

Little Bits of Heaven



OTHERWORLD JOURNEYS

Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times.

By Carol Zaleski.

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By Richard A. Shweder

I USED to think, somewhat innocently, that seeing is believing. That was before someone showed me a certified photograph of a leprechaun, looking very much like the little Irish elf of my imagination. Now I have become sophisticated. I have learned, through much schooling, that seeing is believing only if I am already prepared to believe; and that there is a lot more to our conceptions of ultimate reality, and a lot less to the visionary experience of it, than meets the eye.

"Otherworld Journeys" is about visionary representations of the afterlife. It is not a book for occultists and Carol Zaleski is not a parapsychologist. She is a scholar of religion at Harvard University who has undertaken an examination of medieval and contemporary eyewitness accounts of life after death. Across the centuries and across cultures there are many common themes in the stories that are told: an exiting of the self or soul from the body and a period of hovering about, disembodied and remote from one's ultimate destination in the netherworld. A life review. A guided journey through a dark mist or narrow passage or locked gate (or perhaps across a weak bridge or over a steep mountain) into the beatific realm of the really real, bright

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and timeless (where, at the very least, life goes on at a less hurried pace).

Needless to say, not every otherworld traveler has been in touch with precisely the same afterlife reality. According to Ms. Zaleski, there are some notable historical variations in the testimonials. Heaven has become democratic, egalitarian, congenial and "friendly to human interests" in our modern era: no terrifying tribunals or ranking of souls or purgatorial debts, and "requirements for sainthood have been greatly relaxed." Heaven, I can imagine it being argued, has been managed to keep up with the times.

There are some regional variations as well, at least in details. In South Asia a Hindu soul traveled to heaven on the back of a "bespangled cow." At least one American hailed a taxicab. Heaven, it would seem, has accommodated itself to the denominational attitudes and habits and technologies of its clientele.

People who have had a near-death experience and a vision of the afterlife, whether they are medieval monks or contemporary atheists, do not think they were hallucinating or fantasizing. The vision feels real to them. As with all apparently direct encounters with reality, the experience is inherently compelling, especially for the person who has had it. Otherworld travelers return from their trips transformed and highly motivated to convince others that their encounters were real. They are convinced there is something out there that they have been privileged to experience, and that what they have witnessed is not only so good it deserves to be true, it really is true. They think that any open-minded person should be impressed by similarities in their independent "observations."

Unfortunately, there are many stay-at-home-in-your-body folk who do not see it that way. After reading "Otherworld Journeys" I told my adolescent son about all the eyewitness testimony in defense of the afterlife. He replied, "There is no heaven, so it can't be true; but if there is a heaven, then they don't make mistakes and

send souls back to tell stories about it." His reply reminded me of the theoretical physicist who, when confronted with some puzzling evidence on subatomic particles from a carefully conducted long-term experiment, declared: "I'll believe that data only when I have a theory that makes it plausible."

It reminded me, as well, of some of my University of Chicago undergraduates. Over the years I have asked them whether yogic-type levitation has ever occurred. They divide into three groups. Those, the proud products of a liberal education, who think that anything is possible. Those who positively believe levitation has occurred but have never seen it. Those who think it is theoretically impossible and would not believe it no matter what they saw. They have already seen it on magic shows and on movie screens, and they think "hallucinations" and "mirages" are infinitely more likely than genuine levitations. By the time you finish reading "Otherworld Journeys" you may find yourself wondering how you ought to react to a documentary videotape of the heavenly lights. How do we hazard the journey from appearance or experience to reality and then manage to get back? Certainly we need a guide.

Ms. Zaleski has written a sophisticated postmodern, hence nonphilosophical, book about that timeless philosophical problem. The problem is how to explain mental objects (for example, a vision of heaven or an encounter with a leprechaun). Are they caused by "inside the head" states of mind (for example, imagination, fantasy or dream) or are they caused by "out there" states of the object world (for example, a "real" heaven or a "real" Irish elf)?

SOPHISTICATION, as we learn from "Otherworld Journeys," has been around for a long time, even in those dark ages before we saw the light. Gregory the Great, the sixth-century Pope who made use of deathbed visions and return-from-death testimony to argue for the immortality of the soul, evaluated dream images according to a refined, sixfold classification of their source (from a full stomach or an empty one? from illusion or from revelation?). He tried to develop tests for the reliability of visions. He did not solve the problem, nor has anyone else.

