

Book review by Steven Neubauer

**Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife**

by Eben Alexander, M.D. Copyright 2012.

In this book Eben Alexander III, a practicing neurosurgeon for 25 years and in good health, recounts the story of how he suddenly became ill with severe flu-like symptoms and quickly fell into a coma with what was diagnosed as an extremely rare and severe brain infection, a form of E. coli gram-negative bacterial meningitis. Within days, monitors were recording the activity, or the lack of activity, occurring within what Dr. Alexander described as "my now all-but-destroyed brain."

As his family gathered around in his intensive care hospital room, his doctors determined his higher brain functions had ceased working and began discussing with his wife the possibility of removing the ventilator and allowing him to die naturally. Even if he survived, his wife was informed by the finest specialists, Dr. Alexander's brain had suffered irreparable damage and he would never regain enough function or awareness to even feed himself, much less live any sort of productive or meaningful life.

Then, after seven days in coma, Dr. Alexander suddenly awakened. He began speaking immediately and following weeks of therapy had recovered nearly all of his brain function and memory and, eventually, all of his skills and training as a neurosurgeon. He also experienced a profound near-death-experience (NDE) and retained a vivid memory of an extended tour through heaven, guided by a beautiful angel-like woman who rode on "the wing of a butterfly," and spending a virtual eternity communicating with God before returning to his body and waking up in the hospital.

According to Dr. Alexander, the spiritual realm exists over and above the material universe. In fact, the innumerable material universes are but a minute part of the spirit universe, what Dr. Alexander described as "punctuation marks, the purpose of which is to bring beings into existence and allow them to participate in the glory of God." "The Big Bang that created our universe," wrote Dr. Alexander, "was one of these creative punctuation marks."

Dr. Alexander goes on to explain that the human brain is not the source of human consciousness, rather the brain is really a limiting factor in consciousness, a filter of sorts that was designed to prevent people from attaining knowledge of the spirit universe and keep us focused on the material universe in which we live, until we die and are lifted into the spirit realm, where our true, far less limited true consciousness actually resides.

Following his return to our Earthly realm, Dr. Alexander, formerly a self-described agnostic and skeptic, not only wrote of his heavenly experiences in *Proof of Heaven*, but also travels around the country attempting to convince people that God exists, that God created the material universe and humans for the purpose of creating loving beings who will share in Gods glory, that religions are valid and that prayer works, and that everything that exists is made of love.

Please note that what follows here are entirely my comments, my analysis of the book, and do not reflect any comments or opinions other than my own.

The first thing I noticed, right from page one of the prologue, is that author Eben Alexander sure has a high opinion of himself. No opportunity was missed to inform the reader of his staggering accomplishments, how great his life has been, how wonderful his family is, and how singularly qualified he is to report on the existence of God and heaven.

In the prologue we learned that Dr. Alexander was an accomplished skydiver and that his great reflexes saved him during a jump gone wrong through someone else's incompetence. We also learned of his superb education and his subsequent vast accomplishments as a neurosurgeon and scientist. So qualified to die, go to heaven, and report back to humanity was Dr. Alexander that he referred to his own experiences as "a perfect storm of near-death-experiences." Later in the book Alexander reflects on the extremely unlikely nature of his coma and his recovery and the even more unlikely circumstance of it happening to such a highly qualified brain expert and concluded: "I simply had to take seriously the possibility that it really and truly *had* happened for a reason."

Although he always knew he was adopted, Alexander (and I will now cease to refer to him as Dr. Alexander) was adopted as a foundling by a prominent neurosurgeon and his wife and grew up in a perfectly wonderful family with siblings who were both produced naturally by his new parents and an adopted sister. So wonderful were these various siblings that, upon learning of his illness, they all immediately dropped whatever they were doing (one hopes that none of THEM were in the middle of brain surgery) and traveled from all over the country to his hospital room, where they prayed for him and took turns holding his hand non-stop for seven days. As an adult, Alexander has a wonderful wife of 31 years, and two wonderful kids, one of whom is studying to be (surprise!) a neurosurgeon. Could a life be any more perfect?

To be fair, Alexander did mention that at one time in his life he had a recreational drinking problem. But, because he is who he is, he was able to recognize the problem before it became serious and resolve it without too much effort. The only other reported problem in his life centered around his being adopted. It never bothered him, he assured us, until later in life when some trivial incident sent him spiraling down into a years-long depression thinking about how his birth mother had punted him out of her teenaged life.

