

Maria's Near-Death Experience: Waiting for the Other Shoe to Drop

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The extraordinary story of a Seattle heart patient is widely cited as powerful evidence for a near-death experience as more than a complex hallucination. Here is our investigation of the claim.

HAYDEN EBBERN, SEAN MULLIGAN, and BARRY L. BEYERSTEIN

I'm not afraid to die; I just don't want to be there when it happens.

—Woody Allen

Skeptics enter most debates at a disadvantage because they are usually forced to cast doubt on comforting beliefs. The idea that so-called near-death experiences, NDEs for short, could count as evidence for survival of the soul after death is perhaps the most comforting belief of all. Since physician Raymond Moody (1975) coined the term “near-death experience” to describe a reasonably consistent set of experiences recalled by about a third of those who are resuscitated after near-fatal incidents, such descriptions have been welcomed with enthusiasm by a large segment of the public.

Susan Blackmore (1991) has described near-death experience as follows: “For many experiencers, their adventures

seem unquestionably to provide for evidence for life after death, and the profound effects the experience can have on them is just added confirmation. By contrast, for many scientists these experiences are just hallucinations produced by the dying brain and of no more interest than an especially vivid dream. So which is right? . . . neither is quite right: NDEs provide no evidence for life after death, and we can best understand them by looking at neurochemistry, physiology, and psychology; but they are much more interesting than any dream. . . . Any satisfactory theory . . . leads us to questions about minds, selves, and the nature of consciousness."

Historically, philosophers have used the term *mind* to refer to the subjective awareness of one's self and its surroundings and the experience of imagining, planning, and willing our actions. Psychologists and neuroscientists generally prefer the term *consciousness* when referring to this inner stream of perceptions, images, memories, and feelings. It is from them that the brain assembles the conscious model it experiences as reality. By mixing inference with sensory inputs, body images, emotions, and stored memories, the brain constructs our sense of an ongoing self dwelling in a physical body, surrounded by a real world of objects and events. In religious lore, the terms *soul* or *spirit* encompass not only this subjective awareness of the self and its whereabouts, but also the belief that this mental tableau is a manifestation of a divine *essence* each individual is thought to possess. Believers consider souls nonmaterial, usually immortal. In what follows, *mind* and *consciousness* will refer to secular, naturalistic depictions of mental awareness. *Soul* or *spirit* will be reserved for when the holder's views imply that this awareness of the self is somehow supernatural, separable from the body, and capable of surviving death (i.e., in an "afterlife"). NDEs are only one example of episodes in which the brain's construction of reality breaks down temporarily and allows the self model to *feel* as if it were pure spiritual essence, no longer attached to a physical body.

The NDE typically begins with a sense of serenity and relief, followed by a feeling that the self is leaving the body (the "out-of-body experience," or OBE). From this vantage point, the supposedly disembodied spirit sometimes feels that it is

Hayden Ebbert is an undergraduate in the Department of Psychology and Sean Mulligan is a graduate student in the Department of Biological Sciences at Simon Fraser University. Barry Beyerstein is a faculty member and member of the Brain Behavior Laboratory in the Department of Psychology at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., V5A 1S6, Canada.

observing attempts to revive its lifeless body. A subset of those who reach the OBE stage further report being propelled through a spiral tunnel toward a bright light. For some, the light eventually resolves into a significant religious figure, deceased relative or friend, or vista of paradise. As rescue procedures begin to take effect, these patients often report feeling great reluctance at being pulled back into the painful, uncertain, everyday world.

Virtually every book retelling this now-familiar story achieves best-seller status and reaps substantial rewards for its author.

James Alcock (1981) provided several insights into the motivations underlying this fervent longing for "proof" of an afterlife. He also suggested an explanation for why the will to believe so readily overcomes the desire to examine the evidence critically (Alcock 1981, p. 65):

Intellectually capable of foreseeing that they will one day die, yet emotionally too frail to accept that physical death may indeed be the end of their existence, human beings have long clung to the idea that life continues beyond the grave.

Alcock reminds us that survival beyond death lies at the core of almost all formal religions and that protecting this hope was also a major impetus for the founding of the modern discipline of parapsychology. Alcock was referring in the latter statement to the eminent group of British scholars and statesmen who in the nineteenth century banded together to form the Society for Psychical Research. Disturbed by the implications of modern science for their Christian worldview, these members of the intelligentsia espoused the goal of

establishing *scientific* proof for the existence of an immortal soul.

Reports of NDEs appeared earlier than the nineteenth century, however. One of the earliest accounts is that of a soldier's supposed return from death, found in Plato's *Republic*. The Bible too is replete with stories of people raised from the dead, as are the sacred texts of most other faiths. Although reports of NDEs have shown up over the centuries, the appearance rate seems to have increased dramatically in recent times. This is likely due to vast improvements in emergency medicine, coupled with a worldwide resurgence of religious fundamentalism (a twentieth-century movement among Christians, Jews, and Muslims that advocates the literal interpretation of their respective sacred writings). The spiritual interpretation of NDEs is reinforced by the mass media, which prosper by pandering to public longings of all sorts, including the desire for life after death.

The concept of immortality is, in the final analysis, a meta-physical proposition that can only be accepted or rejected on

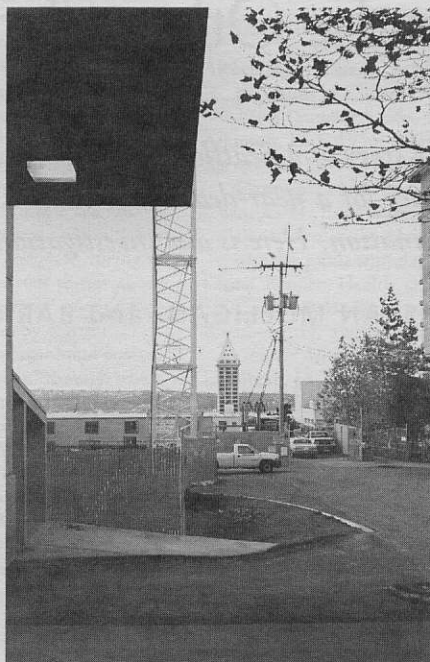


Figure 1. View from the ground outside Harborview Medical Center where the shoe Maria said she saw was located. In the background is the Smith Tower, where an NDE support group said one would have to be positioned to see a shoe on the medical center window ledge.