

MASTER THESIS

CULTURAL COMPARATIVE AND
ANALYSIS OF NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CULTURAL COMPARATIVE AND
ANALYSIS OF NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES

M.Msc. THESIS

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this master thesis to all of the future University of Sedona graduate students from the Monterey Peninsula in California, USA. May all of your dreams be fulfilled and may your studies and research bring you to places you never dreamt possible.

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ABSTRACT

Interpretations of near-death experiences are influenced by psychosocial teachings and belief systems, usually put in place from childhood. Pre or post conceived notions of death and afterlife vary. Different cultures and religious beliefs or systems have resulted in the formation of numerous groups who have fostered their own interpretations of death and afterlife. Certainly the immediate transition period between life and afterlife are inclusive. This thesis provides an overview of comparisons of theories and for the plausibility of theories of near death experiences. Contained herein, the author will give an overview of the human consciousness as it might be with life after death according to cultural or religious beliefs. Also included will be interpretations of near death experiences by different cultural groups. Combined with the contemporary interpretations of various studies of people who have had near death experiences (throughout this thesis abbreviated as NDE's) and the arguments against reductionism provide grounds for the plausibility of the theories concerning NDE's.

(VII)

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is designed to address the various views of what a Near Death Experience (NDE) means to most people and how it may differ by various people from different cultures or religions, ages or scientific viewed vantages.

Are there similarities in their experiences as to how they “see” the “other side”? Are there similar beliefs overall? Is an individual's personal belief experienced within the individual's consciousness? Do their experiences relate through their various religious practices? Through social participation are individual beliefs formed and heightened?

Cultural or religious beliefs may both provide explanations for unexplained phenomena and communicate the essence of human transpersonal experiences. Can the effects of cultural or religious diversity may not only influence the interpretations of near death experiences but also may account for some of the differences in the descriptions of encounters with incorporeal entities, the setting of the experience, and in the activities that are reported during the experience. Beliefs can provide references to explain the "difficult to explain" experiences associated with a near death experience. Most reported near death experiences

appear to support many philosophical and religious theories of what is anticipated in life after death such as communion with incorporeal beings and the existence of afterlife polar planes of good and bad, heaven and hell.

It is the intention of this thesis to provide a review of the near death experience (NDE) phenomenon and the beliefs in life after death of some cultural and age denominations who have reported near death experiences, as well as their interpretations of these experiences. The thesis will conclude that these interpretations, combined with contemporary near death scientific research, and arguments against reductionist interpretations provide grounds for the plausibility of advanced theories concerning near death experiences.

CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF LITRATURE

NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES

The near death experience can be defined as an event caused by accident or illness where a person could very easily die, and in fact is often diagnosed as clinically dead, and yet survives and continues living a life after the experience. NDE's appear in all parts of the world and in all cultures. The experiences have been reported for centuries. In fact, there are cave paintings in Europe that show life after death in connection with near death experiences. Today, there are an increasing number of experiences reported and with much more detail.

Plato's Republic presents the story of a near death experience of a Greek soldier named Er. In this account, the soldier is killed in battle and his body is placed on a funeral pyre. Just before he is to be cremated, he awakens and tells a story of leaving his body and traveling with others to a place where they were all to be judged?

Historical figures such as Carl Jung, Thomas Edison, and Ernest Hemingway have also reported their own near death experiences.

One of the early pioneers of the Out of Body Experience (OBE) offered as "proof" of life after death was Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1926-2004). She

is well known for her work on death and dying, although she eventually claimed that death does not exist. Death, she thought, is one of several possible transitions through permeable boundaries, whatever that means.

Raymond Moody (1944-), an M.D. and psychology Ph.D., is considered by many to be the father of the modern NDE movement. He coined the expression 'near death experience' and has written several books on the subject of life after life. He is well known for his compilation of a list of features that he considers to be typical of the near death experience. According to Moody, "the typical NDE "includes a buzzing or ringing noise (typical of people who are starting to "shift" from human form to more urethral lighter bodies), a sense of blissful peace, a feeling of floating out of one's body and observing it from above, moving through a tunnel into a bright light, meeting dead people (saints, Jesus, angels, Muhammad); seeing one's life pass before one's eyes; and finding it all so wonderful that one doesn't want to return to one's body". (Carroll, 251) This composite experience is based on interpretations of testimonials and anecdotes from doctors, nurses, patients and "every day" people. Characteristic of Moody's work is the glaring omission of cases that don't fit his hypothesis. If Moody is to be believed, no one near death has had a horrifying experience. Yet, "according to some estimates, as many as 15 percent of NDEs are hellish" (Blackmore, 362). Reports of Christians meeting Muhammad or Muslims meeting Jesus or Jews meeting Guru Nanak, if they exist, seems to be non-existent. Which leads

one to have to think, do we see who we have been convinced we should be seeing by our life lessons taught?

In order to evaluate near death experiences effectively, it is necessary to have an understanding of personal beliefs concerning life after death. According to Kellehear & Irwin (1990), “the possible roles of social conditioning in the nature of the experiencer's interpretation of the NDE warrant further investigation.”

(http://www.newdualism.org/nde-papers/Kellehear/Kellehear-Journal%20of%20Near-Death%20Studies_1990-9-77-90.pdf)

Numerous surveys have documented that the majority of people in the United States believe in life after death. Psychologist Charles Tart (1991), in his article, “Altered States of Consciousness and the Possibility of Survival of Death”, discusses his belief that humans regain some type of consciousness after death. He states, the direct experience of existing and experiencing in some form that seems partially or fully independent of the physical body is relatively common in various altered states of consciousness, and this kind of experience constitutes the most direct knowledge of survival an individual may have.

Past life researcher Brian Weiss (1988) reports that there are experiences of what seems to be life after death, as reported by many of his subjects, and that

the different experiences and concepts of the subject's lifetime, involving religion and death, can influence the individual's understanding of death and afterlife.

