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THE LIFE DEATH REVEALS

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Forward: Although written some years ago, this article contains the passion which drove me to continue my research for two decades of disciplined work. --*P.M.H. Atwater*

Life, that's what I want to talk about, life!, but not the way most people do. I want to talk about life as it really exists, unbounded by anyone's prejudice or preference and unhindered by scientific claims or personal belief systems. I want to talk about the life death reveals because dying taught me that life is far more dynamic and far more diverse than any dream or fantasy. Death taught me to wake up and realize just how alive life is.

Millions of people can echo my sentiments, adults and children alike, all of them people who experienced the near-death phenomenon as I once did and who believe they actually crossed over to the other side of death and returned.

It's incredible when any of us get together for, in the sharing of our stories, we talk about what happened when death came, how that affected us, what we learned, how we've changed, and how our lives have altered because of what we went through. Oft-times there's more laughing and crying and hugging than there is conversation, because our hearts know more now than our heads and our eyes usually see beyond appearances.

That moment of death, whether clinical or nearly so, unites us, not just because we experienced something unique yet common to us all, but more because we now know that the greatest of all secrets isn't any secret . . . death doesn't end life, it only ends the physical form we wear.

A 1992 Gallup Poll survey estimated that thirteen million Americans had experienced the near-death phenomenon but better resuscitation methods and more effective medical care have expanded that original estimate. Today, between forty to forty-five percent of those resuscitated in a hospital environment will probably undergo the experience. When you include significant others in those figures - families, friends, health-care providers, anyone affected to whatever degree - then the numbers mushroom.

Anyone can have a near-death experience. Religion or culture makes no difference, neither does age. Children, even tiny babies, can have one, remember it, and when they are old enough to be proficient at language tell their parents and their story will match the adult experience, though seldom will you hear children mention past-life reviews or concerns about this-life problems. When both adults and children draw pictures of what happened to them, the subject matter they illustrate is virtually the same.

The phenomenon itself consists of a universal and consistent pattern of components which can include a sensation of floating out of one's body and existing apart from it, accelerating through a dark tunnel, ascending toward and entering into a bright light at the end of the tunnel. Many individuals claim they are met in the light by angelic beings or loved ones previously dead, and conversation ensues. This dialogue, which seems more telepathic than verbal, can involve questions about life and its meaning or perhaps revelations about personal issues. Many report a review of the life just lived followed by an assessment of gains and losses made during the life. Seldom do experiencers want to leave the light-filled world they discovered on the other side of death, but eventually they are told to leave or sense they must. Reviving is not always pleasant. Although it is rare for any single report to include all the elements possible with the phenomenon, most cases do encompass about half of them.

No serious researcher has yet been able to disprove the near-death phenomenon, although many have tried. Popular arguments are: "The tunnel component is a symbolic replay of birth." A representative sample of those reporting the tunnel effect were contacted again to determine the manner of their birth. The result - there is no statistical difference whatever between those born vaginally and those born caesarean in reports of the tunnel effect. "The phenomenon is a drug-induced hallucination." Most reports come from people who had not been given drugs before their experience. In cases where drugs had been administered, most of those were drugs known not to cause hallucinations. Only a relatively small percentage could have been drug related. "It is caused by oxygen deprivation." Almost all reports are consistently lucid, clear, coherent, and richly detailed. Often information gained during the experience which could not have been known before is later verified as accurate. "No reports have come from people who revived after being completely dead." Not true. Some reports have come from people dead for over an hour, even from individuals pronounced clinically dead and taken to a morgue.

A typical case of the many I researched. . . a woman who was badly injured in an automobile/truck accident and declared dead during surgery, revived on the operating table. Excited, she spoke to her doctors of a world of brilliant light and meeting her father there. She claimed her father told her he too had just died, and where and how. Then he revealed why she had been born and what she had yet to accomplish before she could continue her journey through the light beyond death. Relatives who had gathered at the hospital pooh-poohed her story saying they had spoken with the father that morning and he seemed in perfect health. So to prove the woman's story a mere hallucination, one of the doctors telephoned the father, who lived several hundred miles away. After several attempts to locate him, the doctor learned that the woman's father had died exactly as she had described five minutes before she did. None of the relatives knew of his death since it was so recent and no one had yet been notified.

