

Level: advanced

A Taste of Heaven?

Pre-reading discussion

We are going to read a passage about near-death experiences – remarkable experiences some people say they have had when, for instance, they suffered a severe heart-attack, almost died but were brought back from the brink of death by doctors. Have you heard any stories about experiences like this?

Reading

1. Jessie Lott suffered a massive cardiac arrest (otherwise known as a heart attack). While the doctors struggled to get her heart beating again she says that she left her body. "I was looking down, and I saw my body, and I saw the doctors. The next thing I can recall is being in a tunnel and moving towards a bright light. The light got bigger and bigger, and then I was in a place of brilliant, beautiful life. The sense of peacefulness was indescribable."
2. Jessie is one of 344 heart-attack victims who were interviewed about the experiences they had had while they were being revived. The study, published in the prestigious scientific journal "The Lancet", revealed that 18% could recall similar experiences. Jessie Lott's story is typical because it includes the out-of-the-body experience, the feeling of euphoria and the journey through a tunnel towards a bright light that crop up repeatedly in accounts of what are commonly known as near-death experiences (NDEs).
3. The fact that some people have these experiences is undeniable; the question, though, is: what are we to make of them? Joyce Hawkes, who had a near-death experience when she was knocked unconscious by a falling roof tile, is convinced that she was given a glimpse of a life beyond death. Previously she had been a cell biologist to whom the idea of a spiritual reality had seemed to be nonsense. Her NDE changed all that. "What I learned was that there truly is no death, that there is a change in state from a physical form to a spiritual form, and that there's nothing to fear about that transition," she said. She has since abandoned her career as a biologist and now works as a spiritual healer.
4. Some people remain sceptical, however. Susan Blackmore, a psychology professor at a University in Bristol (UK), argues that the apparent journey through a tunnel towards a bright light is a perfectly understandable consequence of what happens in the visual cortex of the brain when it is starved of oxygen.
5. Medical scientists have also known since the mid-1990s that the drug ketamine (sometimes used as an anaesthetic) can induce experiences which have all the features described by people like Jessie Lott and Joyce Hawkes, including the experience of drifting away from the body. There are also indications that a chemical acting just like ketamine is released in relatively large quantities when the oxygen level in the brain is dangerously low (a state known as cerebral anoxia). The conclusion of Dr Karl Jansen, a psychiatrist in London, is that those claiming to have "returned from death" may have been very close to death but they did not die. Their experience was not a glimpse of another reality. It was simply an altered state of consciousness triggered by chemical changes in the brain.
6. Arguments like this did not entirely convince the Dutch researchers who interviewed the 344 heart-attack victims. They insisted that the near-death experiences are different from ketamine-induced experiences in one important respect: only the former changed the lives of the people who had them. Although the evidence is very limited, it supports the view that only genuine NDEs can lead to marked changes in people's personalities, often involving losing the fear of death, and becoming more compassionate and loving. One heart-attack victim, Dianne Morrissey, said, "Since the experience I have been living my life with so much more enjoyment and appreciation. I live my life a hundred percent more now, and yet it is as if I can hardly wait to die. It's not that I have a death wish. It's just that I know now how tranquil things will be afterwards."

Questions

1. Which three events or elements are commonly included in an NDE?
2. How does Susan Blackmore account for the experience of travelling through a tunnel?
3. If Dr Karl Jansen and Joyce Hawkes met up for a cup of coffee and a chat about NDEs, what do you think would be the most important issue about which they would fail to agree?
4. What is cerebral anoxia?
5. People like Dr Jansen think chemicals like ketamine can explain everything. What do the Dutch researchers think it cannot explain?

Vocabulary search

Look for words or phrases having the following meanings. (The numbers in brackets refer to the paragraph numbers.)

1. tried hard (1)
2. widely admired, held in high esteem (2)
3. stories, reports (2)
4. a brief look (3)
5. According to Joyce, there are two kinds of reality: material and (3)
6. change (3)
7. When something is not supplied with what it needs, it is (4)
8. cause (two verbs in paragraph 5 in different tenses),
9. moving slowly, floating without any means of controlling the direction (5)
10. very sensitive to the suffering of others (6)
11. peaceful (6)

Over to you

Do you think people like Joyce Hawkes have really had a glimpse of life after death or are you more inclined to share the views of sceptics like Dr Jansen?

Language extra

In the passage we came across this sentence:

Joyce Hawkes "had been a cell biologist **to whom** the idea of a spiritual reality had seemed to be nonsense."

Here we have joined two ideas together using a relative clause.

Idea 1: "Joyce had been a cell biologist."

Idea 2: "The idea of a spiritual reality had seemed **to** Joyce to be nonsense."

Sometimes when we join ideas together like this using a relative pronoun and we have a preposition (like the word "to" in the sentence above) we have a choice about where to put the preposition. For instance:

"That's the girl **who** I bought my bike **from**."

"That's the girl **from whom** I bought my bike."

The second sentence sounds more formal, and out on the streets and in the cafeterias we wouldn't usually speak like that. (Note: we use "whom" for people and "which" for things, places and times.)

To practise this, rewrite the following sentences using a preposition immediately followed by a relative pronoun ("whom" or "which"). (Note: there is no Cambridge-style, 5-word limit in this exercise.)

1. We have heard a lot about Shakira recently.
Shakira is a woman
2. Nothing matters more to Bob than building.
Bob is a man
3. This is the rope they hanged Saddam Hussein with.
This is the rope
4. It is sometimes said that our ancestors came from a planet near Sirius.
A planet near Sirius is sometimes said to be the place