“A survey conducted in 1991 by Dr. Colin Ross, associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, suggests that as many as one in three people have left their bodies and returned— most often during times of crisis, extreme pain, and near-death. In 1992, a new Gallup Poll survey revealed that around 13 million Americans claimed to have undergone at least one NDE.”
(<http://www.unexplainedstuff.com/Afterlife-Mysteries/Individual-Human-Experience-with-Death-and-the-Afterlife-Near-death-experiences-ndes.html>)

Research has demonstrated that near death experiences are no more likely to affect the devoutly religious than the agnostic or atheist. Near death experiences can be experienced by anyone. According to Talbot (1991), “near death experiences appear to have no relationship to "a person's age, sex, marital status, race, religion and/or spiritual beliefs, social class, educational level, income, frequency of church attendance, size of home community, or area of residence". (Talbot, 240)

Near death experiences have been recorded in cultural folklore, religious, and social writings throughout the world. According to Greyson (1992) and Mauro (1992) reports have been recorded from societies such as Native American,

Tibet, Japan, Melanesia, Micronesia, Egypt, China, India, Africa, Australia, Europe, and the United States. According to Ring (1980), there does not appear to be any relationship between, on one hand, an individual's spirituality and religious practices, and on the other hand, the likelihood of experiencing a near death experience or the depth of the ensuing experience.

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCE

Near death “experiencers” consistently report similar experiences. According to Talbot (1991), "One of the most interesting aspects of the NDE phenomenon is the consistency one finds from experience to experience". (Talbot, 240)

Although most near death experiencers may not experience all of the traits associated with near death experiences or in the same order, experiencers consistently report similar experiences. The following is a constructed description of the content of a near death experience representing most of the major traits.

At the onset of the near death experience, the individual may experience a sense of being dead, and surprise at being dead, yet will remain peaceful and have no feelings of pain. Following the peaceful awareness of being dead, the experiencer may have an out-of-body experience, a perception of separating from the physical body and moving away from the deceased body. The individual may experience a sense of moving through a tunnel, during the stage of entering into the darkness. As the individual passes through the tunnel, there may be an awareness of a bright light towards the end of the tunnel. While experiencing the consciousness of the light, ethereal forms recognizable by the experiencer may

be seen in the light. In the later part of the near death experience, the individual may sense that he or she is rising rapidly towards the light into what he or she may consider heaven or another plane of consciousness. During this ascension, the experiencer may encounter an "Entity or Being of Light" reported to be either God or another spiritual deity, or an energy form recognized by "non-theists". The encounter with the "Being of Light" engulfs the experiencer with a sense of unconditional love that emanates from the entity. During this encounter, the near death experiencer may become aware of having a total panoramic review of his or her life and may experience a sense of self-judgment when observing his or her life events in review. But not all subjects find this to be true. Some never see their past. The judgment is not by the entity but is a personal judgment by the experiencer. Throughout each of the stages, and particularly in the latter stages of the near death experience, the individual may be reluctant to return to his or her former life. This is most typical of all who "come back" from an NDE.

Although most near death reports are positive, in that they are pleasurable experiences, there are some reports of negative or "hellish" type experiences. The reports of negative near death experiences appear to be very rare. Of all the reported near death experiences, a 1982 Gallup poll estimated that less than 1% are considered to be negative, hellish, and frightening experiences. The negative near death experiences are reported to contain similar traits as positive

experiences but are associated with a sense of extreme fear, panic or anger, a sense of helplessness, and possible visions of demonic creatures.

Many individuals who have experienced a near death experience claim a fuller understanding of their religious or spiritual insights and their impact on their lives. They report that they feel closer to God after their near death experience. The term God is used in this thesis, as it is the most generally known word. However, in many books, reference materials and papers, the “seer” is feeling a “Being”. The word God could be substituted for the word, Creator, or Source or Master, etc. Ring (1980) comments: “The way in which post-incident religiousness reveals itself among core experiencers is primarily in terms of an inward sense of religion: They feel closer to God, are more prayerful, are less concerned with organized religion and formal ritual, and express a sense of religious tolerance and religious universalism It isn't clear that their belief in God per se grows stronger, although it is clear that their religious feeling does.” (Ring, 173)

Following their incident, they are significantly more inclined than non-experiencers to be convinced there is life after death. The effect of this spiritual awakening on the experiencer is a more positive attitude towards life, a lack of fear of dying, and a sense of service towards others.

MODELS OF NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES

The phenomenology, the study of phenomena, of the near death experience can be described by reporting the various stages of the experience, the characteristics or traits of the experience - which occur during various stages of the experience, by the constellations or related conscious experiences associated with near death experiences, or by the experiential grouping of stages, traits, or constellations of the experiences. Experiencers may experience some or all of these stages, traits, consciousness, and types. The stages of near death experiences relate to the experiencers' sense of progression towards a destination. The traits are associated with a sense of consciousness or knowledge concerning the activities within the near death experience. Noyes and Slymen (1978-79) and Sabom (1977) further categorize the stages and traits of near death experiencers into constellations and group types to analyze further the phenomenology of the near death experience. The statistical analysis of the data presented in the Ring (1980, 1985), Evergreen (Lindley, 1981), and Noyes and Slymen (1978-79) studies, and the research of Sabom (1977) demonstrate the consistency of these models of classification of near death experiences.

Kenneth Ring (1980) has devised a model of stages of near death experiences that are recognized by near death experiencers. These are the stages. (Ring, 40)

1. "A sense of peace at the time of death.

2. A sense of separation from the body.
3. A sense of entering into darkness.
4. Seeing a bright light.
5. A sense of entering the light.”

DISTINGUISHING QUALITIES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NDE

10 Common knowledge points summarized from various authors such as James Mauro, Bruce Greyson, P. van Lommel and R van Wees, D Tyler, M. Morse and Kenneth Ring. As well as the summary of www.IANDS.org pages appearing in APPENDIX A. And more specifically from website:

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Near-death_experience)

1. A sense/awareness of being dead.
2. A sense of peace, well-being and painlessness. Positive emotions.
A sense of removal from the world.
3. A perception of one's body from an outside position.
4. A "tunnel experience". A sense of moving up, or through,
a passageway.
5. A rapid movement toward and/or sudden immersion in a powerful
light. Communication with the light
6. An intense feeling of unconditional love.

7. Encountering "Beings of Light", "Beings dressed in white", or similar.
Also, the possibility of being reunited with deceased loved ones.
8. Receiving a life review.
9. Receiving knowledge about one's life and the nature of the universe.
10. A decision by oneself or others to return to one's body, often accompanied by a reluctance to return.

