

PROOF OF HEAVEN: A DOCTOR'S EXPERIENCE WITH THE AFTERLIFE

BY DR. EBEN ALEXANDER ON 10/8/12 AT 1:00 AM EDT



As a neurosurgeon, I did not believe in the phenomenon of near-death experiences. I grew up in a scientific world, the son of a neurosurgeon. I followed my father's path and became an academic neurosurgeon, teaching at Harvard Medical School and other universities. I understand what happens to the brain when people are near death, and I had always believed there were good scientific explanations for the heavenly out-of-body journeys described by those who narrowly escaped death.

The brain is an astonishingly sophisticated but extremely delicate mechanism. Reduce the amount of oxygen it receives by the smallest amount and it will react. It was no big surprise that people who had undergone severe trauma would return from their experiences with strange stories. But that didn't mean they had journeyed anywhere real.

Although I considered myself a faithful Christian, I was so more in name than in actual belief. I didn't begrudge those who wanted to believe that Jesus was more than simply a good man who had suffered at the hands of the world. I sympathized deeply with those who wanted to believe that there was a God somewhere out there who loved us unconditionally. In fact, I envied such people the security that those beliefs no doubt provided. But as a scientist, I simply knew better than to believe them myself.

In the fall of 2008, however, after seven days in a coma during which the human part of my brain, the neocortex, was inactivated, I experienced something so profound that it gave me a scientific reason to believe in consciousness after death.

I know how pronouncements like mine sound to skeptics, so I will tell my story with the logic and language of the scientist I am.

Very early one morning four years ago, I awoke with an extremely intense headache. Within hours, my entire cortex—the part of the brain that controls thought and emotion and that in essence makes us human—had shut down. Doctors at Lynchburg General Hospital in Virginia, a hospital where I myself worked as a neurosurgeon, determined that I had somehow contracted a very rare bacterial meningitis that mostly attacks newborns. *E. coli* bacteria had penetrated my cerebrospinal fluid and were eating my brain.

When I entered the emergency room that morning, my chances of survival in anything beyond a vegetative state were already low. They soon sank to near nonexistent. For seven days I lay in a deep coma, my body unresponsive, my higher-order brain functions totally offline.

Then, on the morning of my seventh day in the hospital, as my doctors weighed whether to discontinue treatment, my eyes popped open.

There is no scientific explanation for the fact that while my body lay in coma, my mind—my conscious, inner self—was alive and well. While the neurons of my cortex were stunned to complete inactivity by the bacteria that had attacked them, my brain-free consciousness journeyed to another, larger dimension of the universe: a dimension I'd never dreamed existed and which the old, pre-coma me would have been more than happy to explain was a simple impossibility.

But that dimension—in rough outline, the same one described by countless subjects of near-death experiences and other mystical states—is there. It exists, and what I saw and learned there has placed me quite literally in a new world: a world where we are much more than our brains and bodies, and where death is not the end of consciousness but rather a chapter in a vast, and incalculably positive, journey.



I'm not the first person to have discovered evidence that consciousness exists beyond the body. Brief, wonderful glimpses of this realm are as old as human history. But as far as I know, no one before me has ever traveled to this dimension (a) while their cortex was completely shut down, and (b) while their body was under minute medical observation, as mine was for the full seven days of my coma.

All the chief arguments against near-death experiences suggest that these experiences are the results of minimal, transient, or partial malfunctioning of the cortex. My near-death experience, however, took place not while my cortex was malfunctioning, but while it was simply off. This is clear from the severity and duration of my meningitis, and from the global cortical involvement documented by CT scans and neurological examinations. According to current medical understanding of the brain and mind, there is absolutely no way that I could have experienced even a dim and limited consciousness during my time in the coma, much less the hyper-vivid and completely coherent odyssey I underwent.

