



# DEATH before LIFE after LIFE

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The Near-Death Experience Isn't Just  
a Modern Phenomenon

By *Greg Taylor*

**I**n December 1943, as World War II raged across the European continent, Private George Ritchie lay perilously close to death in a Texas military hospital suffering from a severe case of pneumonia. The twenty-year-old had recently completed his basic training, and was booked on the next day's train to Richmond to study as a doctor at the Medical College of Virginia. However, as a fever took hold, his body temperature soared above 106 degrees. On the cold winter's night of December 20 1943, Private Ritchie left on another, far stranger journey:

I heard a click and a whirr. The whirr went on and on. It was getting louder. The whirr was inside my head and my knees were

made of rubber. They were bending and I was falling and all the time the whirr grew louder. I sat up with a start. What time was it? I looked at the bedside table but they'd taken the clock away. In fact, where was any of my stuff? I jumped out of bed in alarm, looking for my clothes. My uniform wasn't on the chair. I turned around, then froze. Someone was lying in that bed.<sup>1</sup>

Private Ritchie didn't stop to think any further, assuming that he had slept through the night and was now late for his Virginia-bound train. He rushed out into the corridor and attempted to gain the attention of an approaching sergeant. However, the sergeant appeared not to see him and brushed past without the slightest acknowledgement.

The young private decided to take matters into his own hands, and dashed down the corridor toward the exit, a pair of swinging metal doors. Suddenly he found himself flying through the air faster than he'd ever travelled before. When he finally came to a halt, Private Ritchie realised with amazement that he had travelled to his desired destination, Richmond – “one hundred times faster than any train could.” Despite still wearing his army-issue hospital pyjamas, he approached a civilian stranger to ask for some bearings, but realised to his distress that this man didn't appear to see him either. While that fact disturbed Private Ritchie, what followed left him gaping. Reaching out his left hand to tap the man on the shoulder, he found to his astonishment that his hand passed straight through the stranger's body.

At this point, Private George Ritchie realised that he was dead:

And suddenly I remembered the young man I had seen in the bed in that little hospital room. What if that had been ... me? Or anyhow, the material, concrete part of myself that in some unexplainable way I'd gotten separated from. What if the form which I had left lying in the hospital room in Texas was my own? And if it were, how could I get back to it again?

Within an instant of this thought he found himself rushing back to the army hospital, where he desperately searched ward after ward for his physical body. Scanning the faces of sleeping soldiers, Private Ritchie was at wit's end when he finally came across a body covered with a sheet. Noticing the onyx and gold fraternity ring on the middle finger of the cadaver's hand, he was, not surprisingly, only slightly relieved to realise that this corpse was his own body.

Suddenly the room got much brighter, and a 'being of light' appeared to Private Ritchie. Suddenly, the episodes of his life played out before him – “everything that had ever happened to me was simply there, in full view, contemporary and current, all seemingly taking place at the same time”

– while 'the Light' asked one simple question: “What did you do with your life?” It is important to note however, that at no time did Ritchie feel that he was being judged by the being. After this review of his life, the being – whom the newly dead man surmised was Jesus – then took him on a tour of both earthly and heavenly realms. To Private Ritchie's surprise, the being then gave him orders to return to the human realm.



If anybody was more surprised at his return to life than George Ritchie, it was probably the army physician who had just signed the young soldier's death certificate. An orderly had noticed some movement as he prepared the corpse for the morgue, and summoned the doctor who quickly administered a shot of adrenaline straight into the dead man's heart. Private Ritchie returned to life with a burning throat and a crushing feeling in his chest – a full nine minutes after he had appeared to have taken his last breath.

## DYING TO KNOW

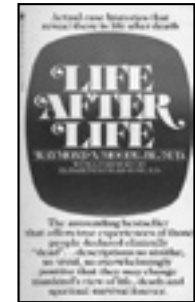
The resurrection experience of George Ritchie marks a key moment in the debate over the survival of death, as it directly inspired the modern fascination with a phenomenon which has become known as the near-death experience (NDE). The young private went on to become Dr George Ritchie, a psychiatrist whose description of the death realms made a great impression upon one of his students, one Raymond Moody, when he related it during a philosophy lecture in 1965. A decade later, that same student told the world about not only Dr Ritchie's NDE, but also a great many others when he published the best-selling book *Life after Life*. Going on to sell more than 13 million copies, Moody's book brought the NDE into the public consciousness, and inspired further scientific investigation of these strange experiences, as well as Hollywood movies such as *Flatliners*.