In a study done by Noyes and Slymen (1978-79), near death experiences were classified into three types of events, mystical, depersonalized and hyper-alert. The mystical event reflects a feeling of understanding and a sense of unity. The depersonalized event describes leaving the physical body and is characterized by an altered sense of time. The hyper-alert event results in clearly defined thoughts packed into a very small time frame. The vision generated by a hyper-alert event remains with the experiencer for the rest of their life.

As stated by Raymond Moddy (1988), the mixed experiences, the near death experiencer may experience a mixture of autoscopic and transcendental experiences. Regardless of the methodology used to classify near death experiences, the anecdotal nature of the near death reports are similar and consistent between experiencers.

TRANSPERSONAL AND REDUCTIONIST THEORIES CONCERNING NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES

Near death researchers suggest that near death experiences are related to a state of consciousness, separate from the physical body, which occurs at the time of death. Near death researchers have collected hundreds of phenomenological descriptions of individual near death experiences and have statistically correlated the occurrences of the stages and traits associated with these experiences. The consistency of near death experience reports provides support for the theories that these experiences are not a result of hallucinations or mental dysfunctions. Individuals, regardless, of age, race, religion, or national origin have reported similar experiences during a near death episode. The chi-square method of statistical analysis has been used by near death researchers to determine if the similarity of events reported during the near death experience, by experiencer, is a result of chance or is to be expected elements of the near death experience. The chi-square method is a non-parametric statistical test that is used to determine the statistical significance of the difference between the frequencies of reported outcomes with the expected frequencies of outcomes.

Researchers such as Sagan (1979) and Siegel (1981) attempt to debunk the near death experience by stating that it is a result of a chemical reaction within the brain during the dying process. They postulate that as the eyes deteriorate

following death they produce the bright light that is reported to be seen during the near death experience. According to Moody (1988), the tunnel effect and a sensation of being out-of-body is believed to be caused by the chemical reactions in the body during the death process. According to researcher Ronald Siegel (1981), the descriptions given by dying persons are virtually identical to descriptions given by persons experiencing hallucinations, drug-induced or otherwise.

Carl Sagan (1979) states that some of the near death experiences can be associated with a wiring defect in the human neuro-anatomy that under certain conditions always leads to the same illusion of astral projection/out-of-body experience.

According to Moody (1988) and Morse (1990), some researchers attempt to explain near death experiences as the mind's defense against the fear of dying, that the mind creates positive images of an afterlife in order to control the fear of dying.

Many near death researchers regard three consistently repeated reports as providing credibility for the transpersonal theories that near death experiences are the expression of an altered state of consciousness separate from the physical or mental realm of human existence that have a profound impact on the

experiencers' life. These reports thus are crucial to cite in responding to the theorists who attempt to debunk the near death experience as a transpersonal phenomenon. These three factors reported are:

Reports That Provide Credibility for the Transpersonal Theory of the NDE

1. Consistent reports of out-of-body experiences of individuals who sense that they separate from their physical body during the near death experience and can observe their body and surroundings from a detached position.
2. The consistent reports of near death experiences of children that are similar to those experiences reported by adults.
3. The attitudinal and personality changes of the near death experiencers following their experience

COMPARING OBE'S AND NDE'S

During an OBE (out of body) experience, experiencers report that they leave their physical body and view their body, and other activity, from a detached, uninvolved perspective. Upon recovery from this experience, many experiencers recall details of medical procedures being performed on them that they had no prior knowledge of the technique. Some experiencers report that they travel to other locations, other than the place where the body may be lying "dead." The out of body experiencer is then able to report things that he or she may have seen during the out-of-body experience, and there is no other logical explanation for the source of this knowledge. An example of this experience is a story told by a very nearsighted woman. During her out of body experience, she reports that she was first lying on an operating table with the anesthesia machine behind her head. She then became aware that she had detached from her body and was able to see, without difficulty, the equipment identification numbers on the anesthesia machine. These numbers were out of her normal visual range and behind her body's head. She then floated up to the top of the room and noted that the top of the light fixtures were dirty. After her recovery from her out of body experience, she returned to the operating room and was able to ascertain that the numbers she had seen on the machine were correct and that the light fixtures

were in need of cleaning (Ring, 42-43). This experience supports the belief that these experiences involve separation from the physical body and mind.

An OBE is part of an NDE, the difference seemingly to be that in an NDE you are not simply in a trance or meditative state, but you are indeed clinically dead.

Your heart has stopped your brain has ceased. Your soul or essence has not just left your body for a relaxed trip to Paris but instead has actually been drawn into another dimension. One where you seem to know you have a choice not to come back. “There are multi facets of the ‘knowing’ in that space. Whereas an OBE is a detachment of the body where somehow you know it is temporary. And although experiences speak to the light and airy feeling of flying and enjoying their “ride” they do not seem to sense a death or departure from the earth life.”

(Assante, n.p.)

CHILDREN AND NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES

Young children have reported having near death experiences. Their reports are similar to adult near death experiences even though they may not have had time to be indoctrinated with the same cultural or socio-religious beliefs regarding death as adults, or developed a fear of death through their psychological development. Children report having NDE's, passing through a tunnel, and encountering spiritual forms.

About 85% of children who experience cardiac arrest have an NDE. With improving cardiac resuscitation techniques, more and more children are surviving cardiac arrest. More children who have had NDEs are alive today than ever before, and the number is likely to increase because of improved resuscitative techniques. Apparently, youngsters of any age can have an NDE. Very young children, as soon as they are able to speak, have reported NDEs they had as infants or in the process of being born.

The accounts of young children's near death experiences suggest the unlikelihood of the debunking theory that near death experiences are the mind's psychological defense towards dying. Children who have not had time to learn of their mortality do not usually fear dying. According to Frank (1982) and Anthony

(1967) children, until between the age of five and seven, consider death to be reversible and generally do not have a fear of dying. They, therefore, do not have a need to create an afterlife experience, such as is experienced in a near death experience, in order to overcome a fear of dying, according to Moody (1988) and Morse (1990). Furthermore, following near death experiences, children share similar after-effects of the experience as adult experiencers. They grow to have a sense of purpose and direction in their lives, and as they mature, do not develop a fear of dying, according to Morse (1990).

