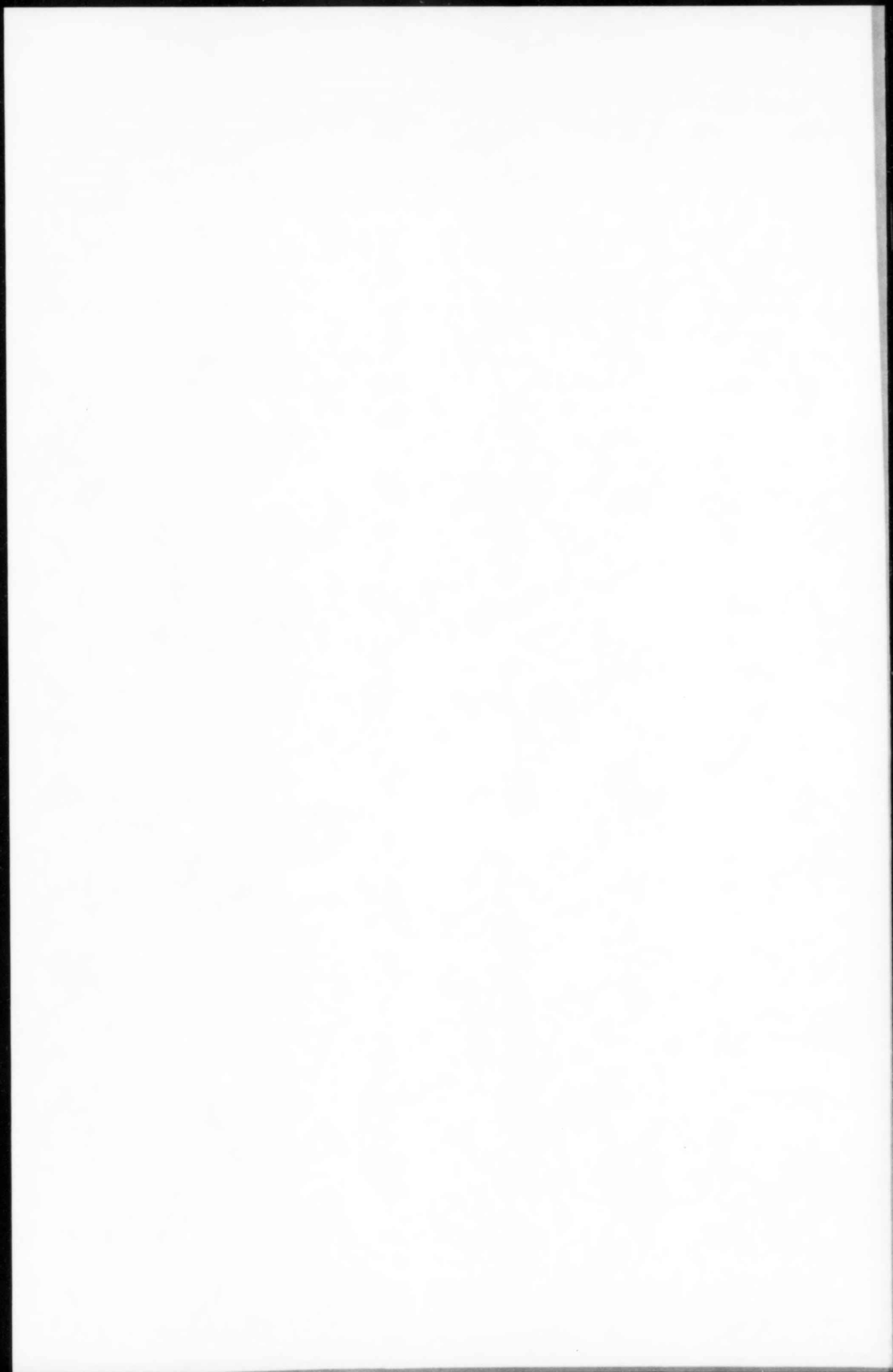
Dedicated NDErs will want to read this book for themselves. Most of the book consists of stories from which the author draws conclusions that are favorable to the transformation hypothesis and his theory.

