



The body is not all we are ...

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I have been with many people as they approached their death. My conversations with them, my experiences of their shift in consciousness as they approached death, lead me to believe that dying is a form of birthing, and that there is some kind of continuation of consciousness after death. I began to think of dying as a sacred process of transformation into an existence without a physical body.

I have long been familiar with Near Death Experiences (NDEs) and fascinated by their content. But none of this prepared me for my experience of after-death communications (ADCs), following the sudden death of my husband in June 2001. These experiences were utterly surprising and amazing. I felt very comforted and reassured by them. Although most of those I spoke to did not express doubt at them, I felt very alone with this. I felt that if I have these experiences there must be many people who have them. But why did I not know about this? Why do people not talk about it? I felt as if I was breaking a taboo by doing so. The silence about the subject provoked me to investigate this phenomenon and I began to see links with other, similar phenomena, and the work I had developed in my death education courses. This has

opened up the whole of this field for me, which I consider to be the mystery of living and dying, in a surprising and new way. I have found people who have done research in this area or who were interested to exploring this and similar phenomena.

In this article I would like to show that these various phenomena have many similarities. Perhaps each one of them shows us an aspect of what lies beyond the physical? If we dare to piece it together, can we recognize a cohesive whole?

Near Death Experiences

NDEs were written about and named by Dr. Raymond Moody in his groundbreaking book *Life After Life* in 1975. NDEs have been reported by many people who have been resuscitated after being pronounced clinically dead, most

commonly during an operation, due to cardiac arrest or after an accident. Typically, during this time they become aware of floating above their body, feeling no pain at all and looking down at their body and the scene, seeing and hearing what is going on. They feel they are going down a passageway or tunnel, towards a bright light, where they are met by people they love who have died before them, or by spiritual beings who have been important in their lives, who exude unconditional love. At the same time they may experience a life review, being aware of the effects of their actions on other people. They generally report a sense of great serenity and peace, or even joy. They are told it is not their time to die, and then find themselves back in their body.

Research shows that people who have had NDEs often feel profoundly changed in their outlook on life. They feel that the essence of life is to love and to use this life in a meaningful way. They have the sense that there is 'life' after death, survival of consciousness, and that death is a beautiful thing which they no longer fear, leading them on to a beautiful place, filled with compassion and love.

Distressing NDEs (dNDEs)

A small number of people report distressing NDE's. They report experiencing torment, loneliness, helplessness and powerlessness, and seeing frightening landscapes or beings. Only a small number of all NDEs reported have been dNDEs: 1% - 15%). Bush (2002) concluded

that everyone has the potential for a dNDE.

Tasks for the Living and Dying

Christine Longaker in her book 'Facing Death and Finding Hope' speaks of Four Tasks for the Living and Dying. These are based on William Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning. In my death education work I use a slightly amended version based on what Christine has taught me. These are issues we need to engage with, in order to have a sense of having lived well. They can help us at the end of our lives, preparing for a peaceful death. Many people naturally engage with them as they get older and think about death and prepare for dying. I was hugely inspired in my work by the book 'Cancer as a Turning Point' by Lawrence LeShan (1989), a psychoanalyst who developed a way of working with seriously ill people, helping them to live authentically, making the most of their remaining time. And I also recommend you to read 'Intimate Death' by Marie De Hennezel (1997), psychologist working with dying hospice patients in Paris. Or Megory Anderson (2001), a theologian based in San Francisco who I believe is a true midwife for the dying. She used ritual as a way of facilitating the process of dying in a spiritual and meaningful way. All of these in various ways reflect these tasks:

1. To feel one's life has meaning (life review). To look back, to reassess the present and to look ahead. What is really important?

2. To heal one's relationships and deal with any unfinished business. Here the aim is forgiveness. To be able to express love and to address whatever is in the way of doing that. What is needed to find peace?

3. To prepare for death in practical and spiritual ways. To put practical affairs in order. Make a will. Discuss with family and friends what you wish to leave them, discuss your funeral wishes. Do you want to have an environmentally friendly funeral? A 'green' burial? How you wish to be cared for as you are ill or dying? Make a Living Will and discuss this with your family and doctor. What do you believe happens when we die? What religious or spiritual practices are important to you? Share feelings and thoughts with your family and friends.

