

Survival of Bodily Death
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Near Death Experiences as Evidence for Survival of Bodily Death
Bruce Greyson

As a near-death researcher in the Medical School at the University of Virginia, Bruce Greyson presented some of the best examples and theories of near-death experiences that support the case for survival.

Greyson began by presenting two early twentieth-century models for explaining NDEs:

1) The Perceptual Release Theory: Developed by the British neurologist, Hughlings Jackson, this theory proposes that NDEs are essentially projections of our own thoughts, i.e., hallucinations. He offered the analogy of a fire inside a home that is reflected in a window. During the day we look out the window and see the trees outside, but as night falls all we can see is the fire reflected in the window and can no longer see the outside world. This is the situation with hallucinations in response to sensory deprivation. The hallucinations in our mind are comparable to the reflection of the fire at night in the window. When we have been deprived of sensory input from the outside world, our mind starts to reflect thoughts that the brain is creating and projecting. In this view, NDEs are simply hallucinations internally generated as our brain loses sensorial input from the outside world.

2) The Alternate Realities Model: Developed by the American psychologist, William James, this theory proposes that when the brain shuts down in a sensory deprivation situation or NDE, its ability to filter out information breaks down, and thus a flood of experiences comes rushing into our consciousness that we inaccurately call "hallucinations." According to James, these experiences are available to us all the time, but we do not register them because our brains are normally filtering them out. James offered a different analogy to explain his theory. He suggested that we think of bright sunshine in the daylight as our normal consciousness, but when the sun sets in the evening, we notice that the moon and stars have been out there all along though hidden during the bright daylight. The sun functions to filter out a set of experiences that were there all along, but we could not see or experience them until it was gone. Similarly, our brain filters out a wide array of experiences that come rushing into our consciousness when it is deprived of sensory input.

Which model best fits the contemporary evidence for NDEs? Greyson next summarized four aspects of NDEs that support William James model and the case for survival of bodily death:

1. Accounts of enhanced mental acuity and clear memory function occurring while ones brain is under anesthesia. 2. Reports of accurate non-local vision which transcend normal eyesight. 3. Reports of encounters with deceased beings which resulted in accurate information impossible to surmise through normal sense perception in regular space and time. 4. Accurate accounts of the procedures and events in hospital rooms that occurred while the patient was incapacitated or even technically dead.

Greyson then mentioned some of the best NDE cases:

1. The case of Al Sullivan: Al was a 55 year old truck driver who was undergoing triple by-pass surgery when he had a powerful NDE that included an encounter with his deceased mother and brother-in-law, who told Al to go back to his to tell one of his neighbors that their son with lymphoma will be OK. Furthermore, during the NDE, Al accurately noticed that the surgeon operating on him was flapping his arms in an unusual fashion, with his hands in his armpits. When he came back to his body after the surgery was over, the surgeon was startled that Al could describe his own arm flapping, which was his idiosyncratic method of keeping his hands sterile.

2. The case of the Chinese woman: The author Maggie Callanan in her 1993 book, Final Gifts, wrote about a case in which an elderly Chinese woman had an NDE in which she saw her deceased husband and her sister. She was puzzled since her sister wasn't dead, or so she thought. In actuality, her family had hid her sister's recent death from her for fear of upsetting her already fragile health. This case might be explained by psi since the family knew, but there are cases where nobody in proximity knew.

3. The case of Pam Reynolds: This is reported by Michael Sabom in his book Light and Death. Pam Reynolds underwent a very risky operation to remove an aneurysm from her brain, in which her brain was drained totally of its blood so that the doctors could clip off the swollen blood vessel. During this procedure, Pam had a deep NDE in which she saw all of the details of the operation and later reported on it with complete accuracy, even though she was "dead" by usual criteria (no heartbeat or respirations, flat EEG) for much of it!

4. Cases of the blind who can see: Recorded by Kenneth Ring in his book, Mind Sight, there is solid evidence for 31 cases in which blind people report visually accurate information obtained during the NDE.

Addressing the frequent explanation that such events can be accounted for as hallucinations, Greyson noted that:

1. If these are hallucinations, then how is that such incredibly accurate and verifiable information is resulting from the NDEs? 2. People on drugs who have NDEs see fewer deceased relatives when they travel out of body. This suggests that people who do see relatives are clear-minded, not hallucinating. 3. People see deceased but not living relatives in their NDEs. In some cases of children, they see dead relatives whom they had never met or seen pictures of. How could they hallucinate accurately the visual images of someone they have never met?

Greyson concluded by briefly noting how we might design a good NDE study. He suggested that we first need to target populations that are likely to have them, such as hypothermic circulatory arrest patients, and then set up specific visual targets in the hospital room that can be clearly identified. Furthermore, Greyson added that a good physiological apparatus should be set up to measure what is happening in the body during the NDE.

Looking at the surmounting data altogether, Greyson believes that survival is the most parsimonious explanation for growing data of near-death experiences.

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