Morse's ideas are interesting, and any number of them could be on target to significant discoveries—or they could just be charming fantasies. One cannot tell from the material presented here. The inferential process is neither well disciplined nor well linked with the available data. Generalizations come all too easy, and methodological problems are glossed over. Furthermore, no attempt is made to relate his findings with the earlier work of Kenneth Ring (1984), who pursued much the same hypotheses and reported his method and data in more detail.

So the stories keep coming. Will the once promising realm of NDE research end up as fodder for campfire stories, or will there be investigators willing and able to take the long, slow, often frustrating road toward verified knowledge?

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BOOK REVIEW

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Transformed by the Light: Life After Near-Death Experiences, by Cherie Sutherland. Sydney, Australia: Bantam, 1992, 287pp, A\$17.95

In accordance with Murphy's Law—that whatever can go wrong will—two important authors on near-death research have chosen the same book title, *Transformed by the Light*, at the same time on opposite sides of the world. It is to be hoped that this won't prevent either work from getting the full international recognition it deserves. Certainly Cherie Sutherland, whose name will already be familiar to readers of this Journal from her three major papers in recent years (Sutherland, 1989, 1990a, 1990b), has written something of an international landmark work in the field, in at least four respects.

In the first place, this work is quite a landmark in academic recognition of near-death studies. Of course, individual academics of high authority have been active in near-death studies right from the early days when Raymond Moody (1975) coined the term "near-death experience," or "NDE." But those have been peaks on a vast plane of scholarly indifference, with relatively few mounds of interest elsewhere.

It is another matter altogether when a university not previously associated with the field is prepared to award a scientific Ph.D. for near-death research, and perhaps especially so in Australia, where scientific noses tend to be harder than almost anywhere else in the world. The University of New South Wales, in particular, has an

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unashamedly technological interest almost built into its constitution, so its grant of a doctorate in social science for the work on which this book is based is testimony not only to the author's considerable scholarly ability, but also to the fact that times are indeed changing as far as mainstream acknowledgement of near-death studies is concerned.

In fact, with this act, the university has shown itself somewhat ahead of general public and media attitudes in Australia, for until this book came out there was a widespread impression here that NDEs were byproducts of American religious credulity, occasionally used to titillate the readers of "women's magazines," but mainly phenomena of the American television talk shows, which are popular afternoon viewing here. Serious books on the subject haven't been readily available in Australia since Moody's *Life After Life* (1975), because our publishers and booksellers have until quite recently been hamstrung by our former imperial ties to Britain. The appearance of a home-grown Australian book drawing on hundreds of Australian NDEs and written by a faculty member of one of our most prestigious universities is therefore a doubly welcome event here, simultaneously bringing a much-needed update on the scientific studies of the past decade and rooting them firmly in Australian soil with Australian (in some cases quite unmistakably Australian) case histories.

And this is the second way in which this book is an international landmark, for there are still all too few systematic research studies aimed at replicating in other regions of the world the pioneer findings of American researchers. While Australia has much in common with the United States besides its use of the English language, there are also considerable cultural differences, so it is of real interest to discover that on this continent, too, NDEs not only happen but produce major changes in experiencers' lives that cannot be dismissed simply as results of going through a close brush with death.

One cultural difference between Australia and America that emerged right at the start of Sutherland's research was that NDErs Down Under seem extremely reticent about any kind of publicity, irrespective of their socioeconomic or racial backgrounds. "In general the interviewees tended to be highly sensitive to the reception of their information," Sutherland writes (p. 52), and I can believe it, for when some of us tried to start an Australian chapter of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) in the late 1980s, we met with considerable suspicion that our aim was in some way to exploit experiencers, either for media sensationalism or for religious propaganda. In fact, Sutherland was able to get "AUSTRALIANDS" off the

ground in 1989 only by starting with people whose trust she'd won personally in her interviewing work, and then making membership contingent upon the signing of a pledge not to use information obtained from other members for any commercial or propaganda purpose without specific permission. No doubt some American, British, and European NDErs have the same reticence, but the attitude seems particularly strong here.

