

MORMON NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES

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INTRODUCTION In recent years, interest in reports of near-death encounters has been stimulated primarily by the widely publicized research on death and dying by Kubler-Ross (1969), and Moody (1975). Moody reported on 150 cases of persons experiencing clinical death, or who nearly died due to accident, severe injury, or illness. From this, Moody developed a list of common elements or near-death experiences. Noyes and Kletti (1976) analyzed 114 accounts of near-death experiences, and found remarkably similar descriptions. Sabom and Kreutziger (1977) interviewed fifty patients having near-fatal encounters, with results similar to those of the other investigators. Osis and Haraldsson (1977) reported on deathbed observations in which physicians and nurses completed questionnaires and were interviewed concerning 442 cases in the United States and 435 cases in India. They found that 80 percent of the apparitions appearing to terminal patients were deceased persons and religious figures, and that 75 percent of the apparitions came to take patients away to a postmortem existence.

Though accounts of near-death experiences have circulated among Mormons for many years, only a single study by Canning (1965) reported on seven Mormons who had died and returned to life. Most of his subjects reported a displacement of the conscious self from the physical body and saw their bodies lying in death. Some experienced travel though "time and space", and six left their earthly environs after their death. Two reported that guardian angels or guides came to lead them, and several noted the vegetation, landscape, and buildings in the afterworld, as well as the orderliness and pleasant busyness there.

They described conversations with friends or relatives who had died. One respondent said that the dead did not appear to be at the same age as at the time of their death. Two said that the members of the spirit world were variously dressed, usually in white. Several subjects resisted returning to life.

The uncommon number of written historical descriptions of near-death experiences and the openly expressed accounts among Mormons today may be explained by the social values of Mormons. O'Dea (1957,130) noted that the Mormon's belief in afterlife and their social value system encourages the exchange of near-death experiences in church meetings and elsewhere. Moody (1975,85) like other researchers, found while those with near-death experiences were certain of the reality of such experience, they also realized that today's society is unsympathetic and unbelieving, so they remain silent.

CASES Here we will compare 11 Mormon accounts of near-death experience which are distributed over more than a century (1838-1976) to identify persistent elements.

Case 1. (Woodruff, 1909,59) A Mormon woman's 1838 account was relayed by her husband: Her spirit left her body, and she saw it lying upon the bed and the sisters there weeping. She looked at them and at me (the husband) and upon her babe, and while gazing upon the scene, two persons came...carrying a coffin and told her they had come for her body. One...told her that she could have her choice: ...to go to rest in the spirit world, or, on one condition, she could...return to her tabernacle and continue her labors on earth. The condition was, that if she felt that she could stand by her husband, and...pass though all the cares, trials, tribulation and afflictions of life which he would be called to pass through for the

Gospel's sake, unto the end. She said: 'Yes, I will do it.'

Case 2 (Crowther,1967,382): In 1852 a Mormon girl of 16 wrote that her departed mother escorted her in visiting the spirit world. There she saw an unfinished building and was led into a large, beautiful bedroom in the building where she saw a young boy and some other persons whom she recognized. In another room she saw the Mormon Church founder Joseph Smith walking with his head bowed as if in thought, and other men who were writing. Her departed mother told her she had received her dress from the Lord, and that she took her turn working in the kitchen.

Case 3 (Lundwall,71-73): In 1856, a Mormon man near death told of an order, government buildings, and gardens in the spirit world, and of his reluctance to return and resume his body. When in the spirit world he saw the order of righteous men and women; beheld them organized in their several grades, and there appeared to be no obstruction to his vision...he looked to see if there was any disorder there, but there was none; neither did he see any death or darkness, disorder or confusion. He saw the righteous gathered together in the spirit world, and there were no wicked spirits among them. He saw his wife; she was the first person that came to him. He saw many that he knew, but did not talk with any except his wife... She came to him, and he said that she looked beautiful and had their little child, that died on the Plains in her arms...

