

Comments from Professor John Wren-Lewis on Susan Blackmore's book *Dying to Live: Science and the Near Death Experience* (Harper Collins 1993)

Susan Blackmore maintains throughout this book that she has no intention of debunking the spiritual significance of Near-Death Experiences (NDEs) when she explains them in terms of brain-functioning - and I believe her, but I doubt if most readers will. In fact when her book first came out, Phillip Adams was delighted to have her on his radio programme because her book casts real doubt on some of the most famous NDE stories that seem like evidence of life after death, and a leading NDE researcher refused to take part in discussion with her on the programme, I suspect for precisely the same reason. Susan comes across as a debunker despite her contrary intentions, and since I happen to agree with almost everything she says, I've been trying to figure out why.

The answer, I've finally decided, lies in the way she puts her case, which conveys what I can only call a depressive or down-putting feeling that for most readers cancels out her protestations about fully accepting the mystical message of NDE reports. I'm not talking about her literary style in any ordinary sense, which is delightfully clear and warm. I'm talking about that hidden content of language which poets use (though only a few of the very great ones like Blake have even begun to understand it), which preachers and journalists and political orators often abuse, and which scientists in their everyday work try to pretend isn't there. I can best illustrate what I mean by contrasting two alternative ways of describing my own NDE (to which, incidentally, Susan refers in her final chapter):

1. As I came round, I found myself emerging from a kind of heavenly space that was no mere vacancy, but an infinite Aliveness which was also peace past understanding; moreover that peace has remained with me at the back of my consciousness ever since, for many years now, as the ground of my personal awareness in each instant, transforming all experience with the absolute knowledge that the hairs of my head are all numbered no matter what befalls. I know myself moment by moment as "Eternity, John Wren-Lewis", and everything I experience, even so-called nasty experience, is shot through with the living fact of Eternity's love for the productions of time.

2. When the patient regained consciousness, the endorphin-levels in his brain were abnormally high, and this has somehow altered his brain's modelling-programme ever since, making him much less anxious about the future, even about the prospect of eventual dying.

The trouble with the first of those accounts is that it's not much use to a working physiologist. The trouble with the second is not only that it leaves out the depth of the feeling involved, but also, more important, that it subtly conveys the implication that things like endorphins, brains and information-processing programmes are factually real and solid while things like eternity, heaven and the divine love for John Wren-Lewis are 'only imagination', when in fact all so-called physical things and events are as much products of imagination as the others. Now Susan in theory knows this very well: when she explains NDE visions of 'heaven at the end of the tunnel' or of meeting lost loved-ones as models constructed by the endorphin-flooded brain when its sensory input is cut off and its cells are firing abnormally because of anoxia, she is quick to add that the solid physical world we think we perceive in normal waking life is also a model which is being continuously constructed by the brain, and made to seem real by precisely the same processes as virtual realities are constructed and made to seem real. What she fails to allow for is the fact that the very use of phrases like 'models constructed by the brain' imply that 'brain' is something more real than the models, when in fact that is only the way of speaking that happens to be useful in studying brains scientifically. For purposes of actual living, phrases like 'heaven where my loved ones are still living' could be, and I think are, not just equally valid but more valid.

The materialist who says 'Ultimately human experience is only a modeling-process in the brain' couldn't be wronger, because the brain is itself a model produced by modeling processes in the brain. If any statement at all is to be made along these lines, it would have to be more like 'Ultimately there is only modeling', which might be better put as 'Ultimately there is only Consciousness'—not 'my' consciousness constructing models of an external universe, but Consciousness-as-such constructing

'me' as a kind of centre, along with a universe of space and time which 'I' perceive to contain other similar foci of Consciousness with whom 'I' communicate, as well as God knows what else. The capital 'C' is a hint of the fact that even this kind of statement won't really do, because the word 'consciousness', like the word 'modeling', implies a living activity, yet leaves out the quality of that aliveness: to try to get that quality in, we need expressions like 'I am one with the One who creates continually'. The point about mystical experiences, of which NDEs are just a special case, is that they are experiential, felt realisations of that implied fact, which for most of life gets ignored. From the physiologist's point of view they may be 'produced' by endorphins in the brain, but that in no way means that Reality is any less marvellous than is suggested by, say, the magnificent opening passages of the Book of Genesis in which the One creates the world and finds it good: the endorphin-flooded brain is simply one way in which the One Reality experiences the marvel.

Susan's argument towards the close of the book is that when modern cognitive psychology discovers that all our experience is modelling, it points logically to Buddha's discovery under the bodhi-tree that isolated suffering selfhood is an illusion—and I would agree entirely. Where it seems to me that her case falls short is in failing to convey what it was about the Buddha's discovery which gave rise to legends about all the gods of the universe coming to bow down to him in gratitude for this enlightenment, when no-one I've yet met has ever felt that way about cognitive psychologists nor, I regret to say, about Susan's book. I'm absolutely with her in wanting to dissociate near-death research from airy-fairy theories about tunnels as transitions to other worlds, or about reincarnation, or about Beings of Light sending people back with World Missions and such like, but the reason I'm with her on this is that I actually know since my NDE that the world of everyday is not 'merely material'. It is a Wonder that contains all the marvels that the airy-fairy theories are trying, inadequately, to express. The trouble with all reductive explanations, even gentle ones like Susan's, is that their tone effectively throws out the baby of marvel with the bathwater of nonsense that comes from trying to describe the marvel too literally. Given this alternative, people who know in their bones that there is something much more than the ordinary round of 'birth, copulation and death' will hang on to the nonsense for dear life, and they're right!

My own experience of the marvel in and since the NDE leaves me literally agnostic about whether Eternity will find some way of continuing to play the personal game called John Wren-Lewis after the body which bears that name has died. My inclination is to think that enough will be enough both from Eternity's point of view and Planet Earth's, but the Infinite Eternal isn't governed by what I or anyone else can believe or doubt. What I know is that in the process of body-dying, the personal consciousness called John Wren-Lewis de-focusses, as it were, into Eternal Infinite Aliveness where 'before' and 'after' have no meaning, and as John now I find this prospect neither frightening nor offensive, because I've been there and it's indescribably wonderful.

Words fail in trying to say anything about it, but it's the absolute opposite of loss. The best I can manage in trying to describe it is to say that it embraces and includes the value of all J W-L's actual and possible 'achievements' and relationships without the limitations of time and space. That, I feel sure, is what the finite brains of some NDE-ers are struggling to visualise when they conjure up all-forgiving life reviews and meetings with 'lost loved ones' which so conspicuously lack any of the all-too-human characteristics that make real-life loved-ones such a bore at times! And as for life in time before death, all the resources of Eternity are available to each of us at every instant as the ordinary natural Ground of our personal being, and this includes all the value of 'spirit guides', 'wisdom from the other Side', patron saints, angels, archangels and all the company of heaven, without the Monty Python silliness that inevitably results from the finite mind's attempts to imagine such things concretely.

