"Death travelers" are bringing back stories of life beyond death: an interview with author Judy Bachrach

They can fly through walls or circle the planets, **turn into** pure light or meet long-dead relatives. Many have blissful **experiences** of universal love. Most do not want to return to the living. When they do, they're often endowed with special powers: They can **predict** the future or intuit people's thoughts. Many **end up** unhappy and divorced, **rejected** by their loved ones or colleagues, burdened with a knowledge they often **dare** not **share**. They are the "death travelers." If this sounds like the movie Flatliners or a science fiction novel by J. G. Ballard, it isn't. These are the **testimonies** of people who have had near death experiences (NDEs) and returned from the other side to tell the tale. Journalist Judy Bachrach decided to listen to their stories and compiled them in a book. Here she talks about how **advances** in medicine are **enabling** us to raise the dead, why the scientific and religious communities are **hostile** to the idea of NDEs, and how a British traffic controller returned from the dead with the ability to predict the stock market.

*Your book, Glimpsing Heaven: The Stories and Science of Life After Death, opens with you **volunteering** to work in a hospice. Why?*
The person who put the idea in my head was former First Lady Barbara Bush, whose own daughter had died in hospice at the age of four. One of my best friends was **dying of** cancer. We were both at the time 32, and I couldn't **get over** it. I was terrified of death, and I was terrified of her dying. So I decided to start working in a hospice to get over my terror of death.

*Until the 20th century, death was **determined** by holding a mirror to a patient's mouth. If it didn't mist over, the person was dead. We now live in what you call the "age of Lazarus." Can you explain?*
Everybody who's been revived by CPR, cardiopulmonary resuscitation is a **formerly** dead person. We walk every single day among the formerly dead. Death is no longer simply the **cessation** of breath or heartbeat or even brain stem activity. These days people can be dead for up to an hour and come back among us and have memories. I call them "death travelers" in the book.

*One scientist you spoke to **suggests** that NDEs may simply **result from** the brain shutting down, like a computer—that, for instance, the brilliant light often **perceived** at the end of a tunnel is **caused** by **loss** of blood or hypoxia, lack of oxygen. How do you **counter** these arguments?*
The problem with the lack of oxygen explanation is that when there is a lack of oxygen, our **recollections** are fuzzy and sometimes **non-existent**. The less oxygen you have, the less you remember. But the people who have died, and **recall** their death travels, describe things in a very clear, **concise**, and structured way. Lack of oxygen would mean you **barely** remember anything.

Most death travelers don't want to return to the living, and when they do, they find it is a painful experience. Tell us about Tony Cicoria.
Tony Cicoria is a neurosurgeon from upstate New York. He believed death was death, and that was the end. Then one day he was on a picnic with his family, talking to his mother on the telephone, when a bolt of lightning hit the phone. The next thing he knew, he was lying on the ground saying to himself, "Oh, my God, I'm dead." He knew he was dead because he saw his mother-in-law screaming at him. And he called out to her and said, "I'm here! I'm here!" But she didn't hear anything. Next he was traveling up a flight of steps without walking. He became a bolt of blue light and **managed** to go through a building. He flew through walls, and he saw his little kids having their faces painted. Right after that, he felt somebody thumping on his chest. A nurse who was in the **vicinity** was trying to resuscitate him. But he did not want to come back to life. Very much like other death travelers, he wanted to stay dead. Being dead is **evidently** a very interesting experience. And exciting.

*You suggest there is a difference between brain function and **consciousness**. Can you talk about that idea?*
This is an area where a lot more scientific research has to be done: that the brain is possibly, and I'm **emphasizing** the "possibly," not the only area of consciousness. That even when the brain is **shut down**, on certain **occasions** consciousness **endures**. That's because, as some scientists claim, the brain is not the only locus of thought, which is very interesting.

You coin several new terms in the book. What's a Galileo?
I call the scientists who are **involved in** research into death travel "Galileos" because, like Galileo himself, who was persecuted for explaining his theories about the universe, scientists involved in research into what **occurs** after death are also being persecuted. They're **denied** tenure. They're told that they're inferior scientists and doctors. Anthony Cicoria, the man who was struck by lightning, didn't tell any of his fellow surgeons about his experience for something like 20 years.

Why do you think the scientific community is so hostile to the idea of NDEs?
I think the scientific community is very much like I used to be. Journalists tend not to be very religious, we tend not to be very credulous, and we tend to believe the worst possible **scenario**, which, in this case, is nothing. The scientific community is very materialistic. If you can't see it and you can't measure it, it doesn't exist.

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