



The DYING LIGHT



Exploring the strange phenomenon of lights
seen at the time of death

by *Greg Taylor*

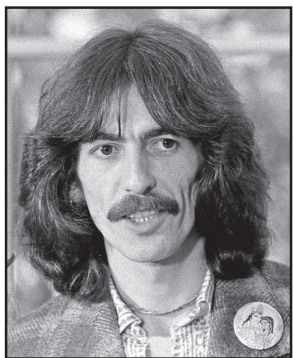
“Sunrise doesn’t last all morning, a cloudburst doesn’t last all day,” sang George Harrison on the title track to his first post-Beatles solo album *All Things Must Pass*. Although the song is naturally seen as an ode to the impermanence of human life, the lyrics also note that never-ending change means that those left grieving can look to the future with hope: “Darkness only stays at night-time, in the morning it will fade away.” But Harrison also intimated, through lyrics written in the first-person, that those that die too might move onwards: “None of life’s strings can last, so I must be on my way, and face another day”.

Three decades after writing this song, the former Beatles guitarist went ‘on his way’ himself, in the literal sense, dying on the 29th of

November 2001 – aged just 58 – after a battle with lung cancer. Is it possible that Harrison – a devotee of Indian mysticism – truly did move on, in some sense, to ‘face another day’? Intriguingly, the extraordinary life of George Harrison seems to have been matched with an extraordinary death, going by the events his wife Olivia witnessed as the former Beatle shed this mortal coil:

There was a profound experience that happened when he left his body. It was visible. Let’s just say, you wouldn’t need to light the room, if you were trying to film it. He just...lit the room.¹

The lazy response to the above testimony would be to mark down Olivia Harrison’s observations as hyperbole – the poetic wish-fulfilment of a grieving wife – except for the fact that she is far from alone in witnessing strange phenomena such as this at the deathbed of loved ones. As I pointed out in my recent book, *Stop Worrying! There Probably is an Afterlife*,



George Harrison

there have in fact been numerous cases in which those caring for the dying have described seeing a bright light surrounding the dying person, exuding what they relate as “a raw feeling of love”.² And when I say ‘numerous’, I’m not exaggerating: neuropsychiatrist Peter Fenwick was amazed to find in a survey of palliative carers that *one in every three* reported accounts of “a radiant light that

envelops the dying person, and may spread throughout the room and involve the carer”, a description which sounds remarkably similar to the “profound experience” recounted by Olivia Harrison. In a similar Dutch study, the numbers were even more staggering: *more than half* of all carers reported observations of this ‘dying light’!

Dipping into these experiences on a case-by-case basis, the phenomenon continues to intrigue. Peter Fenwick was told by one lady that while sitting at her dying husband’s bedside there was suddenly “a most brilliant light shining from my husband’s chest”. The light began to rise toward the ceiling, and she began hearing “the most beautiful music and singing voices”, filling her with an overwhelming feeling of joy. At this point, the nurse interrupted with news that her husband had just passed, and the light and the music instantly disappeared, leaving the woman bereft at being left behind, after being shown just the barest of glimpses ‘behind the veil’.³

Similarly, another woman reported that as she watched her mother pass away...

...It was then that I saw her face appeared to be glowing with a gold light. The light began to leave through the top of her head and go towards the ceiling. Looking back to my mother’s face I saw that she was no longer breathing.⁴

In a survey of palliative care nurses in Australia, one respondent told how he, another nurse, and the patient’s husband saw a blue-white light leave the body of the patient and drift toward the ceiling. “As she died we just noticed like an energy rising from her...sort of a bluey white sort of aura,” the nurse explained. “We looked at each other, and the husband was on the other side of the bed and he was looking at us... he saw it as well and he said he thinks that she went to a better place”. As is often the case, this experience was transformative for the nurse: “It probably changed the way I felt about people dying and what actually happens after death”.⁵ In fact, the researcher responsible for the Australian study which uncovered this anecdote, Deborah Morris, was herself originally inspired to investigate strange death-bed experiences by her own experience of seeing the ‘dying light’. “There was a young man who

had died in the room with his family and I saw an aura coming off him,” she recounts. “It was like a mist. I didn’t tell anybody for years. I’ve never seen it again”.⁶

This ‘mist’ or ‘vapour’ leaving the body is another strange element that is sometimes (though certainly not always) reported during experiences of death-bed light (some describe it as smoke or vapour, others say it resembles the shimmer above a hot road, while some witnesses claim even to have seen it coalesce into a human-type shape). One carer told how she awoke in the darkness of early morning to the sight of “a flame licking the top of the wall against the ceiling” above her dying father’s bed. “I saw a plume of smoke rising, like the vapour that rises from a snuffed-out candle, but on a bigger scale... it was being thrown off by a single blade of phosphorus light”, the witness recounted. “It hung above Dad’s bed, about 18 inches or so long, and was indescribably beautiful...it seemed to express perfect love and peace”. She switched on the light to investigate further, but the phenomenon instantly vanished; “the room was the same as always on a November morning, cold and cheerless, with no sound of breathing from Dad’s bed. His body was still warm”. Another carer told of the profound effect seeing such things can have on one’s worldview:

As he died something which is very hard to describe because it was so unexpected and because I had seen nothing like it left up through his body and out of his head. It resembled distinct delicate waves/lines of smoke (smoke is not the right word but I have not got a comparison) and then disappeared. I was the only one to see it. It left me with such a sense of peace and comfort. I don’t think that we were particularly close as my sister and I had been sent off to boarding school at an early age.

