

Lessons from the Light: What We Can Learn from the Near-Death Experience

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For more than twenty years we have been hearing about near-death experiences (NDEs), those transcendental episodes that so many people who have experienced the beginnings of death have recounted for us upon returning to physical life. These travellers' tales have helped to fashion a much more positive vision of the nature of death itself. Recently, however, NDE researchers such as myself have been more concerned with the question of how we can learn from these experiences so as to help us with our daily lives. How can we make use of this body of knowledge about NDEs so as to live with greater self-awareness and spiritual insight?

To extract the essential lessons of the NDE for everyday life, I would like to draw on some of the material from a new book of mine, *Lessons from the Light*, which is an attempt to distill the wisdom teachings of the NDE in such a way as to enable its readers to apply them to their own lives. Here, however, I will focus on just one particular feature of the NDE which is usually called the life review, i.e., that portion of an NDE when the individual has a panoramic review of his or her life wherein virtually everything that has ever happened to the individual is revealed, often in an atemporal holographic display of countless visual images. However, in the life review you are more than a passive observer watching yourself in the movie of your life. Actually, you are back in it all over again, and you experience what happened to you as it were happening once more. In short, but to simplify somewhat, you are living your life afresh -- your memories have somehow transformed themselves into vivid recreations of the episodes of your life. To see what this kind of experience has to teach those of us who haven't had it, I'll concentrate on a single episode from a particular life review. It comes from the NDE of a man I know very well with the unlikely (but actual) name of the famous fictional character of the American author, Mark Twain -- Tom Sawyer. Here, let me introduce my friend, Tom, to you by giving you something of a context for his experience to follow.

As a youth Tom had an uncontrollable temper, and one day it really got him into trouble. He had been driving his hot-rod pickup truck through town when a pedestrian darted out and almost collided with it. Tom, rather than being relieved that no accident had occurred, found himself incensed that this man had almost damaged his beautiful truck. Angry words were exchanged, soon followed by blows, and Tom eventually pummelled his victim into unconsciousness and left him lying in the middle of the street. Shortly afterward, however, overtaken a bit by remorse, he reported the incident to the police and was let off with a warning.

Years later, during his NDE, Tom was forced to relive this scene, and like many others who have described their life reviews to me, he found himself doing so from a dual perspective. One part of himself, he said, seemed to be high up in a building verlooking the street from which perch he simply witnessed, like an elevated spectator, the fight taking place below. But another part of Tom was actually involved in the fight again. However, this time, in the life review, he found himself in the place of the other party, and experienced each distinct blow he had inflicted on this man -- thirty-two in all, he said -- before collapsing unconscious on the pavement.

This role reversal in the life review in which one finds himself directly experiencing the effects of one's actions on another is not unique to Tom. In fact, it is found quite often in accounts of life reviews and seems to ram home their lessons for living to those who experience this surprising empathic turnabout.

Here are some quotations from the many experiences I culled for my book which give a sense of how powerful and all-encompassing the life review may be:

"FLASH! Brilliant colours came radiating from within me, to be displayed in front of us [she was with a group of persons whose faces radiated unconditional love], like a theatre floating in air. It was a three dimensional, panoramic view of my life, every aspect of my life. Everything I had ever said or done, or even thought, was right there, for all of us to experience. I re-thought every thought, I re-experienced every feeling, as it happened, in an instant. And I also felt how my actions, or even just my thoughts, had affected others. When I had passed judgement on someone else, I would experience myself doing that.

Then I would change places in perspective, and experience what that judgement had felt like for them to receive from me. Then I'd return to my own feelings, to be able to respond to the drama I'd just witnessed and experienced, to react, for example, with shame or remorse because of that episode. Multitudinous actions or thoughts, derived from my own meanness, unkindness, or anger, caused me to feel the consequent pains of the other people. I experienced this even if at the time I had hurt someone, I had chosen to ignore how that would affect them. And I felt their pain for the full length of time they were affected by what I had done. Because I was in a different dimension where time can't be measured, as we know time to exist on earth, it was possible to know all of this and experience it all at once, in a moment, and with the ability to comprehend all of this information!"

[During her life review], " I remember one particular incident ... when, as a child, I yanked my little sister's Easter basket away from her, because there was a toy in it that I wanted. Yet in the review, I felt her feelings of disappointment and loss and rejection. What we do to other people when we act unlovingly!... Everything you have done is there in the review for you to evaluate (and) when I was there in that review there was no covering up. I was the very people that I hurt, and I was the very people I helped to feel good.... It is a real challenge, every day of my life, to know that when I die I am going to have to witness every single action of mine again, only this time actually feeling the effects I've had on others. It sure makes me stop and think."

"It proceeded to show me every single event of my 22 years of life, in a kind of instant 3-D panoramic review.... The brightness showed me every second of all those years, in exquisite detail, in what seemed only an instant of time. Watching and re-experiencing all those events of my life changed everything. It was an opportunity to see and feel all the love I had shared, and more importantly, all the pain I had caused. I was able simultaneously to re-experience not only my own feelings and thoughts, but those of all the other people I had ever interacted with. Seeing myself through their eyes was a humbling experience."