Yet when Sutherland's interviewees *did* open up about their experiences, they overwhelmingly reported life changes and attitude changes (of course, in varying degrees) very similar to those found by Kenneth Ring (1984) in America and Margot Grey (1985) in Britain: complete loss of fear of death, less attachment to materialistic values both in life and thought, a heightened sense of spiritual meaning in life, and in many cases, new practical life directions resulting from increased self-esteem combined with a wish to serve the general human good—including, in most cases, a new level of concern about human relationships with the rest of nature.

Having traveled over 10,000 kilometers to establish this general picture, Sutherland went on to study these changes in more detail, selecting for that purpose 50 experiencers whose preliminary interviews indicated a rating of between 6 and 24 on Kenneth Ring's (1980) Weighted Core Experience Index, to ensure comparability with his and other studies done elsewhere. The main body of this book is based on her analysis of indepth interviews with these 50 NDErs, including before-and-after assessments of attitudes to death and dying; religious and spiritual affiliations; psychic sensitivities; and views about self, relationships, work, and life interests; and present lifestyle priorities and attitudes toward contemporary social issues. Her presentation of this analysis shows a real gift, in the same class as Ring's, for bringing statistics to life by well-chosen quotations from the experiencers themselves, making fascinating and very easy reading.

The third and most important way in which *Transformed by the Light* is a landmark is that the perspective from which Sutherland analyses her findings is sociological rather than medical or psychological. As Ring is quick to recognize in his Foreword to this book, this perspective gives added weight and often new depth of insight to her confirmations of his own and others' findings. For example, Sutherland confirms Ring's observation that while NDEs tend to increase experiencers' spiritual interests, often dramatically so, they almost never strengthen attachment to a specific religious dogma or institution, and usually loosen or even abolish such attachment—which is no doubt one reason

why mainstream religions have been slow to take an interest in NDEs, and have on some occasions even regarded them as devices of the devil. But in Sutherland's analysis this is seen as just one instance of NDErs' devaluing social conformity based on fear or lack of self-esteem; attitude changes leading to socially meaningful rather than financially secure jobs, which many of her subjects also reported, are another symptom of the same basic psychosocial phenomenon.

This insight is a personal as well as a professional one for Sutherland, inasmuch as she herself was changed by an NDE, during the birth of her son in 1971, from a conventional housewife with few spiritual concerns and no academic interests, to a social worker, and then into the sociologist she is today. And that is the fourth aspect in which this book is a landmark: it is an example of what is at present a very rare phenomenon in near-death research, a study carried out by a qualified professional who is also a firsthand experienter.

Perhaps it was just as well that Moody, Ring, and the other pioneers in this field weren't themselves experiencers, for in those early days medical and scientific prejudice was such that anyone who'd actually had an NDE might well have been regarded as suspect, incapable of objectivity and perhaps even mentally unbalanced. But as P. M. H. Atwater proclaimed some years ago (1988), there comes a point where lack of firsthand experience in a subject like this must limit understanding. Now that the credibility of NDEs and near-death research has begun to be recognized, qualified researchers who've themselves "been there" may open up a whole new phase of research.

One specific challenge Atwater threw down was that the pioneer researchers, in their anxiety to establish that the NDE could not be dismissed as evidence of mental instability, concentrated on experiencers' own accounts of positive life changes, ignoring the fact that families and acquaintances often found that NDErs' new nonattachment to financial security and conventional beliefs very disturbing. Sutherland's sociological approach enables her to grasp this nettle: many of her interviewees were quite frank in reporting social tensions and even marital breakups resulting from their new (and by their own account, definitely positive) spiritual and social attitudes. While not unsympathetic towards the families who have to suffer such disruptions (thanks perhaps to her background in social work), she is nevertheless convinced that the changes induced by the NDE really are positive, not just for the experiencers as individuals but for society too; for without some radical break with our civilization's materialism and rigid competitive belief and value systems, there seems little hope for humanity's survival on this planet.

