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Gentle tenacity

(A review of After by Bruce Greyson).

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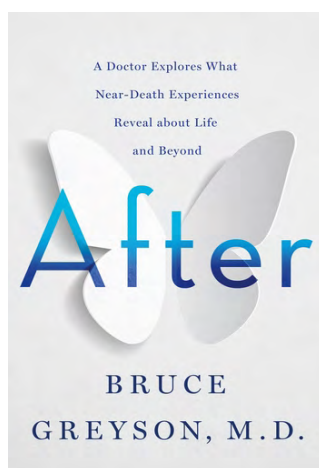
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Gentle Tenacity^{1,2}

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A Review of

AFTER: A DOCTOR EXPLORES WHAT NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES REVEAL ABOUT LIFE AND BEYOND. Bruce Greyson. Bantam, 2021. Pp. 259 (hardcover). \$20.87. ISBN 978-1-7876-3462-6

Near-death experiences (NDEs) remain opaque to our full understanding. What to make of accounts by some of those who have had brushes with death (sometimes with cessation of recordable brain activity) and “come back” to tell about having left their physical bodies and arrived to timeless realm of pure love and acceptance in which they encounter divine beings and their dear departed, and from which they may be asked to return to their painful bodies and ordinary lives? Psychological and cultural theories fail to explain the consistency of core aspects of NDEs, despite some cultural variations (e.g., Belanti et al., 2008), and physiological theories are often little more than evidence-free speculations contradicted by the extant data (cf. Greyson,

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2014). And just to make matters more complex, NDEs at times include accurate accounts of anomalous cognition that the experient had no apparent way of knowing.

Bruce Greyson, Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Sciences at the University of Virginia, is the foremost researcher of NDEs (disclosure: I have asked him to contribute chapters to my books). He starts the summation of his decades-long career with an NDE that deeply stirred him. A patient recovering from a drug overdose told him of a conversation Greyson had had with her friend in a corridor the previous night, mentioning as well a tomato sauce spot on his tie (which was hidden under his lab coat), while she was sleeping in a room far away. Granted, this is what some skeptics might call a “mere anecdote,” not data, but Greyson reminds the reader (p. 61) that the original quotation about anecdotes and data can be attributed to Raymond Wolfinger and is “The plural of anecdote is data,” rather than the opposite as some critics state (e.g., <https://sites.google.com/site/skepticalmedicine/the-plural-of-anecdote-is-not-data>). There are also stronger instances in which NDEs included anomalous cognition, including meeting people who had already died unbeknownst to the person (for a review of dozens of cases see Holden, 2009, for detailed review of the cases of Maria and Pam Reynolds, described by health professionals who were in the scene, see Kean, 2017). The authors of the conclusion that NDEs are nothing but “the manifestation of normal brain function gone awry” (Mobbs & Watt, 2011) disregarded this information a priori (Greyson et al., 2012), which begs the question.

After that preamble, Greyson describes in various chapters (with copious quotations from individuals he has interviewed) the characteristics of NDEs, including a sense of timelessness, apparent perceptions from outside the physical body, a sojourn to a realm of bliss, and cognitive lucidity, so different from the musings of delirium. He does not shrug from also citing the small percentage of NDEs that have been far less than beatific, before offering his concluding remarks, which will make unhappy both those who a priori have concluded that they are nothing but malfunctioning brains and those who expect that they will offer *definitive* proof of survival after death. Along the way, Greyson offers some fascinating tidbits such as the fact that the young Einstein was a student of the first compiler of NDEs, the geologist Albert Heim, and might have been influenced by his account of the changes in time perception during them.

As a good scientist, Greyson has conducted research to answer specific questions, instead of offering empty opinions from whichever end of the spectrum. To offer but two examples of his programmatic approach, consider the criticism that the uniformity of NDEs could be explained by respondents having read the popular 1975 book by Raymond Moody *Life After Life* or subsequent media exposure. Greyson and a collaborator tested this hypothesis and showed that the only significant difference

in 15 phenomenological features of pre- and post-1975 accounts was the greater incidence of reports of tunnels, which he considers not a discriminating feature for NDE because it appears in other alterations of consciousness (Athappilly et al., 2006). *After* does not mention which they are, but they include psychedelic (Siegel & Jarvik, 1975), shamanic (Harner, 1980), and spontaneous “deep” hypnotic (Cardeña, 2005) experiences. And in response to data-free criticisms that NDE accounts are exaggerated with the passage of time and contacts with others who also had them, Greyson conducted a study that showed that the scores of 72 surviving patients who had completed an NDE scale (which he created and validated) remained significantly consistent across factors and items (Greyson, 2007).

Greyson ends *After* with seven conclusions (pp. 216–221): NDE are common and can happen to anyone, under exceptional circumstances, that can lead to substantial life changes, including reducing the fear of death and motivating the person to live more fully. Greyson’s last two conclusions will prove challenging for some readers, but then they should counter with better evidence and arguments than those offered by him: NDEs “raise questions” about the relation between mind and brain, and about personal consciousness surviving death. Despite the obvious relation between mental and brain processes in everyday life, Greyson questions the “received knowledge” that mind (or, in some discussions, consciousness) can be completely reduced to brain functioning, a conclusion that is supported by other bodies of evidence. They include the recent work on terminal lucidity, in which long-term senile and other CNS-damaged patients become lucid hours or days before dying, a literature to which he has also contributed (Batthyány & Greyson, 2021), and research on psi phenomena suggesting that organisms are affected by temporally and spatially distant events (for a review see Cardeña, 2018).

The last proposal, referring to what NDEs may tell us about the survival of personal consciousness, proves even more difficult to solve. They are consistent with the possibility of survival (although of course they are *near*, not *after* death experiences), as does research on the accuracy of purported communication from the dead through mediums, both in the past (e.g., Gauld, 1982) and more recently (Sarraf et al., 2020), and on the accuracy of statements by children claiming having lived a past life (for a review see Mills & Tucker, 2014). All of these, however, can be explained otherwise, for instance by anomalous cognition among living beings, even without having to dismiss them a priori, as some critics do.

Nonetheless, many NDE features (other than some such as being sent back to life or seeing the deceased) also occur in contexts not related to being close to death (cf. Cardeña et al., 2014), and a mere belief of being close to death may trigger some

NDE features except for the experience of light and enhanced cognition (Owens et al., 1990). Greyson is well aware of these complexities and speculates that NDEs may provide insight into other aspects of reality rather than being literal depictions of life after death. As for claims suggestive of reincarnation, Greyson (2021) himself mentions how difficult it is to interpret cases in which different children claim to have been the same person in the past. Nonetheless, he concludes that “We may eventually come up with another explanation, but until then, some form of continued consciousness after death seems to be the most plausible working model” (p. 221). We are far from making coherent sense of the various strands supportive of survival, let alone integrating them with neurocognitive theories (Gauld, 1982), but alternatives to a reductive materialist position provide potential solutions toward the integration of these disparate materials (Kelly & Marshall, 2021).

In his parting words, *Alive* returns to the point that, independently of other implications, NDE can transform the lives of those who experience them (and of some who are just in contact with those people) and inspire more compassionate, meaningful, and joyful lives. Greyson has brought his tenacity as a scientist to empirically ground this statement, and his kindness as a person to offer such inspiration to his readers.

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