When he was finally able to find his birth mother it turned out that she actually later married his birth father and they both really did love him and they eventually had more kids and a long happy life together. Birth dad was a Naval aviator, successful commercial pilot and even an astronaut trainee. Birth mom was, like adopted mom, an educated and suitably refined wife for a successful husband. Later it was noted that birth dad, in addition to everything else, was also an attorney!

You know, I'll bet that happens a lot. Scared teenage girls get knocked up, set their new babies adrift in a basket of reeds, and the kids not only get adopted by rich, educated, accomplished

and happy families, but their birth families then go on to become equally rich and educated and accomplished and happy.

Even his coma-inducing illness was special and, as he noted repeatedly throughout the book, so rare as to be virtually impossible for a healthy adult to contract. The impossibility of his illness and the equal impossibility of his recovery from that illness, along with the presence of his perfect family who would rush in to hold his hand for a solid week and his own singular qualifications as a brain scientist, all lead Alexander to conclude that he must have been deliberately chosen by God to visit the afterlife and report back on God's existence.

Also straining credibility is Alexander's assertion that the "angel" who guided him during his trip through heaven turned out to be the dead natural sister he never knew. Of course, he did not realize this at first, even after seeing a photo of his dead sister and after insisting that his memories of his journey through heaven were the most vivid and memorable of his life. He "recognized" his dead sister as the angel long after his coma and only after seeing the photo and then still later reading an account of the NDE of a little girl who "died" and went to heaven and saw the dead brother she never knew she had. An obvious case of "retrofitted memory."

Even the writing itself isn't believable. Alexander wrote in great detail about events and particular conversations that occurred among his family and friends in various locations during his coma. Yes, he could have gone back later and asked about those events and conversations. But people, even Alexander's perfect family members, do not recall quotable dialogue days or weeks or months later. And it would have been months later, as Alexander states he was mentally incapacitated for months after his coma and, for that matter, did not decide to write the book until sometime after that.

To cite only one of many examples, Alexander relates a cell phone conversation between his sister Jean and her husband David which occurred after he was hospitalized and family members were homing in:

"Have you gone through Richmond yet?" he asked.

"No," Jean said. "I'm just north of it on I-95."

"Get onto Route 60 West, then Route 24 down to Lynchburg. Holley just called. Eben's in the emergency room there. He had a seizure this morning and isn't responding."

"Oh, my God! Do they have any idea why?"

"They're not sure, but it may be meningitis."

Jean made the turn in time and followed the undulating two-lane blacktop of 60 West through low, scudding clouds, toward Route 24 and Lynchburg.

No one remembers conversations like these under these circumstances in this sort of detail months later (or even days later), right down to the type of clouds encountered along a particular stretch of highway along the drive to the hospital. It sounds fabricated and is in fact the very sort of writing style used to write fiction. Bad fiction. Although that sort of wholesome,

cornball dialogue does impress the folks who would be most likely to believe a wholesome, cornball account of a visit to heaven, which no doubt explains why it was repeatedly included in the book. This type of "dialogue" certainly doesn't represent any sort of factual account written by someone who was in a coma at the time. For me, it calls into question the validity of everything else in the book, including and especially that vivid recollection of visiting heaven and communing with God.

Of course, even if the trip to heaven wasn't a knowing fabrication (as other such stories have been recently shown to be), it could have been, and most likely was, some sort of dream or hallucination. Alexander vehemently denies even the smallest possibility of this, and he is after all a prominent neurosurgeon with far more knowledge of these things than us poor uneducated slob who were not chosen by God to have a guided tour of heaven.

But it makes me recall a dream I had when I was sick with Lyme Disease which, like Alexander's meningitis, is a bacterial infection. In my dream I was feeling sick and was stumbling along a deserted road. It was dark but near dawn, with the sky starting to grow lighter. A woman in a car stopped and asked if I was all right. She saw that I wasn't and helped me crawl into the back seat of her car and then began driving. I did not know this woman but she was about 40 with short light brown hair. As she drove past a fenced-in field I propped myself up and looked out a window and saw clearly in the dawning light a herd of dinosaurs (large raptors, various sauropods, allosaurs), snapping at each other and playing much as young dogs would run and play in an open field. I mentioned to the woman that I was seeing dinosaurs and she looked over and said she could see only a herd of deer. I said I must be having hallucinations and she agreed, suggesting that she take me to a hospital. I asked her not to take me to a hospital and she said she would take me to her business, where I could rest before deciding what to do. She drove into the East York or Hellam area and pulled into a small shopping center. She explained that she and her husband have a propane gas business there and they have a room they use when they sleep over that I could use until I felt better. She left me in the room saying she was going to call for help. I sat in the empty room and soon lay down on the couch and went to sleep.