In *Life after Life*, Moody recounted the various phenomena that one might expect to experience during an NDE, based on the testimony given to him by hundreds of near-death experiencers. The following passage is an idealised description of the NDE, assembled by Dr Moody from the testimony of those who had flirted with death:

A man is dying and, as he reaches the point of greatest physical distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to hear an uncomfortable noise, a loud ringing or buzzing, and at the same time feels himself moving very rapidly through a long dark tunnel. After this, he suddenly finds himself outside of his own physical body, but still in the immediate physical environment, and he sees his own body from a distance, as though he is a spectator. He watches the resuscitation attempt from this unusual vantage point and is in a state of emotional upheaval.

After a while, he collects himself and becomes more accustomed to his odd condition. He notes that he still has a "body", but one

of a very different nature and with very different powers from the physical body he has left behind. Soon other things begin to happen. Others come to meet and to help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving warm spirit of a kind he has never encountered before – a being of light – appears before him. This being asks him a question, non-verbally, to make him evaluate his life and helps him along by showing him a panoramic, instantaneous playback of the major events in his life. At some point he finds himself approaching some sort of barrier or border, apparently representing the limit between earthly life and the next life. Yet he finds that he must go back to the earth, that the time of his death has not yet come. At this point he resists, for by now he is taken up with his experiences in the afterlife and does not want to return. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love and peace. Despite his attitude, though, he somehow reunites with his physical body and lives.



Later, he tries to tell others, but he has trouble doing so. In the first place, he can find no human words adequate to describe these unearthly episodes. He also finds that others scoff, so he stops telling other people. Still, the experience affects his life profoundly, especially his views about death and its relationship to life.<sup>2</sup>

This account is fictional – the ‘perfect’ NDE so to speak; a ‘real-world’ NDE will usually not include every one of these elements. Nonetheless, most recorded NDEs do include a number of them. For example, George Ritchie's experience included a ‘whirring’ noise at onset, the viewing of his own body, and an encounter with a being of light who helped evaluate his life. Many other real-world reports exhibit other of these ‘recurrent regularities’. For example:

I got up and walked into the hall to go get a drink, and it was at that point, as they found out later, that my appendix ruptured. I became very weak, and I fell down. I began to feel a sort of drifting, a movement of my real being in and out of my body, and to hear beautiful music. I floated on down the hall and out the door onto the screened porch. There, it almost seemed that clouds, a pink mist really, began to gather around me, and then I floated right straight on through the screen, just as though it weren't there, and up into this pure crystal light, and illuminating white light. It was beautiful, and so bright, so radiant, but it didn't hurt my eyes. It's not any kind of light you can describe on Earth. I didn't actually see a person in this light, and yet it has a special identity, it definitely does. It is a light of perfect understanding and perfect love.<sup>3</sup>

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Fifteen years ago when I was fifty-nine I had a heart attack... Then everything became warm and bright and light and beautiful... I was travelling along a tunnel. It was light, light, light. I didn't move my feet, I just 'floated' I suppose. But it was calm and peaceful and just lovely. Gradually there was a brilliant light at the end – really brilliant – and I knew I was going right into the glowing heart of that light, but then I saw a group of people between me and the light. I knew them; my brother, who had died a few years before, was gesticulating delightedly as I approached. Their faces were so happy and welcoming. Then somehow my mother became detached from the group. She shook her head and waved her hand (rather like a windscreen wiper) and I stopped, and I heard the doctor say, "She's coming around," and I was in my bed and the doctor and my husband were there. My first words to the doctor were, "Why did you bring me back?"<sup>4</sup>

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My heart stopped beating. I didn't know at that time that that was exactly what happened to me, but anyway when this happened I had an experience. Well, the first thing that happened – now I am

going to describe it just the way I felt – was that I had this ringing noise brrrrnnnnng-brrrrnnnnng-brrrrnnnnng, very rhythmic. Then I was moving through this – you're going to think this is weird – through this long dark place. It seemed like a sewer or something."<sup>5</sup>

However, many cynics of the near-death experience were quick to suggest that the success of *Life After Life* was in fact the most important contributor to the 'archetype' of the near-death experience, with most subsequent NDEs reported being just 'copycat' effects, brought on by contagion – unconsciously or consciously – by the massive popularity of Moody's book. Despite Moody's impressive collection of case reports, skeptics seemed happy to reverse the causality, with his archetypal NDE now allegedly serving as the inspiration for later reports featuring elements such as the tunnel, past life review, and being of light.