Another case which is typical. . . while traveling at high speed late one night, a man vaguely remembered hitting a patch of ice before his car was airborne and then crashed. Suddenly, from a position high above his body looking down, he could see everything perfectly, every detail of the twisted car, the solitary tree, and the nearby two-story house with a light on in an upstairs window. He somehow "floated" over to that window and "waved" for help. The man inside looked up as if seeing him, then rushed downstairs to the telephone. Injuries sustained by the driver were extensive, including blindness and the loss of one arm. Months later, however, the man's eyesight returned and he was able to draw a picture of the crash scene, the tree, and the nearby house - with every detail so exact that the police officer who saw the picture said it was almost like a photograph of the accident even though there was no human way the man could have ever seen any thing at all. The fellow in the house also confirmed the accuracy of the drawing plus the spooky apparition of the

accident victim waving to him from outside his upstairs window. "It's a good thing he caught my attention that way because I never heard the crash and I would have had no reason to go outside until morning."

Amazing stories such as these are becoming more numerous, but now details are being carefully cross-checked. Contrary to what some would prefer to think, the stories are not only holding up under scrutiny, they are proving more incredible than at first glance.

This implies that what near-death survivors have been saying about the truth of life deserves more serious consideration, statements such as: you don't need a body to be alive, physical handicaps have no bearing on the "real" person, earth life is purposeful and worth its living, death is but a shift in consciousness from one mode of awareness to another, we are responsible for what we make of ourselves for life is more than it seems and we each have a role to play, life is actually the gift of eternal love.

And they discover that God exists.

The vast majority of near-death survivors talk about God, regardless of whatever they may have believed or not believed before their experience occurred. Almost to a person they claim that the light they encountered, that incredibly warm and loving and compassionate light, was God or an expression of God. "The light beyond death is pure ecstasy," one survivor explained, "and the light I encountered is the Light of God."

This knowing of how life is ordered changes one, but not necessarily as one might think.

Let me give you an example of what it was like for me so soon after surviving death and having three different near-death experiences. This particular incident is quoted from a copy of a letter I wrote at the time:

"The sun was a bright ball and I swear I owned it for I felt that big and that important. My legs were finally holding all my weight. Both of them. I was upright and the whole world could see me. So I stood there, me, a grown adult, standing at a busy downtown intersection in Boise, Idaho, after having run an entire city block without falling. Tears of joy flooded forth.

"Each minute sensation from my legs was received in my brain as if it were the afterclap from a sonic boom. That loud, and I could both hear and feel simultaneously. If I couldn't hear a sensation then I couldn't feel it either because, for some reason unbeknownst to me, both faculties had merged. They were now equal halves of the same sensory mechanism, reverberating in shouts of feeling/sound throughout my body.

"As I cried, I noticed rays of energy protruding from me and spiraling out into the air. They looked like pulsating flares glinting in the sunlight. A car honked when I wobbled off the curb into the street, feeling somewhat dazed and giddy. I jumped back and when I did those energy flares flipped into fireworks, setting off a cascade of what appeared to be miniature rockets shooting off in all directions.

"This impressed me as ridiculous. Energy doesn't visibly protrude from a human body and certainly not from mine in broad daylight and in public. It was preposterous, but it was happening. I felt like a freak, a circus buffoon. The light show created when I jumped stilled when I became motionless. So I just stood there, staring at nothing in particular, lost in thought.

"These rays, whatever they were, came from inside out. That meant I must be causing them, but I could not figure out how or why and, to be honest, I'm not certain if I really cared. People walked by. They would stop and give me a studied look, then scurry on. I wondered what they saw when they looked at me. Could they see the flares, too? I didn't have the nerve to ask. My legs responded with an ache which echoed into pain. Phlebitis and the damage done by blood clots were not easy to overcome. It was hard work relearning how to stand, walk, and climb stairs; but running, that was different. It was heaven, truly heaven, to be able to run again. Regardless of noisy pain, fireworks, and energy flares, this moment on the street corner was to be

savored, tears notwithstanding, so I did.