"Mine was not a review, but a reliving. For me, it was a total reliving of every thought I had ever thought, every word I had ever spoken, and every deed I had ever done; plus, the effect of each thought, word and deed on everyone and anyone who had ever come within my environment or sphere of influence, whether I knew them or not.... No detail was left out.

No slip of the tongue or slur was missed. No mistake or accident went unaccounted for. If there is such a thing as hell, as far as I am concerned this was hell"

To get more of the full impact of these observations and make them relevant to your own life, you can easily perform an instructive exercise by taking a few minutes to write whatever comes to mind, beginning with the words:

'When I reflect on these commentaries in relation to my own life, I ...'

Here are some of the implications that have emerged from my work with this material.

Perhaps the most obvious -- and important -- insight that is voiced, in one way or another, is that this exercise forces one to think about the meaning of the Golden Rule in an entirely new way. Most of us are accustomed to regard it mainly as a precept for moral action -- 'do unto others as you would be done to'. But in the light of these life review commentaries, the Golden Rule is much more than that -- it is actually the way it works. In short, if these accounts in fact reveal to us what we experience at the point of death, then what we have done to others is experienced as done to ourselves. Familiar exhortations such as, "love your brother as yourself," from this point of view are understood to mean that, in the life review, you yourself are the brother you have been urged to love. And this is no mere intellectual conviction or even a religious credo -- it is an undeniable fact of your lived experience. As one near-death experiencer told me: "No matter what I did to any person -- no matter what that action might be, good or bad -- that action would react not only upon me but also on others around me. I knew that every action was its own reaction. What we do for or against another, we do to ourselves. I fully understood what Jesus meant when He said, 'As ye do it unto the least of these, you do it unto me.' "

Another way of putting this would be to say that the life review demonstrates that, psychologically and spiritually, there is really only one person in the universe -- and that person is, of course, yourself. Every act, every thought, every feeling, every emotion directed toward another -- whether you know the person or not -- will later be experienced by you. Everything you send out, returns -- just as Tom Sawyer felt each of the thirty-two blows he had viciously rained down on his overmatched victim. Remember what one of the persons quoted above said to pithily encapsulate this lesson from the life review: "I was the very people that I hurt, and I was the very people I helped to feel good." Next time you are in the middle of a heated argument with someone, you might find yourself stopping in mid-sentence when you realize that your verbal assaults will one day inevitably be reflected back to you in the unsparing mirror of your life.

Pondering these implications of the life review makes me think about justice in a new way, too. It occurs to me, what could be a more perfect form of justice than this -- everything you do becomes yours. It is not that we are rewarded for our good deeds or punished by our cruel ones; it is simply that we receive back what we have given out, and exactly as we have done.

These reflections in turn suggest a revisioning of one aspect of the NDE that seems to give many people trouble. Very often, following a lecture on NDEs, a question is raised to the effect of whether everybody will eventually find himself in the presence of the Light and receive the incomparable blessings that the Light seems to extend to anyone who comes within its embrace. Behind the question, there is usually the implication that some persons should be disqualified for this experience -- rapists, for example, or others who have led

morally reprehensible lives (or even, with some fundamentalists, persons who are "unsaved").

The answer I have heard several near-death experiencers give to this question is unqualified: Everyone, they say, will come into this light. The Light is unconditional and plays no favourites. This reply invariably stirs an agitated response in some members of the audience, and someone will then play the trump card. "Even Hitler?," a voice will ask incredulously.

I remember an answer that was given to this query by a near-death experiencer who, as a child, had suffered severe sexual and physical abuse from her father. When she found herself in the Light, she asked it telepathically, "Does everyone come here?" She was told, "yes." Then, she herself asked the very question that represents the limit for most people: "Even Hitler?" "Yes." And, then, pushing the Light even further, she found herself asking, "Even my father?" Again, "yes."

But having to re-experience what one has done, thought, and felt about others, can be hell itself. A prisoner, not previously quoted, who actually had a long criminal career said, in a passage whose relevance to Hitler's atrocities cannot be overlooked. Apparently nothing was omitted in this nightmare of injuries, but the most terrifying thing about it was that every pang of suffering I had caused others was now felt by me as the scroll unwound itself."

But in these life reviews, justice is seemingly always tempered by a kind of mercy that allows most of us to re-experience our lives without teeth-gnashing anguish and remorse. There is never any condemnation -- you are not judged. You are in the presence of a being who loves you unconditionally. You are treated with total compassion. You are already forgiven. You are only asked to look at your life, and to understand.

Although the life review may be the price you pay for entrance into the Light, the presence within the Light helps you through it with the greatest and most tender compassion and love and, even at times, humour. You are not being punished; you are being shown, so that you can learn.

A man who had quite a hard time looking at his life during his review commented: "I feel strongly that the whole life review would have been emotionally destructive ... if it hadn't been for the fact that my friend [the being of light] and my friend's friends, while we watched the whole thing, were loving me. I could feel that love. Every time I got a little upset, they turned it off for awhile and they just loved me. Their love was tangible. You could feel it on your body, you could feel it inside of you; their love went right through you. The therapy was their love, because my life review just kept tearing me down. It was pitiful to watch, just pitiful ... it was nauseating. But through it all was their love."

The lessons of the life review are available to everyone, whether one has had an NDE or not. All that is necessary is not to forget what one has learned, and to act upon that knowledge.

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