Sutherland also, in the concluding chapters of this book, exposes the other face of this sociological coin, by showing from her interviews how NDErs need the sympathetic understanding of others and access to a supportive social and intellectual environment, in order to realize fully the benefits of the experience in their own individual lives. While these chapters require more concentration than the earlier ones, they represent real frontier research, as she analyzes the various kinds of "trajectory" that experiencers can follow in bringing their initial revelations into their subsequent everyday lives. Communication and understanding are the key factors, and without them even a profound NDE can sometimes fade into a mere memory. By contrast, the recent growth of general public recognition and understanding of NDEs and what they are about has enabled many people to revive the memory of an almost forgotten NDE and turn it, many years later, into a truly transformative event. This is vital groundwork material for IANDS in both its supportive and its educational roles, as well as for future research.

So Sutherland's *Transformed by the Light* is a real landmark book that deserves a world audience as soon as possible. If I venture a couple of criticisms, they are not so much faults I find in the book itself as questions it raises in my mind that require further research. First, Sutherland follows most other recent writers in this field in quoting the now-famous Gallup Poll (Gallup and Proctor, 1982) that estimated that 5 percent of the adult population have had NDEs, at least in Western countries where the latest resuscitation technology is readily available. She concludes that if even only a portion of those have been "transformed by the light" the way her subject were, there are now a large number of such "Aquarian conspirators" around to leaven society's materialistic lump (Ferguson, 1980).

I profoundly hope she's right, and have indeed recently expressed just this hope in print (1993), but I can't help wondering why, if there really are so many NDErs out there, there haven't been many more joining IANDS, which is still a small-membership organization globally. Retinence may be part of the explanation here in Australia, but surely not everywhere, and surely it can't explain such a huge discrepancy. Perhaps Sutherland's book may stir our Australian pollsters to check out the Gallup findings, and maybe that will provoke some much needed further confirmations elsewhere. A figure smaller than 5 percent of the population wouldn't detract from Sutherland's findings or from their prophetic character, but it might prevent false optimism.

Finally, I am both personally and scientifically bothered by what might be described as a "New Age" bias in the kind of spiritual awakening Sutherland finds amongst her 50 chosen NDErs. Most of them

see their loss of fear of death, their new sense of loving purpose in life, and their detachment from materialism as directly linked with psychic powers and belief in reincarnation. But the latter, in classical Eastern traditions, are not regarded a spiritual at all: the whole object of mystical enlightenment in Hinduism and Buddhism is to get off the wheel of endless rebirths, and psychic abilities are regarded as potentially inimical to such awakening.

Now I'm all for valuing experience above tradition, but it so happens that my own NDE in 1983 was a major spiritual awakening and transformation, yet it has in fact left me much *less* inclined than I was before to be interested in either reincarnation or psychic powers (Wren-Lewis, 1985). Accordingly, I can't help wondering whether Sutherland's findings in these particular respects might be artifacts of her use of Ring's Weighted Core Experience Index in choosing her sample, since that instrument favors dramatic visionary NDEs (which mine was not), and is by Ring's own account correlated with the psychological tendency known as dissociation, which is also known to be correlated with belief in psychic powers and previous lives (Ring, 1992).

The scientific point here is not that there is anything "wrong" with the NDEs of Sutherland's chosen sample, but that if we want to uncover the really essential psychospiritual core of the near-death phenomenon—and that in my view should be the main priority of future near-death research (Wren-Lewis, 1992)—then we could be in danger of being misled by nonessential factors and of neglecting important data if we take Ring's index as a paradigm of the NDE instead of as the limited research tool that he himself holds it to be. In other words, future research should cast its net more widely, to take in other kinds of NDE, and may also make *separate* examinations of the spiritual and psychic consequences of NDEs. In the meanwhile, Sutherland's book is required reading.

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Letter to the Editor

A New Life for Near-Death Studies

To the Editor:

In an earlier Letter to the Editor (Luciani, 1992) I reacted to Kenneth Ring's planned abandonment of near-death studies by objecting to his shallow conclusion that little is left to be studied. I also offered the view that whereas the vision-oriented near-death wheel may well be worn to near-death, the answer now is not to abandon near-death studies, but to change the wheel. I believe it is high time for scholars to turn their sights to what happens to us in our lives after a near-death experience (NDE), and as an NDEr I have a few ideas to offer.

