

IDEA

Life After Death?

The experience is a familiar one to many emergency-room medics. A patient who has been pronounced dead and unexpectedly recovers later describes what happened to him during those moments—sometimes hours—when his body exhibited no signs of life. According to one repeated account, the patient feels himself rushing through a long, dark tunnel while noise rings in his ears. Suddenly, he finds himself outside his own body, looking down with curious detachment at a medical team's efforts to resuscitate him. He hears what is said, notes what is happening but cannot communicate with anyone. Soon, his attention is drawn to other presences in the room—spirits of dead relatives or friends—who communicate with him nonverbally. Gradually, he is drawn to a vague "being of light." This being invites him to evaluate his life and shows him highlights of his past in panoramic vision. The patient longs to stay with the being of light but is reluctantly drawn back into his physical body and recovers.

Clues: Once dismissed as nothing more than hallucinations, these "near death" experiences are now being seriously examined by several psychiatrists and psychologists for possible clues to what happens at the moment of death. One such researcher, Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, an internationally respected expert on the psychiatric dimensions of dying, now claims that she has proof that "there is life after death" on the basis of hundreds of such stories. Although other psychologists believe that Dr. Kubler-Ross lends too much credence to tales told by the dying, her outspoken views have recently heightened scholarly interest in near-death phenomena.

What most impresses Kubler-Ross about the cases she has assembled over the last eight years is the evidence of out-of-body consciousness—that is, the apparent ability of people who exhibit no respiration, heartbeat or brain-wave activity to describe events taking place around them. She is currently checking out each case against medical records for a book she plans to publish next year. "If you have a woman who has been declared dead in a hospital and she can tell you exactly how many people walked into the room and worked on her, this cannot be hallucination," she argues. Although details of near-death accounts vary somewhat, Kubler-Ross says that all her subjects report certain common experiences: a pervasive sense of calm well-being, a feeling of personal wholeness—even among accident victims who

have lost limbs—and the experience of being greeted by previously deceased loved ones. As a result of such experiences, she says, "many of them resented our desperate attempts to bring them back to life. Death is the feeling of peace and hope. Not one of them has ever been afraid to die again."

In a series of in-depth interviews conducted independently of Kubler-Ross's research, another physician has discovered extraordinary similarities among 50 near-death experiences result-



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Fifteenth-century woodcut of soul leaving body

ing from accidents, illness and sudden cardiac arrest. According to Dr. Raymond A. Moody Jr., who holds a doctorate in philosophy as well as a medical degree, many subjects experienced enhanced intellectual capabilities and, upon recovery, amazed doctors by their unusually technical knowledge of resuscitation procedures.

Unlike Kubler-Ross, Moody does not claim scientific proof of an afterlife. But he does believe that most near-death experiences cannot be readily explained away as delusions induced by pain-killing drugs: the narratives, he says, are too clear and too similar to one another. In his popular paperback "Life After Life,"* Moody also dismisses cultural conditioning as an explanation because the reported experiences do not conform

to contemporary American images of death. On the contrary, he asserts that "the picture of the events of dying which emerges from these accounts corresponds in a striking way with that painted in very ancient and esoteric writings totally unfamiliar to my subjects." In particular, Moody finds that the experiences of floating out of the body, meeting spiritual companions and encountering a being of light are remarkably analogous to images found in the Tibetan Book of the Dead.

As part of yet another effort to track down clues "that would suggest an afterlife," psychologist Karlis Osis of the American Society for Psychical Research in New York City has tabulated by computer interviews with 877 physicians who have reported deathbed visions by their patients. Most of them involve dying patients who see benign apparitions coming for their souls. Osis has determined, at least to his own satisfaction, that patients whose brains were impaired by high fever or disease reported fewer visions than those who were fully alert at death. Moreover, he asserts, powerful drugs such as morphine and Demerol actually decrease the coherence of such visions. "The sick-brain hypotheses we considered do not explain the visions," Osis concludes, "and so far it looks as if patterns are emerging consistent with survival after death."

Waiting for Data: Critics of afterlife research have held their fire until they can see the data that Kubler-Ross publishes. Still, says psychiatrist Charles Dahlberg of New York University, "I don't see how you can set up the control group needed to examine this subject scientifically. The afterlife is a matter of faith." Father Eugene Kennedy, a Roman Catholic priest and professor of psychology at Chicago's Loyola University, finds Kubler-Ross's new focus "a falling-off from her previous work which related death to the whole of human life." Kennedy, for one, believes that "intimations of immortality don't come from vaporous experiences at life's end but from the love and creativity we exercise to overcome the tragedies of life."

Even if Kubler-Ross has not proved her point, she has laid out phenomena that modern science has not yet adequately explained. "I don't at all agree with Elisabeth when she says that the experiences she and I have both had working with the dying absolutely guarantee life after death," says Dr. Charles Garfield of the Cancer Research Institute of the University of California. "I also don't take the extreme scientific-maternalist position that these are the utterances of deranged persons. I don't really know what is happening, and I am willing to tolerate the ambiguity."