

Eben Alexander

Eben Alexander is an American neurosurgeon and brain researcher who underwent a near-death experience in 2008 during a coma caused by bacterial meningitis. In 2012 he published a bestselling autobiographical book about his experience, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey Into the Afterlife*. He has subsequently written two follow-up books and gives lectures and workshops.

Background

Eben Alexander was born in 1953 and raised in North Carolina, USA.^[1] As a child he had dreams of flying, and as an adult he replicated this joyful sensation by skydiving; on one occasion he avoided a fatal accident by split-second thinking, a memory which would later resonate with his [near-death experience](#) (NDE).

Alexander earned his medical doctorate in 1980, specializing in neuroendocrinology. He completed a fellowship in cerebrovascular neurosurgery in Britain, then worked for fifteen years as an associate professor of surgery at Harvard Medical School, specializing in neurosurgery. He contributed to the improvement of neurosurgical techniques, authoring or co-authoring some 150 academic papers and book chapters, and presenting at more than two hundred medical conferences.

Alexander was made aware at an early age that he had been adopted as a baby. He was rebuffed when he first attempted to contact his biological parents, which precipitated a career-threatening depression that lasted for some seven years. Eventually he was able to forge relationships with his birth family.

Illness

On 10 November 2008, aged 54, Alexander was struck by *E coli* meningitis, which put him in a coma for seven days. For this period the entire neocortex of his brain, which rules higher functions such as language and logic, was apparently non-functional. His chances of survival were estimated at only ten per cent. The exact medical cause was never determined. Attending doctors first thought it might be a strain of *E coli* that carried the threat of wide contagion, but testing showed it was not: his case was apparently without precedent. Intravenous antibiotics brought no improvement. Recovery from bacterial meningitis was unknown for anyone who'd been comatose for more than a few days. It was anticipated that if Alexander survived, he would suffer chronic speech problems and would require nursing care for the rest of his life.

On the seventh day the doctors discussed with Alexander's family the possibility of terminating antibiotics and letting nature take its course. But then his ten-year-old son Bond ran into the room and begged him to return to life. To everyone's astonishment, Alexander opened his eyes, began thrashing and, when his breathing-tube was removed, said 'Thank you', and 'All is well'.

Recovery to normal consciousness took several days. Alexander was plagued with past memories, daydreams of skydiving, and paranoid fantasies – all signs of 'ICU psychosis', a condition common in patients whose brains have been inactive for an extended period. It was two months before his full neurosurgical knowledge returned to him. Ultimately he recovered fully.

Near-Death Experience

At the beginning of his experience, Alexander says he found himself in a tangible darkness hearing a

pounding rhythm, but appearing to have lost his body, memory, identity, and sense of time and language. His consciousness was clear but limited; he did not feel human or even animal, just a point of awareness. Feeling increasingly trapped, he began noticing grotesque faces, strange chants and a visceral smell. He later referred to this state as 'Earthworm's-Eye View'.

After an indeterminate period, he observed an object that turned slowly, radiating filaments of white-gold light, and accompanied by indescribably beautiful music – the 'Spinning Melody' as he later named it. He realized he was looking through the light, then began to soar upwards, seeing lush green earth-like countryside, streams, waterfalls, and joyful people – a place he named the 'Gateway'. As he flew, he saw a beautiful girl with him, riding on a delicate surface that was covered with intricate patterns and indescribable colours, like the wing of a butterfly. Millions of butterflies flew all around. The Girl on the Butterfly Wing, as he later named her, gave him a message: 'You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever. You have nothing to fear. There is nothing you can do wrong'.^[2]

He continued to a skyscape of pink-white fluffy clouds, and far above them saw flocks of transparent shimmering orbs flying, which he realized were advanced beings. Sight and hearing were not separate here; he felt he could not sense anything here without becoming part of it. Each time he thought of a question, the answer 'came instantly in an explosion of light, color, love, and beauty'.^[3] He came to an infinite void, dark and yet full of light, which he named the 'Core'. Here he was given information that, he writes, will take him the rest of his life to unpack: that there is not one universe but many, with many forms of life; that love lies at the centre of all of them; and that although evil exists – including on Earth, because there is free will – it is relatively rare.