To begin with, I contend that everyone who has had an NDE has also had an accompanying spiritual encounter. Not all NDErs are aware of having had a spiritual encounter, but where is it written that experiencers must recall the total or even any part of near-death's supernatural encounter? Those who claim to have total recall of their NDEs may simply be certifying to no more than clear recall of whatever they were able to remember.

Why would some experiencers return with key elements of a near-death vision blocked from their minds? It might have to do with a pledge made to the superconscious self on the higher plane, a pledge that the conscious ego sometime later along the return route may see as a threat to one's accustomed way of life. In self preservation, the conscious ego blocks all or parts of this vision. It was that way for me; my own spiritual near-death encounter was partially blocked for many years (Luciani, 1993).

I believe scholars need to get "hip-deep" into the study of how we experiencers respond to our higher-plane pledges. This is where all the answers always were. The NDE's exotic visions may have been the starting gun for scholarly near-death research, but it is now time to move out onto the race track where the more credible, creditable, and inherently more measurable data are found: in life after the NDE.

More to the heart of this new kind of near-death study, I would rhetorically ask whether we have yet learned anything about the how, what, or where of NDEs from studying the visions. Contrary to viewing

near-death studies as terminal, I submit we have now matured in our studies of the trees to the point that we can now begin to view the forest. It is time to pursue the most important question: why? why the physical NDE? why its spiritual encounter? why me out of five billion others on Earth?

Such questions lead to heady hypotheses, but they must be approached through extensive data collection, analysis, and reporting on what experiencers have done with their lives since the NDE. And I suggest this next round of studies should rely to a greater extent on data collected *mano a mano*, verbalized, and upfront, and especially without those lifeless, fill-in-the-blanks questionnaires. Curve-fitting statistical techniques for rejecting extreme values are equivalent in this field to tossing out the baby with the bath water. Today's extreme points, we radical, nonconforming, individualistic loners who responded to our pledges, may evolve under concentrated analysis into the norm.

My next revelation should not come as a surprise to NDErs, nor should it take away any of the fun from researchers. I believe that every NDEr comes back to life with the central mission of serving others, and that to do so *we must do something different* with our reprieved lives. While this is not news to most experiencers, what would be news would be near-death researchers wrapped in the luster of credibility drawing the same conclusion from indepth analysis of life after an NDE.

I find it exciting to envision future issues of this Journal spilling over with productive studies of post-NDE lives. What I am calling for awaits the collective genius of probing scholars who are willing to persist in efforts to extract best-fit estimates of what near-death is truly about. I say the indepth future studies of life after the NDE are certain to excite the world far beyond what past accounts of near-death vision ever have. The ball is in your court.