"I could taste it, the sun, and I could taste the satisfaction of being there. Whatever I saw or thought about deeply had flavor, a taste. My faculties for sight, thought, and taste had also merged. Feeling/sound. Flavored sight and thought. Who in their right mind would believe any of this. Me? Anyone?

"My head drooped in dejection as tears rolled into sobs. I was thirty-nine years old, a forms analyst for a large bank with a successful writing and projects development career behind me, and I was standing on the street corner sobbing like a baby.

"Every morning and every night I had practiced my exercises, puffing away, heaving my right leg along, in an effort to regain strength and coordination. I wanted muscle control back and a brain which would respond automatically and in rhythm with normal biological impulses. I wanted that very much, so I crawled. Three children had I birthed and raised but now I was back crawling, relentlessly crawling, as if I were clawing my way back to some kind of normalcy.

"I calmed down and the tears stopped. Stiffly I straightened and headed back to the bank where I worked. This was just another coffee break and time was up. Energy flares lessened as I bit my lip, for the walk back pained me and the limp returned when I pushed past the glass doors to a waiting elevator."

That bright day when I was first able to run again without falling is forever etched in my memory as a miracle of miracles. It meant that much to me for the damage done to my body following a miscarriage, a large blood clot which dislodged in my right leg, phlebitis, and adrenal failure, had been severe. The incident I just relayed occurred in the summer of 1977, and was unusual in the way the energy flares and multiple sensing differences I had experienced since my near-death episodes seemed to expand so suddenly and so radically. This extreme expansion lessened, then faded as years passed, but changes in my physical ability to process sensations and stimuli have remained. The experience changed me, even physically.

Certainly, not every near-death survivor went through what I did but, in ways unique to each, the majority did come face to face with unsettling differences in their ability to respond to the strange newness of a once familiar world.

My way of dealing with my own situation was to seek out others as myself and ask questions as I knew nothing about the near-death phenomenon at the time and had never heard the term used. This quest for information led me through ten states where I spoke with several thousand people and initially interviewed over two hundred other near-death survivors - plus anyone else connected with them including spouses, children, neighbors, employers. Learning what all these people thought, how each felt about what had happened and how they coped with it, helped me to better understand what I had undergone and what was continuing to happen in my life.

I discovered during this early quest to understand that, as the phenomenon of near-death has a universal pattern of components, so too does its aftermath, with a pattern of aftereffects common to most experiencers regardless of age, belief, education, culture, or politics. With the urging of Kenneth Ring (a leading researcher of the near-death phenomenon and author of "HEADING TOWARD OMEGA") to cross-check my original findings and do more interviews, I complied, later writing the book "COMING BACK TO LIFE: THE AFTER-EFFECTS OF THE NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE." The book was originally published by Dodd, Mead & Company in 1988 but is out now in paperback through Ballantine Books.

(Later on I went on to write "Beyond the Light" (hardcover Birch Lane Press, paperback Avon Books), and "Future Memory" (hardcover Birch Lane Press). Both books extend my research into broader and more extensive observations on near-death and related topics.)

Some aftereffects have been reported by other, more professional researchers - things like how experiencers are less materialistic afterward and become more loving and caring and lose any fear of death - but seldom does anyone acknowledge all the aftereffects and the difficulty people have adjusting to them.

What follows is the pattern of seven psychological components I noticed when interviewing near-death survivors and their families: the inability to personalize love and a sense of belonging - people who have undergone a near-death experience come to love others without the usual conditions and attachments society expects. This can be very disconcerting to loved ones and friends who expect the individual to behave the same as always. The ability to love expands for the survivor and becomes inclusive instead of exclusive.

