When we think about stories of Near Death Experiences (NDE’s) we tend to view the recounting of these in a positive light. The tales we usually hear are those containing positive experiences – soulful beings, wonderful colours, feeling loved beyond imagination, and heavenly lights. Wonderful stuff!

The problem with the narrative above is that it creates a misleading impression. While wonderful accounts of NDE’s occur, so do ones which are distressing to the experiencer. According to Nancy Evans Bush (an NDE researcher) around 1 in 5 NDE’s are negative in nature. Some contain a lot of fear, others distressing experiences of emptiness and others still versions of Hell.

There likely are many reasons why distressing NDE’s are not as frequently reported including:

1. Positive NDE’s can provide comfort for many people. As such they are easier to digest in the public arena.
2. People may feel ashamed for having a negative experience when other accounts are largely positive. After all who want to admit they were sent to hell?
3. There may well be a fear of being judged involved.
4. Want to avoid re-experiencing the distress that occurs when they talk about the experience

The reality is there are probably a lot of reasons for this disparity in the literature. Certainly, more than are listed here. One of the better books I have read on distressing NDE’s is entitled:

**Dancing past the Dark: Distressing Near Death Experiences by Nancy Evans Bush.**

I should mention that though this book is highlighted in this article, it is not a book review. It is more the case that the book raises some interesting points which I think maybe of some value to the readers of this site.

Before delving into Nancy Evans Bush NDE account, it is important to note that there does not seem to any rhythm or reason as to why some people have negative experiences and others have positive ones. It’s clear from the literature that positive experiences are not elicited via some version of worthiness or even godliness. The other point to consider is that pre-existing beliefs about deaths do not seem to determine the quality of the NDE. A
catholic does not necessarily have an NDE with conforms to catholic ideas and beliefs. A Buddhist can have an NDE which clashes heavily with their day to day beliefs. The book emphasizes these same points.

Nancy Bush describes her NDE in the book. Her account is very interesting. As she describes it she was in hospital giving birth to her child when the experience occurred. She had a sensation of seeing the hospital and town down below her and then being flung into space. She describes the darkness as immense.

Here is her account of what happened next:

“A group of circles appeared ahead and slightly to my left, perhaps a half-dozen of them, moving toward me. Half black and half white, they clicked as they flew, snapping white-to-black, black-to-white, sending an authoritative message without words. Somehow its meaning was clear: “This is all there is. This is all there ever was. This is It. Anything else you remember is a joke. You are not real. You never were real. You never existed. Your life never existed. The world never existed. It was a game you could invent. There was never anything, or anyone. That’s the joke – that it was all a joke.”

The circles felt heckling but not evil, mocking, mechanistic, clicking without feeling. They seemed like messengers, certain of what they were saying, not ultimate authority themselves but with an authoritative message.”

She then describes attempting to prove them wrong. The circles persisted. Here is a bit more of her account:

“And then I was entirely alone. The circles had moved out of sight, and there was nothing left – the world unreal and gone, and with it my first baby, and this baby who would never be born, and all other babies. Everyone I knew and loved – (but how had I known them, if they were never real?) – gone, and hills, and robins. There was no world, no home, no babies, not even a self to go home to. I thought that no one could bear so much grief, but there seemed no end to it and no way out. Everyone, everything, gone, even God, and I was alone forever in the swimming twilight dark.”
One of the things that accounts such as this facilitates is bringing a more balanced view of NDE’s. The world is dualistic, it operates on yin and yang, on opposites. Where there are positives there will also be negatives. As such we should expect the after-death experience to operate on similar principles. Her account is by no means the only account provided. Other experiences presented in the book range from void type experiences to experiencing profound fear and to visioning what might be termed Hell.

There are also some great examples of synchronicity in the book. Jung would be loving it no doubt! The circles mocking her, were the Taoists symbols for yin and yang she found out years later! The synchronicities seem to point to an underlying intelligence which underpins all.

A sense I have of some of the experiences is that while they may have been fearful and distressing, they have some remarkable similarities with the enlightenment experience – or non-experience to be more precise. Chief among them is that there is only one thing in existence. In void oremptiness or stillness there is only awareness. A primal, nascent awareness which is completely alone. As someone approaches this reality it is not difficult to understand why it would be fearful. An annihilation of this type is not something which ego favours.

The fear involved seems to keep the experiencer on the edge – on the cusp of the event horizon. The fear itself becomes a type of impassable barrier which keeps the person entrapped. This is where grace may intercede, but that is probably a topic best left for another day.

One of the takeaways that a few researchers have concluded is that NDE’s provide an opportunity to turn one’s life around. True that this could be said of many events, but because of the profoundness and intensity of the NDE, it seems to be particularly highlighted.

“A psychospiritual descent into hell has been the experience of saints and sages throughout history, and it is an inevitable episode in the pervasive, mythic theme of the hero’s journey. Those who insist on finding the gift, the blessing of their experiences have the potential ultimately to realize a greater maturity and wholeness (Bush, 2012, p.129)”. 
Distressing Near Death Experiences

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