4. To make a heartfelt connection with self and others and to let go, opening into life and into death. Getting ready to leaving things behind, feeling it is alright to let them go, opening up to the unknown.

These practices should help us to die without too much regret and to feel at peace with ourselves, and with what we leave behind. The issues are relevant at any stage of one's life, they are guides for how we need to live. But they are particularly relevant when we approach the end of our lives. Not surprisingly therefore, these themes are also part of 'Nearing Death Awareness'.

Nearing Death Awareness (NDA)

NDA is a term coined by Callanan and Kelley in their moving and inspiring book 'Final Gifts-Understanding the special awareness, needs, and communications of the dying' (1992), who wrote about their experiences as hospice nurses with dying patients. NDA is said to develop in people as they are nearing death. This awareness may or may not be conscious. For instance some people close to death know when they will die and will tell their family, or those closest to them. I am thinking here of people who are elderly or people with a terminal illness. But even in some cases of sudden death, we can retrospectively observe NDA.

There are two aspects to NDA, and both aim for a peaceful death. One is the concern with earthly matters: there is a need to feel all affairs are settled in order to feel ready to die and feel at peace. This echoes the 'tasks of living and dying'.

The other is concerned with 'unearthly' matters: with what happens after death, regarding religious or spiritual matters. There is an awareness of a dimension that lies beyond the physical reality and their consciousness may drift between these two worlds. They may experience the presence of predeceased loved ones or meaningful religious or spiritual figures (Death Bed Visions). For example, they might say that their mother is here in the bed next to them and they are happily talking with her, when it is clear that their mother has died years ago.

Dying people will commonly use symbolic language (Stanworth, 2004; Callanan & Kelley, 1992, Sanders, 2007) instead of straightforward descriptions, to express what they are experiencing and what they need in order to die peacefully. They may report having powerful dreams. They may experience great pain, sadness and distress as they aim to heal their lives. They may be fearful of what awaits them after they die. To engage with them, it is important to listen, and understand their communications. In this way we can help them to complete their lives, help to relieve their suffering and pain. Through such a healing of the spirit even physical pain can be eased in some cases, and enable people to let go and die with a sense of inner peace.

Quite often dying people will talk about needing to get ready for a journey, for departure. They need their loved ones to be ready to let them go. A dying person is comforted to know that their loved ones are well and are taken care of after they have gone. 'Their work here is done.'

Death Bed Visions (DBVs)

A DBV is an otherworldly experience that occurs before the death of a person. On rare occasions they can be witnessed by those in attendance. It can take place moments, days, weeks or months before the death occurs.

Typically, a DBV is experienced by a person close to dying and is invisible to others around them. Visions are usually of departed loved ones, often

radiating or surrounded by intense light. Some people have reported seeing children, seeing an angel or some other meaningful, religious figure in the room with them. They feel tremendously comforted by their presence.

DBVs can take various forms. Like ADCs they may occur as a seen presence in the actual room, or appear in dreams.

Death Coincidences (DCs)

According to Raymond Moody, 'a death coincident occurs when family members or friends accompany their dying loved one into the other realm and then return to their bodies. Co-travellers leave their bodies, view the scene below, sense peace and return to their bodies. Other similar elements are light and a tunnel, life review, apparitions and personal transformation following the witnessing of the event. (Moody and Arcangel, 2001, page 163). These experiences are very similar to NDEs.