The problem may be unsolvable, and thus timeless, in large part because we cannot directly know what is "inside the head" or what is "out there"; states of mind such as fantasy or revelation can be postulated but not directly viewed, and states of the world can only be known through our mental representations of them, through our testimonials and drawings and photographs and meter readings, etc. To her credit, Ms. Zaleski's detailed investigation of earnest testimonials about the afterlife leads us to the recognition that we too can encounter reality only as a mental or symbolic object, and that there is a philosophical problem here, and it is a difficult one. What right do any of us have to believe in the realism of our representations of reality?

"Otherworld Journeys" is a postmodern treatment of that problem, arguing for the sacramental value of imagination and a positive role for revelation and the spirit in the interpretation of the objective world. In the classic modern view of things, dating officially from the 17th-century philosopher Descartes, imagination stands in contrast to perception and reason, and it is bad to confuse or conflate them. In the current post-modern view, perception is a form of imagination and

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imagination is a form of perception. Through a dialectical process of imaginative perception and perceptive imagination we construct a (rational?) conception of a reality that can only be known through the terms of our symbolic representation of it.

AS Ms. Zaleski might put it, our symbols must (and ought to?) participate in, and be part of, the reality they represent. That line of reasoning leads her to an attempted vindication of visionary representations. Visionary images (for example, the soul described as "a luminous sphere whose gaze extends to all directions") are justified, not on the grounds that they correspond to something independent of themselves, but rather on the grounds of their power, as imaginative creations, to evoke a sense of transcendent reality. It seems to be a revealed truth for postmodernists that a concrete imagination making use of visual symbols infused with esthetic, moral and emotional value is not Descartes's feared demon-deceiver of those who seek the truth. God forbid they are wrong.

"Otherworld Journeys" is not a philosophical text, though it is organized as a selective historical review and analysis of the meaning of lore about soulful journeys to transcendent realities and stories about the return from death. The historical materials extend from the Assyrian epic of Gilgamesh through the dialogues of Gregory the Great and the visions of St. Paul to the near-death testimony of people who have had the experience of feeling that they were outside their body and had survived its death. These are made much of in such contemporary works as Raymond Moody's "Life After Life," George Ritchie's "Return From Tomorrow" and Michael Sabom's "Recollections of Death: A Medical Investigation."

The book also reviews the contemporary "scientific" debate between advocates of the afterlife and their intellectual gadflies, the skeptics. It is not a new debate. Indeed, for those in search of eternity it is comforting to learn that in the 13th century, Peter of Cornwall composed a book on the veracity of visions of the afterlife, which he wrote for those who "believe that there is no God" and who believe that "the world is ruled by chance" and "who only believe what they see." Then and now both camps seem to think that, in principle, the controversy can be settled empirically by gathering or inspecting ever more carefully the mental objects in question (near-death stories) and the conditions surrounding their production. That is their timeless view of the way science is sup-

posed to settle things.

Ms. Zaleski evaluates the claims of the advocates, who point to the common themes in near-death testimony, to the absence of conventional religious imagery, to eyewitness accounts by atheists and to other "hard" evidence, no less remarkable than a photograph of a leprechaun. She evaluates the counterclaims of the skeptics, who argue that it's all a fantasy associated with fear of death, or if not that, then it's a hallucination associated with toxic psychosis, or if not that, then it's an artifact of the interview technique, etc. She concludes that if "scientific" evidence is all we are going to have to go on, then the debate must end in a draw.

Ms. Zaleski hopes for more, and here this fine book, near its end, falters in the mist. She wants to argue that otherworld testimony is "above all" a dramatic or narrative form making powerful, evocative use of personification and visual symbolism. Yet she does not want to reduce it to a mere literary motif expressing metaphorically a psychological or moral need.

SHE wants to argue that the otherworld is "the inner world projected on the stage of the imagined cosmos" and that imaginative projections can be neither verified nor debunked because the realities they formulate are beyond proof in terms of observations or logic. Yet she also wants to grant otherworld travelers the right to reverent belief in their experiences, as well as the right to be bound through their visions to a realm of reality. By the end of "Otherworld Journeys," imaginative projections, such as visions of the afterlife, have been turned into postmodern revelations; and according to Ms. Zaleski, revelations are binding only if they bind and their truths are true only for those who are prepared to make them their own.

Ernest Gellner, an anthropologist and modernist, once described that type of conclusion as "the soft porn of irrationalism." Postmodernists view it as a form of illumination and deliverance, a welcome freeing of a reality-seeking spirit from the fate of grasping for a reality that is always just out of reach.

We are left at the end of this otherworld journey in a proper place, alone on a path without a convincing conclusion, still wondering. Is there escape from that fate? Did previous travelers stay in the netherworld long enough to vouch for quietude and certitude at the end of the road? Is there no celestial doubt or debate? When it comes to the authority of visions, a hasty glimpse of heaven may be no more reassuring than blind faith. □