During the experience, he travelled back and forth from the Earthworm's-Eye View to the Spinning Melody to the Gateway and then the Core many times, learning that motion would follow from his intention. Then one time found he was unable to re-enter the Gateway region, and this filled him with a sadness unlike any he'd ever known.

As he moved down through great walls of clouds he heard countless beings praying for him, helping him keep his spirits up. Heaven, he was promised, would always be with him. He began to see faces, and knew they were people important to him on Earth, though he could not identify them yet. The feeling of freedom was replaced by one of obligation, and the hyper-reality of the experience diminished. 'My mind – my real self – was squeezing its way back into the all too tight and limiting suit of physical existence, with its spatiotemporal bounds, its linear thought, and its limitation to verbal communication', he writes.^[4]

Analysing the experience, Alexander notes that it differed from the typical NDE in that he lost all sense of his incarnate identity, and therefore underwent no life review. He saw this forgetting as an advantage because it allowed him to travel deeper into the higher worlds. 'Our truest, deepest self is completely free. It is not crippled or compromised by past actions or concerned with identity or status', he writes.^[5]

He describes thinking outside the brain as 'a world of instantaneous connections that make ordinary thinking (aspects limited by the physical brain and the speed of light) seem like some hopelessly sleepy and plodding event'.^[6] In retrospect he credited a momentary flash of this ability for saving his life while skydiving as a young man.

He further writes:

Even though I'd forgotten my life down here, I had remembered who I really and truly was out there. I was a citizen of a universe staggering in its vastness and complexity, and ruled entirely by love ... Ultimately, none of us are orphans. We are all in the position I was, in that we have other family: beings who are watching and looking out for us – beings we have momentarily

forgotten, but who, if we open ourselves to their presence, are waiting to help us navigate our time here on earth ... Each and every one of us is deeply known and cared for by a Creator who cherishes us beyond any ability we have to comprehend.^[7]

Alexander felt the entire experience to be real, even hyper-real. 'I had been alive, and aware, truly aware, in a universe characterized above all by love, consciousness, and reality', he writes. 'I knew it so completely that I ached. What I'd experienced was more real than the house I sat in, more real than the logs burning in the fireplace'.^[8]

Aftermath

Alexander was ecstatic that he now knew 'who I really was and what kind of a world we inhabit'. Eager to describe the experience to whoever would listen, he found it dismissed by other doctors – just as, he ironically notes, he himself had failed earlier to understand similar accounts given to him by his own patients. At the urging of his adult son he wrote a comprehensive account before reading anything on NDEs, then read widely, being struck by the commonalities between his experience and those described in the research literature.

He also reviewed his own medical records, which he interpreted to indicate his neocortex had been inactive for seven days. This eliminated many normal explanations commonly posited for NDEs, he realized, such as distorted memory recall, REM intrusion or drug-induced hallucinations, as all these require neocortical function. He writes: 'Everything – the uncanny clarity of my vision, the clearness of my thoughts as pure conceptual flow – suggested higher, not lower, brain functioning. But my higher brain had not been around to do that work'.^[9]

Alexander came to feel that he had an obligation, as a scientist and a healer, to share his experience. However, he was troubled that, unlike other NDE experiencers, he had not encountered deceased relatives; he particularly wished that his father, who had died about four months earlier, might have been present to reassure him of his worthiness. That left a seed of doubt in his mind of the validity of his experience.

Then he received a photograph of a biological sister Betsy, who had died before he first reconnected with his biological family, and recognized her as the Girl on the Butterfly Wing. This unified in his mind his two worlds, that of doctor, father and husband, and the magnificent world of his experience, overcoming the sense of conflict. 'My NDE had healed my fragmented soul', he writes. 'It had let me know that I had always been loved, and it also showed me that absolutely everyone else in the universe is loved, too'.^[10]

Books

Eben Alexander has written two further full-length works. *The Map of Heaven: How Science, Religion, and Ordinary People Are Proving the Afterlife*,^[11] which also reached the *New York Times* bestseller list, gathers accounts from other NDE experiencers, ancient writers and modern scientists to reveal the commonalities that suggest the reality of consciousness beyond the brain, life beyond death and 'Heaven'. *Living in a Mindful Universe* ^[12] is an instructional book on the nature of consciousness, giving meditation and mindfulness techniques to help access the quality of knowing that Alexander experienced.