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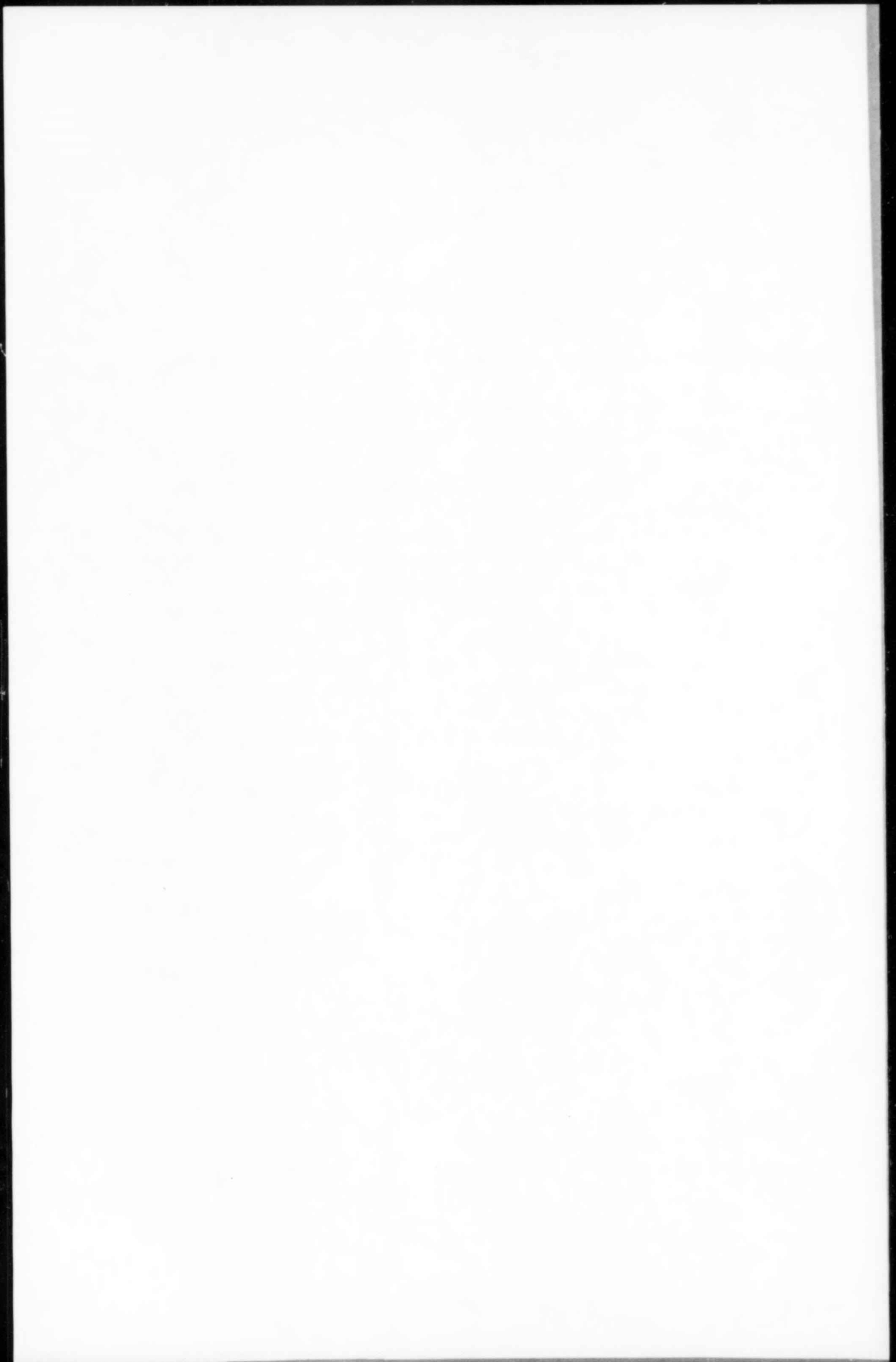
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Announcement

Parapsychology Foundation 1993 D. Scott Rogo Award

The Parapsychology Foundation is proud to announce that the winner of the Second Annual D. Scott Rogo Award for Parapsychological Literature is Dr. Justine Owens, Assistant Professor of Psychiatric Medicine at the University of Virginia Health Sciences Center. Dr. Owens' manuscript, *Consciousness Near Death*, addresses the issues of near-death experiences from a multidimensional perspective. The research in which she is involved incorporates physiological, psychological, and transcendental approaches to the experience. It is her contention that "by embracing the importance of these more mundane factors, the paranormal aspects of the NDE become more credible."

The Foundation created the D. Scott Rogo Award for Parapsychological Literature as a tribute to Rogo, who enjoyed a multifaceted career as parapsychologist as well as that of prolific writer. Application for this award may be made year round to the Parapsychology Foundation, Inc., 228 East 71st Street, New York, NY 10021, with the winner to be chosen and notified on or about May 1st. The award was conceived to assist an author financially during manuscript preparation. Content and degree to which the field of parapsychology will be enriched by this manuscript are the criteria for selecting the recipient of this award.