The inability to recognize and comprehend boundaries, rules, limits - one of the biggest reasons life seems so different afterward is because the experiencer now has a basis of comparison unknown before. Familiar codes of conduct can lose relevance or disappear altogether, as broader avenues of interest and inquiry and a more spiritual outlook take priority.

Difficulty understanding time sense or references to either past or future - the majority of near-death survivors develop a sense of timelessness, some even reject or refuse to wear watches. They often come to live with a heightened awareness and appreciation of the present moment.

Sensitivities enhance and expand, the intuitive opens up to the psychic - there is no denying the fact that, if not psychic before, the experiencer becomes so afterward; if psychic before, he or she becomes even more so after. Out-of-body experiences can continue, the light beings met in death can become a daily part of the person's life, and extrasensory perception can become rather ordinary.

A shifted or changed view of physical reality, with a noticeable reduction of fears and worries - life takes on a different meaning when seen from the perspective of "mountaintops" rather than "mud puddles." The paradoxes and puzzles of life begin to make sense, while patience and forgiveness tend to replace former needs to criticize and condemn. Such switches in character can seem bewildering to the family who have no way to understand what is going on or why.

A different feeling of physical self, knowing we live in and "wear" our bodies - the average near-death survivor comes to regard him or herself as an immortal soul currently resident within a material form so lessons can be learned while "sojourning" in the earthplane. They now know they are not their body, they are a living soul, a child of God. Family members often consider this attitude "eccentric."

Difficulty with communication and relationships, finding it hard to say what is meant or to understand the language phrasing others use - it's almost as if the survivor changes frequency while his or her family remains on the same wavelength. The world is the same, but the individual isn't. Communication improves with patience and effort on everyone's part and life can return to "normal," but chances are the near-death survivor will be ever different as if responding to a "tune" no one else hears.

I hasten to add here that many times these aftereffects fade with time or disappear altogether. With others, however, the aftereffects not only remain but increase as the years pass. It is my belief that in recognizing what is common and normal to the experience, much needless misunderstanding and confusion can be avoided.

Coming back to life need not be difficult. If family and friends are open and receptive, they too can benefit as much from helping the survivor as if they had had the experience themselves. The phenomenon can then be a shared event and lives can be immeasurably enriched because of this.

But it takes time. There seems no way to short-cut the process of shifting around one's world. Even though what happens is sudden, integrating the event and determining what it may mean can take years.

I can't begin to emphasize what a difference caring and receptive people make, or maybe I should use the word "informed." Here are two examples of families who were threatened and intimidated by the changes in their loved one's behavior. The first involves a successful businessman from southern California. When he contacted me, he said, "After my experience I came to love my wife and my children more than I ever thought I could. I love everyone. My experience taught me REAL LOVE, UNCONDITIONAL LOVE." Correspondence from his wife and children, however, told another story for they did not feel the love he described. A gap slowly developed between what he felt and what they felt. Several years later I heard from the man again. In desperation and confusion, he noted the difficulties he was having holding down his job and earning a living, not to mention problems with his family. He couldn't understand why people had trouble relating to him when he was so filled with love and joy. He was generous and affectionate, yet people seemed to turn away or back off. His own family would hardly speak to him any more. In despair he decided to leave town and "drift" for awhile. That was in 1982. I haven't heard from him since.

With the other case, a woman from Bedford, Virginia, had been pronounced dead from automobile accident injuries but she later revived. Months after her recovery, her worried family asked me to come. The woman was middle-aged, married, had several children plus a younger one, and was a professional health-care provider with a part-time business on the side. After spending hours with both her and her family I noticed the all too familiar pattern. While she spoke of feeling so much love and joy she could almost burst, her family was terrified. Not only did they not feel the love she described with animation and enthusiasm, they thought she was hallucinating and out of touch with reality. She was gloriously happy. They were afraid. She was open and willing, ready to change everything in her life. They just wanted back the woman they loved. She was aglow and utterly transformed. They were bereft.