Criticisms

Neuroscientist and writer Sam Harris, responding to a *Newsweek* article about Alexander's experience, argued that Alexander provided no genuine evidence that parts of his brain were 'shut

down' or 'inactive' during the illness itself or the experience, and objected that 'Alexander makes no reference to functional data that might have been acquired by fMRI, PET, or EEG ... only this sort of evidence could support his case'.^[13] He notes similarities between Alexander's experience and those of individuals under the influence of N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT), implying that the experience was an artefact of brain chemistry.

In an audio interview, Alexander criticized Harris for basing his comments on a cursory media article instead of reading the book, and gave details of the illness which he insisted precluded any kind of consciousness. He stated:

Going from symptom onset to coma within three hours is a very dire prognostic sign, conferring 90% mortality at the very beginning, which only worsened over the week. Anyone who simply concludes that "since I did so well I could not have been that sick" is begging the question, and knows nothing whatsoever about severe bacterial meningitis. I invite the skeptical doctors to show me a case remotely similar to mine. My physicians, and their consultants at UVA, Bowman Gray-Wake Forest, Duke, Harvard, Stanford and beyond were astonished that I recovered.^[14]

An article in *Esquire* by Luke Dittrich^[15] implied that Alexander made up his account. Dittrich stated that Alexander's career was in jeopardy due to multiple malpractice suits and firings, and that in two malpractice cases he had altered medical records to match his version of events: the suggestion was that Alexander fabricated the experience so as to invent a new career. Dittrich quotes an attending doctor as saying Alexander had been conscious and delirious rather than comatose throughout his illness, and further claims the Dalai Lama implied that Alexander could have been lying.

NDE researcher Robert Mays responded to Dittrich on the website of the International Association for Near Death Studies (IANDS).^[16] He points out that, according to Alexander's account, Alexander did not alter medical records except to make corrections; following the lawsuit in question he was examined by four medical boards and allowed to continue in practice. Regarding Dittrich's claims about statements by an attending doctor, according to Mays the doctor complained Dittrich had asked her leading questions, misquoted her and quoted her out of context. Mays also notes that the video of a meeting between Alexander and the Dalai Lama does not support Dittrich's claims regarding the latter's views.^[17]

KM Wehrstein

Literature

Alexander, E. (2012). *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey Into the Afterlife*. New York: Simon & Shuster.

Alexander, E., with Tompkins, P. (2014). *The Map of Heaven: How Science, Religion, and Ordinary People Are Proving the Afterlife*. New York: Simon & Shuster.

Alexander, E., with Newell, K. (2017). *Living in a Mindful Universe: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Heart of Consciousness*. New York: Rodale Books.

Dalai Lama (10 May 2013). [Life and after life](#). [YouTube livestream recording.]

Dittrich, L (2013). [The prophet](#). *Esquire*, 12 October.

Harris, S. (12 October 2012). [This must be heaven](#). [Web page.]

Mays, R. (2 December 2016). [Esquire article on Eben Alexander distorts the facts](#). [Web page, last updated 12 August 2020.]

Tsakiris, A. (16 October 2012). [Sam Harris and Steve Novella offer half-witted attack of Eben Alexander's near-death experience](#). [Web page.]

--

References

Footnotes

- 1.^ Alexander (2012). All information in this article is drawn from this source unless otherwise noted.
- 2.^ Alexander (2012), 40.
- 3.^ Alexander (2012), 46.
- 4.^ Alexander (2012), 117.
- 5.^ Alexander (2012), 84.
- 6.^ Alexander (2012), 84.
- 7.^ Alexander (2012), 95-6.
- 8.^ Alexander (2012), 130.
- 9.^ Alexander (2012), 143. For more detail on neuroscientific hypotheses for his experience, see Appendix B, 172.
- 10.^ Alexander (2012), 170.
- 11.^ Alexander with Tompkins (2014).
- 12.^ Alexander with Newell (2017).
- 13.^ Harris (2012).
- 14.^ Tsakiris (2012).
- 15.^ Dittrich (2013).
- 16.^ Mays (2016).
- 17.^ Dalai Lama (2013); see from 46:54. The Dalai Lama appears to say 'In this particular case, no reason to tell lie'.