When I woke up I was home in bed. And I was utterly convinced that the incident really occurred, so vivid and detailed was the memory. And I did in fact feel sick, the same as the previous night stumbling along the road, although I was well enough to be aware that the dinosaurs, the only impossible component of the incident, were hallucinations, but then I also knew that while conversing with the woman in the car. She must have called someone who brought me home. Yes, that was it. It had to have been real. Even as long as a week later, feeling better from another week of meds, I drove out through East York and Hellam looking for the shopping center with the propane business, just in case it really did happen and there was a woman and her husband I should thank for helping me.

And that particular dream occurred after I had begun taking the antibiotic series and was beginning to recover. During the worst of it, before starting the medication, I would have extremely vivid and detailed and often violent or cryptic dreams and be constantly confused

over what was real and what wasn't. I would frequently wake up in bed shaking and scared during one of these dreams only to wake up again, and again, hardly knowing which waking was real and which was just part of another dream.

My infection was more prolonged but less severe than the one allegedly suffered by Alexander, so I don't know how that relates, other than to note that that sort of infection-induced dream experience is one you almost need to experience for yourself to understand just how vivid and seemingly real it can be.

In addition, I was never clear about Alexander's actual condition. At different points in the book he describes his higher brain functions, or the condition of his neocortex, using terms such as nonfunctioning, damaged, not alive, and dead or functionally dead. These various terms do not mean the same thing. Even assuming that his account of the medical aspects of his illness and recovery is accurate, was Alexander's brain dead or was it nonfunctioning? If he was truly brain dead for a period of days and then later spontaneously fully recovered, that would truly be hard to explain.

But I suspect that nonfunctioning, temporarily nonfunctioning, is closer to reality. But does that mean his neocortex was completely nonfunctional for the entire seven days? Or did the level of function vary during the coma? Did portions of the brain shut down over time as the infection spread, and then return to function as the infection subsided? Did the neocortex ever really stop functioning entirely, or just slow down to a point where activity was not readable by our instruments? This aspect of the case bears more investigation.

In any case, science and semantics aside, my real doubts about the account of this "Proof of Heaven" are very simple and basic.

Most NDEs last only a few minutes, usually while the person is being revived through various medical efforts. Alexander claims to have been chosen to spend a week visiting heaven and asking God questions and receiving profound answers to those questions, presumably for the purpose of returning with answers that would benefit mankind.

So where are those answers? You know, to those questions we all have about God and heaven and an afterlife?

Questions such as:

Alexander insists that prayer really works and cites his own coma experience, and the many family and friends who gathered to pray for him, as an example of the power of prayer to focus the love of the universe to heal sick people. (Although if God really did pick Alexander to have a coma, visit heaven and then return, as Alexander insists, then the prayers of Alexander's relatives and friends could have played no part in his recovery from coma.) So why didn't Alexander provide an answer to the question of why prayer, as George Carlin pointed out, only works about half the time? In fact, those who pray for the survival of terminally ill people have a

success rate of nearly zero. Are people doing it wrong? How about some answers here before someone else croaks unnecessarily?

If, as Alexander claimed, we are all brought "into existence" to allow us "to participate in the glory of God," and to eventually experience God's unlimited love, then does everyone get into heaven? Is Hitler up there, bathing in the serene beauty and unlimited love of God? How about Stalin? Or Jeffrey Dahmer? If people such as these are in heaven, then what is the point of good behavior? If people such as these are not in heaven, then where are they? Is there a place called Hell? If so, how does it differ from Heaven? Can bad people be redeemed at the end of life and earn heaven at the last minute? Does one really evil act, such as murder, rape, or missing Sunday Mass, in an otherwise good lifetime ruin one's chances to get to heaven? Or is there some sort of balance sheet that determines this?

On the subject of prayer, Alexander stated that he was unable to recognize individual "spirits" during his first six days visiting heaven. Although he was surrounded by beings who he understood were human spirits and who spoke to him constantly, he could not recognize anyone because their images were indistinct and their voices were muffled, much like, as he described it, the voices of the partially seen adults in a Peanuts cartoon. During the seventh day, however, he saw and recognized several family members and a friend in heaven praying for him. The people he saw were not dead but rather the very same family members who had gathered in his ICU room to pray for his recovery on the seventh day of his coma, plus a family friend. Alexander cites this vision as irrefutable proof that prayer is communication with God. But isn't it more likely that he was simply aware of these family members praying aloud in his room, plus the religious friend he knew would be praying for him, and incorporated them into his dream or hallucination? And why were all of those voices unintelligible during his first six days in heaven? No one in heaven is able to design a decent sound system?