P.M.H. Atwater studied over 270 child NDErs. She found that:

1. 76% reported a comforting "initial" experience. Such experiences involved up to three elements, things like a loving nothingness, a friendly voice, a visitation by a loving being, an out-of-body experience, and/or the peacefulness of either a safe light or safe dark place
2. 19% reported a pleasurable or heaven-like experience
3. 3% reported a distressing or hell-like experience
4. 2% had a "transcendent" experience in which they felt they acquired special knowledge.

<http://iands.org/about-ndes/childrens-ndes.html>)

ATTITUDINAL AND PERSONALITY CHANGES FOLLOWING NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES

According to Wilson (1987), the real importance of the near death experience is in the after-effects it has on the life of the experiencer. The usual psychological and spiritual after-effects of a near death experience consist of changes in personality and values and an attitudinal change towards religion and death. There is a heightened sense of appreciation of life, especially of the world of nature and of other people. The near death experiencer achieves a sense of understanding of what is important to him or her in life and strives to live in accordance with his or her understanding of what is meaningful. Consistently reported after-effects of near death experiences are the lack of fear of death, an attitude of unconditional love and service towards others, and the desire to seek knowledge.

According to Ring (1985), many near death experiences act as a catalyst to a spiritual awakening for the experiencer. Here is the definition of spiritual orientation (Ring, 1984):

1. "A tendency to characterize oneself as spiritual rather than religious, per se.
2. A feeling of being inwardly close to God.

3. A de-emphasis of the formal aspects of religious life and worship.
4. A conviction that there is life after death, regardless of religious belief.
5. An openness to the doctrine of reincarnation.
6. A belief in the essential underlying unity of all cultures and religions.
7. A desire for a universal religion embracing all humanity.”

(Ring, 144-145)

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS – N/A

CHAPTER FOUR
FINDINGS AND RESULTS

CULTURAL BELIEFS CONCERNING DEATH, AFTERLIFE AND NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES

Polls and studies support the assumption that the majority of people believe that death is not the end of one's existence but rather a transition from one life to another. Different religions have provided belief structures that support the religious and social needs of practitioners. Rituals and sacred writings support the various religious interpretations of what death is and what it will be like in the afterlife. However, even with the differences in religious beliefs, there are similarities between many different religious groups regarding afterlife beliefs. One similarity among religious groups is the belief in an afterlife following physical death. Another similarity is the presence of "the two polar images of life after death - the abode of the righteous, heaven or paradise, and the place for the wicked, or hell" (Grof & Grof, 13). These polar images are also recognized by many near death experiencers.

NDE's and the reports of a consciousness of life after death have been provided by members of Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, Christian, and Mormon religions, among others. Agnostics and atheists also have reported near death experiences even with their predisposed lack of belief in anything greater than personal self and this life. The following are brief commentaries regarding the

beliefs concerning death, afterlife, and near death experiences within these religious and religious frameworks.

AGNOSTICS AND ATHEISTS

Agnostics think that it is impossible to know whether there is a God or life after death. Atheists believe that there is no God and no life after death and that death is the cessation of the existence of the individual. Agnostics and atheists have reported having near death experiences. These experiences are similar to the reports of individuals who have professed a spiritual belief prior to their NDE. Agnostics & atheists report that they achieve an altered state of consciousness in which they have experienced some or all of the traits Moody attributes to a near death experience. According to Rawlings (1978) and Ring (1985), most agnostics and atheists interpret their near death experiences as a glimpse of life after death. Prior to the near death experience, they did not believe in life after death. As a result of the experience, most agnostic and atheist experiencers eventually move toward a more spiritually guided life with “a **new found** belief in life after death”, (Ring, 151) During the research done by Maurice Rawlings (1978), he did not find an agnostic or atheist who having experienced a near death remained convinced that there is no God or afterlife.

BUDDHISM AND HINDUISM

Buddhists believe that upon death, there is rebirth to another life. Death is accepted as inevitable and not feared. The believer's actions, in this life, will determine his or her level of rebirth. Karma is the force created by the actions of the individual - the effects of actions. Good karma, which is achieved by compassionate actions in this life, leads to a higher existence in the next life. Nirvana is reached by achieving an understanding of the nature of reality. "This must be discovered through the experiences of other dimensions of human consciousness". (Klein, 103) According to Buddhist cosmology, numerous, hierarchically arranged heavens exist along with eight hot and cold hells. The individual spirit exists in one of these realms, based upon the karma created in the previous life, until reborn into another life. According to Klein (1991), "This cycle continues until the enlightenment of nirvana is achieved" (Klein, 103).

According to Swami Adiswarananda (1991), in the Hindu religion death comes as a break in the continued events of life and brings about a change in the form in which the spirit resides. Hindus believe that the afterlife is a passage of time in a heaven or hell, dependent upon the karma built up in life. The judgment about one's life is based upon the karma that the individual created in his or her past lives. The rebirth of the spirit into the next life, through the transmigration of the

soul, is determined by the developed karma and the individual's last thoughts in the present life.

An individual's search for eternal happiness and immortality results in the rebirth of the spirit in different bodies until the spirit learns that happiness and immortality are not a result of the fulfillment of desires but are attained when all desires and needs are no longer important, according to Adiswarananda (1991) and Elb (1906). Johnson & McGee (1991) pointed out that according to some Hindus, the various religious faiths are different paths to reach one and the same goal - union with God as ultimate Reality.

According to Kellehear, Heaven and Gao (1990). Becker (1981) has suggested that near death experiences may have been responsible for part of the development of Pure Land Buddhism in China. Ferris (1991) says that a Hindu report of an NDE relates that the experiencer entered into heaven on the back of a cow.

According to Mauro (1992), "East Indians [Hindus] sometimes see heaven as a giant bureaucracy, and frequently report being sent back because of clerical errors," whereas Japanese experiencers report seeing symbolic images, such as "long, dark rivers and beautiful flowers". (Mauro, 57)

During the NDE, the Buddhist experiencers have reported seeing the personage of Buddha, and Hindu experiencers report seeing Krishna. The difference in Buddhist and Hindu reports of near death experiences is predominately associated with the afterlife setting and the personages that the experiencer reports encountering.