It took me months to come to terms with what happened to me. Not just the medical impossibility that I had been conscious during my coma, but—more importantly—the things that happened during that time. Toward the beginning of my adventure, I was in a place of clouds. Big, puffy, pink-white ones that showed up sharply against the deep blue-black sky.

Higher than the clouds—immeasurably higher—flocks of transparent, shimmering beings arced across the sky, leaving long, streamerlike lines behind them.



Birds? Angels? These words registered later, when I was writing down my recollections. But neither of these words do justice to the beings themselves, which were quite simply different from anything I have known on this planet. They were more advanced. Higher forms.

A sound, huge and booming like a glorious chant, came down from above, and I wondered if the winged beings were producing it. Again, thinking about it later, it occurred to me that the joy of these creatures, as they soared along, was such that they had to make this noise—that if the joy didn't come out of them this way then they

would simply not otherwise be able to contain it. The sound was palpable and almost material, like a rain that you can feel on your skin but doesn't get you wet.

Seeing and hearing were not separate in this place where I now was. I could hear the visual beauty of the silvery bodies of those scintillating beings above, and I could see the surging, joyful perfection of what they sang. It seemed that you could not look at or listen to anything in this world without becoming a part of it—without joining with it in some mysterious way. Again, from my present perspective, I would suggest that you couldn't look at anything in that world at all, for the word "at" itself implies a separation that did not exist there. Everything was distinct, yet everything was also a part of everything else, like the rich and intermingled designs on a Persian carpet ... or a butterfly's wing.

It gets stranger still. For most of my journey, someone else was with me. A woman. She was young, and I remember what she looked like in complete detail. She had high cheekbones and deep-blue eyes. Golden brown tresses framed her lovely face. When first I saw her, we were riding along together on an intricately patterned surface, which after a moment I recognized as the wing of a butterfly. In fact, millions of butterflies were all around us—vast fluttering waves of them, dipping down into the woods and coming back up around us again. It was a river of life and color, moving through the air. The woman's outfit was simple, like a peasant's, but its colors—powder blue, indigo, and pastel orange-peach—had the same overwhelming, super-vivid aliveness that everything else had. She looked at me with a look that, if you saw it for five seconds, would make your whole life up to that point worth living, no matter what had happened in it so far. It was not a romantic look. It was not a look of friendship. It was a look that was somehow beyond all these, beyond all the different compartments of love we have down here on earth. It was something higher, holding all those other kinds of love within itself while at the same time being much bigger than all of them.

Without using any words, she spoke to me. The message went through me like a wind, and I instantly understood that it was true. I knew so in the same way that I knew that the world around us was real—was not some fantasy, passing and insubstantial.

The message had three parts, and if I had to translate them into earthly language, I'd say they ran something like this:

"You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever."

"You have nothing to fear."

"There is nothing you can do wrong."

The message flooded me with a vast and crazy sensation of relief. It was like being handed the rules to a game I'd been playing all my life without ever fully understanding it.

"We will show you many things here," the woman said, again, without actually using these words but by driving their conceptual essence directly into me. "But eventually, you will go back."

To this, I had only one question.

Back where?



A warm wind blew through, like the kind that spring up on the most perfect summer days, tossing the leaves of the trees and flowing past like heavenly water. A divine breeze. It changed everything, shifting the world around me into an even higher octave, a higher vibration.

Although I still had little language function, at least as we think of it on earth, I began wordlessly putting questions to this wind, and to the divine being that I sensed at work behind or within it.

Where is this place?

Who am I?

Why am I here?

Each time I silently put one of these questions out, the answer came instantly in an explosion of light, color, love, and beauty that blew through me like a crashing wave. What was important about these blasts was that they didn't simply silence my questions by overwhelming them. They answered them, but in a way that bypassed language. Thoughts entered me directly. But it wasn't thought like we experience on earth. It wasn't vague, immaterial, or abstract. These thoughts were solid and immediate—hotter than fire and wetter than water—and as I received them I was able to instantly and effortlessly understand concepts that would have taken me years to fully grasp in my earthly life.