After speaking of the gardens and the beauty of everything there, he said that he felt extremely sorrowful at having to leave so beautiful a place and come back to earth, for he looked upon his body with loathing, but was obliged to enter it again...

Case 4 (Hinkley,1959,183) In the early 1860's a Mormon, badly injured in an accident related

that his spirit left his body and stood, as it were, in the air above it. He could see his body and the men standing around, and he heard their conversation. At his option he could re-enter his body or remain in spirit. His reflection upon his responsibility to his family and his great desire to live caused him to choose to enter his body again...

Case 5 (Snow,1929,973) In 1891 a Mormon girl of 15, suffering from scarlet fever, reported that her spirit left her body, and that it took her some time to make up her mind to leave because she could hear and see her folks crying and mourning over her death. As soon as she had a glimpse of the other world, she was anxious to go, because her cares and worries left her. She could hear music and singing. She entered a large hall...filled with people, including many relatives and friends. She said she visited with many of them and noted that everyone appeared to be perfectly happy. Some inquired about their friends and relatives on earth. ...all but one person was dressed in white or cream. She entered another room filled with children, arranged in perfect order according to age and size...convened in a primary or sunday school. As she listened to the children sing, she was told than she must return to finish her mission on earth. As she returned through the large hall, she told the people she was going back to the earth. They seemed to want her to stay with them. She obeyed the call, even though she did not want to leave this beautiful place.

Case 6 (Johnson,1920,451) In 1898 a Mormon missionary near death with malaria reported as follows:- My spirit left the body; just how, I cannot tell. But I saw myself standing some four or five feet in the air, and saw my body lying on the bed. I felt perfectly natural, but as this was a new condition,...I turned my head, shrugged my shoulders, felt with my

hands, and realized that it was I myself. ... While I was in a new environment, it did not seem strange, for I realized everything that was going on, and saw that I was the same in the spirit as I had been in the body. ... I beheld a personage who said: 'You did not know that I was here.' I replied: 'No. ... Who are you?' The personage said: 'I am your guardian angel; I have been following you constantly while on earth.'

Case 7 (Wilson,1915): In 1914 another Mormon woman related that she contracted a lung infection which brought her near death. About mid-day she noted a soft light in her room. Then her dead father and mother and some other dead relatives appeared. During the several hours which followed, they talked about the reason one relative had died leaving behind her small children and come religious matters. She was also directed to do ordinance work for her dead kindred. During this visit, her father was dressed in his military uniform, whereas the others were in ordinary clothes.

Case 8 (Crowther,1967,392): A Mormon crushed by a hay derrick reported:'My spirit left the body and I could see it lying under the derrick, and at that moment my guardian angel, my mother, and my sister were beside me. My mother died in January 1918, and my sister died at the age of four. I saw that her spirit was full grown in stature, and also seemed very intelligent.' This person also recorded that he was introduced to five generations of his father's people; that he was shown the spirits of the children that would yet come to his family if he were faithful. He pointed out that they were full grown, but in a different sphere than those who had lived on earth.

Case 9 (Stokes,1945,78): In 1923, a Mormon dying of strangulated hernia returned to life and reported the following: 'Suddenly, I

was stricken with a coldness that attacked my feet and hands.

It moved up my limbs and...I felt it reach my heart... I gasped for breath, and lapsed into unconsciousness... I awoke in full possession of all my faculties in another sphere of life. I stood apart from my body and looked at it. I saw it lying on the bed. I was now without pain, and the joy of freedom I felt and the peace of mind that came over me were the sweetest sensations I had ever experienced...'(On seeing his little daughter who had died many years earlier:) 'She was more mature than when she passed away, having the intelligence of an adult, and was most beautiful to my eyes, so full of life and intelligent and sweet.