Buddhist and Hindu NDEr's may report different interpretations of the specifics of their experiences; however, the experiences are consistent with other stages, traits, constellations, and group types reported by near death experiencers in other cultures and religions. Some members of the Buddhist and Hindu culture or religions interpret NDE's as providing afterlife visions that are similar to visions ascribed to some Eastern religious experiences associated with death and afterlife. Becker (1984) comments "that ancient Japanese Buddhist meditative and deathbed visions closely parallel modern American near death and deathbed visions." (Becker, 51)

The Tibetan Book of the Dead (1973) describes the Bardo, the three stages of the "disembodied state" following death.

1. In the first stage, the departed have visions of the "Blinding Clear Light of Pure Reality."
2. In the second stage, the departed encounter a succession of "deities."

3. In the third stage the departed is judged based upon past deeds by the "Dharma Raja, King and Judge of the Dead".

(<http://www.ncf.net/bardo.htm>)

These stages are similar in content to other reported NDE's from other religions and cultures. According to Becker (1985) these similarities include a movement through levels - such as "passing through a tunnel, visions of pure light, meeting incorporeal beings, powers of astral projections or out-of-body-experience, and a judgment about one's life." (Becker, 51).

ISLAM

Death, in the Islamic faith, is the cessation of biological life and the resting of the spirit, in the grave, until the Judgment Day. Some Muslims believe that the "good souls" see visions of God, and the wicked see the hell that awaits them.

According to Galloway and Johnson & McGee (1991), from the time of death to the time of judgment, Muslims believe the spirit remains in a state of "dreamless sleep," with the exception of possible visions of eternity.

Faith in an afterlife is based upon the belief in the oneness of God and the belief in a day of resurrection and judgment for all regardless of religious belief. At that time, the spirit will be judged, based upon its deeds in life, and allowed to enter into Paradise and to be with God, to be thrown into the Fire for a period of purgation, or to be condemned to everlasting punishment in the Fire. According to Johnson & McGee and J. Smith (1991), most Muslims believe that non-Muslims can reach Paradise only after a period of purgation.

Muslims have reported having near death experiences, according to Flynn (1986) and Rawlings (1978). In Muslim near death experiences, according to Ring (1985), the Being of Light is identified as Allah, whereas in other religions the light might be identified as God.

Some Muslims interpret the NDE's as a possible glimpse into life after death due to the similarity of the experience with the religious visions of Muhammad and their expectations of life after death, according to Ring (1985) and Zaleski (1987). An Islamic myth describes Muhammad's "Night Journey" as his experience of passing through the realms of the afterlife where he encounters spirits who have died, has a vision of heaven and hell, and communes with Allah.

JUDAISM

The Jewish religion generally emphasizes the current life, and not life after death. Although Judaism recognizes that the life of the spirit does not end at the point of bodily death, it is the Jew's responsibility to focus on a meaningful life and not speculate on life after death. According to Elb (1906), the Jewish Bible states that the actions taken in the present life will reward the righteous and chastise the wicked. It does not specifically address the concept of an afterlife. Even though the Jewish Bible does not directly address immortality, traditional Jews believe that immortality will bring the resurrection of the body and soul, followed by the judgment of the worth of their lives by God. According to Ponn (1991), The Reformed Jew believes that resurrection involves only the soul. Jews believe they live and die only once.

Since there is no discussion, in the Jewish Bible, of afterlife, there is no official Jewish religious opinion regarding life after death. However, according to Ponn (1991), many Jews believe that human souls will be held accountable before God for what has been accomplished in the current life. After death, many Jews believe that they will be reunited with family members in heaven. Their belief in God's caring nature disavows a sadistic punishment in hell. Entrance into heaven is accomplished by righteous living and repentance. Galloway and Johnson &

McGee (1991) point out an important belief, could it be that Heaven is considered a place where anxiety and pain is ended?

There have been a number of reported NDE's by members of the Jewish faith. Barbara Harris, a practicing Jew, reports having had several near death experiences since 1975. Harris and Bascom's (1990) book, Full Circle - The Near death Experience and Beyond, is a narrative of Harris' near death experiences. Jewish people who have had a near death experience relate similar observations and experiences as the experiences of other religious-spiritual believers. "Here the dying person sometimes meets a 'being of light' and reviews their past existence with the aid of this being. At some point the person is told that it is not time to die or makes a conscious choice to return to life, and the soul returns to the physical body." (<http://www.spiritualtravel.org/OBE/neardeath.html>)
Biblio: Near Death Experience. SpiritualTravel.org. n.d. Web. Jan 2013.

This experience is similar to the Jewish belief that what is important in life is the attending to the responsibilities of living a meaningful, productive life. Many NDErs report being met by family members. These reports are consistent with the Jewish belief that after death they will be reunited with family members in Heaven.

CHRISTIANITY

Modern Christians are united in their belief that Jesus is the son of God and that there is an afterlife. Upon death, Christians believe that they come before God and are judged. According to Smith (1991), following death, human life is fully translated into the supernatural domain. Fundamentalists and conservatives interpret the Holy Bible (1952) literally and believe that there is a heaven and hell.

NDE's appear to be familiar paranormal occurrences to Christians. Bechtel, Chen, Pierce, & Walker (1992) reported that 98% of the clergy that they surveyed were familiar with near death phenomena and that almost half of them have counseled parishioners who had a near death experience.

As with other religious interpretations of the NDE, Christians also report encounters with religious beings such as Jesus, Mary, or angels. According to Moody (1975) and Morse (1990), experiencers report similar OBE's, meeting recognizable spiritual entities, movement toward a bright light, and a sense of being in the presence of an energy of "unconditional love" while the experiencer judges his or her life.

According to Flynn (1986), to many experiencers, the NDE affirms the uniqueness and centrality and indispensability of Christ, but in a universalistic way that does not negate or diminish the value of other religious traditions.... (It will) break through sectarian and other barriers and shine a laser beam of Light on the true essence and meaning of Christ for all people.

Ring (1985) supports Flynn's comments, in his conclusions regarding the universalistic spiritual orientation of experiencers following near death experiences. He found that following a near death experience, the "Christian experiencer gravitated towards a religious world view that may incorporate and yet transcend the traditional Christian perspective". (Ring, 147)

MORMONISM

Death in the Mormon religion is not considered to be the end of existence of the individual but the beginning of a new existence as the same person. Mormons believe that they have always lived and will always live as the same individual, "never as someone else or in another life-form" (Eyre, 139).

