Scientists analyze the near-death experience

by LEE GRAVES

Rocky collected money for the Mafia. A typical bagman, he was immersed in the material world of fast cars, quick cash and getting ahead by butting heads. One day, he was shot in the chest and left for dead on the street. He survived, though, and lived to tell of an experience that changed his life. “He described a blissful, typical near-death experience—seeing the light, communicating with a deity and seeing deceased relatives,” says Bruce Greyson, a UVA-trained psychiatrist who interviewed Rocky after the shooting.

The power of the experience often is life-altering. Fear of death vanishes. Love of life blossoms. Spirituality strengthens.

“He came back with typical near-death aftereffects. He felt that cooperation and love were the important things, and that competition and material goods were irrelevant.”

That change in attitude didn’t sit well with Rocky’s Mafia friends, but they let him leave the family circle. It was his girlfriend who screamed bloody murder when he changed careers and started helping delinquent children and victims of spousal abuse. “She was just disgusted with him because, as she put it, he no longer cared for things of substance, meaning money and jewelry and fast cars. She couldn’t believe what happened to this guy,” Greyson says.

So it is with hundreds and hundreds of people, those who have had near-death experiences and those who have been close to them. For 30 years, they have been the subjects of research that has taken Greyson and other scholars in UVA’s Division of Perceptual Studies deeper into a field where the raw material of spirituality, the fundamentals of consciousness, the ethereal realm of the afterlife and the scrutiny of science intersect.

Over those three decades, Greyson, who directs the Division of Perceptual Studies, has witnessed an evolution in our knowledge about near-death experiences. “Back in the early 1980s, when we would present information about these experiences at medical conferences, after the conference was over doctors would come to us individually and say, ‘I had one of these experiences. Let me tell you about it.’”

Several factors made them reluctant to speak publicly. The experiences are intensely private, and people had yet to learn how common they were. In addition, the field of study had yet to gain wide acceptance. As knowledge has grown, reticence has waned. “Now they’re more willing to say that during the conference in front of an audience,” Greyson says.

About one person in 20 has reported having a near-death experience, according to one study. The International Association for Near-Death Studies estimates that 12 percent of people who have had a close brush with death will later report having a near-death experience. The elements of that phenomenon are so consistent that Greyson developed a systematic scale of 16 items to gauge the depth of the event (see the test at the bottom of this article).

A classic example would begin with a person in an accident or medical emergency having a sense of physical death accompanied by an out-of-body experience—feeling like he is floating, possibly seeing his own body and surroundings. The sensation is not alarming and generally is peaceful. Some senses, such as hearing, become heightened.

A period of transition, many times described as moving swiftly through a tunnel, follows. The individual enters a realm of indescribable radiance, where he is met by deceased relatives and friends. A central being of light, often interpreted as a deity, emanates profound joy and unconditional love. The individual then undergoes a life review, where the actions of a lifetime unfold in a vision. He is told or decides that it is not time to die and returns to his body, not always willingly.

The power of the experience often is life-altering. Fear of death vanishes. Love of life blossoms. Spirituality strengthens. Compassion and connectedness become central principles. “[Experiencers] feel they’re part of something greater than themselves. They feel that they’re all part of this universal whatever you want to call it—nature, the godhead,” Greyson says. “Though the research is modern, the phenomenon is ancient. The afterlife has fascinated mankind since he was wrapped in the swaddling clothes of civilization. Egyptian lore and spiritual texts such as The Tibetan Book of the Dead abound with accounts and descriptions of the passage from life to death. In the Bible, St. Paul describes a mystical experience “whether in the body or out of the body I do not know.”

One ancient text in particular piqued the interest of Raymond Moody while he was a student at UVA. Plato’s Republic ends with the story of Er, a warrior who “dies” in battle only to be revived after 10 days. He describes, among other things, a towering band of otherworldly light that serves as a passageway for souls.

