

The Physician Who Watched Himself Die

Copyright 2007 Michael E. Tymn

In his 1903 book, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (published two years after his 1901 death), Frederic W. H. Myers, the pioneering psychical researcher, set forth a story about what is now known as a near-death experience, which took place in 1889. It was told to him by Dr. A. S. Wiltse, a physician of Skiddy, Kansas, known to both Myers and fellow researcher, Dr. Richard Hodgson, as a “careful and conscientious witness.”

Wiltse was suffering from typhoid fever. “I passed about four hours in all without pulse or perceptible heartbeat, as I am informed by Dr. S. H. Raynes, who was the only physician present,” Wiltse related in a letter to Myers. “During a portion of this time several of the bystanders thought I was dead, and such a report being carried outside, the village church bell was tolled. Dr. Raynes informs me, however, that by bringing his eyes close to my face, he could perceive an occasional short gasp, so very light as to be barely perceptible, and that he was upon the point, several times of saying, ‘He is dead,’ when a gasp would occur in time to check him.”

Raynes pricked Wiltse with a needle at various points on his body but got no response. It was later estimated that while Wiltse was without pulse for about four hours, his state of “apparent death” lasted only about half-an-hour. “I lost, I believe, all power of thought or knowledge of existence in absolute unconsciousness,” Wiltse continued the story. “I came again into a state of conscious existence and discovered that I was still in the body, but the body and I had no longer any interest in common. I looked in astonishment and joy for the first time upon

myself – the me, the real Ego, while the not-me closed it upon all side like a sepulcher of clay.

“With all the interest of a physician, I beheld the wonders of my bodily anatomy, intimately interwoven with which, even tissue for tissue, was I, the living soul of that dead body. I learned that the epidermis was the outside boundary of the ultimate tissues, so to speak, of the soul. I realized my condition and reasoned calmly thus. I have died, as men term death, and yet I am as much a man as ever. I am about to get out of the body. I watched the interesting process of the separation of soul and body. By some power, apparently not my own, the Ego was rocked to and fro, laterally, as a cradle is rocked, by which process its connection with the tissues of the body was broken up. After a little time the lateral motion ceased, and long the soles of the feet beginning at the toes, passing rapidly to the heels, I felt and heard, as it seemed, the snapping of innumerable small cords. When this was accomplished, I began slowly to retreat from the feet, toward the head, as a rubber cord shortens. I remember reaching the hips and saying to myself, ‘Now, there is no life below the hips.’”

Dr. Wiltse could not recall passing through the abdomen or chest, but he recollected that his “whole self” was collected into his head. He appeared to himself something like a jellyfish in color and form and remembered thinking that he would soon be free. As “he” emerged from his head, he saw two women sitting at the head of his physical shell and wondered if there was room for him to stand.

“As I emerged from the head, I floated up and down and laterally like a soap bubble attached to the bowl of a pipe until I at last broke loose from the body and fell lightly to the floor, where I slowly arose and expanded into the full stature of a man. I seemed to be translucent, of a bluish cast and perfectly naked. With a painful sense of embarrassment, I fled toward the partially opened door to escape the eyes of the two ladies whom I was facing, as well as others who I knew were about me, but upon reaching the door I found myself clothed, and satisfied upon that point, I turned and faced the company.”

To Wiltse’s surprise, the arm of one man standing near the door passed through his arm without resistance. The man gave no sign of the contact or of seeing Wiltse as he continued to gaze toward the couch. “I directed my gaze in the direction of his and saw my own dead body.”

Wiltse recalled being surprised at how pale the body looked but congratulated himself on the way he had composed his body, his hands clasped at his chest. He saw the two women weeping, but, at the time, did not recognize them as his wife and sister, as he had no conception of individuality. He then attempted to gain the attention of the people gathered in the room, but he was unsuccessful.

“It did not once occur to me to speak, and I concluded the matter by saying to myself; ‘They see only with the eyes of the body. They cannot see spirits. They are watching what they think is I, but they are mistaken. That is not I. This is I and I am as much alive as ever.’”

Since no one was paying any attention to the real “him,” Wiltse wandered outside. “I never saw the street more distinctly than I saw it then,” he continued. “I took note of the redness of the soil and of the washes the rain had made. I took a rather pathetic look about me, like one who is about to leave his home for a long time. Then I discovered that I had become larger than I was in earth life and congratulated myself thereupon. I was somewhat smaller in the body

than I just liked to be, but in the next life, I thought, I am to be as I desired.”

Wiltse marveled at how well he was feeling, when only minutes before he was in extreme distress. He then looked back through the open door, where he could see his body. “I discovered then a small cord, like a spider’s web, running from my shoulders (of the spirit body) back to my body and attaching to it at the base of my neck in front.”

He soon became aware of a “presence,” which he could not see, but which he knew was entering into an overhead cloud form the southern side. “The presence did not seem, to my mind, as a form, because it filled the cloud like some vast intelligence... Then from the right side and from the left of the cloud a tongue of black vapor shot forth and rested lightly upon either side of my head, and as they touched me thoughts not my own entered into my brain. “These, I said, are his thoughts and not mine; they might be in Greek or Hebrew for all power I have over them. But how kindly am I addressed in my mother tongue that so I may understand all his will. Yet, although the language was English, it was so eminently above my power to reproduce that my rendition of it is far short of the original. The following is as near as I can render it:

This is the road to the eternal world. Yonder rocks are the boundary between the two worlds and the two lives. Once you pass them, you can no more return into the body. If your work is complete on earth, you may pass beyond the rocks. If, however, upon consideration you conclude that...it is not done, you can return into the body.

Wiltse approached the rocks. “I was tempted to cross the boundary line. I hesitated and reasoned thus: ‘I have died once and if I go back, soon or late, I must die again. If I stay someone else will do my work, and so the end will be as well and as surely accomplished, and

shall I die again? I will not, but now that I am so near I will cross the line and stay.”

But as he attempted to cross the line, a black cloud appeared in front of him. “I knew that I was to be stopped. I felt the power to move or to think leaving me. My hands fell powerless at my side, my head dropped forward, the cloud touched my face and I knew no more.” In “astonishment and disappointment,” Wiltse then found himself back in his physical body. “What in the world has happened to me? he exclaimed. “Must I die again?”

∞