I continued moving forward and found myself entering an immense void, completely dark, infinite in size, yet also infinitely comforting. Pitch-black as it was, it was also brimming over with light: a light that seemed to come from a brilliant orb that I now sensed near me. The orb was a kind of "interpreter" between me and this vast presence surrounding me. It was as if I were being born into a larger world, and the universe itself was like a giant cosmic womb, and the orb (which I sensed was somehow connected with, or even identical to, the woman on the butterfly wing) was guiding me through it.

Later, when I was back, I found a quotation by the 17th-century Christian poet Henry Vaughan that came close to describing this magical place, this vast, inky-black core that was the home of the Divine itself.



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"There is, some say, in God a deep but dazzling darkness ..."

That was it exactly: an inky darkness that was also full to brimming with light.

I know full well how extraordinary, how frankly unbelievable, all this sounds. Had someone—even a doctor—told me a story like this in the old days, I would have been quite certain that they were under the spell of some delusion. But what happened to me was, far from being delusional, as real or more real than any event in my life. That includes my wedding day and the birth of my two sons.

What happened to me demands explanation.

Modern physics tells us that the universe is a unity—that it is undivided. Though we seem to live in a world of separation and difference, physics tells us that beneath the surface, every object and event in the universe is completely woven up with every other object and event. There is no true separation.

Before my experience these ideas were abstractions. Today they are realities. Not only is the universe defined by unity, it is also—I now know—defined by love. The universe as I experienced it in my coma is—I have come to see with both shock and joy—the same one that both Einstein and Jesus were speaking of in their (very) different ways.

I've spent decades as a neurosurgeon at some of the most prestigious medical institutions in our country. I know that many of my peers hold—as I myself did—to the theory that the brain, and in particular the cortex, generates consciousness and that we live in a universe devoid of any kind of emotion, much less the unconditional love that I now know God and the universe have toward us. But that belief, that theory, now lies broken at our feet. What happened to me destroyed it, and I intend to spend the rest of my life investigating the true nature of consciousness and making the fact that we are more, much more, than our physical brains as clear as I can, both to my fellow scientists and to people at large.

I don't expect this to be an easy task, for the reasons I described above. When the castle of an old scientific theory begins to show fault lines, no one wants to pay attention at first. The old castle simply took too much work to build in the first place, and if it falls, an entirely new one will have to be constructed in its place.

I learned this firsthand after I was well enough to get back out into the world and talk to others—people, that is, other than my long-suffering wife, Holley, and our two sons—about what had happened to me. The looks of polite disbelief, especially among my medical friends, soon made me realize what a task I would have getting people to understand the enormity of what I had seen and experienced that week while my brain was down.

One of the few places I didn't have trouble getting my story across was a place I'd seen fairly little of before my experience: church. The first time I entered a church after my coma, I saw everything with fresh eyes. The colors of the stained-glass windows recalled the luminous beauty of the landscapes I'd seen in the world above. The deep bass notes of the organ reminded me of how thoughts and emotions in that world are like waves that move through you. And, most important, a painting of Jesus breaking bread with his disciples evoked the message that lay at the very heart of my journey: that we are loved and accepted unconditionally by a God even more grand and unfathomably glorious than the one I'd learned of as a child in Sunday school.

Today many believe that the living spiritual truths of religion have lost their power, and that science, not faith, is the road to truth. Before my experience I strongly suspected that this was the case myself.

But I now understand that such a view is far too simple. The plain fact is that the materialist picture of the body and brain as the producers, rather than the vehicles, of human consciousness is doomed. In its place a new view of mind and body will emerge, and in fact is emerging already. This view is scientific and spiritual in equal measure and will value what the greatest scientists of history themselves always valued above all: truth.

