

In Memoriam: Peter Fenwick (1935 –2024)¹

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Peter Fenwick, who died at the age of 89 was a neuroscientist and leading authority on the phenomenon of near-death experiences (NDEs). He was most closely connected with the Scientific and Medical Network (SMN), and it was my privilege to succeed him as SMN President. However, he also made important contributions to psychical research, regarding psi as a link between science and spirituality. Many parapsychologists prefer to focus on experimental work and eschew any reference to mystical or transpersonal experience. However, there has been a shift of emphasis in recent years with a greater attention on topics like transpersonal psychology. A final theory of mind must surely accommodate its normal, paranormal, and transpersonal aspects and it is impossible to draw a sharp distinction between psychic and spiritual experience.

Peter was born and grew up in Kenya, where his father was a coffee farmer and his mother a surgeon – indeed the first woman to be admitted to the Australian College of Surgeons. She inspired Peter's ambition to go into medicine. At prep school in Kenya, he would always take on the role of doctor if somebody was hurt, doing the

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triage and then sending them to see the matron. He moved to UK and studied Natural Sciences at Trinity College, Cambridge. The Master of Trinity at the time was, appropriately, the Nobel Laureate neurophysiologist Lord Adrian, and one of his tutors was the Nobel Laureate physiologist Sir Andrew Huxley.

His initial ambition was to become a brain surgeon but he changed his mind after observing an operation during medical training and decided to become a neuropsychiatrist so that he could talk to people and “not have them unconscious while I looked into that deep, dark hole.” (Brown, 2024). He became consultant neuropsychiatrist at the Maudsley, with a particular interest in the study of epilepsy, and was in charge of the Neuropsychiatric and Epilepsy Unit until his retirement in 1997. He was also co-Director of the Department of Neurophysiology at Broadmoor Hospital. From 2000 to 2009 he spent several months a year working at the RIKEN Neuroscience Institute in Japan, using magnetic field tomography to probe various psychological paradigms.

Peter had a long-standing interest in the problem of consciousness and published many papers on altered states. He also conducted some of the first studies of the effect of meditation on brain activity. One of his participants was George Harrison, who had begun meditating after meeting Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and volunteered to have his brain waves analyzed. Peter noted wryly that his EEG record could have acted as his pension fund if he had kept it but it vanished, someone else having recognized the value of 50 meters of a Beatles’ brain-wave!

His interest in NDEs was prompted by Raymond Moody’s best-selling *Life after Life* in 1975. When he first read it, he dismissed it as “psychobabble” but a year later one of his patients vividly described having had such an experience and Peter changed his mind. He realized that this is a phenomenon for which science cannot provide a rational explanation. Thereafter the study of NDEs – and other studies of the dying process – would become an important part of his life’s work.

He interviewed carers, medical staff, and chaplains and was the first scientist in the UK to broadcast on the subject. Then in 1987 he presented the TV program *Glimpses of Death*, which raised public awareness of the topic. He received over 2000 letters from the general public after it, which led to his comprehensive study of the characteristics of the experience. In 1985, with Margot Grey and David Lorimer, he founded and became President of The International Association for Near-Death Studies UK.

In 1995 he and his wife Elizabeth, a writer on health matters, coauthored *The Truth in the Light*, a book that gave personal accounts of NDEs reported to him by over 300 members of the public. In 2000, he began research in hospices and nursing homes in

the UK and Holland, examining the experiences reported by the dying and their carers around the time of death. He also stressed the importance of spiritual support in palliative care. He studied the phenomenon of bi-location, where patients report looking down on their prone bodies on the operating table. He placed cards with writing and pictures on the ceiling of the operating theatres in the hope they could be seen by patients leaving their bodies, although the results were inconclusive. In 2008, he and his wife Elizabeth published a second book, *The Art of Dying*, examining end-of-life experiences and the connections between the dying and their relatives at the time of death. In 2019, an account of his life-long exploration of consciousness was provided in his autobiography *Shining Light on Transcendence: The Unconventional Journey of a Neuroscientist*.

His contention that NDEs provide evidence that consciousness can survive bodily death was criticized by some scientists, who argued that the phenomena resulted from the dying brain being starved of oxygen (anoxia). Peter dismissed this argument because trainee pilots in flight simulators were routinely subjected to loss of oxygen but never had NDEs. Anoxia leads to confusion and disorientation rather than the clarity which characterizes an NDE. This is most striking in the cases of people who experience a panoramic life review, where their life is played back, sometimes in its entirety, affording a view not only of their own thoughts and actions, but a realization of how those thoughts and actions affected others. He was particularly interested in the Buddhist teachings on death and dying. In many cases, NDE experiences resemble those recorded in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which dates from the eighth century and was read to a dying person to guide them through the post-mortem experience.

Although I have stressed his interests in NDEs, this was part of his broader fascination in the question of whether consciousness is just brain activity – in which case when the brain dies, consciousness dies with it – or whether the brain acts as a filter to produce our conscious experience of the world, as argued by William James over a hundred years ago but still regarded as heretical today.

He was also interested in the link between consciousness and spirituality – his understanding being influenced by his personal meditation practice – and through his writings and lectures, became a pioneer in promoting this link as a legitimate area of scientific inquiry. He argued that the structure of the world just does not fit into a reductionist framework in which there is nothing beyond the brain. He also played a crucial role in bringing the spiritual dimension into psychiatry. His infectious enthusiasm, and his status as a scientist, was invaluable in helping establish the Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group of the Royal Group of Psychiatrists, now having a membership of more than five thousand, around one in four UK psychiatrists.

The sadness and sense of loss at Peter's passing is balanced by the knowledge that he himself was looking forward to his "promotion" and had no doubt that life does not end with the death of the body. "There is no death, I know that now," he told the *Telegraph* in an interview. "There is death of the body, but there is no death of the individual person. I don't fear it all. I'm looking forward to it" (Brown, 2024).

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