

[www.colinwilsonworld.net /-a-serious-question](http://www.colinwilsonworld.net/-a-serious-question)

A serious question

7-8 minutes

A serious question...

2008

The University of Southampton is launching the most amazing project in its history: an attempt to reach a definite conclusion about whether we go on living after the heart has stopped beating and the body has entered the state called physical death. What is so epoch-making is that science itself should have the courage to ask a question that is usually regarded as the domain of religious belief. If the answer is affirmative, we could even envisage a day when life-after death is taught in science classes at school.

My own comment would be that it's about time, too. The question has been around for at least a century and a half and taking it seriously is long overdue.

One of the first persons to raise it was a professor of geology who fell down a mountain. It happened to Albert Heim when he was leading a climbing party in the Alps in 1871. His hat blew off, and in an attempt to save it, he fell seventy feet to a snow-covered ledge. He recorded that although the fall lasted only a few seconds, his whole past life seemed to flash before him. And on the ledge, he felt no kind of anxiety – only a marvellous

sense of peace and calm, which he compared to magnificent music. When he was rescued, he was so intrigued by the experience that he devoted the next twenty years to collecting other experiences of climbing accidents, and was amazed that so many were like his own. Moreover, even people who finally died from falls had that same delightful feelings of joy.

The first distinguished scientist to take up the question was an Irish professor of physics named Sir William Barrett. He was married to an obstetric surgeon who worked in a London maternity hospital. On the evening of January 12, 1924, she came home with a strange story to tell. One of her patients had suffered a heart attack after giving birth, and as Lady Barrett held her hand, the woman said: 'Don't let it get dark - it's getting darker and darker.'

Then she looked across the room and said: 'Oh, lovely, lovely!'

'What's lovely?'

'Lovely brightness, wonderful beings,' said the woman. 'Why, it's father. He's so glad I'm coming.' Then she started with surprise. 'There's Vida!'

Vida was the patient's younger sister, who had died two weeks earlier, but the woman had not been told in case it upset her. She died an hour later, continuing to hold a normal conversation with the real people around her bed but still seeing her dead father and sister and the 'lovely light'.

Sir William Barrett was so fascinated by this incident that he began making inquiries in hospitals, and soon found that most doctors and nurses could tell similar stories. He went on to write a book about it called *Death Bed Visions*.

In the 1940s, one of his admirers, a Latvian researcher

named Dr Karlis Osis, had the sensible idea of sending out a questionnaire to hundreds of other doctors and nurses asking for their observations on dying patients. He learned that a huge percentage saw dead relatives. Dying children often saw angels, and were puzzled to discover that they had no wings.

Another researcher, Erlendur Haraldsson, went to India to find out whether people from a different culture would have the same kind of deathbed experiences. The answer was yes. They also saw – and had conversations with – dead relatives.

Now in the mid-1960s, a young philosophy student from the University of Virginia, Raymond Moody, came across an account by a psychiatrist named George Ritchie, who as a young soldier had apparently died, then revived. And he told how he woke up and saw his own body lying on the bed. He went into the corridor, and a nurse walked straight through him. He tried talking to somebody, who obviously could not see or hear him. And eventually he woke up back in his body.

Moody got to know Ritchie, was convinced of his sincerity, and spent eleven years collecting accounts of other people who had apparently 'died'. Most told the same story – of going through a tunnel towards a bright light, and finally emerging into some 'other place'. Many were then told they could not stay because it was not 'their time', and reluctantly made to return to the everyday world. And again and again, such people said they would never again be afraid of death.

Raymond Moody got himself a medical degree, by which time he had collected about 150 accounts of what he called 'near-death experiences' or NDEs. He then decided he may as well write a short book about them, called *Life After Life*. And when it

appeared in 1977, it became an instant best-seller, and caused dozens more researchers to explore NDEs. Which is how the general public learned about this amazing subject.

Not all were convinced. Many argued that when man faces death, he undergoes a frightening sense of losing his reality, and that the experience of peace and bliss is a kind of defence mechanism. Hence the experiences of floating out of the body. However, the University of Southampton team has devised an interesting way of testing this. There are shelves near the ceiling, with pictures which could be seen only by someone hovering above them. So the person who claims to have been out of his body is asked what he saw on them. And by means of this test, many have convinced the questioners of the reality of the experience.

I have to admit that I have never had anything remotely like an 'out of the body experience'. But I have always been prepared to accept them as real because I have talked to people who have – including my own mother. In 1955, a family doctor failed to diagnose a stomach pain as appendicitis; the appendix ruptured, and she was rushed into hospital with peritonitis. For the rest of that year she was in and out of hospital, having operation after operation. During this time I was in London writing my first book, and when I visited her I saw her growing weaker and weaker.

Then, to my relief, she began to improve. And one day, much later, she told me how she had become convinced she was dying, and was quite resigned to it. And at this point, she said, she saw beside her bed 'this old fellow with a white beard', who looked like something out of the Bible, and was wearing

sandals. She could not remember what he said, except the words 'Now look, you can't go yet. There's too much for you to do. You're needed here'. From then on, she felt better. She lived to see the publication of *The Outsider*, which became a best-seller. And, sadly, she was indeed needed, to nurse my father through a long final illness with cancer.

The old chap with sandals certainly knew what he was talking about.