This new picture of reality will take a long time to put together. It won't be finished in my time, or even, I suspect, my sons' either. In fact, reality is too vast, too complex, and too irreducibly mysterious for a full picture of it ever to be absolutely complete. But in essence, it will show the universe as evolving, multi-dimensional, and known down to its every last atom by a God who cares for us even more deeply and fiercely than any parent ever loved their child.

I'm still a doctor, and still a man of science every bit as much as I was before I had my experience. But on a deep level I'm very different from the person I was before, because I've caught a glimpse of this emerging picture of reality. And you can believe me when I tell you that it will be worth every bit of the work it will take us, and those who come after us, to get it right.

NEW ARTICLE

How Near-death Experiences Work

BY ED GRABIANOWSKI

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are common enough that they have entered our everyday language. Phrases like "my whole life flashed before my eyes" and "go to the light" come from decades of research into these strange, seemingly supernatural experiences that some people have when they're at the brink of death. But what exactly are NDEs? Are they hallucinations? Spiritual experiences? Proof of life after death? Or are they simply chemical changes in the brain and sensory organs in the moments prior to death?

In this article, we'll discuss what makes an experience an NDE and who typically has them. We'll also explore spiritual, philosophical and scientific theories for why they happen.



Dr. Raymond Moody coined the term "near-death experience" in his 1975 book, "Life After Life." Many credit Moody's work with bringing the concept of the near-death experience to the public's attention, but reports of such experiences have occurred throughout history. Plato's "Republic," written in 360 B.C.E., contains the tale of a soldier named Er who had an NDE after being killed in battle. Er described his soul leaving his body, being judged along with other souls and seeing heaven [ref].

For the purposes of this article, a near-death experience is any experience in which someone close to death or suffering from some trauma or disease that might lead to death perceives events that seem to be impossible, unusual or supernatural. While there are many questions about NDEs, one thing is certain -- they do exist. Thousands of people have actually perceived similar sensations while close to death. The debate is over whether or not they actually experienced what they perceived.

In the next section, we'll take a look at some of the traits of near-death experiences.

Near-death Experience Traits

Most NDEs share certain common traits, but not all NDEs have every trait and some NDEs don't follow a pattern at all. Here are the traits that "typical" NDEs share:

- **Intense, pure bright light** - Sometimes this intense (but not painful) light fills the room. In other cases, the subject sees a light that they feel represents either Heaven or God.
- **Out-of-body experiences (OBE)** - The subject feels that he has left his body. He can look down and see it, often describing the sight of doctors working on him. In some cases, the subject's "spirit" then flies out of the room, into the sky and sometimes into space.
- **Entering into another realm or dimension** - Depending on the subject's religious beliefs and the nature of the experience, he may perceive this realm as Heaven or, in rare cases, as Hell.
- **Spirit beings** - During the OBE, the subject encounters "beings of light," or other representations of spiritual entities. He may perceive these as deceased loved ones, angels, saints or God.

- **The tunnel** - Many NDE subjects find themselves in a tunnel with a light at its end. They may encounter spirit beings as they pass through the tunnel.
- **Communication with spirits** - Before the NDE ends, many subjects report some form of communication with a spirit being. This is often expressed a "strong male voice" telling them that it is not their time and to go back to their body. Some subjects report being told to choose between going into the light or returning to their earthly body. Others feel they have been compelled to return to their body by a voiceless command, possibly coming from God.
- **Life review** - This trait is also called "the panoramic life review." The subject sees his entire life in a flashback. These can be very detailed or very brief. The subject may also perceive some form of judgment by nearby spirit entities.

Near-death experiences and out-of-body experiences are sometimes grouped together, but there are key differences. An OBE can be a component of an NDE, but some people experience OBEs in circumstances that have nothing to do with death or dying. They may still have spiritual elements or feelings of calm. OBEs can happen spontaneously, or drugs or meditation can induce them.

In the next section, we'll take a look at who typically has NDEs and how they're affected.

Who Has NDEs?

