BOOK REVIEW

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Subtext for Children of the New Millennium, by P. M. H. Atwater. Charlottesville, VA: P. M. H. Atwater. Available from the author at P.O. Box 7691, Charlottesville, VA 22906-7691 or at <www.cinemind.com/atwater>.

In Children of the New Millennium, P. M. H. Atwater continues to analyze her extended research into near-death experiences (NDEs). However, this book is particularly concerned with children’s NDEs. The reader should always keep in mind that Atwater is herself an experiencer, having had three near-death episodes in 1977. As Kenneth Ring (1984, 1992) aptly pointed out, ineffability is one of the characteristic features of NDEs, which are not easily comprehended and evaluated by nonexperiencers. Thus, a person who is him- or herself an experiencer is much better suited than the nonNDEr to understand the message of the NDE. Another background of Atwater’s research is her extended experience with more than 3,000 adult experiencers whom she interviewed following their episodes.

For this book, Atwater investigated 277 people who had undergone NDEs while they were children and discloses the similarities and differences between children’s and adults’ NDEs. The causes of the childhood NDEs Atwater studied included, in order of frequency, drowning, major surgery, minor surgery such as tonsillectomies, child abuse, trauma, and lightning. Unlike many other authors, she accentuates both the positive and not-so-positive effects of NDEs, in this book even more

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deeply than in her previous writings (1988, 1994, 1996). In a most analytical way, she first presents her results, based on interviews of these 277 childhood experiencers, 52 of whom filled out extended questionnaires, and then develops her conclusions drawn from the results, step by step. As usual in her work, she offers very provocative ideas and implications. Throughout the book, Atwater presents many case reports, often with original drawings, to underline the development of her ideas, which she then discusses comprehensively with the findings and viewpoints of other authors from the extended literature on the subject.

Children of the New Millennium is divided into 11 chapters and an extended section of footnotes, commentaries, and additional ideas. Atwater further provides a subtext for this book, available by mail or from her website, since the publisher was unable to carry the whole contents of the original version of the book because of space limitations. The subtext contains this “missing material” and comprises three appendices, with recommendations for working with children, research methodology, and resources and bibliography. Thus a complete understanding of this work comprises both the book and its subtext. The reader should not expect a smooth and comprehensive presentation of childhood NDEs, but rather, as usual in Atwater’s works, a very challenging and often provocative evaluation of her well-rounded research findings, sometimes contradicting what other authors in the field have found.

Children’s NDEs are far more common than generally imagined. Atwater writes that “the vast majority of children who face death experience a near-death scenario. And these children contend with the same aftereffects, both psychological and physiological, as do adults… but in a different manner” (p. 4, original italics). This is the central statement of the book. Afterwards, these children exhibit a noticeable brain enhancement, often combined with a sharp rise in intelligence, which Atwater calls a transformation of consciousness or a “brain shift/spirit shift,” by which she means nothing less than a chemical and functional change in the brain that could cast light on the mechanisms of human evolution: “The ‘engine’ of evolution … is normally so gradual that centuries must pass before we can even glimpse the changes it fosters. Brain shifts/spirit shifts jump-start that process…. ” (p. 18). These claims might look risky to some people, but Atwater gives good reasons for her statements in view of the effects found in children.

According to Atwater, brain shifts/spirit shifts represent expansions of consciousness and faculties into the next plane of growth and