Case 10 (Interview): In 1972 a young Mormon woman was severely hurt in an auto accident. She remembered that she felt that her body was falling off a bed ... or descending a tunnel somewhat similar to a dark staircase. She said: 'As I reached the end of the tunnel, I felt an urge to turn back, but ...I couldn't stop the falling or drifting sensation... I recall thinking to myself: I'm dying... I remember looking at my own self from another person's perspective.'

Case 11 (Interview): In 1976 another young Mormon woman, seriously injured when she rolled her car, found herself walking up a steep incline where she passed a large number of people. A woman dressed in white told her she must return to her body, and that an ambulance was coming for her. She told the lady that she had died, and that it was a little late for an ambulance. She was told that she had more to do, and that instructions would be given to her later. Again she was told to return to her body. As she went back she saw her body on the ground by her car, and all the people standing around. Then her spirit entered her body and she became conscious.

DISCUSSION The data from the Mormon accounts of near-death experiences suggest that certain events are particularly prevalent including movement by the subject out of the physical body, the meeting of others, such as close relatives, friends, or a guardian angel, the movement of the subject from the earthly environs into another world, and coming back to this world.

The near-death experiences in this study were very similar to those reported by Moody, Noyes and Kletti, Sabom and Kreutziger, although many of the Mormon accounts are more than a century in the past. All eleven of the Mormon subjects experienced the subjective phenomena of detachment from the body and nine experienced some control by an external force. All eleven subjects experienced Moody's common element of meeting others, and nine reported coming-back experiences. Six saw Moody's "cities of light".

The experiences of Sabom and Kreutziger's subjects were classified as autoscopic or transcendental, or both. They defined autoscopia as self-visualizing from a detached position of height, and transcendence as passage of the consciousness into a foreign region or dimension. Seven of the Mormon subjects experienced autoscopia, and six experienced transcendence. Comparing this study with Canning's study of seven Mormon near death experiences, shows marked similarity. The Canning subjects reported displacement of the conscious self from the physical body, and saw their body lying in death, like nine of the subjects in this study. All but one of Canning's subjects reported leaving their earthly environs after death, as did six of the subjects in this study. Several of Canning's Mormon subjects noted vegetation, landscape, and buildings in the afterworld, like four subjects in this study. Several Canning subjects described conversations with deceased friends

or relatives, as did seven of the subjects of this study.

Mormon subjects tended to describe near-death experience in terms familiar to their subcultural group, and to describe social phenomena in terms of their own cultural conditioning. Those entering the other world tended to observe organizational and family structures, and other activities familiar in their daily lives. The observer sees what he is trained to see.

The data are inconclusive on duration of Mormon near-death encounters. Some subjects may have experienced what Moody calls encounters of extreme duration (1977, 9). Many reported going into another world, which Moody identified only in encounters of extreme duration. The high incidence of Mormon subjects reporting travel to another world could be due to the earlier encounters, which occurred before the advent of modern medicine. With modern medicine, most near-death accounts are shorter, which may preclude long narrative accounts of "a vision of knowledge", "cities of light", and a "realm of bewildered spirits which Moody found (1977, 922). However, the Mormon accounts do provide a more detailed description of the "other world". These accounts are also unusual due to 1) requests to do something in this world from those in the other world, and 2) the reception of religious and other types of instruction from those in the other world.

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of other occupational groups may not be as diligent as these heads and chairpersons, but generally, the curriculum vitae contributes an informative and favorable presentation of self. There is reason to believe the information contained in curricula vitae is very accurate. The vita is a succinct summary of one's professional background, experience, and qualifications. It is the credential for employment. If it became known that a candidate misrepresented himself, the results could be very damaging. In addition, professional ethics mandates honesty in the preparation of curricula vitae. Comparatively, there is little doubt that a person is less likely to give false data on a vita, than in an interview, or on a questionnaire.

The final advantage of the vita, as a data source, is that it does not have the reactive measurement effect that is typical of many personal documents. It is also free of other problems of the more traditional methods of research, such as interview response set, where conventional, rather than factual answers are given, and the problem of fatigue of the respondent and the observer.

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