Moody, whose studies at UVA led to a Ph.D. in philosophy in 1969, initially found little practical connection between classical text and contemporary experience. In 1965, however, a colleague related details of his own near death. When Moody later taught at East Carolina University, a student who had been severely injured in an accident stopped him one day after class. “I’ll never forget it. He said, ‘Dr. Moody, I wish we could talk about life after death in this philosophy class.’
A RIPPLE EFFECT

More than 30 years after publishing the bestselling Life After Life as a medical school resident at UVA, Raymond A. Moody Jr., 62, lives in Anniston, Ala., with his wife, Cheryl, and family. He recently completed research for a new book tentatively titled Nonsense, Science and the Spirit: Thinking About the Afterlife.

The response to Life After Life, followed two years later by a second book about near-death experiences, was completely unexpected. "When I wrote that book, I was hoping that it would sell a few copies and get out to a few other psychologists and psychiatrists," he says.

Over the years, his work on near-death experiences has had an emotional impact on his personal life, he says. "It has made a difference in that I try as much as I can to keep before my mind that, if there is anything to this, then I will see my life in review one day. It sort of wakes you up to the importance of other people and relationships and so on."

He sees an "unfreezing" of thinking about life after death in coming years, but it won't come through science.

"I think there are two factors here. One is the baby boomers. They’re into that period where people naturally wake up to their own mortality or they begin to see their parents die," Moody says. "Concurrently, the real breakthrough will come not from science, but rather from conceptual thinking. If you look at it historically, always something like this—a shift in some problem of this immensity—has come about not from a scientific move, but rather from some rethinking … somebody who figured out a whole new way of looking at it." “I said, ‘Why do you want to talk about that?’"

“He said, ‘About a year ago, I was in an accident, and my doctors said I died. I had an experience that has totally changed my life, and I haven’t had anybody to talk about it with,’” Moody relates.

The student’s story not only paralleled that of Moody’s Charlottesville colleague, but also had echoes of Plato. “At that point, I realized there had to be more of them,” he says. Moody began conducting interviews and in 1975, while doing his medical residency as a psychiatrist at UVA, published Life After Life.

It proved a seminal work. Moody coined the term “near-death experience” and outlined aspects common to the phenomenon. The book generated a tidal wave of interest, and Moody was inundated with mail, far more than he could manage given the demands of his residency.

In 1975, Greyson was an assistant professor of psychiatry at UVA. Moody showed him a box overflowing with one week’s worth of letters and asked him if he wanted to follow up. “Of course I couldn’t put them down,” Greyson says.

So began a life’s work of methodical inquiry into an area little explored by Western science. Moody’s book, coupled with the writings of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross on the death experience, sparked interest that now blazes among a host of individuals, groups and interests. There now is a scientific Journal of Near-Death Studies (Greyson is editor) and the International Association for Near-Death Studies. The phenomenon has been mainstreamed to the point that readers can now turn to reference books such as The Complete Idiot’s Guide to the Near-Death Experience.

Popular acceptance, however, is no substitute for empirical analysis in the scientific community. Greyson is a skeptic; he believes only conclusions supported by data. “Science is my game. I can understand that there are philosophical or theological ways of approaching this, but that’s not my interest,” he explains. “My interest is in the scientific understanding of it.”

The cumulative weight of personal stories certainly counts in this regard, but Greyson employs a number of different studies to test for veracity. To analyze whether accounts are embellished over time, Greyson asked 72 patients who had completed the 16-item scale in the 1980s to complete the scale again without referring to their original responses, then compared the results for variations. To gauge how a near-death experience affected one’s ability to cope with stress, another researcher studied 18 participants of support groups sponsored by the International Association of Near-Death Studies, then set up a control group of 25 people from the same support groups who had not had a near-death experience.

Greyson’s studies, combined with research by others in the field, have methodically addressed questions such as: Do people of different cultures report similar phenomena? Do people tend to embellish or elaborate on their experiences over time? Are reports recorded before Moody’s influential 1975 book consistent with those afterward? Can’t near-death experiences be attributed to other causes—medication, mental illness, religious preconceptions, wish fulfillment, hallucinations? And finally: How can the mind continue to operate—record perceptions, senses and thoughts—and be conscious if the brain is dysfunctional?