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints are saddened by the death of a loved one but are comforted in the belief that upon death the spirit is united with God in a spirit world, continuing to progress in knowledge, and await the coming of other family members, the resurrection of the physical body, and the final judgment. A belief in an afterlife is an essential part of the faith of the members of the Church of the Latter Day Saints.

In Mormonism, only "sons of perdition" - former believers who betray the church - are destined for eternal punishment. All others are assured at least an entry into a lesser Paradise, called the "Telestial Kingdom," where one spends eternity apart from God. The most faithful attain the "Celestial Kingdom," where they commune directly with God and eventually may they themselves become gods and populate new universes with their own spiritual offspring. The Mormon Church is the only church that has a way to be redeemed. So if a spirit has not

been exposed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ before Judgment Day, then he is given a chance to hear the Gospel, accept the teachings and be redeemed.

The judgment reported by Mormon NDEr's essentially a self-judgment. This self-judgment is similar to the reported life reviews and self-judgment that are reported in NDE's. Experiencers report that they see a panoramic review of their entire life and then judge their own actions while awash in the "unconditional love" of the "Being of Light". According to Eyre (1991), after the judgment, the spirit dwells with others that are most like it. As with many other religious groups, Mormon NDEr's consistently report meeting with deceased family members, and being in the presence of a being of light which they call God. However, some Mormon NDEr's report two events that appear to be uncommon with non-Mormon experiencers. They report that they are requested to do something in the world, when they return to life. According to Lundahl (1982), much like instructions from the "other world", beings accomplish or help others in the earth plane.

Furthermore according to Lundahl (1982), members of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints report a high number of NDE's per capita of their religion. The high number of reported NDE's is probably due to the social values of the Latter-day Saints which encourages individuals to share their NDE's much more openly than most other social groups. Mormons interpret the NDE's as part of their religious beliefs and a glimpse of life after death.

SCIENTIFIC FINDINGS – A DIFFERENT VIEW

To scientifically tract NDE's is virtually impossible. One cannot induce death in order to bring a human back to life and study their death experience. There are no double blind studies. However there is much interviewee data accumulation studies. The Pim van Lommel study is a good example to give a generalization of todays scientific stand on NDE's.

The Pim van Lommel study was done in Holland and published in Lancet. These Dutch scientists found that “12 percent (or 18 percent, depending on how NDE is defined) of 344 resuscitated patients who had experienced cessation of their heart and/or breathing function reported an NDE.” (Impey, 40) Which lead them to conclude that the cause of the NDE was purely physiological, the researchers reasoned that all of the patients should have had one because of their similar plight. Psychological factors were ruled out by the researchers, as were the medications taken by the patients. However, the researchers believe that neurophysiological processes must play some part in NDE. Similar experiences can be induced through electrical stimulation of the temporal lobe (and hence of the hippocampus) during neurosurgery for epilepsy, with high carbon dioxide levels (hypercarbia), and in decreased cerebral perfusion resulting in local cerebral hypoxia as in rapid acceleration during training of fighter pilots, or as in

hyperventilation followed by Valsalva Manoeuvre. Ketamine-induced experiences resulting from blockage of the NMDA receptor, and the role of endorphin, serotonin, and enkephalin have also been mentioned, as have near death like experiences after the use of LSD, psilocarpine, and mescaline. These induced experiences can consist of unconsciousness, OBE's, and perception of light or flashes of recollection from the past. These recollections, however, consist of fragmented and random memories unlike the panoramic life-review that can occur in NDE. Further, transformational processes with changing life-insight and disappearance of fear of death are rarely reported after induced experiences. Thus, induced experiences are not identical to an NDE.

“The only significant factor between the NDEr's and non-NDEr's in the Dutch study,” according to van Lommel and his colleagues, “was age: those who had NDEs tended to be younger. This is partly due to the fact that older cardiac arrest patients are more likely to die than younger ones, but it may also be partly due the fact that younger brains are more likely to have better short term memory functions than older brains.” (<http://www.skeptidic.com/nde.html>)

They also found other significant differences between those who reported the NDE and those who didn't, but they occurred after the experience. According to Greyson (1998), "NDEr's had become much more empathic and accepting of others since their NDE than had the non-NDEr's. And NDEr's had become both

more appreciative of the ordinary things of life and much less afraid of death than had the non-NDEr's." (<http://www.skeptdic.com/nde.html>) This difference certainly supports the claim that the NDE is a profound and potentially life-altering experience. It does not, however, support the Dutch researchers' contention that it provides important evidence for consciousness existing outside of the brain.

Moody, on the other hand, is sure that NDE's are evidence of consciousness existing separately from the brain. He thinks that NDE's prove the existence of life after death. Skeptics, on the other hand, believe that NDE's can be explained by neurochemistry and are the result of brain states that occur due to a dying, demented, extremely stressed, or drugged brain. For example, neural noise and retino-cortical mapping explain the common experience of passage down a tunnel from darkness into a bright light. According to Susan Blackmore (1993), vision researcher Dr. Tomasz S. Troscianko of the University of Bristol speculated: "If you started with very little neural noise and it gradually increased, the effect would be of a light at the center getting larger and larger and hence closer and closer....the tunnel would appear to move as the noise levels increased and the central light got larger and larger....If the whole cortex became so noisy that all the cells were firing fast, the whole area would appear light." (<http://www.skeptdic.com/nde.html>)

Blackmore attributes the feelings of extreme peacefulness of the NDE to the release of endorphins in response to the extreme stress of the situation. The buzzing or ringing sound is attributed to cerebral anoxia and consequent effects upon the connections between brain cells. Dr. Karl Jansen has reproduced NDE's with ketamine, a short-acting hallucinogenic, dissociative anesthetic.

It is possible that a person may appear dead to our senses or our scientific equipment but still be perceiving? The visual and auditory perceptions occurring while unconscious-but-perceiving may be produced by a variety of neuronal mechanisms. In fact, we now have evidence that patients who appear brain dead may in fact be capable of conscious thought. In 2006, scientists in the UK and Belgium did an FMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) on a woman in a vegetative state and found that parts of her brain showed activity when she was spoken to and asked to think about things like playing tennis.