In 1982, pollster George Gallup, Jr. and author William Proctor released "Adventures in Immortality," a book about NDEs based on two Gallup polls specifically addressing near-death and belief in the afterlife. This poll remains the most widely used source for statistics about NDEs.

Gallup and Proctor found that 15 percent of all Americans who had been in near-death situations reported NDEs. Of those, 9 percent included a "classic out-of-body experience," while 11 percent included entering another realm or dimension and 8 percent featured the presence of spiritual beings [ref]. Only 1 percent reported negative NDEs. But these numbers are more than 20 years old, and other researchers, whose studies are usually on a smaller scale, report statistics on NDEs that can vary widely from the 1982 poll.

A statistical analysis of more than 100 NDE subjects revealed that prior religious belief and prior knowledge of NDEs did not have an appreciable effect on the likelihood of having an NDE [ref].



Other research has focused on the effect an NDE has on the subject's life. Kenneth Ring, one of the most prolific researchers and authors of NDE studies, reports a large number of subjects who gain self-confidence and become more extroverted after an experience. One of Ring's studies quantified changes in subjects' attitudes toward life. These generally include a sense of purpose in life, an appreciation of life, and increase in compassion, patience and understanding and an overall feeling of personal strength. A small percentage of subjects reported feelings of fear, depression and a focus on death. Ring also found that NDE subjects tend to feel a heightened sense of religious feeling and belief in a spiritual world. However, he notes that this does not necessarily translate into an increase

in church attendance -- it is more of an internal, personal increase in religious and spiritual feelings. Finally, people who go through NDEs often find that they do not fear death, and feel that a positive experience will be awaiting them when they actually die.

Next, we'll examine the spiritual and supernatural theories that seek to explain near-death experiences.

Supernatural Theories

Theories explaining near-death experiences fall into two basic categories: scientific explanations (including medical, physiological and psychological) and supernatural explanations (including spiritual and religious). Of course, these explanations can be neither proven nor disproven. Acceptance of supernatural explanations is based on faith and spiritual and cultural background.

The most basic supernatural explanation is that someone who goes through an NDE is actually experiencing and remembering things that happen to their disembodied consciousness. When they are near death, their soul leaves their body and they begin to perceive things that they normally cannot. The soul goes through the border between our world and the afterlife, usually represented by a tunnel with a light at the end. While on this journey, the soul encounters other spiritual entities (souls), and may even encounter a divine entity, which many subjects perceive as God. They are offered a glimpse into another realm of being, often thought to be Heaven, but they are then pulled back, or choose to go back, into their earthly body.

Belief in astral projection connects NDEs with other forms of out-of-body experiences. Astral projection is the ability of an "astral self" to travel outside the body. In an NDE, this astral self, or soul, spontaneously leaves the body and travels freely to other places. A few cases of NDEs seem to offer proof that people actually experienced events from a point of view different from that of their earthly body. People who were unconscious, non-responsive, had their eyes closed or had been declared clinically dead have reported details of procedures done to them and people who were present in the room [ref]. Some NDE subjects who suffered from permanent blindness have reportedly been able to identify the color of a doctor's shirt, for example [ref].

For those with a strong belief in Judeo-Christian theology, NDEs represent proof that we have souls, that they continue to exist after we die and that Heaven and Hell are real places. Some believe that NDEs are the work of Satan, who seeks to exploit people's vulnerability at the time by appearing as "an angel of light." Satan's ultimate reason for this deception is unclear.

Other NDE theories are a bit more esoteric. Some believe that an NDE represents a psychic connection to higher-level intelligent beings from another dimension. These beings may be humans who have evolved their souls beyond the birth-death-reincarnation cycle, thus offering a glimpse of humanity's future as high-order spiritual beings. Sometimes, an NDE can even offer a literal view into the future, as in the apocalypse prophecy NDEs mentioned earlier.