Conversely, some New Age commentators have speculated as to why the NDE has suddenly come to such prominence, with no previous history until recent decades. Is it a sign of a change in human consciousness, or some prophetic signal of an impending change in the world?

## DEATH THROUGH THE AGES

However, the fact of the matter is that there are many examples of 'pre-Moody' experiences, recorded throughout history and in many different cultures. It seems that this is, quite simply, a phenomenon that has been with us since time immemorial. Take for example the writings of the famous Greek philosopher known to us as Plato (428 – 348 BCE). In a number of his 'dialogues', Plato describes the higher planes of existence in familiar terms. He talks of how the soul of a person separates from the physical body at the time of death, how

this soul may find itself crossing a body of water on a ‘ship of death’, and may then meet and converse with the spirits of deceased family and friends. For Plato, death is akin to awakening from a dream – the formerly imprisoned soul is released into a state of greater awareness and memory.

It is in Book 10 of Plato’s classic, *The Republic*, that we find a remarkable narrative which proves that the near-death experience has been with us throughout history. Here the legendary philosopher recounts the tale of a Greek soldier named Er, apparently killed in battle, but who revived with scant minutes to go before his body was to be immolated in the funeral pyre. After awakening, Er described how his soul had gone out of his body and travelled to the deathly realms, where he had seen souls being judged by a display of their past deeds. However, he had been ordered to return to the land of the living and explain what he had seen to others – a feature of many NDEs.

The Roman historian Plutarch also related the experience of one Aridaeus of Soli, who “fell from a certain height upon the nape of his neck and died...The third day he was carried away to be buried when he came back to himself and rapidly recovered...” Aridaeus told how, having ‘died’, he felt his spirit body exiting his physical body through his head. His sense of vision now seemed augmented; sharper, and strangely capable of viewing “around in all directions at once”. Similarly – like George Ritchie – Aridaeus could “move in all directions easily and quickly”. All of a sudden, a deceased relative who had died young appears before him, and Aridaeus then is shown the workings of the afterlife realms, before reviving. It is also interesting to note that subsequent to his experience, Aridaeus transformed himself and his lifestyle, becoming more pure of heart and helpful in his community. So much so, that he was given a new name, ‘Thespesius’, meaning ‘divine’ or ‘wonderful’.<sup>6</sup>

The story of Aridaeus could be lifted straight from the pages of Raymond Moody’s *Life After Life* – apart from the fact that it was written almost two millennia beforehand! Moody makes special note

in his book about how experiencers are changed by their NDEs, often developing a zest for life and the twin pursuits of focusing more on personal relationships, as well as the quest for knowledge. Most also seemed to lose any fear of dying. They too have become ‘Thespesius’. For example, in *Life After Life* we find one individual’s testimony that they now “try to do things that have more meaning, and that makes my mind and soul feel better. And I try not to be biased, and not to judge people. I want to do things because they are good, not because they are good to me... I feel like this is because of what happened to me, because of the places I went and the things I saw in this experience.”<sup>7</sup>

The 360-degree-vision described by Aridaeus is another common point with the reports of modern near-death experiencers. Even minor points, such as his spirit leaving through his head – consider this report from *Life After Life*:

I lost control of my car on a curve, and the car left the road and went into the air, and I remember seeing the blue sky and saw that the car was going down into a ditch... At that point, I kind of lost my sense of time, and I lost my physical reality as far as my body is concerned... My being or my self or my spirit, or whatever you would like to label it – *I could sort of feel it rise out of me, through my head.* And it wasn’t anything that hurt, it was just sort of like a lifting and it being above me... As it went out of my body, it seemed that a large end left first, and the small end last.<sup>8</sup>

In his article for *Darklore Volume 2*, Michael Tymn also pointed out the ‘pre-Moody’ NDE (occurring in 1889) of Dr. A.S. Wiltse, as related in Fred Myers’ classic 1903 book, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*: “I began slowly to retreat from the feet, toward the head, as a rubber cord shortens. I remember reaching the hips and saying to myself, ‘Now, there is no life below the hips. *As I emerged from the head,* I floated up and down and laterally like a soap bubble.”

