

Near-Death Experiences, God and Love

by Crawford Knox

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Human beings are autopoietic systems: systems that have self-healing, self-sustaining and creative attributes. But these self-healing powers in human beings cannot prevail against some of the deeply embedded and resistant structures that block healing within the personality. These blockages come from many sources. Apart from genetic and other life factors, it is hard to ignore the increasing evidence that reincarnation occurs, so most of us seemingly come into this world with unresolved issues from earlier lives.

There is evidence too, that babies, almost from conception, are aware of, and lastingly influenced by, their relationship with their mothers, her relationships with her surroundings, and by how the birth is handled. Also from an early stage, our culture begins to build-in its own warpings. I strongly recommend Brian Thorne's Sarum lectures, *Infinitely Beloved*, from which I shall quote later, on this subject.

It is difficult to heal the trauma caused by these forces, unless the personality incorporates some measure of openness or unless it is beginning to break-up. So healing can best prevail where there is openness, humility and even some chaos.

People who have been able fully to release these healing attributes seem first to have coherently *understood* their situation, and been given a new vision of life. This is the work of the Logos, the order and reason of God, the divine Christ. And secondly they seem to have received a sense of loving acceptance and reassurance which has relaxed the natural defences which we all build round us, and allowed the self-healing forces to operate more strongly. This is the work of the Holy Spirit

and is the approach of person-centred psychotherapy which features in Brian Thorne's lectures. Much of this paper will be devoted to showing how these two approaches feature in deep near-death experiences and their far-reaching implications.

I believe that near-death experiences have important implications for our understanding of the transformation of human nature and for the Christian faith. Unfortunately, although one would expect opposition to the strong evidence that NDE's offer, from the scientific community, who hold to materialism as an act of faith, opposition is found also amongst Christians who regard empirical evidence as an enemy of faith. This to me is a paradox, for the more I learn, the more my faith is strengthened. But it does require a certain openness to allow I may be wrong about the way God works.

NDEs have been known since earliest times but they have increased enormously in number in recent years as a result of the great improvements in resuscitation techniques. But, although literally millions of people have had near-death experiences, the percentages are comparatively small, perhaps about 15% of the total resuscitated. It is interesting to speculate on what may happen to the 85% who are resuscitated yet recall no such experience? We can at least point to some possible explanations.

It could be related to the length of time that the bodily functions have stopped (there is evidence that suggests the deeper experiences happen when the patient is closer to biological death). The ability of the patient to recall any experiences after resuscitation may depend on age and the type of illness, and to their state of mind. NDE's are sometimes recalled only many years later and the mind has the ability to suppress bad experiences.

As death approaches, some people are very ready to go and some are already aware of those from the other side who have come to guide them. Unfortunately, especially in the case of sudden death, it seems that many people are still in a state of denial. They do not recognise that they have died and try to carry on their normal earth-bound lives. Since chronological time does not exist in that dimension, some hauntings would indicate that this refusal to let go of their earlier lives may even last for centuries on our time scale.

According to George Ritchie, angels are always hovering above them ready to respond with help immediately, but freewill still prevails and they do not interfere until their aid is sought. What happens to such people meanwhile?

I quote from Brian Thorne's *Infinitely Beloved* and relate that passage to another from George Ritchie's classic account of his NDE, *Return from Tomorrow*. Thorne says:

A few years ago, in the face of escalating freneticism in the work-place, it was jokingly asserted that nobody on his or her death-bed would express regret at not having spent more time in the office. I no longer appreciate that joke. I have a nagging suspicion that in more recent times I have met those for whom their working life has become so obsessively important that at the hour of their death they would indeed lament the missed hours at the office or at their computer terminal. In uttering this dire judgement I have in mind a client who, having been abandoned by his wife and children, was reconciled to the inevitability of this outcome in the light of his workaholicism. 'I have made my choice,' he said, 'and I can hardly blame them for making theirs'. The difference between him and an alcohol abuser was that his illness was so strongly affirmed and applauded by the organisation for which he worked that they made him a senior executive (*op. cit.*, pp43-46).

