

Science and the Afterlife – October 20, 2013

by **David Green**

“To be or not to be?” In the famous soliloquy of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* we hear expressed the questions people have been asking ever since...well, ever since. What does it mean to “be?” What does it mean to die? And to know in advance, as we live, that death awaits us? What’s on the other side, if anything?

On the one hand, the character of Hamlet describes it as a mystery. He calls it an “undiscovered country”...“from whose boundaries no traveller returns.” So, to cross the border into the country of death is irreversible. On the other hand, Hamlet forgets he’s had a personal conversation with one traveler who *has* returned—his father, whose ghost has told Hamlet about his own murder.

Hamlet’s certainly not the first nor will he be the last to have conflicting beliefs and experiences about what happens after we die. Dreams and visions of the afterlife have been pretty constant across human history. Neanderthals buried their dead with trinkets and tools and food to help them on their journey.

The question does seem to be more and more popular, though. Lately a fair number of folks claim to have actually entered into the afterlife before coming back again to write best-selling accounts of what they saw and felt there. But those are just the folks who chose to write about it. Experiences of people who had some kind of peek into the next world, now number in the millions.

And it’s something moving now beyond the realm books and plays and movies and religious belief. The question is now being asked – quite seriously – by science. Not scientific quacks, either. Developments in neuroscience have inspired new ideas about the persistence of human consciousness after we die.

It’s easy enough to dismiss a lot of the popular fascination with the afterlife as a phenomenon of an aging population of baby-boomers. That generation is famous for being pretty impressed with their own importance, and many are waking up to the reality of aging and death and are wondering – as if no one else ever has before – what happens next?

But at the same time, wondering about this is nothing new.

As I mentioned, all through human civilization – across time and cultures – we’ve had people believing they’d survive the deaths of their bodies. Because it seems that in all societies – past and present – people have experienced things that lead them to that conclusion.

Near-death experiences, people who report seeing deceased relatives coming to take them away just before they die. Children who remember previous lives—which can be taken as evidence for reincarnation.

Apparitions or ghosts have been reported from all cultures. And a lot of people all over the world and over time claim to have communicated with the dead.

So the obvious conclusion to draw from all that is that we somehow survive the deaths of our bodies and that sometimes those who have gone before us can return and communicate.

Of course, those beliefs were adopted by and blended into various religious dogmas. A lot of those concepts today are just taken for granted: a heaven with streets paved with gold for the good people God loves and accepts, and a hell with a lake of fire and brimstone for all the bad folks. That's why I have a fireproof life jacket.

Organized religion realized early on that ideas about an afterlife were – and still are – quite useful in helping modify people's behavior. You can often get folks to act nicer and give money to the church if there's the promise of some kind of reward, or the threat of punishment. You can even inspire people to go to war and kill other people if there may be an eternal reward in it for you.

But something happened along the way. A little bump in the road called the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. Isaac Newton's theory of physics was very mechanical. Even though Newton was a religious guy personally, his ideas could be taken to mean that the universe could exist just fine without any kind of spiritual component. In other words, God wasn't required to run things.

So philosophers like Voltaire used Newtonian physics to support the idea of materialism. Materialism basically means that all that matters is what we can see, touch, taste, feel, and hear – anything made of matter; anything material. And anything else is just a by-product of our imagination. So, we shouldn't believe in superstitious things or in organized religion.

Voltaire and other philosophers had good reason for promoting those ideas because of the truly awful history of religious warfare. They had a legitimate complaint against the authority of the church, because religious folks were doing a lot of horrible things to hurt people, and had been for quite a while.

Then, eventually, Darwin came along with his theory of natural selection– evolution – that further eroded the authority of western religious ideas. Including – by extension – doctrines about an afterlife.

And today, a lot of Atheists – or non-theists – would describe themselves as materialistic thinkers in the Voltaire sense of the word. They prefer hard scientific proof as opposed to anything that might affirm a belief in something beyond the material.

Initially there were at least a couple of responses to this challenge to the idea that something might exist beyond what can be scientifically proven. One response was religious fundamentalism. Which seeks to reject any science that goes against church doctrine, whatever your doctrine might be.

The other response was an attempt to find scientific evidence for an afterlife. That came to be called spiritualism. Which really took hold in the late 1800s and early 1900s. That was the era of séances and experiments with people apparently communicating with their dead loved ones through mediums.

Ideas like extrasensory perception – or ESP – and telepathy and clairvoyance were very popular. But from a scientific standpoint, materialism had taken such a strong hold, those ideas like ESP were relegated to being considered bogus: a fraud.

So, a basic assumption we're still living with is: science and spirituality are at odds with each other. And to say that you believe there's some truth in both means that you've compromised yourself in some way. You've either given up on rational, scientific truth to suit your spiritual beliefs, or you've chipped away at your spirituality if you embrace science. The assumption is, the two simply can't exist in the same room. That's why many scientists who claim to have religious beliefs are often viewed with suspicion by their scientific colleagues. And it's why other religious folks often call religious people who believe in things like evolution heretics.

And up until recently, broadly speaking, that's been the reason why the scientific community has viewed any discussion of an afterlife with a lot of skepticism. It's just assumed that things like near-death experiences must be the result of some kind of physical, neurological phenomena we don't fully understand – yet – but given the march of time and scientific understanding of how the brain works, near-death experiences and other things that suggest an afterlife will be explained in a perfectly rational way.

People who have a more materialistic view of things do have a point when it comes to what people claim about their glimpses into the afterlife. And that is, these folks who are temporarily dead, from a technical standpoint, are simply experiencing what they expect or what they've been taught. They're viewing an afterlife they already believe in.