There are numerous other examples from many centuries ago. For example, a document written in Tibet during the 8th century – although almost certainly part of a much older oral tradition – describes after-death encounters similar to those outlined by Raymond Moody. In fact, this document provided an actual ‘manual’ for the journey after death. Known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, this enigmatic work was usually read to either the dying or already dead, to assist them in their transition to the afterlife. It describes at length numerous stages of the journey from the land of the living to the world of the dead, and some of the descriptions match the modern NDE remarkably well.

For instance, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* explains that after the soul of the deceased separates from the physical body, it is likely that roaring, thundering and whistling sounds will be heard. The soul will likely be able to observe the physical surroundings, but will be unable to interact with them. However, the newly dead will also find that travel within this new plane of existence is virtually instantaneous, the journey made simply by desiring to go to a destination – just as young Private Ritchie found. At later stages of the post-death journey, this ancient book describes a meeting with a pure light, and a life-review in which all past deeds are replayed in order to summarise the life of the newly deceased. It is worth noting that beyond these experiences, there are many ‘deeper’ stages of death described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which no survivor of a near-death experience has ever recalled.

Tibetan tradition is not the only place where we find historical crossovers between religions and the NDE. In her book *The Near Death Experience: Mysticism or Madness*, theologian Judith Cressy points out that a number of the biographies of celebrated mystics tell of an apparent dying, followed by a return to life with a visionary message to pass on. For instance, Cressy takes a look at the experience of Theresa of Avila:

I thought I was being carried up to Heaven: the first persons I saw there were my mother and father, and such great things happened in so short a time...I wish I could give a description of at least the smallest part of what I learned, but when I try to discover a way of doing so, I find it impossible, for while the light we see here and that other light are both light, there is no comparison between the two and the brightness of the sun seems quite dull if compared with the other. [Afterwards] I was...left with very little fear of death, of which previously I had been very much afraid.<sup>9</sup>

Here we again see many of the standard elements found in modern NDEs – a death, followed by a meeting with deceased relatives, the ineffability of the experience, the ‘light’ which is beyond compare, and the post-experience transformation and loss of fear of dying.

### MORE MODERN EXAMPLES

Moving through time, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century we find the childhood account of Admiral Francis Beaufort. In 1795 he fell off a vessel anchored in Portsmouth Harbor. Not knowing how to swim at the time, he spent a considerable amount of time submerged before he was successfully rescued. Beaufort described what he experienced while underwater:

All hope fled, all exertion had ceased, a calm feeling of the most perfect tranquility superseded the previous tumultuous sensations... Though the senses were thus deadened, not so the mind; its activity seemed to be invigorated in a ratio which defies all description, for thought rose after thought with a rapidity of succession that is not only indescribable, but probably inconceivable, by anyone who has not himself been in a similar situation. The course of these thoughts I can even now in a

great measure retrace – the event which had just taken place, the awkwardness that had produced it, the bustle it must have occasioned, the effect it would have on a most affectionate father, and a thousand other circumstances minutely associated with home were the first series of reflection that occurred.

This sharpness of thought, and ability to analyse vast amounts of information in a seeming short time are hallmarks of the NDE. However, the next stage of the experience touches on one of the most common aspects – the life review. Beaufort tells how his thoughts then began to take a wider range...

...our last cruise, a former voyage and shipwreck, my school, the progress I had made there and the time I had misspent, and even all my boyish pursuits and adventures. Thus traveling backwards, every past incident of my life seemed to glance across my recollection in retrograde succession; not, however, in mere outline as here stated, but the picture filled up every minute and collateral feature; in short, the whole period of my existence seemed to be placed before me in a kind of panoramic review, and each act of it to be accompanied by a consciousness of right or wrong, or by some reflection on its cause or its consequence; indeed, many trifling events which had been long forgotten, then crossed into my imagination, and with the character of recent familiarity.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, Beaufort's words – "panoramic review" – actually crop up regularly in modern descriptions of this part of the experience. Note too that it is not just a 'dump' of memories without purpose; just as in modern NDEs (see Moody's archetypal NDE), the review is accompanied by "a consciousness of right or wrong." For example, Moody quotes one experiencer as viewing "some instances where I had been selfish to my sister, but then just as many times where I had really shown love to her and had shared with her."