After Death Contact Experiences or After Death Communications (ADCs)

ADCs are spontaneously experienced communication or contact with a deceased loved one. This spontaneous contact can come in a variety of ways, during waking hours or during sleep, or being woken up by them. Seeing the deceased person, hearing their voice, feeling their touch, having a sense of their presence, smelling a scent that reminds of the deceased person (perfume, cigar smoke, mixture of perfume or smell of incontinence), getting a

sign involving an animal (humming bird, bird, butterfly), the radio or lights coming on or going off, clocks or watches stopping. People also report shared ADC's, where several people witness the experience, or third party ADCs where the dead contact a third party with a message for the bereaved. People generally report feeling deeply reassured and comforted by these experiences. They feel their loved one is in a safe place, where they are happy and still able to care for their loved ones. In the words of a thirteen-year-old boy who had an ADC from his beloved grandfather:

'This experience showed me that my pop had not gone away leaving me without a grandpa, but that he was still very much beside me looking out for me and still helping me to avoid mistakes. He still loved me. It made me feel much better because I knew that my pop was happy where he was because he could still joke with me. It makes me less sad to know he's okay and still visiting me and my family. My mom also has had visits from him. I am not so afraid to die anymore because I know now only our bodies die. Pop proved that to me.' (LaGrand, 1999, page 117)

My own experiences of ADCs:

My experiences of ADCs came as a complete surprise, so much so, that I completely blanked the first time. Only when it happened a second time, in much the same way, did I realise what had happened the first time. I was overjoyed and amazed at having this experience.

The first experience took place on the fourth day after my husband's death. Nicholas died in a car accident of a broken neck. With the help of friends and family, I was busy organising his funeral, a natural burial on our private land. As founders of the Natural Death Centre, we had discussed our funeral wishes many times, so I knew exactly what to do. I was very busy organising, planning and delegating. I was also in shock. I had very little sleep and I was not able to eat much. I also did not cry or express much emotion, I went into action.

So on the fourth day, I was as usual speaking to someone on the telephone giving information. I was talking to a friend and I burst into tears and cried. Suddenly, as I sat there on the stairs, holding the telephone to my right ear, I felt Nicholas standing behind me, bending over me and putting his hands on my elbows. I could clearly feel him touch both my elbows. I could clearly see his left hand on my left elbow. At the same time I felt complete stillness, as if someone had put a glass bell over me. It was a complete and sudden change from the state I had just been in. I felt very calm. It felt very normal or natural to feel his presence. I kept looking at his hand, seeing the little hairs on the top of his hand and felt enormous comfort at seeing and feeling him there. I felt the pressure of his hands as he touched my elbows. I felt that without speaking, Nicholas was clearly conveying to me that he was okay and that I was okay and that everything was okay.

And there was peace. I was comforted and reassured by this.

The second time it happened in the exact same way, again as I sat on the stairs, crying and talking to a friend on the phone. In wonder and amazement I told my friends and family what was happening. It was important for me to share this experience, and others that followed. Even though my family and friends did not know what to make of these experiences, they felt pleased for me, because they could see that I felt very much comforted. Other experiences I had were visitations in dreams. Or visitations during the day, feeling his presence, him standing behind me and the touch of his hands on my shoulders, again to the same affect as before. I felt a stillness, a kind of peace come over me, a kind of bliss.

On one of these occasions a friend witnessed this and saw Nicholas standing behind me to the right, where I felt Nicholas to be. I was with a group of friends on a walking holiday in La Gomera and we had gone to church on the Sunday. During Holy Communion there was a very emotional moment when some beautiful music was played on a little tape recorder. I started to cry and through my tears saw another woman cry. Dressed in black and older than me, I assumed she too was a widow. I cried, feeling sorry for myself and for her. Suddenly I felt Nicholas standing to the right behind me, touching my shoulders. Immediately I felt comforted and became still and reminded of his continued presence on some other level. After leaving the church my

friend who had been in the pew behind me told me that he had seen Nicholas standing between my friend and me, describing the place where I had felt Nicholas to stand.

I had experiences of Nicholas during waking hours for exactly a year and visitations in dreams ended eighteen months after his death. Many of them are too personal to speak about in public; all of them are deeply meaningful. These experiences were extremely real and vivid. And they conveyed to me that death is not the end, but there is some kind of continuity.

Following these extraordinary experiences, I felt the urge to research this phenomena and came across an email from Fred Zimmermann, an American who had emailed Nicholas at the NDC in 1999, suggesting that after death communications could help the bereaved. As far as I know Nicholas never responded to this email, nor did he look up the book by Louis LaGrand that Fred was talking about: 'Messages and Miracles - Extraordinary Experiences by the Bereaved'. I imagine Nicholas had dismissed this subject as cranky and not worth thinking about. But after my experiences, I did not think this weird at all, although I might have done in the past. I got in touch with Fred. He and his wife had an extraordinary story to tell. It is included in LaGrand's book. It is the best book I have come across on this subject and I highly recommend it.

