

Between Worlds: A Near-Death Sound Experience

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Every voyage is the unfolding of a poetic. The departure, the cross-over, the fall, the wandering, the discovery, the return, the transformation... The complex experience of self and other (the all-other within me and without me) is bound to forms that belong but are subject neither to “home,” nor to “abroad”; and it is through them and through the cultural configurations they gather that the universe over there and over here can be named, accounted for, and become narrative (Minh-ha, 1994, p. 21).

Between Worlds invites listeners to imaginatively consider how a *near-death experience* might *sound*. A term coined and popularized by psychologist, Raymond Moody, in the mid-1970s, near-death experiences (NDEs) generally refer to spontaneous and seemingly universal occurrences, in which “the soul leaves the body during a period of clinical death or near-death, and has spiritual episodes” (Caritas Consciousness Project, 2023). As Shushan (2022) suggests, “virtually every society in nearly all times and places has some kind of belief in consciousness surviving bodily death” (p. 3). Even so, Shushan (2022) reports that no two NDEs are alike, in that none contain all of the below defining elements, as accounts are generally comprised of a selection of sub-experiences such as leaving the body; seeing one’s corpse; existing in a quasi-physical form; entering darkness and/or a tunnel; emerging into bright light; meeting deceased friends or relatives; encountering spirits or deities; communicating telepathically with other spirits; seeing, entering, or traveling to a mirror-world or other worlds; reviewing one’s life panoramically;

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experiencing a dream-like state; enduring judgments, trials, and/or obstacles; and/or meeting guardians, gatekeepers, or judges; in addition, to experiencing vivid senses and clarity; distortions of time; feelings of peace and/or transcendence; a sense of love and acceptance; visions of the past or future; information or instructions; and/or choosing to return to one's body (p. 9).

NDE accounts are literary, in that they are "at least partly products of intertextuality, meaning that they are situated within a narrative genre and thus follow certain literary conventions" (Shushan, 2022, p. 11). Moreover, music or sound are often reported in NDE experiences (Shushan, 2022), and it is also commonly stated that the sense of hearing is preserved at the end of life (Blundon, et al., 2020). By inviting listeners to contemplate how a near-death experience might sound, *Between Worlds*, weaves together a range of instruments and sound snippets to construct an aural afterlife world, based on the following common NDE sub-experiences:

- *Leaving the body*: Listeners enter *Between Worlds* to the sound of my heartbeat, which was recorded with a contact microphone. When creating this opening, I envisioned myself moving in and out of awareness prior to death. I integrate voice-over to illustrate a cascade of thoughts that might occur in this liminal state. The voice-over was recorded with a bullet microphone, the statements were then layered, and effects were added. I focus on the senses versus a panoramic life review to connect with a broader listening audience. For me, sensory experiences represent embodied aliveness – a way to remember the richness of life before death. My sensory thoughts stretch into silence as the heart slows and stops beating, calling forth darkness, a void, or sense of emptiness.
- *Emerging into bright light and entering a tunnel*: I utilize hanging chimes to convey the sensation of a bright light, a common NDE occurrence. From here, listeners move through what I sonically perceive as a tunnel, wherein the sound of a singing bowl bridges chimes with a gong and shruti box, creating a drone. A field recording of wind is included to impart an 'air' of movement. When visualizing a tunnel, I wanted to suggest a sense of structure, so a percussive rhythm played on vibraphones lingers in the background. To signal a shift out of the tunnel, a recording from my home organ was layered into the mix to mark the space between exiting the tunnel and entering another world.

- *Traveling to another world:* In NDE accounts, people often speak of traveling to other realms, so my goal was to build a world that mirrored Earth in an ‘other-worldly’ way. To do so, I employed field recording sound snippets of sandhill cranes (recorded in Colorado), guinea pigs (recorded in Peru), and beavers (recorded in Wisconsin) to create this speculative realm. Gongs and harp were also integrated to generate more ambiance and texture within the afterworld.
- *Meeting a deceased loved one:* When entering this afterworld, listeners immediately encounter my cat, Mr. Snow, whose meows were recorded before he died in 2017. In this soundscape, Mr. Snow reflects meeting a deceased loved one. As the listener travels through the afterworld, they hear Mr. Snow meow again, in addition to the sound of a chime, which I situate as a ‘being of light’, that might also be a deceased loved one, deity, or guide.
- *Encountering spirits:* Before exiting the afterworld, listeners encounter a cloud of voices, which I imagine as other spirits or souls existing in this realm. The voices were recorded in Myanmar in 2016, featuring a group of children chanting together. This field recording showcases other spirits or souls in this afterworld, in a manner that appears to transcend language.
- *Returning to the body:* The listener’s experience in this afterworld comes to an abrupt halt as the sound of the organ ushers the traveler back into their body, returning from this near-death experience. The organ recording utilizes different volumes and speeds to impart a sense of movement, wherein one is descending towards the Earthly realm and the physical, material body. The bloom of a gong corresponds with the moment where one re-enters the body. Shortly thereafter, the sound of my heartbeat returns, closing the near-death sound experience.

A Zoom H4N Pro was used to create these recordings, along with contact, bullet, and stereo condenser microphones. The recordings were layered and mixed using Mixcraft Pro.

NDEs are a “complex, multi-faceted phenomena,” which are both “rooted in the cultural environment of those that have them,” and they are also processed by “an enculturated individual” who then recounts the NDE in “socially, religiously,

and linguistically idiosyncratic ways” (Shushan, 2022, p. 15). In *Between Worlds*, it is my hope that the ‘betweenness’ this sonic narrative presents encourages listeners to interrogate their own near-death experience(s) and/or afterlife beliefs, while also inviting them to temporarily exist as a translator between worlds. In doing so, this sonic narrative actively performs something, in that it locates listeners in the soundscape – a place that may have been previously absent in their imaginations. As a listening act, listeners enter this world, traveling to a universe “over there,” in Minh-ha’s (1994) terms to experience a world that is neither “home” nor “abroad.” *Between Worlds*, in my view, is an “unfolding of a poetic” that performs a sonic narrative of an imagined afterworld, rooted in my interpretation of individual and cultural NDE accounts, engaging the sense of hearing, while also inviting infinite afterlife interpretations and listening possibilities.

References

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