The life review is also prominent in one of the first studies truly devoted to the near-death experience. In 1892, Albert Heim, a Zurich geology professor, presented his findings from 25 years of research into the experiences of people who survived acute life-threatening situations – notably, climbers who fell during their ascents. He found that 95 percent of his subjects reported a certain, consistent experience:

There was no anxiety, no trace of despair, no pain; but rather, calm seriousness, profound acceptance, and a dominant mental quickness and sense of surety. Mental activity became enormous, rising to a hundred-fold velocity or intensity. The relationships of events and their probable outcomes were overviewed with objective clarity. No confusion entered at all. Time became greatly expanded... In many cases there followed a sudden review of the individual's entire past; and finally the person falling often heard beautiful music and fell in a superbly blue heaven containing roseate cloudlets.<sup>11</sup>

In his paper "Historical Perspectives on Near-Death Episodes", John Audette also cites the case of explorer Admiral Richard Byrd. He points out that Byrd discusses his own 'pre-Moody' near-death experience in his book, *Alone*, published in 1938. It occurred as a result of carbon monoxide poisoning Byrd suffered during his well-known Antarctic expedition. He recalled that "I saw my whole life pass in review," and also that he "realized how wrong my sense of value had been and how I had failed to see that the simple, homely, unpretentious things of life are the most important" – again, both common elements of the NDE. Byrd told how the struggle "went on interminably in a half-lighted borderland divided by a great wall. Several times I was nearly across the wall into a field flooded with a golden light but each time I slipped back into a spinning darkness."<sup>12</sup>

One of the most fascinating accounts mentioned by Audette is the case of Louis Tucker, a Catholic priest. Tucker described his

near-death experience in his 1943 memoirs, *Clerical Errors*, and it is one of the closest analogues of Moody's 'archetypal NDE' that is likely to be found. It took place in 1909, when Tucker was suffering the life-threatening effects of a severe case of food poisoning. With the family physician in attendance, Tucker lost consciousness, and was shortly thereafter pronounced dead by the doctor. What followed is worth quoting in full, as Tucker gives wonderful detail about the experience:

The unconsciousness was short. The sensation was not quite like anything earthly; the nearest familiar thing to it is passing through a short tunnel on a train... I emerged into a place where people were being met by friends. It was quiet and full of light, and Father was waiting for me. He looked exactly as he had in the last few years of his life and wore the last suit of clothes he had owned... I knew that the clothes Father wore were assumed because they were familiar to me, so that I might feel no strangeness in seeing him, and that to some lesser extent, his appearance was assumed also; I knew all these things by contagion, because he did.

Soon I discovered that we were not talking, but thinking. I knew dozens of things that we did not mention because he knew them. He thought a question, I an answer, without speaking; the process was practically instantaneous... What he said was in ideas, no words: if I were to go back at all I must go at once... I did not want to go back; not in the least; the idea of self-preservation, the will to live was quite gone...

I swung into the blackness again, as a man might swing on a train, thoroughly disgusted that I could not stay, and absolutely certain that it was right for me to go back. That certainty has never wavered. There was a short interval of confused and hurrying blackness and I came to, to find myself lying on my bed with the doctor bending

over telling me that I was safe now and would live... I told him I knew that some time ago, and went to sleep.<sup>13</sup>

It's interesting to note Tucker's analysis of how his father's appearance was "assumed" so that he would "feel no strangeness in seeing him." Also worth pointing out is the aspect of "not talking, but thinking," as this is yet another aspect common to near-death experiences. For instance, Raymond Moody quotes one experiencer as saying "I could see people all around, and I could understand what they were saying. I didn't hear them, audibly, like I'm hearing you. It was more like knowing what they were thinking, exactly what they were thinking, but only in my mind, not in their actual vocabulary."<sup>14</sup> George Ritchie mentions in his own influential account that "the words were out, in this strange realm where communication took place by thought instead of speech, before I could call them back."

### THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

Although Raymond Moody is often given much of the credit for 'discovering' the near-death experience, more than a decade before the publication of *Life After Life* another researcher had already written at length on the topic. In his books *The Supreme Adventure* (1961) and *Intimations of Immortality* (1965), Dr. Robert Crookall cited numerous examples of what he called "pseudo-death," noting the archetypal elements that Moody would later bring to the public's attention. What's more however, Crookall also compared these tales of 'pseudo-death' with accounts of the death process as told by 'communicators' through mediums – and found a number of these same recurring elements, well before they were public knowledge.

