

## Letters to the Editor

### Responses to Augustine's "Does Paranormal Perception Occur in Near-Death Experiences?"

To the Editor:

Keith Augustine acknowledged in his response to my commentary on his article, "Does Paranormal Perception Occur in Near-Death Experiences?" that my data show that NDErs "*as a whole* were not particularly prone to embellish" their accounts (Augustine, 2007, p. 271). However, he added that "it remains to be seen whether NDErs who, *in particular*, report ... NDEs with paranormal elements, are prone to embellishment, such as those claiming veridical paranormal perceptions during out-of-body NDEs, accurate prophetic visions shown to them during their experiences, or encounters with recently deceased persons they did not know about at the time of their NDEs" (pp. 271–272). Actually, that evidence does *not* remain to be seen, because I had already reported it in my study that Augustine cited. In addition to documenting that NDE Scale scores in general were not embellished over a period of two decades, I presented data showing that purportedly paranormal and transcendental NDE features were not embellished but actually declined nonsignificantly over time, including claims of precognitive visions, extrasensory perception, encounters with mystical "presences" or deceased spirits, and out-of-body experiences, which actually diminished significantly over the two decades (Greyson, 2007).

Augustine reported what he described as "relevant, albeit indirect, survey data" bearing on the beliefs of near-death researchers, in an effort to establish their cognitive bias, but none of the studies he cited in fact involved near-death researchers, *even indirectly*. He noted that a study of the beliefs of Parapsychology Association members showed that very few thought that the evidence supported a belief in survival. However, that survey was conducted in 1975, before the term "near-death experience" had been coined and the phenomenon described (McConnell and Clark, 1980), and therefore had absolutely no

relevance for whether parapsychologists considered NDEs evidence for survival. He also cited a survey of physicians showing greater belief in survival than among other scientists, but that survey is irrelevant to the beliefs of near-death researchers, as only a small handful of the 700,000 physicians in this country have studied NDEs. Likewise, his citation of a survey of beliefs among the general population can hardly be assumed to reflect near-death researchers' beliefs.

Augustine cited the titles of Raymond Moody's books as evidence of his belief in survival of death. In his later book *The Last Laugh* (Moody, 1999), Moody specifically disavowed any responsibility for those titles and attributed the suggestions that NDEs promoted belief in survival to his publishers' and editors' distortion of his work:

The truth is, in their pursuit of riches and for the sake of sensationalism, publishers/editors hacked so much out of what I wrote that for a long time I haven't recognized myself in those books. The covers that publishers stamp with untruthful exclamations like, "Scientific proof of life after death!" are a constant headache and a continuing source of embarrassment. Hype like that sells books, maybe, but it mangles the credibility of the subject.

[T]here may be *no such thing as life after death*.... I'm afraid I may have helped to make people feel "certain" about the existence of life after death because of my work in reporting near-death experiences. This is ironic, since *I* have never been certain.

What I am saying is that I have never equated – and I never meant to equate – my reporting of so-called "near-death experiences" with a declaration on my part of the unquestioned existence of "life after death." The media did that. And my publishers did that, with the way they edited and marketed my book. I never assumed myself to be reporting the experiences of people *after* death, nor have I ever reached the conclusion that because people were having certain kinds of experiences when they were near to death, an ongoing "life" after death had now been proven beyond question. The purpose of my first book, in fact, was to *raise* the question, not to *answer* it....

Yet, the visions of the dying offer no such positive proof. (Moody, 1999, pp. viii and 8–9, italics in the original)

I understand and agree with Augustine's distinction between what near-death researchers *say and do* and what they *believe or hope to find*. However, I would extend that same argument to all researchers, not just those who study NDEs. There is no reason to suspect that those who espouse a purely materialistic view of mind-brain relationships are less biased than those who espouse a dualistic view. All research should be held to the same standard of replicability, whether or not it supports the researcher's hypotheses.

I find it peculiar that when confronted with the absence of empirical foundations for his speculations, Augustine repeatedly defended himself by arguing that he never claimed that the bias or embellishment or sensory cuing he postulated for NDE accounts actually existed, but rather simply that they *might* have existed, as if that provided a reasonable argument for anything. Speculating on what *might* have occurred, without any empirical indication that it actually did, amounts to an irrefutable (and therefore unscientific) argument. One might as well argue that the demonic possession is responsible for all NDEs. Of course, there is no evidence that demonic possession plays a role, but since we have no evidence that it doesn't, then it *might* be true. Likewise, Augustine argued that we have no evidence that NDErs embellish their accounts or derive them from subtle sensory cues or that researchers are biased, but since we have no evidence that those things did not happen, then they *might* have. (Actually, we *do* have such evidence that NDErs do not embellish their accounts, as noted above.)

I agree with Augustine that the evidence from NDEs so far does not establish a definitive case for survival of death, or even a definitive case for mind separate from brain. The evidence that we have at this point allows multiple interpretations. In the face of such ambiguous data, Augustine privileges the materialist interpretation because he believes the antecedent probabilities are higher for that viewpoint. Where he and I differ is in our estimates of those antecedent probabilities. I think there is sufficient evidence from other lines of research suggesting independence of mind and brain (Kelly, Kelly, Crabtree, Gault, Grosso, and Greyson, 2006; Radin, 1997) that the materialist interpretation of NDEs should not be granted special privilege over others. Perhaps most importantly, he and I agree on the need for further research and for better data.

### References

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To the Editor:

I am writing in response to Keith Augustine's article on paranormal perception in near-death experiences (NDEs) in the Summer issue of the Journal (Augustine, 2007a) and his subsequent response to commentaries on that article (Augustine, 2007b). However, before addressing some of Augustine's critique and commentary concerning my own work and views, I would like to enter a couple of qualificatory statements.

First, having formally withdrawn from the field of near-death studies in 2000, I am, as it were, "coming out of retirement" after seven years of silence in order to address some of the issues Augustine raised. Second, I must confess that I do so reluctantly because I am convinced that debates of this sort rarely settle anything. Disagreements between materialists and believers in some sort of transcendent reality have been raging since the days of Democritus and Plato and have never been resolved by either argument or evidence. And even since the beginnings of Spiritualism in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and extending through the subsequent rise of psychical research and finally into the modern era of near-death studies, nothing fundamentally has changed. Any reader familiar with the history and personages of the aforementioned domains will recognize that the