It is interesting to note that non-Judeo-Christian religions have stories and descriptions of death that seem to explain many of the common NDE traits. Buddhism, for example, describes "the clear light of death," as well as demonic embodiments of moral failure. The soul's goal is to recognize both the light and the apparitions as projections of the soul's own nature, not something objectively real. If that happens, the soul may escape the birth-death-reincarnation cycle and reach nirvana [ref].

Next, we'll find out what science has to say about the NDE.

Scientific Theories

Science cannot ultimately explain why some people have near-death experiences. That's not to say that current scientific explanations are incorrect, but NDEs are complex, subjective and emotionally charged. Further, many aspects of NDEs cannot be tested. We can't run a test to determine if someone actually visited



Heaven and met God or purposely take someone to the brink of death and then resuscitate them in a lab to test their out-of-body perception.

Nevertheless, medical science offers compelling evidence that many aspects of NDEs are physiological and psychological in nature. Scientists have found that the drugs ketamine and PCP can create sensations in users that are nearly identical to many NDEs. In fact, some users think they are actually dying while on the drug.

The mechanism behind some of these strange experiences is in the way our brains process sensory information. What we see as "reality" around us is only the sum of all the sensory information our brain is receiving at any given moment. When you look at a computer screen, the light from the screen hits your retinas, and information is sent to the appropriate areas of the brain to interpret the light patterns into something meaningful -- in this case, the words you are currently reading. An even more complex system of nerves and muscle fibers allows your brain to know where your body is in relation to the space around it. Close your eyes and raise your right hand until it is level with the top of your head. How do you know where your hand is without looking at it? This sensory system allows you to know where your hand is even when your eyes are closed.

Trauma affecting functional areas of the brain, such as the somatosensory and visual cortexes, could cause hallucinations that get interpreted as NDEs.

Now imagine that all your senses are malfunctioning. Instead of real sensory input from the world around you, your brain is receiving faulty information, possibly because of drugs, or some form of trauma that is causing your brain to shut down. What you perceive as a real experience is actually your brain trying to interpret this information. Some have theorized that "neural noise," or an overload of information sent to the brain's visual cortex, creates an image of a bright light that gradually grows larger [ref]. The brain may interpret this as moving down a dark tunnel.

The body's spatial sense is prone to malfunction during a near-death experience as well. Again, your brain interprets faulty information about where the body is in relation to the space around it. The result is the sensation of leaving the body and flying around the room. Combined with other effects of trauma and oxygen deprivation in the brain (a symptom in many near-death situations), this leads to the overall experience of floating into space while looking down at your own body, and then leaving to float down a tunnel.

The peaceful, calm sensation felt during NDEs may be a coping mechanism triggered by increased levels of endorphins produced in the brain during trauma. Many people experience a strange sense of detachment and a lack of emotional response during traumatic events (whether or not they were related to a near-death experience). This is the same effect. NDEs that include visits to Heaven or meetings with God could involve a combination of several factors. Faulty sensory input, oxygen deprivation and endorphin-induced euphoria create a surreal, though realistic, experience. When the subject recalls the encounter later, it has passed through the filter of his conscious mind. Bizarre experiences that seem unexplainable become spirit beings, other dimensions and conversations with God.

The experiences of people whose out-of-body adventures allow them to see and hear events that their unconscious body shouldn't be able to perceive are more difficult to explain. However, it is plausible that unconscious people can still register sensory cues and prior knowledge and incorporate them into their NDE. Whether this is more plausible than the subject's soul floating out of their body is a matter of personal opinion.

Of course, this only scratches the surface of all the possible explanations for an NDE. NDEs seem to offer some hope that death is not necessarily something to be feared, nor is it the end of consciousness. Even science has a difficult time grasping death -- the medical community has struggled with specific definitions for clinical death, organ death and brain death for decades. For every aspect of an NDE, there is at least one scientific explanation for it. And for every scientific explanation, there seem to be five NDE cases that defy it.