

Originally I devoted an entire chapter to near death experiences (NDE). Then I decided that it was too much, pared it back, and added this information to *Chapter 3: What Do We Really Want?*

However, I continue to be fascinated by this topic. For those of you who share this interest, here's the original, uncut version of the manuscript.

Chapter 5: Dead End or Doorway?

If the belief in an afterlife were to be accepted not on the basis of faith or on the basis of speculative theology, but as a well-confirmed scientific hypothesis, then this could not be ignored by our culture. ...everything changes.'

- Dr. Neil Grossman

What happens when we die? This question has haunted religious leaders, philosophers, scientists, and ordinary folks like you and me since the dawn of human consciousness. However, in the late 20th century, findings of scientific inquiry began converging with traditional religious beliefs, as medical technology has brought people 'back from the dead' and they have lived to tell their tale. As these findings become widespread, I believe there will be a significant shift in commonly held beliefs in Western society. This shift will have tremendous implications for how we live (and finance) the rest of our lives.

Why are we exploring dying in a book on retirement and living the rest of our lives? Well, dying is the way we conclude a successful retirement! So, in this chapter I'm going off on a tangent, exploring the latest research on what happens when we die. Please bear with me – I will come around to the implications for the WAI/WSID questions.

I believe that people in the Western world have an unhealthy fear of death, primarily because we don't seriously believe in any form of existence after death. We die, and it's 'game over.' This fear drives some unhealthy behavior, such as:

- We put pressure on ourselves to have a good life while we're here, because there's nothing after we're gone.
- Our commercial society helps us transform this pressure for the good life to buy more material things. A popular bumper sticker in my area states that 'he who dies with the most toys, wins.' Another saying tells us that 'we can't take it with us when we're gone,' which translates into get more toys now.
- Long term personal and spiritual growth become subjugated to our pursuit of material goods and the 'here and now.'
- And when we're dying, we'll spend any amount of money to stave off the final end.

All of these behaviors affect how we live and finance our later years.

Like most people, I also admit to being afraid of death – who isn't? However, an incident 12 years ago eased my fears. I was riding my bike one morning as part of my exercise routine, and the next thing I know, a few weeks are gone. I had fallen and experienced a severe concussion. For the next few weeks, I slept about 20 hours a day, and was incoherent for the other 4. The two weeks were a total blank, but as I came back to my normal self, I felt at peace about death, with much less fear. While I don't remember a vivid near death experience like those described later in this chapter, I did have this vague feeling that I had gone and come back, and it wasn't anything to be feared. So this incident aroused my curiosity on death, but it lay dormant until I started on this book. Let me say right away that I didn't start writing this book with the intention of talking about what happens when we die. As often happens with me, I stumble on something that affects me profoundly. One night I took a break from researching this book, and I was reading one of my favorite journals – the *Noetic Sciences Review*, now called *Shift*. This is published by the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS). IONS was founded by Edgar Mitchell, the Apollo astronaut who had an epiphany while he was returning from the moon. He saw the earth as a living entity, and he 'knew' this through ways other than conventional thinking. This prompted his quest of discovery, as described below.

The inside cover of the *Noetic Sciences Review* states its purpose:

'Noetic sciences further the explorations of conventional science by rigorous inquiry into aspects of reality – such as mind, consciousness, spirit – that include, yet go beyond, physical phenomena.'

The September-November 2002 issue had an article on near death experiences (NDE) by Dr. Neal Grossman that blew me away. NDE are situations where a person is dead by clinical standards, but revives, often as a result of the latest in medical technology, and reports experiences that are astonishing and cannot be explained by commonly accepted science. For example, they may accurately describe conversations in the waiting room, while they are in surgery in the operating room. We'll come back to this article in a little while.

Documented NDEs are a phenomenon of 20th century medical technology. We are now able to revive people from accidents or sudden illnesses, such as severe heart attacks. Before, these people would have had 'death experiences,' not 'near death experiences,' and they wouldn't have lived to tell their story.

Interest in this subject started with physicians whose patients had NDE and told their stories. At first, these stories seemed incredulous and were dismissed, but when these experiences were repeated by several patients, and their stories had many elements of consistency, inquisitive physicians started their investigations.

Dr. Grossman's article mentioned above describes one such NDE, where the patient's body temperature was lowered to 60 degrees, and all the blood was drained from her body.

