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Book Catalog An excerpt from To Touch the Light:

Introduction

Like many Americans, I have always wondered about--and been a little frightened by-- the concept of death. It is the great unknown, and the unknown is always-frightening. To answer our questions about it, we have looked to religion, and sometimes to science, but the answers found there have always been less than satisfactory.

Death is a part of life. Family, friends, lovers ... everyone grows older and all eventually die. It is hard to watch the terminally ill waste away and then slip away. But we don't talk about it because it is something that we can always discuss tomorrow or the next day or next week. After all, we have forever.

And that might be the key. Maybe we do have forever. Edgar Cayce, among others, tells us that we are all born again and again, as we strive to obtain a state of perfection. Death is merely a transition from one state of existence into another--not unlike birth, which moves us from a world of all warmth and darkness into one that is harsh, bright, and often cold.

Death is not a topic that I would have chosen for myself, and I came into it without the bias that infects many other projects. This was a search for me, as well as an assignment to investigate the near-death phenomenon.

Of course, I had heard the term and knew that there were those who claimed to have seen the other side, meaning they believed they had died and left this world. I didn't know that, according to a recent (1992) Gallup Poll, eight million people claimed to have had a near- death experience (NDE). I didn't know that people from other cultures and other countries reported much the same thing when they talked about it at all. And, I didn't realize that there was scientific as well as religious debate over the validity of near-death. Nor did I realize that there was a scientific as well as a Christian bias against acceptance of the NDE.

Studying the phenomenon of the near-death experience provides some insight into what is being reported, but it doesn't actually define the event. The discussion with one man, however does. He had been traveling with a companion when they were caught in a storm of ice and snow. The driver lost control of the car and it slammed into a tree, knocking the driver unconscious but apparently killing the passenger.

For thirty minutes, according to the passenger, he was dead, floating, talking with an uncle who had died years before. Then, with no transition, he was back in the car and fully aware of the danger of his surroundings. He knew that he had to get out of the car and find help. Though gravely injured, he crawled to a house for assistance. There was no doubt in his mind that he had died. He was in the process of transcending this life into the next. For some reason it wasn't time for him to go and he was returned, instantly, to life.

That is his belief, There is no evidence to corroborate it, except for the emergency crew who were surprised that he had lived, given the extent of his injuries, and the facts surrounding the automobile accident.

There are a few examples of those who have died and not returned. Some cases can provide us with insight. My

grandmother had been in a coma for a period before she died on a Saturday evening. Before she died, she seemed to be semiconscious and she seemed to see something above her that she wanted to reach. She lifted her arms as if about to embrace someone or something. The impression was that she was staring upward, and trying desperately to reach what she saw above her.

I do not know what she saw because she died right after that moments after that. Because of her illness, no heroic effort was made to resuscitate her. That was the right decision to have made at that time given those circumstances.

But her actions give us all something to think about. Did she "see the light" and was she trying to pull herself into the tunnel? Or were these actions just the normal muscle spasms recorded as the electrical activity ceases in the brain? Science might have one answer . . . I have another.

Science, in fact, has done little about near-death until recently. Doctors, psychologists, therapists, and others either ignored the tales or believed them to be nothing more than hallucinations. It was Dr. Raymond Moody who began the interest in near-death and who began the investigations into the circumstances around it. Moody, author of *Life After Life*, was not the first to record near-death experiences. Pope Gregory the Great included tales of near-death in his *Dialogues*. Though most of the stories in that book seemed to be "morality tales," a number of them included elements of the near-death experience.

The idea, however, that some essential part of the individual survives death is as old as recorded thought. Each culture, each civilization had stories and myths about the "other side" of life. Ancient Egyptians prepared for the journey with gold and food and proper ceremony. Other civilizations believed that the journey was not a one-way trip, but that the soul could be reborn several times . . . in some cases as a lower form of animal but in most as a human, to live another full life.

There is talk that all reference to reincarnation, the idea of the rebirth of the soul, has been edited out of the Bible. Rumors persist that these records are stored in the Vatican, but that Christian teachings require that reincarnation be hidden. Yet, throughout the world; the majority of the people, and the majority of religions, acknowledge reincarnation.

Many Americans now accept reincarnation as true. There are those who engage in "past life" regressions, assisting others in exploring their former lives. Some of them use the techniques to alleviate pain and problems in this life by finding root causes in past lives.

These people are not pushing reincarnation as a religion, but as a fact of life. And there is a body of evidence, much of it anecdotal, that suggests that reincarnation isn't a belief of the unschooled, the ignorant, or the primitive, but something with a foundation in fact. There are stories of reincarnation that have been investigated and corroborated. And, there appears to have been an attempt, both by orthodox religion and the journalistic community to squash the idea without proper investigation.

Many of those reporting past lives claim to have experienced a variety of them. And, contrary to the conventional wisdom, very few suggest they were kings or queens or famous people in a past life. Most report an average life, sometimes rich in detail of how people lived in the past. Many of them had poor, horrible experiences in those past lives.

In fact, if there is a way to learn what happens after death--as opposed to the glimpse that the near-death experiences provide--those who say they have lived before can provide it. They often talk about their death experiences in former lives.

The idea, then, that some part of the individual survives death, is neither new, nor limited, There is a body of evidence to suggest that it happens, and while the hard proof that science demands might not always exist, there is enough evidence to cause questions to be asked. And, there are those who know, because of their personal experiences that such things do happen. They have seen it for themselves, and once a person has had such an experience, no arguments made by others will dissuade them from that belief.

This book is an attempt to put some of these beliefs into perspective. Those who study near-death and reincarnation

provide their thoughts. But more importantly, those who have experienced near-death and reincarnation share their insights. Some of the testimony has to be taken on faith . . . but some of it can be corroborated.

There is one important point that must be remembered when reading this work. I have reported, as accurately as I can, the stories related to me. I have not attempted to verify them by checking with relatives, friends, and doctors. In some cases, because of the way things worked, I had the opportunity to learn that those reporting near death had mentioned it many times to others. I have had the opportunity to obtain corroboration, but I did not do so, believing that my task here was to report but not to investigate. All I can do is present the stories as accurately as I possibly can.

The people are real, telling me what they believe to be the truth as they witnessed it. There might be a valid scientific explanation for what they say. Maybe it is, as some have suggested, a function of lack of oxygen to the brain and the subsequent shut-down of various bodily functions in an attempt to save the brain. Maybe it is all a hallucination based on overload to the brain during times of stress, or in this case, as the witness dies . . . or believes that he or she is about to die.

Or maybe it is something else, just as those who have had the experience suggested. Maybe, as they say, they have glimpsed the other side.