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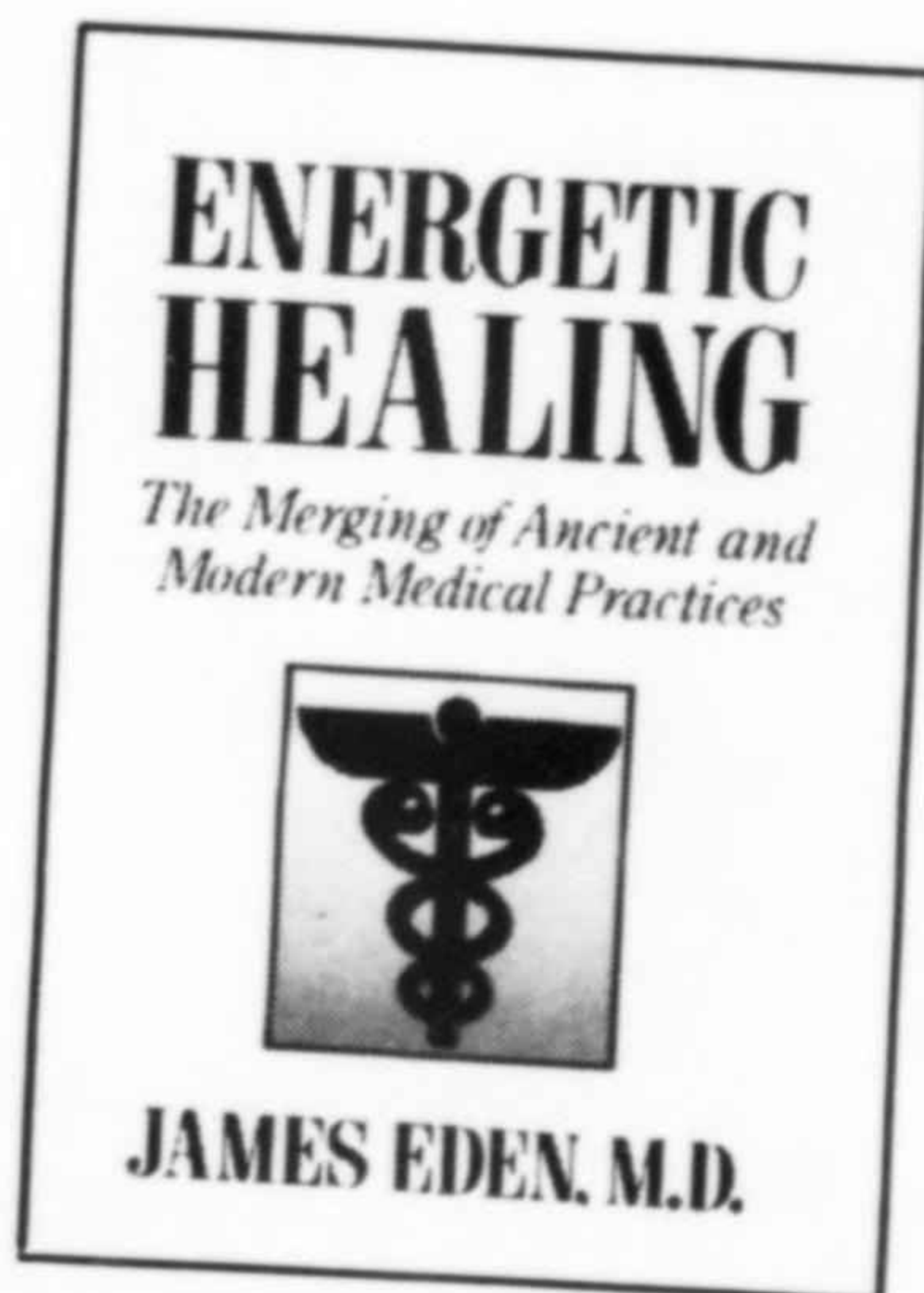
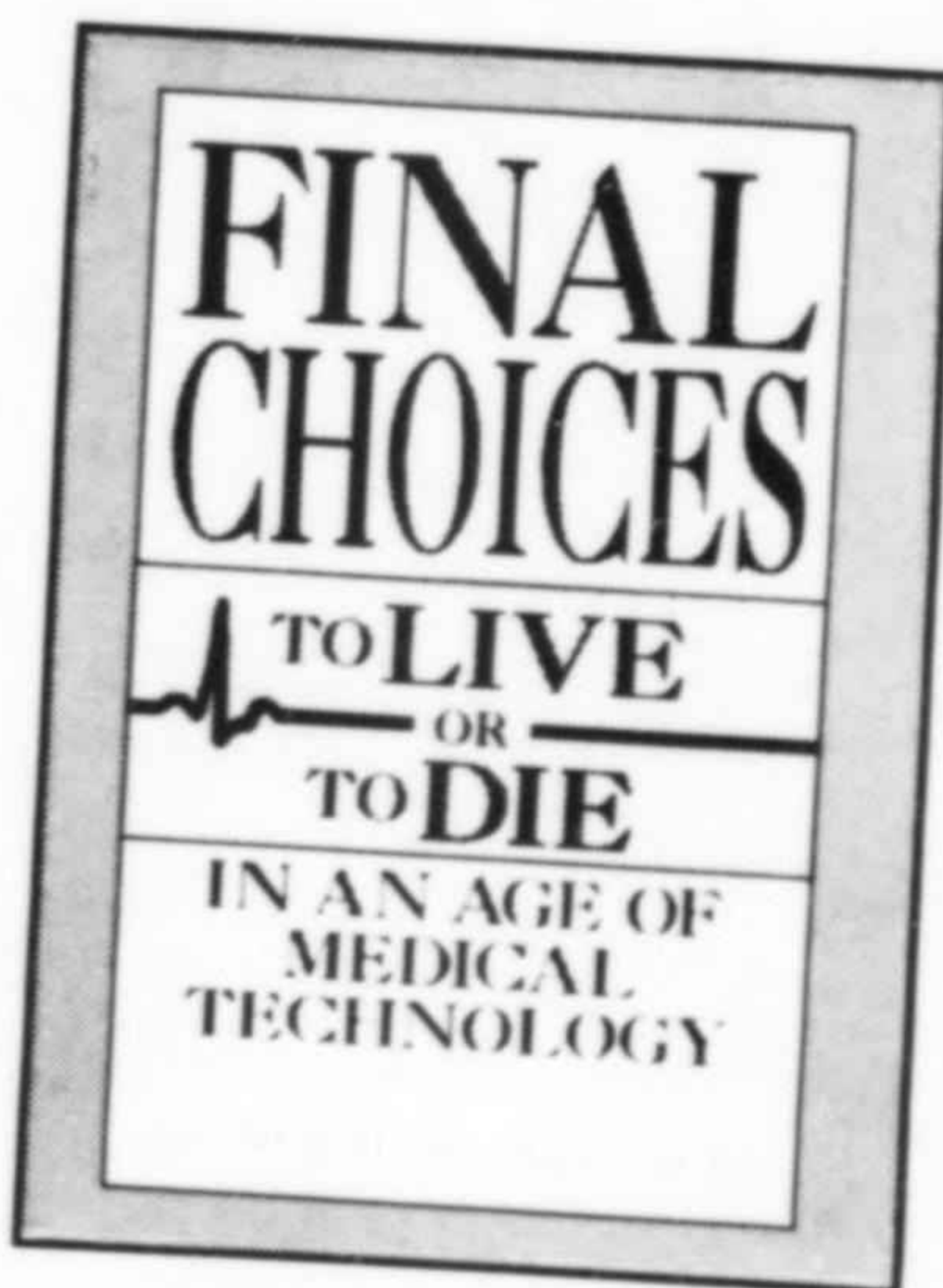
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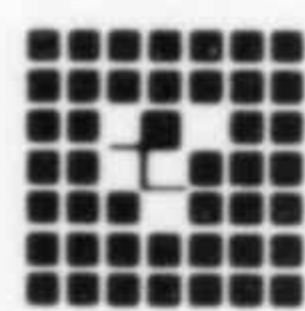
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