'Her electroencephalogram was silent, her brain-stem response was absent, and no blood flowed through her brain.'

'A brain in this state cannot create any kind of experience. Yet the patient reported a profound NDE.'

While there are many possible explanations for such an experience, NDE researchers contend that NDE are evidence that there is more to us than our physical bodies, and this 'something' is our consciousness which can understand events, and survives our physical death.

After reading this article, I was hungry for more information. I quickly ran across the pioneering work on the subject, Life After Life. It was published by Dr. Raymond Moody, M.D., Ph.d, in 1975. It is a short but fascinating book, and I recommend it to anybody who is interested in the subject. He interviewed many patients who had NDE, and found many similarities in their stories. Dr. Moody was able to pick out fifteen elements of NDE which occurred frequently in the narratives he collected. Not all of them had identical experiences, and many of them only had a handful of the fifteen elements he was able to identify. When he reviewed the mass of evidence, he was able to construct a theoretically 'ideal' or 'complete' experience which incorporates all of the common elements.

'A man is dying and, as he reaches the point of greatest physical distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to hear an uncomfortable noise, a loud ringing or buzzing, and at the same time feels himself moving very rapidly through a long dark tunnel. After this, he suddenly finds himself outside of his own physical body, but still in the immediate physical environment, and he sees his own body from a distance, as though he is a spectator. He watches the resuscitation attempt from this unusual vantage point and is in a state of emotional upheaval.

'After a while, he collects himself and becomes more accustomed to his odd condition. He notices that he still has a 'body,' but one of a very different nature and with very different powers from the physical body he has left behind. Soon other things begin to happen. Others come to meet and to help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving, warm spirit of a kind he has never encountered before – a being of light – appears before him. This being asks him a question, nonverbally, to make him evaluate his life and helps him along by showing him a panoramic, instantaneous playback of the major events of his life. At some point he finds himself approaching some sort of barrier or border, apparently representing the limit between earthly life and the next life. Yet, he finds that he must go back to the earth, that the time for his death has not yet come. At this point he resists, for by now he is taken up with his experiences in the afterlife and does not want to return. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love, and peace. Despite his attitude, though, he somehow reunites with his physical body and lives.

'Later he tries to tell others, but he has trouble doing so. In the first place, he can find no human words adequate to describe these unearthly episodes. He also finds that others scoff, so he stops telling other people. Still, the experience affects his life profoundly, especially his views about death and its relationship to life.'

The book goes on to relate many actual experiences which form the basis for this composite experience. It also describes many situations where patients accurately describe events and details during their 'death' that normally they would need to be 'present' to witness. Finally, it describes similarities of modern NDE to traditional descriptions of the afterlife, such as the Bible, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, and Plato's work.

The impact on the lives of people who have had NDE has been profound. Here are some quotes from Life After Life:

'It made life much more precious to me.'

'I want to do things because they are good, not because they are good to me.'

'But after this happened, my mind was the main point of attraction, and the body was second – it was only something to encase my mind.'

'No matter how old you are, don't stop learning. For this is a process, I gather, that goes on for eternity.'

Dr. Moody goes on to state:

'Almost everyone has stressed the importance in this life of trying to cultivate love for others...'

'... development of the soul, especially in the spiritual faculties of love and knowledge, does not stop upon death.'

I find all of these thoughts remarkably consistent with the research on happiness that we reviewed in the last chapter.

Dr. Grossman's article mentioned previously has a concise summary that is insightful.

'Consider the following scenario: Further research on the NDE confirms in great detail what has already been established; many more cases of confirmed veridical perceptions while out of body' are collected and documented; advancing medical technology makes possible many more 'smoking gun' cases of the type discussed above; longitudinal studies on NDEers confirm the already observed behavioral changes aligned with their newly acquired (or recently reinforced) spiritual values; and so forth. The studies are

replicated in different cultures with the same results. Eventually, the weight of evidence begins to set in, and scientists are ready to announce to the world, if not as fact, then at least as highly confirmed scientific hypotheses:

1. There is an afterlife.
2. Our real identity is not our body, but our mind or consciousness.
3. Although the details of the afterlife are not known, we are reasonably certain that everyone will experience a life review in which the individual experiences not only every event and every emotion of his or her life, but also the effect his or her behavior, positive or negative, have had on others. The usual defense mechanisms by which we hide from ourselves our sometimes cruel and less-than-compassionate behavior towards others seem not to operate during the life review.
4. The purpose of life is love and knowledge – to learn as much as possible about both this world and the transcendent world, and to grow in our ability to feel kindness and compassion towards all beings.
5. A consequence of (3) is that it appears to be a great disadvantage to oneself to harm another person, either physically or psychologically, since whatever pain one inflicts on another is experienced as one's own in the life review.

