

**Life After Life: The Investigation of a Phenomenon—Survival of Bodily Death** by Raymond A. Moody, Jr. New York: HarperOne, 2001. 193 pp. \$14.99 (paperback). ISBN 9780062517395. Kindle edition \$10.99 (e-book). [Original work published 1975]

Raymond Moody, often referred to as the father of near-death studies, first published his groundbreaking book *Life After Life* in 1975. After receiving his doctoral degree in philosophy, the young Moody decided to pursue his medical degree in psychiatry to study the philosophy and ethics of medicine. During his time in medical school, Moody encountered people whose accounts of extraordinary experiences after clinical death and subsequent resuscitation seemed amazingly similar to each other. The commonality ended with the stories; the storytellers themselves seemed diverse and independent from each other. Moody's initial investigation into what he termed "near-death experiences" (NDEs) culminated in his pioneering, controversial, and best-selling work (Moody 1975) that, as of 2001, had sold more than 13 million copies (Holden, Greyson, & James 2009a:3).

In that book, Moody described investigating 150 cases of NDEs and interviewing 50 of the people who claimed to have had them. He found a pattern of experiences involving non-ordinary consciousness during what seemed to be temporary physical death. He surmised that NDEs are extraordinary experiences that seem to transcend medical and psychological explanations. However, attempting to remain unbiased, Moody presented his findings without judgment and entertained several possible explanations for the experiences. He acknowledged that in the course of interviewing people who claimed to have had an NDE, he found himself believing the intensity of their convictions: that their experiences, although ineffable and beyond scientific explanation, were real.

### Summary of Content

In the first half of his book, Moody described 15 common elements of NDEs, of which a near-death experiencer (NDER) might experience one or more or all. He offered case examples by quoting NDErs whose experiences illustrated the various elements such as moving rapidly through a dark tunnel, being out of body, encountering one or more beings of light, and experiencing a life review. He noted the profound feelings of peace and love that seemed to permeate most experiences. He also catalogued typical NDE aftereffects that included a renewed vigor for life, appreciation for meaningful relationships, revitalized spirituality, and loss of fear of death.

In the second half of *Life After Life*, Moody discussed some historical accounts of, offered answers to frequently asked questions about, and provided possible explanations for NDEs, as well as offering his personal impressions.

Possible historical accounts of NDEs exist in the Bible, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, and the writings of Plato and Emanuel Swedenborg. Although elements of these accounts are strikingly similar to some elements of NDE accounts, Moody acknowledged that they offer little in the way of proof that NDEs are real experiences. In the last sections, Moody entertained possible explanations for NDEs, drawing from the realms of natural science, psychology, and the supernatural. He argued that neither science nor psychology offers a comprehensive explanation for the phenomenon and again asserted that NDErs believe in the reality of their experiences. Moody concluded with his personal impression that although his work was not proof of life after death, he was convinced that an explanation beyond the natural sciences was possible.

### Analysis and Evaluation

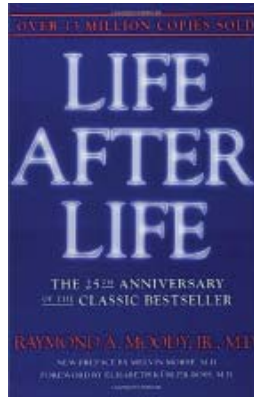
Moody's introduction of NDEs to the world survives as a groundbreaking exploration of a previously unexplored phenomenon that opened a new field of near-death studies. Thirty-seven years later, near-death experiences remain a topic of scientific research into the nature of consciousness at death, the effect of NDEs and similar experiences on experiencer's lives, the possibility of life after death, and the implications of NDE-related phenomena for meaning and purpose in life. A recent comprehensive, critical review of NDE-related literature for the 30 years following publication of Moody's book yielded the conclusion that most of the original findings he reported in *Life After Life* have been substantiated by subsequent research from around the world and representing several cultures (Holden, Greyson, & James 2009b). Moody's initial work has garnered substantial attention from both supporters and critics who continue to debate the nature of NDEs and substantial gratitude from NDErs who finally have a term to label their experiences and research to legitimize it. Though critics have found Moody's work fundamentally flawed in design due to his unempirical investigative approach, near-death scholars continue to seek to improve Moody's original research design with investigation characterized by rigorous scientific method (Holden, Greyson, & James 2009b). However, near-death researchers often acknowledge the difficulty in studying a phenomenon that transcends the usual parameters of space and time.

Although most of Moody's conclusions have withstood repeated scrutiny, one notable exception deserves mention. In *Life After Life*, Moody asserted that NDEs resulting from attempted suicide are generally unpleasant and are characterized by some form of punishment in the afterlife. His speculation for this finding was that life is God's gift to humankind; that suicide is an insult to God, the giver of life; and that distressing NDEs are a form of punishment for violating God's gift. Further research has contradicted his assertion on two accounts. First, with regard to pleasurable and/or distressing contents, NDEs

resulting from suicide attempts have not been found to differ consistently from NDEs resulting from other circumstances—and in any case, NDErs almost never report feeling “punished,” per se (Zingrone & Alvarado 2009). Second, researchers specifically investigating distressing NDEs have found no difference in their frequency related to near-death circumstances, leading investigators to conclude that anyone can have a distressing NDE (Bush 2009).

### Conclusion

In *Life After Life*, Moody offered readers a framework of common elements and aftereffects of NDEs that, by and large, have withstood the test of subsequent scientific investigation (Holden, Greyson, & James 2009b). Following his seminal work, near-death researchers continue to investigate NDEs for their potential to enhance understanding of various death-related phenomena and consciousness in general. His work also has inspired subsequent scholarly attention to issues such as how healthcare providers can most competently serve NDErs in the aftermath of their experiences (Foster, James, & Holden 2009). Anyone interested in the possibility of life after death will find Moody’s first book a refreshingly honest account of a beginning scientist’s discovery of a phenomenon largely unexplored and unexplained. Those looking for quantifiable explanations of NDEs might find this qualitative exploration frustratingly inconclusive. When either scholars or lay people ask for introductory references on NDEs, we recommend *Life After Life* third on the list, after *Lessons from the Light* (Ring & Valarino 1998), which we consider the “heart” of NDEs, and *The Handbook of Near-Death Experiences: Thirty Years of Investigation* (Holden, Greyson, & James 2009b), which we consider the “head” of NDEs. Since 1975, Moody has published several other resources on NDEs and related phenomena, including sole-authored books and videos and co-authored books. We believe that *Life After Life* will likely be not only Moody’s most frequently used resource but also a widely read classic in the field of near-death studies, and justifiably so.



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