Summary

Long-term studies have shown that NDEs can result in lifelong

psychological and spiritual change. Children who had NDE's, later, as young adults in their twenties, remained unusually insightful, kind and compassionate. There are many parallels to be drawn between NDEs, NDAs, DBVs, DCs, and ADC's. And there are some parallels between them and the experiences and needs of the terminally ill or those who are facing death through aging. In NDEs, DBVs, DCs, ADCs, deceased loved ones are seen in the prime of their life and in good health. There is a clear sense of them as being whole and well and the person who has the experience feels joyful and at peace. There are some cases which are distressing and frightening. Either way, should we not take note and treat these experiences seriously, so that people who have them can feel safe to talk about them? If we can consider these phenomena as a natural part of living and dying, and an aid to the process of dying, then perhaps we might be able to assist in a more meaningful and insightful way; and we too, could learn from this.

I believe by keeping an open mind when listening to the experiences of the dying, we can open doors for people who wish to share their experience of dying. We can help them to speak freely, without the fear that their experience will be dismissed or devalued by criticism or scepticism. And the same goes for people who are ill and bereaved.

These experiences are as old as mankind. Cicero (106 B.C.-43 B.C.) wrote of an ADC in his text 'Divination'. Plato (428/427 BC -

348/347 BC) recorded an NDE of a soldier who died on a battlefield. The phenomena are also in line with the beliefs and the ideas of ancient cultures and religions the world over. This is nothing new. So why is it that these phenomena - which can bring great comfort to the people who experience them and for whom they have a profound meaning - are not more widely disseminated and part of the normal curriculum for doctors, nurses, or even in schools? Death is such a natural part of life, surely basic death education is as important as basic sex education?

Psychotherapy trainings commonly have a lot of emphasis on birth, attachment and early development, but rather little is taught about death, endings, separation, dying and end of life issues.

Bereavement counseling seems to be something that volunteer counselors offer, usually with only minimal training. I am amazed at this, because I think it is most difficult and demanding work that calls for a lot of experience, skill, sensitivity and awareness. The bereaved, the ill or dying are extra sensitive and vulnerable, not unlike their counterpart, the unborn, newly born or very young. We have made progress in our caring for babies, but our care for the dying particularly, and also the bereaved, I believe, is still lagging behind.

I believe that there is a great taboo around death. Although some progress has been made in recent years. I think there is a great need for death education

which offers opportunities for people to speak freely about their experiences of death, of dying and bereavement, to reflect on these experiences and to learn from each other - where they can be helped to prepare for death in advance, when there is still time to reflect and discuss it, and where it is not crisis management.

Suggested reading

Anderson, M. (2001) *Sacred Dying: Creating Rituals for Embracing the End of Life*; Prima Publishing, Roseville, California

Becvar, D. (2001) *In the Presence of Grief: Helping families*, Guilford Publications

Callanan, M. and Kelley, P. (1992) *Final Gifts: Understanding the Special Awareness, Needs and Communications of the Dying*; Bantam Books New York

De Hennezel, M. (1997) *Intimate Death: How the Dying Teach Us to Live; ?*

LaGrand, L. (1999) *Messages and Miracles: Extraordinary Experiences of the Bereaved*; Llewellyn Publications, St. Paul Minnesota, USA

LeShan, L. (1989) *Cancer as a Turning Point*; Gateway Books Bath

Longaker, C. (1997) *Facing Death and Finding Hope - a guide to the emotional and spiritual care of the dying*; Main Street Books

Moody, R. 1975 *Life After Life*, Rider & Co

Moody, R. and Archangel, D. *Life After Loss*, Harper One

Sanders, M. A. (2007) *Nearing Death Awareness*; Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia

Stanworth, R. (2004) *Recognising Spiritual Needs in People Who are Dying*; Oxford University Press

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