The scale of this problem is suggested in George Ritchie's book. He was a serviceman in the US army in 1943 who died for some minutes, and was being shown by Jesus what was happening to the others who had died. He found himself over a city seemingly engaged in war work, at night. The problems he reports must have become a lot worse since 1943. He writes:

The streets were impossibly crowded. Just below us two men bore down on the same section of sidewalk and an instant later had simply passed through each other. It was the same inside the humming factories and office buildings—where I could see as easily as I could see the streets—too many people at the machines and desks. In one room a grey haired man was sitting in an armchair dictating a letter onto a rotating cylinder.

Standing behind him, not an inch away, another man, maybe ten years older, kept snatching repeatedly at the speaking tube as though he would tear it from the seated man's hand.

'No!' he was saying, 'if you order a hundred gross they'll charge more. Take a thousand gross at a time. Pierce would have given you a better deal. Why did you send Bill on that Treadwell job?' On and on he went, correcting, giving orders, while the man in the chair appeared neither to see nor hear him.

I noticed this phenomenon repeatedly, people unaware of others right beside them. I saw a group of assembly-line workers gathered around a coffee canteen. One of the women asked for a cigarette, begged her in fact, as though she wanted it more than anything in the world. But the other one, chatting with her friends, ignored her. She took a pack of cigarettes from her coveralls, and without ever offering it to the woman who reached for it so eagerly, took one out and lit it. Fast as a striking snake the woman who had been refused snatched at the lighted cigarette in the other one's mouth. Again she grabbed at it. And again.

With a little chill of recognition I saw that she was unable to grip it. Like me, in fact, they were dead.

But—it was so very different from the way I had always imagined death. I watched one woman of maybe fifty following a man of about the same age down the street. She seemed very much alive, agitated and tearful, except that the man to whom she was addressing her emphatic words was oblivious to her existence.

'You're not getting enough sleep. Marjorie makes too many demands on you. You know you've never been strong. Why aren't you wearing a scarf? You should never have married a woman who thinks only of herself.' There was more, much more, and from some of it I gathered that she was his mother, in spite of the fact that they appeared so nearly the same age. How long had she been following him this way? Was this what death was

like—to be permanently invisible to the living, yet permanently wrapped up in their affairs?

'Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth! For where your treasure is there will your heart be also!' I'd never been any good at memorizing Scripture, but those words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount sprang into my mind (*op. cit.*, pp55-6).

Though all these people were trying to relate, just as they had in life, to others, they did not know they were dead and did not even recognise that, getting no response from others, they were basically alone. When we add to those seen by Ritchie, those who continue to haunt their homes and those who invade the personality of others, sometimes just for company, when they die, we may be some way towards explaining what happens to some of the 85% who are resuscitated but recall no near-death experience. That this may apply to so many, surely suggests that there is something very wrong in the way our culture, including the Churches, prepares us for death, for the world on the other side can be wonderful and is often described as 'home'.

Although I have no time to deal with the experience itself, I would now like to explore the effect of a deep NDE on those who return and do recall the experience. Not all experiences are good, but there is evidence to suggest that distressing experiences are temporary, often lasting only until help is sought from Jesus, the angels, or other divine beings. Life-enhancing NDEs have potentially a number of stages and I want to concentrate on the effects on those people who go forward to the Light and life review and then return, having been in some way transformed.

They are set out by Kenneth Ring in *Lessons from the Light* (Chapter 5).

First are the psychological and behavioural changes. There is a much-enhanced appreciation of what had previously been seen as ordinary aspects of nature and the everyday pleasantries in conversation are seen with greater delight; a sense of wonder, and gratitude for life, itself increases. NDErs have greater feelings of self-worth, self-acceptance, self-confidence and outgoingness, that surprise those who

knew them before. There is an increased and compassionate concern for other people which Ring describes as 'almost unquenchable'. This concern for others extends to the ecological health of the planet. Materialistic values are seen as pointless and empty, as are socially approved concerns with competitiveness and material success.