What made a difference for me, what helped me to recognize the discrepancies between my awareness and the awareness of those around me, was my oldest daughter Natalie. Of my three children, Natalie inherited the same driving curiosity which powers me and she has funneled that energy into a successful career in electronic circuit-board design. Rather independent, like her mother, she sat me down one day and announced: "You are easier to get along with now than you used to be. You are nicer. But to tell you the truth I miss Mom and I want Mom back!" Well, we both searched for her but neither one of us could find her. "Mom" had disappeared.

That was over a decade ago. Last year, Natalie sent me an interesting letter in which she wrote: "All my life you had always been the strong one and there when I needed you. Sure I saw you cry sometimes but I don't ever remember you telling me that you needed me and therefore giving me a chance to be there for you. I never knew how soft a person you could be until after your near-death experiences. The 'hardness' you always had has melted into a gentle wisdom and maturity, and I love it. You did a lot of changing, Mom. Now, it's my turn."

After a near-death experience you want to talk about it, you want to tell the whole world that death ends nothing but the physical body, that God exists and love is God revealed. You want to scream this news from the highest rooftop, you want to shake up a deluded humanity. God is real - life is ongoing and never ending and worth its living. And the life we have is multi-dimensional, limited only by the ignorance of our own misperceptions and the folly of blind belief. You want to say this. You need to say this.

But I honestly do not know what does more to silence near-death survivors - the interested or the disinterested. Let me give you some examples. When I left my home state of Idaho in 1978 and moved to the Washington D.C. area, I drove over one Saturday to the Post Office in Falls Church, Virginia, to mail a letter. My dress was informal, my coat a left-over remnant from the eighth grade (and you can imagine how old it was!). As I returned to my car, the largest man I have ever seen, nearly as wide as he was tall, stood in my way, threw open his massive arms and shouted so loud it seemed the entire world could hear: "There's a white glow all around you. I know what that means. You are a messenger of God and you have come here to

deliver a message about God's word."

Well, quite naturally I stopped in my tracks to hear what he had to say. His size alone commanded attention, not to mention his revelations of my supposed "angel-hood." He went on like this for several minutes until I began to wonder if he knew something I didn't. After he quieted down and the crowds which had gathered dispersed, he cooed up and explained that he was a Christian crusader and he needed to know what the message was I came to deliver before he could help me. All I could answer was that in 1977 I had survived death three times but . . . before I could say another word his eyes flashed and he started off on another volley of shouting. "My God, woman, I knew it. I knew you were special. Just leave it to me. I'll make you famous. I'll make you rich. The whole world's going to know about you." Needless to say, I shut my mouth and ran.

His interest struck me later as funny, but at the time it was horrifying. His version of "sainthood" I could do without. But the disinterested can be just as vocal. During my quest to seek others as myself, a request was made by a psychologist in Winona, Minnesota, for me to stop by and visit. While I was there, a grief group meeting in a funeral home asked me to give a talk about my near-death experiences. Midway through my description of my second encounter with death, a Lutheran pastor sitting opposite me in the large room jumped to his feet, his face suddenly crimson, and he yelled, "You have not been washed in the blood of the Lamb." With that admonition, he stomped out the door followed by half the audience. I affirmed his and everyone else's right to leave, telling them I knew exactly how they felt for when the phenomenon happened to me I couldn't believe it at first, either.

After I finished my talk, the director of the funeral home said, "There's no reason for the pastor to have behaved like that. You must have touched a nerve; but I want you to know I found what you had to say one of the most inspiring messages of hope I've ever heard." Although I continued on my search for others so questions could be asked, I quit talking about my personal experiences after that, except for certain occasions. My desire was to enlighten, not frighten.

I had a lot of help after my experiences were over; a special doctor came to my rescue when traditional medicine failed to make a difference, and three strangers appeared from "nowhere" and volunteered to help. That doctor was William G. Reimer, a respected naturopathic physician who later set up a clinic in Ontario, Oregon, and then retired after a long and successful career. The three strangers were Terry and Elizabeth Macinata and their friend Tom Huber. Terry was Reimer's assistant at the time and was working toward a career in naturopathy himself. Elizabeth was rounded still from birthing their son, but nothing slowed her enthusiasm for composing music and teaching Sunday School lessons to teenagers on the subject of spirituality. Tom had started a new job as a health inspector but his background was quite diverse, what with his love for gourmet cooking and teaching yoga.

