

On Death



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He was 16 when he drowned at the end of swim practice! He was dragged from the pool by his shocked teammates. She was 28 when her heart stopped five different times after she had attempted to kill herself by overdosing. The EMTs (emergency medical technicians or life squad) and then the CCU (coronary care unit) had brought her back to life each time by cardioverting (electrically shocking) her heart. Their near death experiences (NDEs) changed my thoughts and feelings about death.

He reported remembering passing out underwater. They were playing water polo with no rules and a couple of teammates grabbed his arms when he was pushed under water without enough air. He was holding the ball and they wanted it. Although he let go of the ball he couldn't surface for air. He recalled a brief moment of panic followed by an instantaneous transition to the most peaceful place and feeling he'd ever had. He found himself floating in the air about 4 feet off the ground in the trees by a lake that he had grown up near. There were 5 or 6 beings made of light behind him that communicated with him telepathically and told him they were there to help him feel safe and not alone. The light emanating from them surrounded him in a gentle warm glow. He did not turn to see them. Somehow he knew not to turn around to try to see them.

Off to the right a distance away there was a very powerful wide beam of light streaming from above the clouds down onto the ground at about a 45° angle. The top of the light beam was further away than the place it was projecting on the ground. Something told him, maybe the light beings, it was not time for him to enter that light. He then floated over to the lake where he saw himself as a four year old learning to swim. He then reported watching himself grow up in great detail. During this his life review seemed to last many years taking a very long time to watch while he continued to float in the air accompanied by the light beings.

The life review continued up to his current age of 16 and then surprisingly went 2 years into the future to 18 years old when just as suddenly as he found himself floating in the air he found himself laying on the deck of the pool on his back with the coach leaning

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over him calling his name. The entire swim team was standing on the pool deck surrounding him. When he opened his eyes his coach ask him if he was ok and he reported he felt great - so lets go swimming! His coach said he is not going back in the pool that day. He didn't tell anyone the story of his NDE out of concern that they'd think he was crazy. He wondered if perhaps he was "crazy". He was now in his 30s, married with 3 children and had come for treatment of chronic anxiety and mild depression. As a part of his diagnostic evaluation he told me this story during our second diagnostic session when I'd ask him to give me a review of his life starting as young as he could remember and then come forwards from there which I routinely do. Although he reported anxiety and mild depression he also said the best thing about his NDE is that he rarely felt fear about anything since then whereas before his NDE he considered himself easily fearful.

She was released from the CCU to the psychiatry inpatient unit. Because I was on call for admissions that day I introduced myself and asked her if she could meet with me in one of the more private interview rooms on the ward and she agreed. After a few comments regarding the purpose of our meeting and I determined she was not in any immediate distress or discomfort I ask her if she was still wishing she were dead. She responded, "I WILL NEVER DO THAT AGAIN!!" In 20 years of extensive psychiatric practice in multiple settings - the psych ER, community mental health centers, multiple different psych inpatient settings and private practice no one had ever been this clearly certain that they would NEVER try suicide again. I told her this. When I asked the obvious question, what made her so certain, she seemed uncomfortable. After I assured her our meeting was confidential and I would keep it so and not put anything in her chart or tell staff or anyone else what ever she said in a way where she could be identified she told me the following story. "Each time I passed out from the over dose I found myself in a completely black darkness. It was extremely hot and I could hear people screaming in terror. It terrified me. This happened to me FIVE times. I NEVER want to feel that again."

I started thinking maybe she was raised in some sort of fundamental spiritual belief where she learned some form of 'fire and brimstone' so I asked about her prior religious experiences. She reported she never had any spiritual involvement except going to church once or twice at Christmas and Easter when she was a child, "But I'm going to find one now!" Her father was raised reformed judaism and her mother was raised liberal christian but in her home no religion was practice. I discussed with her what her general beliefs were currently and tried to aim her at spiritual communities where she may find compatibility.

It also seemed obvious to me that the young man was in a positive frame of mind, other than the panic, when he drowned. He did not want to die. The young woman was attempting suicide. Therefore it seemed that the mental state a person is in at the moment of their potentially permanent death dramatically influences what they experience during the death process. Also it occurred to me that religious leaders from various faiths had been told similar stories by people who had almost died. Likely it was the consistent presence of such stories that resulted in the almost universal belief in life after death and

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the admonitions against suicide. This idea profoundly changed my previous beliefs. I had previously believed that as long as one was in a state of love when they died then they would have a relatively positive experience. I did not believe there was a negative experience or hell. I had incorrectly believed that the negative experiences that spiritual leaders warned of was used to manipulate followers, to use fear as a motivation for following whatever spiritual faith they were advocating. I reached the new conclusion that there is a dramatically negative experience especially if one has no sense of attachment, connection or love in their life at the time of death.

Since the time when I learned about these two experiences, I have met a number of people who have had both positive and negative near death experiences. Some started out with a hellish experience that then turned positive. Their experiences did correlate with the idea that if there is attachment and love at the time of the near death experience it is positive but if at the time of death there is no attachment and no love the experience is routinely quite frightening. This understanding profoundly reinforced my belief in the ideas that these essays express. The first essay "On Love" argues that Love is the reason to be alive. The experiences of these people support that love is also the preferred state to be in when one dies. From the reports of other people I would also argue that being in a state of hate or anger and not just self destruction or being suicidal, results in a negative near death experience or as the colloquial saying goes it results in "going to hell". Living without Love results in terrifying feelings both currently and at the time of death.

Some might think that since a positive near death experience is so extremely positive that people who have had one would want to die to re-experience that experience. Anyone I had the good fortune to talk with who have had a positive near death experience do not indicate that they want to die currently but they also indicate that there is a remarkable absence of fear in their lives. They don't wish for death but are no longer afraid to die either.