

Knocking on death's door



By Marjie Lundstrom

On Aug. 31, rescuers grabbed Dan Daum's hair and pulled him from the chilly waters of Pawnee Lake near Lincoln.

The 27-year-old Omahan had tumbled into the lake while retrieving an oar. His 14-year-old boating companion screamed for help as Daum disappeared under water for about two minutes.

Daum had no pulse as his rescuers took him to shore. During those two minutes, Daum says today, he experienced a bizarre sequence of events. Discussing it a week later, he described what it was like to die.

Daum's experience—a return from the dead to some, an illusion to others—poses intriguing questions, especially since it follows an almost classic pattern of seeming life-after-death experiences.

What happened to Daum has happened to many others—in eerie exactness of detail. His account is strikingly similar to many cases reported to researchers.

The ramifications of the experiences are of the deepest variety: Does the soul survive? Is there life after death?

Psychiatrists, clergymen and those who have "returned" disagree.

Real experiences

Whatever the interpretation, Daum and other Nebraskans interviewed related experiences that were real to them. All were certain the events had taken place.

And, in some way, each case was like one or more of the others.

'Everything turned black. Then it was just like everything speeded up simultaneously. . . My body was like clouds.'

Daum's experience was one he said was difficult to express.

Slumped in a cushioned chair, he toyed with his wispy brown hair and smoothed his mustache. Posters and wall hangings ornamented the dimly lit room in the apartment house he helps manage. His fingers trembled as he recalled the experience:

"Everything turned black. Then it was just like everything speeded up simultaneously. It was like I was a glider or a helicopter—just sort of floating. My body was like clouds.

"I could see what was happening below. Everything. When I looked at myself lying in the boat, I thought, 'You dumb jackass, get up and move. Do something. Fight, don't give up.'

"I tried to communicate with the others. I yelled at them. It didn't do any good. I tried to reach for anything, but there wasn't anything there. I just couldn't reach far enough. In a way, I was right in front of them. And yet I was a million miles away."

Being of light

After watching his own rescue, Daum says he was met by a presence—a being of light.

"Somebody was there, but there was no form," he said. "It was a very beautiful light—very brilliant, but soft. It was a color you wouldn't mind looking at. I remember how gentle the light was.

"If there isn't a God, then what the hell was that?" The being of light spoke to him, he said, and showed him a picture review of his life. Daum said the review reminded him of the flickering frames of an old movie.

"I felt like I opened a door to my whole past and walked right back into it," he said. "It (being of light) pointed out the mistakes I made and what I could have done to avoid them. It was a very content voice, yet it was a learning, teaching type voice.

"It was like your father and mother comforting you when you've been through something that's really hurt you. They're gentle, but they're very strong and try to give you advice . . ."

This story was written as an assignment in the Depth Reporting class at the UNL School of Journalism. The author is a senior from Wayne. She has been a reporter for the Daily Nebraskan for nearly a year.

Daum says he also encountered his mother and father, both of whom had died violently. Both looked much like they had in life, he said.

'Whole face shone'

"My dad looked happy," he said. "He looked so happy it was unbelievable. His whole face shone."

Daum said although he found the encounters comforting and the floating sensation pleasant, he wanted to come back into his body and live.

"I was confused and scared of dying, and I was too damn stubborn to give up that easily," he said.

The being of light allowed him to return, he said.

"I asked him why he was letting me go back . . . and he told me that because I love life the way I do, he didn't see any point in my giving it up. He told me that if I wanted another chance, I'd have to make it worthwhile to myself."

The return was slow. Daum said he regained consciousness in the ambulance.

After being treated and released at Lincoln General Hospital, Daum returned to Omaha to pick up his life again. But the memory remains vivid and its effect profound.

'Everything different'

"After I came back here, everything was so different," he said. "Everything has a lot of beauty. The experience has made me want to live 10 times more. People have noticed a gentleness and contentment in my voice."

Daum says now he is less afraid of death. "It happens to us all, even to trees," he said. "It's a cycle that goes on, and if it doesn't—life wouldn't be life. Death isn't beautiful, but in a way it is. In death, there is beauty."