For a year and a half the four of us were almost inseparable. I dubbed us "cousins" to explain our close relationship, since we each had keys to the others' homes and we came and went at will. During that year and a half, we held "sessions" amongst ourselves where we would experiment with different styles and methods of psychotherapy. No topic was considered sacred. Upset was ignored. Tears got a box of kleenex thrown at you. Tom and I called most of the sessions as we were relentless in our quest to better understand ourselves and the meaning of life. The sessions we held were incredibly powerful and productive, and we all gained from them.

During this same time, I launched an extensive campaign to relearn everything. Since nothing made sense any more, I resolved to seek new definitions to old standards. This I did by enrolling in beginner classes in just about every subject you can imagine, including cooking and homemaking. I would go on veritable binges of experimentation, examining and re-examining everything in my environment. Anything from pots and pans to underarm deodorant was suspect. I even went so far as to write commercial manufacturers for research reports on various substances and production processes.

I mention this, all the relearning I put myself through, for this reason: anyone who undergoes an impactful transformation, regardless of how or to what extent, experiences change on all levels of being - physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. For some, these changes can be confusing or disorienting, while for others such changes are simply taken in stride.

And the changes I am referring to are not just attitudinal. This is a fallacy. These changes can be quite organic and physical as well. I honestly do not feel I could have made the adjustments I did without the help of the Macinatas, Tom Huber, and Dr. Reimer. These people enabled me to rediscover my own strength and seek for my own truth. Because I know first-hand how helpful a support group can be, I would urge any near-death survivor who might be reading this article to contact the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS); the address follows this article.

For those who are unable to avail themselves of what IANDS has to offer, I recommend the following five-point plan as a way to help near-death survivors adjust:

- 1) Active participation of empathetic listeners who exhibit interest instead of scorn. Give the survivor plenty of time to talk. If he or she is a child, encourage drawing or play acting.
- 2) Absence of pressure to resume everyday life routines. Let them ease back. For awhile, do not expect them to be the same person they once were, and do not be too surprised if they want to make sudden or unusual changes in their life.
- 3) Freedom to explore ideas and ask questions without shame, ridicule, or guilt.
- 4) Supportive therapy of some kind, even if it is just a family rap session conducted in a non-judgmental manner. Group therapy with fellow survivors is ideal, but ONLY if professional or caring strangers are also present to give clear feedback. Survivors need other viewpoints and opinions besides their own, but not to the point of being overwhelmed.
- 5) Exposure to as much information about the near-death phenomenon and its aftereffects as possible, including scientific findings, books, and articles.

Once survivors realize how normal and natural their problems are for what they went through, the faster they will stabilize the aftereffects and the easier they will reintegrate back into society.

The near-death phenomenon suggests and quite persuasively that life does not end with death, and that death is but a shift in consciousness from one level of existence to another. Experiencers make plain, however, that earth life is special and we each have a job to do in the outpicturing of a divine plan.

I am overjoyed at the people, regardless of who or where, who find inspiration from reportings of the phenomenon and from the people who talk about it. There are a number of counselors now who use the pattern of the experience as a model to help their clients move past restricting fears and feelings of loss to reconnect with their own innate potential for positive life fulfillment. Also, people in the process of dying often find encouragement and peace when they come to realize that the light described by millions of experiencers may indeed be the Light of God.

Although there are other ways, easier ways, to learn about the reality of God and the validity of the spiritual path (taking on a personal relationship with God), I have no regrets about what happened to me. At the time, I instinctively labeled my experiences "The Heavenly Sledge Hammer Effect" for that best describes how stubborn I was beforehand. My life today is happier and more wonderful than anything I could have ever imagined. The experiences I underwent in 1977 were my turning point.

Repeated most often from "The Other Side" is the message: LOVE ONE ANOTHER. I hope the world is listening.

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