If we must somehow prove ourselves worthy of heaven by living a good life, then what about all those kids with cancer and other horrible diseases who suffer and die young, before having the chance to prove themselves? If this God is all-loving and the entire universe is part of a larger "spiritual universe" that is composed entirely of love, as Alexander insists, then why are these kids being brought "into existence" merely to be doomed to suffer and die? Why not just skip all that unnecessary and pointless pain?

If the "purpose of [the material universe] is to bring beings into existence and allow them to participate in the glory of God," why isn't the universe teeming with intelligent life? Shouldn't the purpose of every planet in the cosmos be to support and nourish these beings who would participate in the glory of God? Why are there so many planets and solar systems out there that are incapable of supporting any life? Why all the wasted real estate? If humans are the only conscious beings in the universe, again why bother to create all that wasted space? What purpose does it serve? Wouldn't the immense Milky Way Galaxy be more than enough room for us? Wouldn't our solar system be enough?

Who was Jesus? Did such a person really exist? Was the whole biblical story of Jesus all just made-up? Was any of it true? If so, which parts? How about other stories in the Bible? The Koran? All those other holy books? Did any of it really happen as written?

These are the kind of questions that everyone wants answered. Alexander assures us that he spent a week, by special invitation of God, in a heaven where a second could be an eternity, asking questions and receiving incredibly profound and detailed answers. Yet not only does he provide no answers to these very obvious questions, he apparently either never thought to ask those questions or doesn't think the answers are important enough to bother reporting.

Instead, Alexander simply dismisses skeptics as "willfully ignorant" and then breathlessly repeats a shined-up version of the old safely non-denominational nonsense about human consciousness existing separate from the physical brain and a spiritual realm where we all exist as pure spirits with temporary bodies and where everyone has a purpose and prayer works and a God of love embraces us all with unconditional love and the universe itself is in fact made of love. Blah, blah, blah. His description of Heaven, although more detailed and elaborate than most, is essentially no different than the idealized stress-free realm of love and peace and happiness that humans have dreamed about for thousands of generations.

An even more relevant question in this particular case may be:

Assuming this spirit realm described by Alexander and other NDE patients really does exist, is the knowledge of this spiritual realm something living humans are intended to have?

If we are intended to know about the spirit realm, then why not simply reveal it and be done with it? Shouldn't that be easy for an all-powerful God? Isn't God capable of coming up with a better plan to notify the people of the world than killing some guy, then sending him back down to Earth with possible brain damage and a goofy story about visiting an afterlife complete with flocks of butterflies, speech impaired spirits, and a dead relative who flutters around like Tinkerbell?

If living humans are not intended to know about the spirit realm, then why permit the NDEs to occur at all? Why allow every chain smoker with a bad ticker to keel over and sneak a peak of the afterlife? Why not wipe those memories before the unauthorized visitor has a chance to spill the Divine beans back on Earth? Why not simply prevent the visions of an afterlife during NDEs in the first place? Doesn't anyone in Heaven know basic security procedures?

*Proof of Heaven* simply isn't believable as proof of heaven. My guess is that Alexander experienced some really bizarre, infection-induced dreams or hallucinations, either shortly before falling into a coma, at various times during the coma, or shortly after brain function began returning to bring him out of coma. Near the end of the book Alexander dismisses each of the possible medical causes of vivid dreams or hallucinations for someone in his medical condition. But there is one possible effect of the infection and coma that wasn't considered.

Although still not well understood, it has been shown that there are parts of the human brain that are physically or chemically different in religious believers and nonbelievers. These differences include areas of the brain responsible for interpreting and evaluating perceived events and life experiences in either a rational manner or in a fanciful, imaginary manner.

What if the extremely severe brain infection suffered by Alexander not only caused the vivid dreams and coma, but also physically or chemically damaged or altered those parts of the brain that are responsible for belief in, or blind acceptance of, religious and spiritual concepts. That would explain the sudden change in outlook. Before the infection he was rationally skeptical of spirituality and religion in general and NDEs in particular. After the infection he fully accepts the “truth” of NDEs and the existence of a vast spirit realm.

Eben Alexander may now be simply physically incapable of evaluating his vision or dream experiences in any sort of rational manner, or of thinking in any other way that doesn't support his new spiritual beliefs or his “Chosen One” status.

For that loss, he should have our sympathy.