The scientists were startled to find that her brain patterns, when she was asked to imagine herself playing tennis or moving around her home, displayed the same activated cortical areas in a manner indistinguishable from that of the healthy volunteers.

It is possible that the soul leaves the body, but it is not necessary to posit a soul to explain these experiences. "... in any case, we do not yet know whether NDE's

take place just before the crisis, during it, just after it or even during the process of trying to describe it to someone else. If clear consciousness were really possible with a completely flat EEG, this would indeed change our view of the mind/brain relationship, but so far this has not been conclusively demonstrated.” (Blackmore 264)

Finally, Raymond Quigg Lawrence (Blinded by the Light) thinks that NDE's are the work of Satan. Perhaps, or they may be telepathic communications from doctors, nurses, or others in attendance when the subject is near death, or they may be mixed memories composed after waking up and hearing others talk about what was happening while one was near death, or they may be recollections of subconsciously recorded data overheard while in a groggy state. At this point in our knowledge, to claim that NDE's provide strong evidence that the soul exists independently of the body, and that there is an afterlife awaiting that soul that just happens to coincide with the beliefs and wishes of the near death experiment, seems premature.

RESULTS

Throughout history Buddhists and Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Mormons have all reported having NDE's. These experiences are similar to some of the visions or journeys into the afterlife that are described in some of the sacred texts of their cultures and religions. The descriptions of the NDE by members of these religious groups are believed, by many, to be a glimpse into life after death, and appear to be consistent with each religious group's interpretation of the afterlife.

Due to the subjective nature of an NDE there can be no conclusive proof that these experiences provide visions of life after death: however, the reports of out-of-body experiences, the near death experiences of children, and the notable changes in the near death experiencers' life following his or her experience support the possibility of the validity of this theory. Because of the transpersonal nature of NDE's, it is sometimes reported that it is difficult to describe the experience in words. NDE's report that there are not appropriate words to accurately describe the experience. They therefore interpret the experience using words, phrases, and metaphors that reflect their religious-cultural backgrounds.

CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION

For decades near death experiences have been written off as delusions by scientists. They are dismissed as no more than the last twitches of a dying brain. Modern science has no place for mysticism and the paranormal. But now a group of British researchers are challenging the scientific establishment by launching a major study into NDE's. They hope to settle once and for all the question of whether there truly is life after death.

Some people who have survived a life-threatening crisis report extraordinary experiences through their books. I was honored and privileged to speak with these three authors in person. I am giving you one statement from each that I feel personally made a profound difference in my own life.

IN PERSON INTERVIEWS WITH THREE NDE BEST SELLING AUTHORS

Mellen-Thomas Benedict

Oct 3rd 2010

(California, USA)

Interviewed in
Sedona, Arizona

After suffering from a terminal illness, in 1982 Mellen-Thomas Benedict 'died' and for an hour and a half he was monitored showing no vital signs. Miraculously he returned to his body with a complete remission of the disease.



Question: What do you remember most about your NDE to this day?

Answer: "I was in pre-creation, before the Big Bang. I had crossed over the beginning of time/the First Word/the First vibration. I was in the Eye of Creation. I felt as if I was touching the Face of God. It was not a religious feeling. Simply I was at one with Absolute Life and Consciousness.

When I say that I could see or perceive forever, I mean that I could experience all of creation generating itself. It was without beginning and without end. That's a mind-expanding thought, isn't it? Scientists perceive the Big Bang as a single event, which created the Universe. I saw during my life after death experience that the Big Bang is only one of an infinite number of Big Bangs creating Universes endlessly and simultaneously. The only images that even come close in human terms would be those created by super computers using fractal geometry equations.

The ancients knew of this. They said God had periodically created new Universes by breathing out, and recreated other Universes by breathing in. These epochs were called Yugas. Modern science called this the Big Bang. I was in absolute, pure consciousness. I could see or perceive all the Big Bangs or Yugas creating and recreating themselves. Instantly I entered into them all simultaneously. I saw that each and every little piece of creation has the power to create. It is very difficult to try to explain this. I am still speechless about this.”

Nov 9th, 2012

Interviewed in

Monterey, California

Anita Moorjani

(Hong Kong, Hong Kong)

Anita Moorjani is the bestselling author of "Dying to be Me - My journey from cancer to near death to true healing"



Question: When you went to the other side did you see Jesus or Mohammad or any other religious icon?

Answer(s): "No, it wasn't like that. I saw my father. He and I spoke through our knowing. He told me I might want to come back. That it wasn't my time. But I did not see

anyone else. I had an overwhelming sense of BEING all of those holy icons. We are all one there. On this earth I believe in Jesus, but I also believe in Buddha, Krishna, Allah, Shiva, and so on. They each served a different culture and different era, and we are free to choose whom to believe in (or not believe).

Problems only arise when we believe that our chosen (religion or deity) is the one and only path to truth, superior to all others.....

..... On that side EVERY part of you is magnificent – your ego, intellect, body, spirit. It's who you are – a beautiful product of this Universe's creation. There's nothing to let go, nothing to forgive, nothing to attain. You already are everything you need to be.....

..... I can't stress enough how important it is to enjoy yourself and not take yourself or life too seriously. One of the biggest flaws with many traditional spiritual systems is that they often make us take life too seriously. Although you

know that I abhor creating doctrines, if I ever had to create a set of tenets for a spiritual path to healing, number one on my list would be to make sure to laugh as often as possible throughout every single day – and preferably laugh at myself. This would be hands down over and above any form of prayer, meditation, chanting, or diet reform. Day-to-day problems never seem as big when viewed through a veil of humor and love.”

Julia Assante, PhD

(Germany)

Nov 30th, 2012

Interviewed in
Carmel, California

Julia Assante is an established social historian and academic of the ancient Near East. In her new book, *The Last Frontier*, she discusses her uniquely rigorous investigation of where we go after we die.



Question: What happens after death?