This scenario is by no means far-fetched. I believe there is already sufficient evidence to present the above propositions as 'probable' or 'more likely than not' based on the evidence. Further studies will only increase the probability.'

As the messages from Dr. Moody's book and the IONs article have sunk into my consciousness, I am stunned about the implications for how I should live the rest of my life. The conventional image of retirement – the golden years of R&R – feel trivial and less relevant. Again, this is consistent with Dr. Seligman's statement that the *pleasurable life* is not a source of life's satisfaction. I'm drawn to the main messages – gaining knowledge, serving others, and expressing kindness, support and love to my family and friends.

Let me say that it's not my intent here to influence your religious or spiritual beliefs. However, I believe these points are consistent with many religious traditions. And actually, for our

purpose here, it doesn't matter too much what our beliefs are, because I focus on the last three points made by Neal Grossman in his article – (3) the life review, (4) purpose of life is love and knowledge, and (5) it is a great disadvantage to oneself to harm another person. These are good guides for living the rest of our lives and the WAI/WSID questions.

What are the implications for the rest of our lives?

- I don't need huge amounts of money to seek what has meaning for me.
- Helping and serving others is good way to have meaning in my life, and again this need not be expensive. In fact, if I do this through paid work, even if the pay is modest, I'm that much better off.
- I'd rather have growth and learning experiences than material things.
- There is no need to spend huge amounts of money staving off death. I'll lead as healthy a life as possible, but I'll be at peace when my time comes. I'd rather die six months earlier, with family and friends around me, than spend gobs of money hooked up to machines, only to die all alone in some institution.
- It takes the pressure off of retirement as my 'golden years' – as the 'just reward' for working hard and saving all my life. It lets me relax, just go live my life, and be open to my life's experiences.

As for the first two points of the IONS article? The existence of an after-life will never be proved or disproved in a repeatable experiment, which is one mainstay of conventional science (but not the only mainstay). The scientific inquiry on NDE consists of documenting thousands of cases, looking for consistent patterns, and stories and experiences that cannot be explained by conventional theories.

Of this I am certain: there is a large body of documented evidence by scientific researchers that cannot be explained by conventional science. Respected institutions such as the University of Connecticut, University of Virginia, and the British Royal College of Psychiatrists have duplicated and added to Dr. Moody's findings. I look forward to the learning more from

continued investigation into this area. Dr. Moody states this belief nicely near the end of his book:

‘Let us at least leave open the possibility that near-death experiences represent a novel phenomenon for which we may have to devise new modes of explanation and interpretation.’

At this point, believing in an after-life, or not believing in an after-life, is a matter of faith. Neither point of view has been proved conclusively. So why not choose the belief that removes fear, is reassuring, let’s me relax, and basically has a happy ending? This is not an original thought from me – if you are interested, I encourage you to read Huston Smith’s groundbreaking works, The Importance of Religion and The World’s Religions.

In the preface to Life After Life, Dr. Melvin Morse offers the following perspectives:

‘Although for tens of thousands of years humans accepted death as a natural part of life, a brutal revolution in our attitudes concerning death occurred at the turn of the last century. Death became unnatural, dirty, medicalized, and hidden from the public view.’

‘Life After Life was hugely successful because it addressed two major problems in twentieth-century Western Civilization:

1. the loss of collective societal myths having to do with death and dying, and
2. the systematic devaluation of anything to do with the spiritual side of humans.

It’s my belief that our outdated view of retirement stems from the same phenomenon. Because of the loss of myths with death, and devaluation of the spiritual side of humans, retirement has, in a sense, replaced the afterlife as our reward for a good life.

So here’s another thought challenge for us to ponder.

How would we live the rest of our lives if we didn’t fear death, and believed in the five points in the IONS article?

Now we're finished with our exploration of the WAI/WSID issues. The next short chapter summarizes this first section of the book, and then we move on to our health and finances.