I do not believe in God. But as to an afterlife I now really do not know what to think.

Well-known near-death experience researcher Raymond Moody – author of the seminal 1970s book on NDEs, *Life After Life* – relates a case in his recent book *Glimpses of Eternity* in which a Georgia doctor saw a “bright glow” coming from a recently-deceased patient, followed by a mist that “formed over the chest area and hovered there”. The doctor noticed some motion to the ‘mist’, though he described it as being as subtle as “water moving within water”. Another interviewee, a hospice psychologist from North Carolina, told Moody they occasionally had seen lights in the room during someone’s passing, and on two occasions had “seen patients leave their body in cloud form...I would describe these clouds as a sort of mist that forms around the head or chest”.⁷

Another pioneering researcher of strange phenomena occurring at the time of death was the late Dr. Robert Crookall. In his 1970 book, *Out-of-the-Body Experiences*, Crookall cites the case of Dr. R. B. Hout, a physician who encountered both anomalous mist and light in the room during the death of his aunt.

My attention was called...to something immediately above the physical body, suspended in the atmosphere about two feet above the bed. At first I could distinguish nothing more than a vague outline of a hazy, fog-like substance. There seemed to be only a mist held suspended, motionless. But, as I looked, very gradually there grew into my sight a denser, more solid, condensation of this inexplicable vapor. Then I was astonished to see definite outlines presenting themselves, and soon I saw this fog-like substance was assuming a human form... The eyes were closed as though in tranquil sleep, and a luminosity seemed to radiate from the spirit body.⁸

What are to make of these tales? Skeptics of the idea of an afterlife have generally dismissed such testimony as being hallucinations brought on by the stress of the moment, or wishful thinking by the grieving. But how then do we explain the many stories in which *multiple witnesses*

in the same room saw this phenomenon occurring, such as the case mentioned above from the Australian survey of palliative carers, in which two nurses and the patient's husband all saw "a blue-white light leave the body of the patient and drift toward the ceiling"? Peter Fenwick relates an instance in which a person, at the time of their brother's death, witnessed "odd tiny sparks of bright light" emanating from the body – and what's more, these 'sparks' were also seen by another person in the room. In one of Raymond Moody's case files, an entire family witnessed the dying light at their mother's bedside:

The day my mother died, my two brothers, my sister, my sister-in-law and I were all in the room. My mother hadn't spoken a word in several hours, and she was breathing in an irregular pattern. None of us were really upset because mother had been on a long downhill course and we knew this was the end.

Suddenly, a bright light appeared in the room. My first thought was that a reflection was shining through the window from a vehicle passing by outside. Even as I thought that, however, I knew it wasn't true, because this was not any kind of light on this earth. I nudged my sister to see if she saw it too, and when I looked at her, her eyes were as big as saucers. At the same time I saw my brother literally gasp. Everyone saw it together and for a little while we were frightened.

Then my mother just expired and we all kind of breathed a big sigh of relief.⁹

In another case, a hospice worker named David told how he was "stunned" during the passing of a patient with pancreatic cancer when a bright light filled the room, visible to all those present including the dying woman's husband. He described it as "the brightest light I'd ever seen", though it seemed more like a "plasma or the kind of light you see when you get snow-blinded".



If this ‘dying light’ is not an hallucination, what could it be? Is it some sort of energy emitted during the physical death of the body that takes visible form? Or is it some sort of ‘psychical’ manifestation that can only be observed with the mind in a certain state? Is there any relationship between this light seen at deathbeds, and the ‘white light’ so often witnessed by those who have a near-death experience? At this point, we have a lot of questions, but very few – if any – answers. There are possible ways forward from a scientific point of view – for example, Peter Fenwick has suggested that light sensors could be set up in hospice rooms in an attempt to record increases in the amount of light – but at the end of the day, it seems we will likely always be left to make a judgement call based only on anecdotes, or in some cases our own experiences. One thing is sure though: those who have experienced this ‘dying light’ for themselves will likely not be swayed by skeptical arguments. For them, like Olivia Harrison, the experience is profoundly meaningful, and the weak ‘explanations’ of the phenomenon from those who cleave to a skeptical (or perhaps more correctly, materialist) philosophy would bear all the impact of a butterfly trying to move an elephant.

The Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote that “Death is not extinguishing the light, it is putting out the lamp because dawn has come”. His words seem a lot more literal once we are familiar with accounts of the dying light.

Greg Taylor is the owner and editor of the online alternative news portal, *The Daily Grail* (www.dailygrail.com), and is also the editor of *Darklore*. He is widely read in topics that challenge the orthodox worldview, from alternative history to the mysteries of human consciousness. Greg currently resides in Brisbane, Australia. He has written two guidebooks to the esoteric topics in Dan Brown’s novels: *The Guide to Dan Brown’s The Lost Symbol* and *Inside Dan Brown’s Inferno*. His latest book *Stop Worrying! There Probably is an Afterlife* is an exploration of the evidence for the survival of consciousness after death.