

Near-death experiences parallel Biblical resurrection

By [Larry Burk](#) | March 4, 1997 | The Chronicle

There have been numerous bestselling books in the past few years that have had "Light" in the title, and it is no coincidence that they have all been about near-death experiences. Betty Eadie's "Embraced by the Light" topped The New York Times list for almost a year in 1993. Lightning survivor Dannion Brinkley's "Saved by the Light" had a similar impact. Their popular appeal is undeniable, but what do we actually understand about the nature of these experiences from the contrasting viewpoints of science and spirituality?

In "Closer to the Light," pediatrician Melvin Morse describes the typical features, which include floating up a tunnel toward a bright light, encountering deceased relatives and a divine being, feeling unconditional love, having a panoramic life review and being offered a choice to return to life. He then explores the possible neurophysiological explanations for these phenomena and discovers that many of them can be reproduced by stimulation of the temporal lobe. Does this experimental evidence mean that the near-death experience is merely a by-product of the hypoxic state of the dying brain?

The counter-argument to this mechanistic viewpoint suggests that the modern neuroscientific concept of consciousness originating in the brain is as primitive as the story of an unsophisticated tribesman in a remote wilderness discovering a radio and believing that all the music originates inside the box.

From the opposite perspective of consciousness existing outside the brain, the temporal lobe is seen as a transducer capable of being tuned to other dimensions of reality beyond the reach of our current science.

This dilemma lies at the core of the ongoing academic discussion concerning the nature of consciousness. The debate is unresolvable at the present time and remains an issue of belief. If the near-death experience is not proof of the existence of an afterlife, what else can we learn from it?

In "Transformed by the Light," Morse suggests that the most remarkable feature is not the experience itself, but the effect on the lives of the survivors after recovery. Researchers report a typical personality transformation that occurs resulting in a lack of fear of death and an increased sense of purpose and altruism.

This attitude contrasts strikingly with our Western culture's need to deny death, an obsession that people of indigenous cultures view as unnatural and disconnected from the larger circle of life. Ironically, our technological advances in resuscitation over the past few decades have led to the mass production of a form of shamanic initiation that provides an antidote for this fear. What exactly is the hopeful message brought back from these experiences?

As Easter approaches, it is important to reflect on the similarities between the words resuscitation and Resurrection. Upon returning the most frequent comment of these resurrected initiates is that the only thing that really matters in life and death is unconditional love. Their attitude and behavior can be characterized as almost "Christ-like."

Whether or not one believes that Jesus saved us from our sins on the cross, he certainly defined the true meaning of "surrender" with his dying words in the Gospel of Luke: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Now at the end of the millennium, near-death experiences appear to be reminding us that the path to unconditional love is only accessible through the act of surrender: "Not my will, but thy will." Is it possible that in the rediscovery of this "Christ Consciousness" through direct experience we are co-creating a technologically-induced Second Coming?

In "At Peace in the Light" Dannion Brinkley states that he now devotes his life to working in hospices to spread his message of hope. Perhaps our culture can use this dearly-won information to allow us to learn to die well and in connection to a larger universe rather than expensively and in isolation. Instead of focusing on defeating death and prolonging terminal diseases we should turn our attention to healing our lives and mending our relationships before we die.

"All we need is love." Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a priest who was fascinated by technology, said it even better than the Beatles: "Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity we shall harness for God the energies of love and then, for a second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire."

Larry Burk is an associate professor of radiology.