Researchers have concluded that people of different cultures report similar phenomena but interpret them differently (the being of light may be God or Christ to a Christian, Allah to a Muslim). Reports studied over two decades showed no
embellishment, underscoring the reliability of experiencers’ accounts. Reports recorded before Moody’s book are consistent with those afterward, indicating that people did not alter their accounts to conform to his model.

The effects of medication, mental illness, wish fulfillment and other psychological models are significantly different from near-death experiences and there is no scientific evidence connecting them, according to Greyson.

The mind-brain question is particularly absorbing to Greyson and fellow faculty in the Division of Perceptual Studies. He, Edward F. Kelly and Emily Williams Kelly (Grad ’86) co-authored Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century, published in December 2006.

Emily Kelly writes about F.W.H. Myers, a 19th-century psychologist whose work supports the view that the mind is not generated by the brain but is constrained by it. She and Greyson examine how near-death experiences and other phenomena contravene conventional wisdom that the brain has to be functioning properly for consciousness to exist.

Current models of mind-brain interaction need to be re-examined, Greyson argues. Even Newton’s laws of physics break down at the extremes. “I think it’s the same with mind-brain,” he says. “Our mind-brain identity model works fine for everyday walking and talking, but when you’re looking at times when the brain is not functioning and the mind seems to function quite well, you get into that extreme area where we need to look at some other models.”

Such inquiry has profound implications for consciousness and its relation to the physical body, but it lacks the immediacy or life-saving potential of research into cancer and heart disease. That kind of medical research has priority when it comes to funding, always a concern for scientists in a university setting.

The Division of Perceptual Studies receives virtually no state or federal money. Founded in 1968 by the late Ian Stevenson as a research unit of UVA’s Department of Psychiatric Medicine, it is housed in a modest former residence blocks away from the bustle and construction swirling around the UVA Health System. The late Chester F. Carlson, inventor of xerography who late in life studied Buddhism, was the division’s first and main benefactor, and other private bequests have fueled the research.

As with other medical advances, lives sometimes do hang in the balance. Greyson works extensively with patients who have attempted suicide, and his investigations of near-death experiences inform their treatment.

Experiencers generally lose their fear of death. Logic dictates that this would lower inhibitions about suicide, but the opposite has proved true. “It makes people much less suicidal. It’s as if, if you're no longer afraid of death, you're no longer afraid of living life to the fullest,” Greyson says. People look at their problems differently, and it’s that change in attitude that leverages coping skills.

Not all near-death experiences are uplifting, however. For some, the initial aspects—sensing death, floating out of the body—are terrifying. A few report experiences that conform to traditional views of hell: fire, brimstone, demons and tortured souls. One researcher even says that near-death experiences are the work of Satan.

Negative characteristics constitute 1 to 2 percent of recorded near-death experiences. More may be out there, Greyson says, but people might not be as eager to share such trauma. Research also has shown that these accounts do not have the consistency that marks other reports.

Acceptance in the scientific community has come almost begrudgingly, but the landscape is far different from three decades ago. More common are negative consequences among friends and family. Experiencers are transformed by the light and love they encounter, and by the review of their actions. They often change attitudes, jobs and behavior, not always to the approval of those close to them. Though he is one step removed, Greyson has not been untouched by the cumulative impact of story after story of transcendent experience. His scientific objectivity remains unwavering, but his outlook has shifted subtly. “I don’t think I was uncompassionate before this,” he says. “But before I started in this field, I saw things like the Golden Rule as things we were supposed to try to live up to. People come back from near-death experiences and say, ‘It’s not a guideline for you. This is the way the universe works. We’re all in this together. If I hurt you, I’m hurting myself. There’s no distinction between you and me.’”

“That sense tends to rub off after you hear it week after week, year after year, that we are all in this together. … It becomes not a matter of following a rule, but living your life according to these principles.”