Answer: “Knowing that what awaits us is ineffable love, understanding, and forgiveness restores our innate morality. It creates a safe, positive framework of reality that fosters honest evaluations of our lives now—where our fears are blocking self-expression, creativity, and love. And it fosters forgiveness. Knowledge of the afterlife is known for sharpening a sense of life purpose, while expanding our definition of the self. As it is now, we impose enormous limitations on humanity; which would be immediately lifted if we better understood the self that survives the body. Knowledge of the afterlife includes knowledge about reincarnation and how it works. Realizing that our soul histories include different races, different sexes and social categories would break down prejudice. Lastly, I have worked with a great many people who died confused about the afterlife or with false expectations and it caused a lot of unnecessary trouble after their deaths.”

CHAPTER SIX
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have discussed the phenomena of the Near Death Experience and some of the arguments against the plausibility of reductionist theories and for the plausibility of NDE's. The research and "coming forward" of which has only been in the last 25 to 30 years, though one might assume it's been happening throughout the life of mankind.

I believe the near death experiences of individuals of various beliefs are consistent with many religious beliefs concerning life after death and do not compromise the foundations of their religious traditions. Many choose to practice their new sense of universal spirituality within their earlier religions; however, NDErs move toward a religion that is more congruent with their new found knowledge, or choose to practice their spirituality through a religious rituals and practices.

I hope I have provided an overview of the human consciousness of life after death, cultural and religious beliefs concerning death and afterlife, and interpretations of near death experiences by different cultural groups. I believe that the consistency between numerous reports of NDE's, regardless of cultural

or religious beliefs the reports by all experiencers provide plausible arguments for the theories of this experience.

Where are the cultural differences in these experiences? Tribal people may report paddling in a canoe down a long dark river for three days towards the sun, for example, rather than floating down a tunnel towards the light. The experience, whatever the cultural differences, usually has a deep and long lasting effect. It often leaves behind a legacy of profound spirituality and removes the fear of death.

If the mind does continue after the brain has died then this will prove, by default, that the 'soul' is independent of the body. "It comes back to the question of whether the mind or consciousness is produced by the brain," says Dr Parnia. "If we can prove that the mind is produced by the brain then I don't think that there is anything after we die. If the brain dies then we die. It's final and irreversible." "If, on the contrary, the brain is like an intermediary which manifests the mind, like a television will act as an intermediary to manifest radio waves into a picture or a sound, then we should be able to show that the mind is still there after the brain is clinically dead. That will be a significant discovery of life after death." (<http://www.newsmonster.co.uk/paranormal-unexplained/near-death-experiences-are-real-and-we-have-the-proof-say-scientists.html>)

All of the theories and questions posed by scientists are simply academics to those who have had an NDE. They KNOW the answers. Whether a spiritual or biological indentation. None of the NDErs has one doubt in their minds that there is life after physical death. To them as to the author of this thesis there absolutely is. And we believe in a loving benevolent presence there for and with us. Even the atheists and agnostics come back “different”, more hopeful, and often with more definitive purpose, kinder more patient and more generous. Who can deny that it doesn’t matter from which culture or religion one hails? We are indeed **ALL ONE**.

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APPENDIX A

Characteristics of Near Death Experiences

www.IANDS.org 1/27/97

Characteristics from PMH Atwater=s book Coming Back to Life. 1988.

- 1. A sensation of floating out of one=s body.** Often followed by an out-of-body experience where all that goes on around the Avacated@ body is both seen and heard accurately.
- 2. Passing through a dark tunnel.** Or black hole or encountering some kind of darkness. This is often accompanied by a feeling or sensation of movement or acceleration. A Wind@ may be heard or felt.
- 3. Ascending toward a light at the end of the darkness.** A light of incredible brilliance, with the possibility of seeing people, animals, plants, lush outdoors, and even cities within the light.

4. Greeted by friendly voices, people or beings who may be strangers, loved ones, or religious figures. Conversation can ensue, information or a message may be given. Activity referred to as a Ascenario.@

5. Seeing a panoramic review of the life just lived, from birth to death or in reverse order, sometimes becoming a reliving of the life rather than a dispassionate viewing. The person=s life can be reviewed in its entirety or in segments. This is usually accompanied by a feeling or need to assess loss or gains during the life to determine what was learned or not learned. Other beings can take part in this judgement like process or offer advice.

6. A reluctance to return to the earthplane, but invariably realizing either their job on earth is not finished or a mission must yet be accomplished before they can return to stay.

7. Warped sense of time and space. Discovering time and space do not exist, losing the need to recognize measurements of life either as valid or necessary.

8. Disappointment at being revived. Often feeling a need to shrink or somehow squeeze to fit back in to the physical body. There can be unpleasantness, even anger or tears at the realization they are now back in there bodies and no longer on AThe Other Side.@

Characteristics from Raymond Moody's book Life After Life 1975.

1. Hearing the news. Reporting hearing people talking even though presumed dead.

2. Feelings of peace and quiet. Many people describe extremely pleasant feelings and sensations during the early stages of their experiences. APain was gone@, AAll my troubles were gone@.

3. The Noise. Various auditory sensations. ABells tingling@, music, majestic music, loud ringing, buzzing noise, whirling noise, clicking, roaring, banging, etc.

4. The Dark Tunnel. Some reports of black, utterly void, narrow passageway, dark valley, time tunnel, down a path.

5. Out of the Body. Often finding oneself viewing his own physical body from a point outside it, being unfamiliar with their body, Floating, passing through walls, floors, etc.

6. Meeting Others. Awareness of other spiritual beings nearby. Relatives, friends, feelings they had come to protect or guide. Guardian spirits.

7. The Being of Light. Encounter of very bright light. Unearthly brilliance. Identification of being of light varies from individual to individual. Many biblical parallels.

8. The Review. Extraordinarily rapid. Vivid and real incredible detail, three dimensional and in color, like slides clicking.

9. The Border or Limit. Fence, large body of water, line, warnings that if one crosses the border they cannot return.

10. Coming Back. Some do not want to come back or have difficulty. Squeezing back into the body.

11. Telling Others. Feelings of lack of sympathy and understanding when telling others. Difficulty talking with relatives, ministers, peers.

12. Effects on Lives Reticent to tell others. Broadened and deepened by experience. More reflective and more concerned with ultimate philosophical issues.

13. New Views on Death No longer afraid of death, feelings of a lot of changing to do before leaving here.