Guest Editorial: Why Near-Death Experiences Intrigue Us

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In his most recent book, The Light Beyond (1988), Raymond Moody, Jr. includes a chapter with a most provocative title: "Why Near-Death Experiences Intrigue Us." He devotes all of Chapter 4 to exploring this fascinating idea. First, he wonders whether near-death experiencers really died, noting that one intriguing aspect of the near-death experience (NDE) is that NDErs have come closer to death than non-NDErs. Further on in the chapter, he inquires whether the NDE may act as a "religious confirmation" (pp. 68–71) and observes that NDErs tend to be more spiritual, but not necessarily more religious, after their encounter with death.

In his effort to explain why NDEs intrigue us, Moody muses in Chapter 4 whether science would be altered by proof of life after death, a point that is never clearly addressed in this chapter. He ends saying that people would be changed by the proof of an afterlife, but avoids discussing whether or not science would be affected. Moody then goes on to query whether NDEs intrigue us "because they are 'hip'" (pp. 80–83), and concludes that since we have known about them since the writings of Plato, NDEs are not likely to be a passing fancy.

While the above may indeed be valid reasons why NDEs are intriguing to Moody, I am intrigued by them for other reasons, reasons only alluded to in the "Conclusion" to Chapter 4. Moody intimates what is of great fascination to me when he writes, "... death is our greatest mystery and everyone is interested in solving it. NDEs intrigue us..."
because they are the most tangible proof of spiritual existence that can be found" (p. 83). Carol Zaleski supported that point when she wrote that each of us knows we will die, and knowing this, we are driven to find ways to make some sense of death (1987, p. 12).

Moody never does explicate his concluding comment that NDEs illuminate the fundamental metaphysical questions humans have pondered since the inception of the species, questions that F. W. Ross and T. W. Hills have explored in their book, *Questions That Matter Most: Asked by the World’s Religions* (1954). Ross and Hills’ point was that the world’s great religions—Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Taoism—all seek in their own way to answer the same basic metaphysical questions: Who am I? What is real? What is my place in the universe? What shall be my life goals? What is the nature of God? What is the meaning of human life? What happens after death?

Moody hints at possible answers to some of these questions when he mentions in Chapter 4 that NDErs come to regard their bodies as houses for their spirits, that NDEs imply death is a transition to another existence, and that NDErs believe in an afterlife, but in my view he does not go far enough.

I think NDEs intrigue many of us because they help to answer a number of the fundamental spiritual questions many of us have, and to which we are not finding satisfactory answers either from organized religions or from Western science, the reservations of naturalists like Paul Kurtz notwithstanding. These are the very same questions posed by Ross and Hills.

Kurtz (1988) would have us believe that "NDEs can be . . . explained by ordinary science," with the explanations residing in physiological mechanisms such as cerebral anoxia or psychological explanations like depersonalization. Not only has he ignored the cogent counterarguments for physiological and psychological explanations put forth by Kenneth Ring (1980), Margot Grey (1985), and Zaleski (1987), but he has also ignored the fundamental metaphysical questions why NDEs intrigue many of us, and for which traditional science has been unable to provide adequate explanations.

Kurtz has also ignored one of the lessons of the history of science, which is that even though contemporary science cannot explain a phenomenon today, the science of tomorrow may well be able to explain it, a point convincingly made by Robert Peel in his book *Spiritual Healing in a Scientific Age* (1987). Simply recalling the history of the discovery of cells, vaccinations, DNA, and the AIDS virus should be sufficient to demonstrate that at one point science could not explain something we now take for granted.