And that certainly appears to be the case when it comes to people who are very religious. Evangelical Christians, for instance.

Colton Burpo and his father Todd – who's a minister in Nebraska – were recently here in Amarillo to talk about Colton's experience ten years ago.

He was four years old then, and after technically "dying" of a ruptured appendix, his story is, he spent three minutes of earthly time in the arms of Jesus and speaking with a great-grandfather he'd never met, and a sister who he didn't even know existed because she'd miscarried before he was ever born.

After Colton was revived, over time he began telling this story to his astonished parents, so his dad wrote a book called *Heaven Is For Real*, which went on to sell over 8 million copies and spent over 3 years at the top of the New York Times bestseller list. It's spawned a children's book, a speaking tour – as seen locally – and a big-budget movie is now being made.

I expect my own book to perform equally as well. It's called *My Craving for Skinny Vanilla Lattes Is For Real*.

Heaven Is For Real is just the latest in a recent string of similar books written by evangelicals, whom I admire greatly for their genius to turn deeply personal spiritual experiences into lots and lots of money. I'm okay with that.

But for skeptics – materialists and scientists – that book fits very well into the category of the person who had that brief afterlife experience already expected that experience to one degree or another.

But about a year ago, Ebon Alexander wrote about his own cosmic trip in a book called *Proof of Heaven*, which also went on to be a huge best-seller.

The difference is, Ebon Alexander is a Harvard-trained neurosurgeon, who wasn't a very churchy kind of guy, and someone who's expected to know what's possible and what's not about being dead.

He had died because E. coli bacteria had gotten into his spinal fluid, and in fact he has proof that his entire cerebral cortex had shut down – so he had no physical way of holding onto any thoughts or emotions. For seven days he was in a deep coma.

During that time he never met Jesus or any unknown relatives (like little Colton did), but instead a beautiful girl riding a giant butterfly guided him around what he calls the “invisible, spiritual side of existence”. He did encounter a being he considered to be God, and who he refers to as Om. Om, to Alexander, was unconditionally loving and accepting.

After he recovered he had to rethink everything he’d believed about how the brain works. It’s just a given in neuroscience that it’s our brains that generate consciousness and emotion; that there’s nothing external in the universe. Everything is material.

As we might imagine, after his book came out, Ebon Alexander was raked over the coals by many of his fellow scientists. It’s one thing for the little child of an evangelical minister to come back with the kind of stories he did. But it’s another thing entirely for a scientist to claim something that can’t be explained by science.

So his account of heaven was picked apart, every piece of it explained away by some past experience he’d had. And apparently what he went through, according to his critics, was simply a projection of his hopes for an afterlife. And that despite his claims to have been brain-dead for seven days, he clearly did have some activity going on up there that just didn’t make it onto the monitors.

Again, there’s the assumption that science and belief in an afterlife cannot coexist peacefully.

But no matter what you and I may think about all this, a growing number of people who actually don’t claim to have any particular religious beliefs, and people from a wide range of cultures are having near-death experiences.

That’s because we increasingly have the technical ability to bring people back to full consciousness. So, more folks are sharing their afterlife stories, and more scientists are having to figure out what’s going on, and question a lot of previous assumptions.

I think it’s interesting – and maybe a little ironic – that the science of keeping people alive – or resuscitating them after they otherwise would’ve died – is giving rise to questions of a spiritual nature.

Several years ago I had my first conversation with someone who’d died, technically, before being resuscitated. She was in the hospital – very sick – and her heart had stopped. Her monitor beeped loudly, they brought in the crash cart, and after several minutes a doctor and the nurses were able to get her heart going again, and get her breathing again. I happened to be in the room at the time and saw everything.

So a couple days later I went back to see how she was doing. She described for me that when her heart stopped, and she stopped breathing, she found herself floating up and then turning around as if her back was stuck up against the ceiling with Velcro. She could see and hear everything from that vantage point. Herself, lying on the hospital bed, the staff coming in to work on her. She said she felt very peaceful, not in any distress, kind of detached, feeling as if, oh

well, if they get my body going again, that's fine. If not, that's fine, too. And then, suddenly she had the sense of being sucked back into her physical body as her heart started up again.

She said it was actually kind of fun. But there was something else. Someone she felt she knew behind her, waiting patiently, maybe even tugging at her a little bit, very gently. But then when it was apparent she was going to live, letting her go. She said it was as if "Okay, not yet. We'll see you later. You've still got things to do here."

I asked her what she made of all that. She said, "I feel like I really have some things to accomplish. Some important stuff. Mostly, there are people I need to make amends with. Things are clearer now. A lot of the little things I thought were so important don't matter any more." It was as if she had a to-do list, and that very brief experience beyond her physical self, had reminded her, refocused her on what mattered most.

It's one of my favorite true stories. I believe she was sincere. Partly because since that time I've heard almost identical stories from a lot of other people. Those tales have convinced me that any conflict we may have between science and spirituality – including ideas about an afterlife – are of our own making, and are artificial.

It's okay to be skeptical, and I think I am, too, but that's different from being so sure of yourself that you leave no room at all for a little mystery. Those who are absolute – at either end of the religious or philosophical spectrum – can raise interesting arguments, but it can also be rather presumptuous of anyone to claim to know anything absolutely.

When Ebon Alexander was enjoying his brief afterlife journey, he said that "the only thing that truly matters" was communicated to him in three parts. He boils those down to one word—love—but the key phrase may be the third sentence of his longer version:

You are loved and cherished.

You have nothing to fear.

There is nothing you can do wrong.

Sounds wonderful to me. We can still be skeptical of it. Or we can embrace it. Or we can do both at the same time.

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