As Ring says, 'caring rather than achieving is seen as what really matters'. Though many such experiences did not become involved with the formal aspects of religion, they did become more all-embracingly 'spiritual'. Many developed a great thirst for knowledge and became highly motivated to recapture what they learned in the Light and during their experience. Although much of what they learned during the experience was often forgotten, they sought to apply such knowledge and insights as they recalled, to their spiritual quest. Life was seen as meaningful, and as carrying a sacred purpose for everyone, so that the discovery of one's own mission in life became a prime motivation. Fear of death—though not necessarily fear of dying—vanished, and death was seen as in itself liberating: so most became convinced of a survival of death, and a number came to believe in some form of reincarnation. Experiencers were convinced that there is a God, the Light, or by whatever other name they called him. These changes were consistent and reinforced each other to produce a coherent paradigm, that transformed both their view of the cosmos and their everyday behaviour. In a very profound sense *they became themselves*.

However, integrating an NDE into everyday life can be difficult for both for the experiencer and their families. The sudden changes sometimes lead to conflict and even divorce.

Some of the changes are even more far-reaching. The NDE can unleash normally dormant potentials for higher consciousness and extraordinary human functioning. Ring lists 'expanded mental awareness' and 'paranormal sensitivities'. There appears to be a strong link between NDEs and the development of healing gifts. Ring also notes hyperesthesia—sensitivities to light, sound and other environmental factors but also to alcohol and drugs, and tendencies to disrupt the working of electrical equipment, including that in cars, watches and computers. In other words, such people became much more whole and much more transparent to the attributes of God: attributes that are potentially in us all.

There is another very important finding. In people who have not had such experiences but are genuinely open and interested in them, and steep themselves in reports of them, *there is evidence that they themselves change and become more whole in similar ways: their entire outlook on life changes in response to what can be seen as the work of the Logos, as mentioned earlier.* This has been given the name of 'the benign virus'.

Several points of importance emerge from this. The first is that there are deep roots of the divine within each person which will heal and flourish by the Light and life review in deep NDEs. By truly facing our past life in a loving environment, we can open ourselves to the Holy Spirit and to Christ within us and in so doing, can be made more whole.

I have no time to show that there was in the First Temple of Israel and in their Wisdom teachings, a deep awareness of this need for people to become more whole. This was 'the listening heart, the open mind; asked for by Solomon. It was the essential first stage in the deification, the divinisation of man. This was at the root of the faith and teaching of Jesus and carried through into the early Church. It was then largely lost by the West, though not entirely by the Eastern Orthodox Churches, and replaced by the emphasis on the teachings of the Second Temple. These are to be found in the Old Testament and, in particular in the commandments to love God and love your neighbour.

This poses a problem, for no one can love on command. We have to become the sort of person who loves because it is in his or her nature to do so. This is achieved *par excellence* in the NDE in the life review and in the Light—but it can be achieved in other ways.

But, you may say: Jesus gave us the love commandments himself, so we must be able to meet them. Yes, he did, but I believe that as an essential preliminary, Jesus gave us the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. These presuppose the very openness and humility that the NDE evokes. For these to develop, we need each other, and we cannot have morals without wholeness. In the course of everyday life, it is very difficult to achieve wholeness on our own, not least because of the need to unmake attitudes of mind that have been built into us from birth and perhaps before. In so far as we fail to become, or at least see the need to become,

more whole people, I believe we are acting out the shell but have lost the substance of the Christian life.

Our society is breaking up, and if we are to grow into the life of God, if what I have said is right, our entire Western culture, including the Churches, needs to rediscover the vital need for *wholeness*, and what it really means to be the Body of Christ. NDEs provide us with some clues to what is needed, the joys they give, and the costs of failure in this world and the next. There is a task here for Christians and the Churches that greatly expands their present role and teaching.