

## **"Mapping the Afterlife"**

### **A talk by Rhonda Riachi in London, April 2012, summarised by Cherry Simpkin**

Rhonda dedicated her talk to David Fontana, who died last year. His books on the nature of the Afterlife have had a profound influence on her thinking about the subject. She explained that her original attitude to the existence of an Afterlife had been one of open-minded uncertainty but as she went into the subject more she became convinced that life continues after physical death.

A lot of people grow up with a traditional "map" of the afterlife based on the idea that one dies, receives judgement on one's earthly life and then goes to either heaven or hell depending on the result of that judgement. However, the evidence suggests that we should try to get away from these ideas.

Typical examples of phenomena providing such evidence are near-death experiences (NDEs), out-of-the-body experiences (OBEs), channelled communications, instrumental transcommunication (ITC) (e.g. through electronic recorders or radios), reincarnation memories, hauntings and apparitions, and communications received in our sleep from people who have died containing veridical information (i.e. things which could not have been known by the person previously and which are subsequently verified).

The rest of Rhonda's talk centred on the evidence for the Afterlife through Near Death Experiences (NDEs). It was this area that had first stimulated her interest in the question of life after death, and in particular the work of researchers such as Peter Fenwick and Sam Parnia.

For her, NDEs provide the clearest evidence for life after death for a number of reasons. They are the subject of many research projects which continue to reproduce the convincing and important findings. They occur to people of all cultures, races, ages. They often contain verifiable information that the person concerned could not have known. They tend to profoundly change the person's life and attitude to death. She quoted the example of an American stock-broker who had an NDE following a heart attack and, after recovering, went around apologising to all the people he felt he had wronged and gave up his lucrative job to become a social worker. Modern popular interest in NDEs began following the publication of Raymond Moody's book "Life After Life" in 1975, and the pioneering work with the dying by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. However, there had been an academic interest before this. For example, the subject was covered by Frances P Cobbe in her book "The Peak in Darien" published in 1882.

As outlined in Kenneth Ring's book "Life at Death" published in 1980, common experiences in NDE include an awareness of being separated from the body, a feeling of profound peace and a sense of well-being, and an experience of going down a dark tunnel and entering into intense Light. Many people meet dead relatives and friends, and some encounter great spiritual beings such as Christ, Buddha or Krishna. This last is likely to depend on one's earthly culture.

NDEs may seem to last long at the time of the experience but later are found to have taken only seconds in earthly time. The experience often includes a life review in which the person sees what they have done to date and is then told they must go back to earth to make amends and/or change direction in order to achieve their life's purpose. Unlike the traditional religious idea, this life review involves no external judgement. Each person assesses their life through self-judgement.

Rhonda gave a number of examples of reported NDEs. The first was that of A.S. Wiltse in 1889 who had a cardiac arrest while he was suffering from typhoid fever. He 'died' for approximately 30 minutes (a very long time). During this time he came out of his body and saw his two sisters weeping at his bedside. This case was investigated by Frederic Myers, the famous psychic researcher, who believed it to be genuine.

Rhonda quoted from the account of the NDE cited by Raymond Moody as the experience which started him on his NDE research. It involved George Ritchie who 'died' for nine minutes while in a military hospital in 1943 when he was 20. During this time he found himself out of his body and saw a bright Light coming through the ward towards him. He recognized this Light as Jesus who asked him through thought communication what he had done with his life. George then saw his life played out in front of him like a film. He protested that at 20 he had not had time to achieve much, to which Jesus replied that death can come at any age. George realised that Jesus was not judging him but that he was judging himself and that the important criterion is love. Jesus asked 'have you loved others as I have loved you?' During the experience, among other things, George was 'taken' to see people drinking in a bar and saw spirits trying to get alcoholic gratification by 'drinking' through them.

A third case was one documented by both Kenneth Ring and Marion Rankin. This was that of Mellen-Thomas Benedict who had an extended NDE in 1982. During this he experienced a life review but found that he could stop it if he wished. He also saw a Light and found he was able to communicate with it. Aware that people often see the Light according to their own culture and religion, he asked the Light what it really was. He then saw that it was the higher selves of all human souls and that these are all one 'being' coming from the source of all existence. He then received a number of revelations in which he saw that God is us and we are God, that the Big Bang was only one example of God endlessly creating universes, that no religion was better than another, and that we save, redeem and heal ourselves. This NDE lasted for 90 minutes - again much longer than medical science believes is possible.

Rhonda also cited the case of Pam Reynolds who, in 1991, had an NDE while undergoing a clinically-induced death during a brain operation. As her brain was effectively shut down, she should not have been aware of anything. Instead, she found herself 'being brought to consciousness by the piercing sound of the cranial saw'. She felt herself coming out of the top of her head and came to rest so she was looking over the surgeon's shoulder. She had an enhanced sense of awareness and vision. She saw things in the operating room which were different from what she would have imagined. She later also met deceased loved ones and her uncle helped her to return to her body. Re-entry was like "diving into pool of iced water".

Sceptics, such as Susan Blackmore, have suggested physical explanations for NDEs such as oxygen deprivation (hypoxia), abnormally high level of carbon dioxide in the blood (hypercarbia), and drug-induced states. These ideas have been refuted by researchers such as Peter Fenwick, Sam Parnia, Pim vanLommel and others. Often, the brain is not functioning in the NDE state (in many cases the person is "brain-dead"), yet the person experiences a higher awareness than in day-to-day consciousness. Also, drug induced states do not give such profound and life-changing experiences as do NDEs.

In summary, Rhonda concluded by suggesting that we can learn the following from the research into NDEs :

- Our bodies die, we do not
- We influence our own reality
- We judge our own lives
- What we do with our lives here has consequences in the afterlife
- We take our love and knowledge with us
- Consciousness is even more complex than we think
- Preparation for death is important

**Recommended reading:**

Fenwick P and Fenwick E (1995) *The Truth in the Light: an investigation of over 300 NDEs*

Fontana D (2005) *Is There an Afterlife?*

Holden JM, Greyson B & James D (Eds) (2009) *The Handbook of Near-Death Experiences*

van Lommel P (2010) *Consciousness Beyond Life*

Rankin M (2008) *An Introduction to Religious and Spiritual Experience.*

Ring K (1980) *Life at Death*

Ring K & Valarino EE (2006) *Lessons from the light: what we can learn from the near-death experience*

Ritchie G (1978) *Return from Tomorrow*