For example, Crookall shows that, according to ostensibly dead 'communicators', the newly-deceased are usually met by other deceased loved ones: "Usually friends or relatives take the newly-dead



man in charge.” This may not be considered a surprising thing for a medium to say however – it’s probably what most people would wish for. But the common elements continue:

Communicators often declare that, in the early stages of transition, they experienced a panoramic review of their past earth-lives... (1) Findlay was told: “The scenes of the past life are...often revealed to those who are just passing, at the last moment.” ... (2) “I was unconscious for just a moment. Then my entire life unreeled itself” ... (5) “I saw clearer and clearer the events of my past life pass, in a long procession, before me” ... (8) ‘Scott’ told Jane Sherwood that his thoughts “raced over the record of a whole long lifetime.”<sup>15</sup>

As part of his analysis of the ‘past-life review’, Crookall also discovered another historical footnote suggesting that the experience has been with us for a long time. According to Crookall, the great Greek philosopher Pythagoras (circa 500 B.C.) taught that at the time of death, the soul “sees, over and over again, its earthly existence, the scenes succeeding one another with startling clearness.”

Considering how we have already seen that the review is sometimes considered a personal ‘judgement day’, with feelings of right and wrong accompanying each scene, it is fascinating to note the recurring motif that accompanies this aspect, as told by ‘dead’ communicators. “I saw my life unfold before me in a procession of images. One is faced with the effects emotionally of all one’s actions,” said a communicator quoted in a 1929 book. “Each incident brings with it the feelings not only of oneself alone but of all those others who were affected by the events,” according to another communicator. And again, this account from 1928: “Like everyone who passes over, he had been through the whole of his past life, re-living his past actions in every detail. All the pain he had given to people he experienced himself, and all the pleasure he had given he received back again.”

Beyond the meeting with the familiar dead, and the past life review, Crookall’s research also found that communicators tell of the out-of-body experience component (“I saw about me those that had been dead for a long time... Then I seemed to rise up out of my body”; “I was not lying in the bed, but floating in the air, a little above it. I saw the body, stretched out straight.”) and the passage through the ‘tunnel’ (“I saw in front of me a dark tunnel. I stepped out of the tunnel into a new world”; “I remember a curious opening, as if one had passed through subterranean passages and found oneself near the mouth of a cave... The light was much stronger outside.”) to ‘the light’ (“I was with ‘B’ [her son, killed in the War]: he took me to a world so brilliant that I can’t describe it”).

One last account worth touching on is a little-known ‘vision’ which came to Mrs Leonora Piper, considered one of the most convincing mediums of all time (due to the evidential material she produced during more than two decades of being tested by some of the best scientists of the day). In 1896 Mrs Piper was recuperating in hospital after a hernia operation when she experienced a strange dream, which sounds suspiciously like a near-death experience:

On Saturday night I went to sleep and at about one o’clock – I think it was one because I awoke soon after – I had a dream or vision. The first experience I had was as though I was being raised from my bed while still in my body. Then I felt a strong hand clasping my arm on the left; it seemed like the hand of a man. On my right I was being lifted apparently without any contact. I saw a man with long wavy hair and stoop-over shoulders. I think it was Phinuit. I saw George [Pelham] also. It was he who seemed to be holding me up.

Then I heard voices saying, “Come, we wish to take you with us; we wish to give you a rest from your tired body,” and without further sound I was raised. There was a break between my hearing the

voices and my being lifted or raised above my bed. I was conscious of not being on my bed. Then I was carried in space until we came to a delicate blue drapery hanging in folds as though blowing in the breeze. It seemed to be immovable until we passed through when it parted, and I was not conscious of there being any sides to it; I then heard a rustling sound as of people approaching, but I didn't hear the footsteps. It was like the rustling of garments, and then I saw a light as though all space – the whole earth was aglow – such a light! – I never saw anything like it before.

Then I heard children's voices as though singing, and a chorus like young ladies' voices; I was surrounded by them; they were everywhere and they then seemed to form a ring around me. They were all very beautiful and passing around from one to the other was what seemed to be a silken banner or sash which they seemed to be holding. It was soft and silky and entwined about with flowers, and it was held from one to the other so that the silken band helped to form a ring. They had beautifully sandalled feet. I heard the rustling of their garments (something like the rustling of tissue paper) – loose, Greek, flowing garments. They danced about as they formed the ring; then the ring seemed to separate and they dispersed. I felt it was a sort of greeting to me as it were, that is, the ring and their dancing and singing.