Advances in science—genetic research, magnetic resonance imaging—give new tools for a field that Greyson believes will inform broader applications in psychiatry and elsewhere. Acceptance in the scientific community has come almost begrudgingly, but the landscape is far different from three decades ago. “It has been said that science progresses funeral by funeral. I think we’re seeing that as time goes on,” Greyson says. “More and more people are growing up with knowledge about the near-death experience and accepting it as part of the human legacy.”
Only a handful of universities in the world have research units investigating paranormal phenomena. In this country, UVA’s Division of Perceptual Studies remains one of the few academic facilities of its kind. It was founded in 1968 with psychiatrist Ian Stevenson as director because he and others believed that scientific assumptions and theories about the nature of the mind, or consciousness, were incomplete. Stevenson, who died in February, gained international fame for his research into what he referred to as the “survival of personality after death.” He conducted extensive investigations into reincarnation, particularly of children who recalled previous lives. He recorded more than 2,500 cases, publishing his findings in a series of technical books, from Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation to Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Etiology of Birthmarks and Birth Defects. In 1999, the globe-trotting psychiatrist was the subject of a book by Washington Post editor Tom Shroder, Old Souls: The Scientific Evidence for Past Lives, which brought Stevenson’s work to a wider audience. Building on Stevenson’s research, UVA child psychiatrist Jim Tucker shares many of these case studies with the general public in a new book, Life Before Life: A Scientific Investigation of Children’s Memories of Previous Lives. Other researchers in the division have studied types of anomalous perception, such as telepathy, out-of-body experiences, deathbed visions and near-death experiences.

Quantifying the phenomenon

Professor Bruce Greyson developed this scale to measure the depth of an individual’s near-death experience.

1. Did time seem to speed up or slow down?
   0 = No
   1 = Time seemed to go faster or slower than usual
   2 = Everything seemed to be happening at once; or time stopped or lost all meaning

2. Were your thoughts speeded up?
   0 = No
   1 = Faster than usual
   2 = Incredibly fast

3. Did scenes from your past come back to you?
   0 = No
   1 = I remembered many past events
   2 = My past flashed before me, out of my control

4. Did you suddenly seem to understand everything?
   0 = No
   1 = Everything about myself or others
   2 = Everything about the universe

5. Did you have a feeling of peace or pleasantness?
   0 = No
   1 = Relief or calmness
   2 = Incredible peace or pleasantness

6. Did you have a feeling of joy?
   0 = No
   1 = Happiness
   2 = Incredible joy

7. Did you feel a sense of harmony or unity with the universe?
   0 = No
   1 = I felt no longer in conflict with nature
   2 = I felt united or one with the world

8. Did you see, or feel surrounded by, a brilliant light?
   0 = No
1 = An unusually bright light
2 = A light clearly of mystical or other-worldly origin

9. Were your senses more vivid than usual?
0 = No
1 = More vivid than usual
2 = Incredibly more vivid

10. Did you seem to be aware of things going on elsewhere, as if by extrasensory perception (ESP)?
0 = No
1 = Yes, but the facts have not been checked out
2 = Yes, and the facts have been checked out

11. Did scenes from the future come to you?
0 = No
1 = Scenes from my personal future
2 = Scenes from the world’s future

12. Did you feel separated from your body?
0 = No
1 = I lost awareness of my body
2 = I clearly left my body and existed outside it

13. Did you seem to enter some other, unearthly world?
0 = No
1 = Some unfamiliar and strange place
2 = A clearly mystical or unearthly realm

14. Did you seem to encounter a mystical being or presence, or hear an unidentifiable voice?
0 = No
1 = I heard a voice I could not identify
2 = I encountered a definite being, or a voice clearly of mystical or unearthly origin

15. Did you see deceased or religious spirits?
0 = No
1 = I sensed their presence
2 = I actually saw them

16. Did you come to a border or point of no return?
0 = No
1 = I came to a definite conscious decision to “return” to life
2 = I came to a barrier that I was not permitted to cross; or was “sent back” against my will.

A score of 7 or higher is considered a NDE for research purposes. The mean score among a large sample of near-death experiences is 15.

SOURCE: UVA Division of Perceptual Studies, Department of Psychiatry & Neurobehavioral Sciences