

BOOK REVIEW

The Map of Heaven: How Science, Religion, and Ordinary People Are Proving the Afterlife by Eben Alexander, M.D., with Ptolemy Tompkins. Simon and Schuster, 2014. 209 pp. \$16.99. ISBN 978-1476766409.

The rapid onset of gram-negative meningitis in 2008 precipitated an extraordinary near-death experience for Eben Alexander. Uniquely, Alexander had been a neurosurgeon for more than twenty-five years and thus had extensive knowledge of brain functioning. Despite the fact that he had been in a coma for a week, he had recollections of activities, which should not have occurred. The state of his brain during that period simply would not have facilitated those events, yet they seem to have happened. Inspired by the visions and information received during his life-threatening illness, Alexander wrote *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey in the Afterlife*, a best-selling book that catapulted him into fame in October 2012.

The success of the book and various public appearances brought Alexander a vast collection of letters from people who also reported near-death experiences (NDEs). While there have been many books and studies written about NDEs (including some by SSE members), Alexander's professional background clearly set him apart from most of those authors and people sought his expertise and attention.

In *The Map of Heaven* Alexander has conveniently titled each chapter by the gifts he included therein. While his experience is fairly recent, he discusses relevant philosophical positions, such as those of Plato and Aristotle, considered the progenitors of Western thought. He notes that Plato conveyed one of the earliest recorded near-death experiences; that of a critically wounded soldier named Er, who revived consciousness just before his funeral pyre was ignited. Er's description of his trip to a "realm beyond earth" profoundly impacted Plato's thinking and imparts details similar to those Alexander experienced nearly two and a half millennia later.

Alexander also engages the thoughts of former renowned scientists and their consideration of the role of consciousness in the evolution of quantum theories. These include no lesser luminaries than Werner Heisenberg, Erwin Schrodinger, Max Planck, and many others. He quotes Nikola Tesla as stating, "The day science begins to study nonphysical phenomena, it will make more progress in one decade than in all previous centuries of its

existence.” Later in the book he correctly notes that the problem associated with understanding there is a spiritual component to the physical world is not lack of evidence. Rather, as many SSE members can attest, it is the refusal of mainstream scientists to even look at the data.

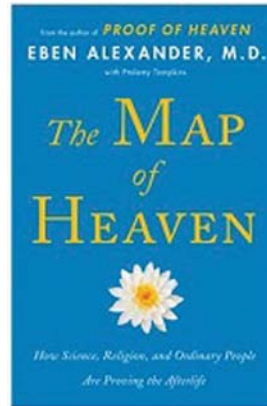
Alexander also discusses whether or not matters spiritual can be intrinsically validated or must be relegated to articles of faith. Endorsing the position of many saints, he concludes that belief/faith is an integral part of understanding the phenomena we observe. Without such faith we cannot comprehend these complex events.

Quoting St. Anselm of Canterbury, an eleventh-century theologian, he notes “In order to know you must first believe.”

Predicated on the notoriety associated with *Proof of Heaven*, Alexander has become a magnet for near-death experiencers who want to share their stories with him. Some of the germane examples he has interspersed throughout the new book. Not surprisingly, many of these reporters begin by noting they have kept the experience to themselves for years or even decades. After reading his prior book, however, they felt empowered to reach out to someone they understood to be a compassionate expert.

Alexander concludes with an Appendix prefaced by teleological questions, ones with universal appeal. Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? Noting “everything is vibrations,” he pairs ancient acoustic innovations and architecture with modern resonance technology—iMRIs—as he explores the ubiquitous nature of vibrations and their significance for all life. During his NDE Alexander encountered what he calls *the Core*, and he reports hearing the sound of Om, which he describes as “the origin of all existence.” This seems to be a reaffirmation of what ancient mystics performed with the Hindu chanting of that same entrancing chord.

The Map of Heaven is filled with cross-cultural and interdisciplinary examples supporting the premise of a spiritual domain; one which is every bit as real as the physical dimensions of consensus reality. The views of mainstream scientists and existential philosophers, past and present, are eloquently merged with observations of common people who have experienced passage through a portal into realms unseen.



JOHN B. ALEXANDER

Note: There are no family ties to the author of the book.