Daum's experience fits that of other Nebraskans. The account most similar to his was that of 65-year-old Frances O'Brien of rural Denton. A strong, vivacious woman, Mrs. O'Brien has operated a farm southwest of Lincoln since her husband's death in 1968.

"I'm a fighter," she says, smiling. Shoulder length silver-gray hair frames her angular face, which still boasts strong, high cheekbones and flashing eyes.

Mrs. O'Brien suffers from a rare and what she described as an incurable disease of the central nervous system, systemic lupus erythematosus.

Heart stopped

In 1973, she underwent surgery at Methodist Hospital in Rochester, Minn. During the operation, she said, her heart and breathing stopped.

Then Mrs. O'Brien had an experience she says she knows was no dream.

"I don't know how I even got there, but I was above the bed and I saw them working so frantically to revive me," she said. "I heard them talking. I could see and hear and think because someone mentioned autopsy and I realized they were talking about me."

Mrs. O'Brien said the sensation was like being on an air mattress on water on a slightly windy day.

"The transition was so easy," she said. "You don't hurt anymore. If that's dying, then no one need fear.

"I didn't seem to need a body. It's a funny thing. I didn't even seem like a wisp of smoke. I was just there. I didn't have any thought of where I was going. I was completely free—free like thought. There weren't any dimensions. I could go where I wanted."

'Competitive spirit'

Mrs. O'Brien said she thinks the mention of autopsy triggered her "competitive spirit" and helped her return to her body.

"I was just stubborn enough I was going to do it," she said. "Knowing myself, I'll accept a challenge. If somebody tells me I can't, then I must show them I can."

Like Daum, Mrs. O'Brien's feelings about death have changed because of her experience.

"I'm not afraid to die," she said. "I know definitely that you live on after you're supposed to be dead, and you can take your intellect with you."

Mrs. O'Brien's confidence that her experience confirms life after death is not shared by two chaplains interviewed.

The Rev. Aldine E. Anderson, director of chaplaincy Hospital in Lincoln, said he does not deny that such experiences exist, but said he does not think they have anything to do with life after death.

Vivid dreams

Paolini said he believes the experiences are vivid dreams, induced perhaps by the stress of illness or by medication and drugs. Case similarities reflect similarities in people, he said.

The rev. Aldine E. Anderson, director of chaplaincy services at Omaha's Immanuel Medical Center, agreed that similar accounts could be explained.

"There is a kind of universal attitude toward death," he said. "When you ask people about death, you are going to get common kinds of answers because there is a common way of looking at it."

Both agreed that so-called life-after-death experiences do not support their religious beliefs.

The Bible does not teach immortality of the soul Paolini said, but rather resurrection of the dead. Immortality of the soul is a Greek idea, he said.

"The Bible says to me that we die perfectly dead—then we are resurrected," Paolini said. "There is a gap between dying and re-establishment of resurrection, not a continuous living of soul from life into death."

He described as fads such studies as Dr. Raymond A. Moody's best-selling book *Life After Life*.

Bandwagon effect

"People make a lot of money writing books and making speeches and everybody jumps on the bandwagon," he said. "They say what people want to hear."

Researchers who stress the beauty of death are "charlatans," he said, because "anyone with compassion does not think death is a beautiful field."

Paolini added that not all near-death "dreams" are beautiful and pleasant.

"I've seen people who have had really bad trips," he said.

'I heard them talking. I could see and hear and think because someone mentioned autopsy and I realized they were talking about me.'

Only one of the Nebraskans interviewed described the experience as unpleasant. A 24-year-old Lincoln high school teacher, who did not want to be identified, said his experience was "terribly frightening."

In September 1975, he underwent exploratory surgery. His gall bladder was removed. Hours later, he suffered massive internal hemorrhaging.

While hospital staff whisked him back to the operating table, his heart stopped.

During the next four minutes, he experienced something he said he wouldn't want to go through again.

"It wasn't a feeling of peacefulness," he said. "There wasn't any pain, but there wasn't any euphoria. It was a feeling of saying, 'My God, look what almost happened!'"

Flashback of summer

Like Daum, this man was detached from his body and watched a review of his life. However, his flashback encompassed only memories of his past summer.

"It was a very rapid slide show of key things—not many bad things, mostly good things," he said. "It was like a moving picture, but I knew each thing was distinct."

Continued on p.8