We passed on along a smooth walk hedged on either side with flowers. We came to pillars – they looked like real pillars, but were not solid-looking, almost transparent. The pillars seemed to be an entrance to what seemed to be a large building. It seemed as though one whole side of the building was open, the pillars forming the entrance. Inside the building as we passed, I saw a long bench or table around which many men were writing; they were each one sitting back one to the other and did not seem to pay any attention to me. It seemed as though some sort of educational work was

being carried on. I looked into their faces as we passed the building; their faces were smooth and devoid of all wrinkles – they had very clear complexions...

...As I was beginning to see a great number of people approaching, I felt as though some one had stabbed me in the back. When I was first being taken up, I seemed to follow a streak of light; it seemed to be a ray of light, similar to a ray of light from the sun through a knot hole, and we followed that light. When I felt the stab, I felt that the same light was behind me, and it seemed to be a cord or string but nothing tangible, and it seemed to be the same ray of light which led me off away from this sphere. As these people approached me, some one seemed to be pulling on the cord, though I could not say it was a cord – it looked like a light and felt like cord. Some one kept pulling and I was being lowered and taken from my feet – (I had been standing erect) – to a position of lying down, and then I awoke and I had a feeling that I had not been asleep but had been awake and had had this experience while awake – and yet my body was so heavy that I could not move – my body seemed so dark and heavy as though it did not belong to me; I had to struggle for breath. I felt depressed to think that I had got back. I could not move a limb at first.<sup>16</sup>



Leonora Piper in 1890

Beyond the archetypal NDE elements, other things worth noting in Mrs. Piper's "dream" include the "rustling of tissue paper" sound often reported in NDEs and other 'altered states', and the "almost transparent" pillars near the "educational" building – something which has been noted in a number of modern NDEs, often referred to as the 'City of Knowledge'. For instance, well-known experiencer Dannion Brinkley told how he saw cathedrals "made entirely of a

crystalline substance that glowed with a light that shone powerfully from within... I knew that I was in a place of learning.” Another account tells how the buildings were constructed out of blocks that “were square, they had dimensions to ’em, except you could see through ’em and in the center of each one of these was this gold and silver light.”

### SEEING THE LIGHT

In conclusion, the evidence seems to show that not only are NDEs an aspect of human experience which has been witnessed throughout history, but that there is some corroborating evidence suggesting that they may well actually be a glimpse beyond the veil of death. The testimony of deceased ‘communicators’ through mediums certainly gives us food for thought before dismissing them simply as a psychological artefact of the dying process.

There are also other avenues which might offer further insights, and which certainly seem to extinguish any thought that NDEs occur by ‘contamination’ or priming. Dr Melvin Morse has conducted extensive research into near-death experiences reported by children. Surveying 26 children who nearly died at Seattle Children’s Hospital, he found that 23 of them experienced aspects of the NDE, whereas his control group of children with non-life-threatening conditions reported none.

They can occur in very young children, too little to have a fear of death to react to, infants who have no internal defense mechanisms against the concept of death. Doctors at Massachusetts General Hospital report that an 8 month old had an NDE after nearly dying of kidney failure. As soon as she could talk, at age two, she told her parents of going into a tunnel into a bright light. Psychiatrists Gabbard and Twemlow report of a 29 month old who

bit into an electric cord and nearly died. He told his mother that he went into a room with a nice man. There was a bright light on the ceiling. He wanted to know if I wanted to go home, or come play with him.”<sup>17</sup>

Besides being informative, you can’t help but be entertained by the accounts given by young children. Morse reports on the experience of a child who almost drowned after being trapped in a car which had driven off a bridge: “First the car filled up with water, and everything went all blank. Then I died. I went into a huge noodle. It wasn’t like a spiral noodle, but it was very straight. When I told my Mom about it, I told her it was a noodle, but it must have been a tunnel, because it had a rainbow in it. Noodles don’t have rainbows in them.”<sup>18</sup>

Melvin Morse’s research reinforces probably the most important aspect of the NDE archetype. He found that adults who had NDEs “gave more money to charity than control subjects, volunteered in the community, were in helping professions, did not suffer from drug abuse...and ate more fresh fruit and vegetables than control populations.”<sup>19</sup> Just as in the story of Aridaeus, as related by Plutarch, throughout history the majority of those who have had these experiences have considered them as completely real, and have subsequently transformed their lives as a result. Perhaps that is the most convincing element of all...

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