

Pam Reynolds (Near-Death Experience)

Pam Reynolds (1956–2010) was an American singer-songwriter from Atlanta, Georgia, USA, whose [near-death experience](#) (NDE) is one of the most frequently cited in the literature. The experience seemingly occurred during a complete shutdown of her brain and body functions that had been instigated purposely to allow delicate surgery on a brain aneurysm. It included accurate views of the operating room and equipment, hyper-awareness, visions of light, and interactions with deceased relatives. Her case is regarded by many as convincing evidence of survival, since her vital signs were monitored continuously, providing certainty that she was clinically dead at the time.

Investigation and Publication

In 1994 Michael Sabom, a cardiologist in Atlanta, launched a study on the relationship between NDEs and spiritual beliefs. He interviewed 160 people, mostly patients of his clinic, finding that 47 of them spoke of having had such an experience, according to criteria identified by NDE researcher [Bruce Greyson](#).¹ Pam Reynolds's case was one of several summarized by Sabom in his book *Light and Death*.² Reynolds has described her case in a BBC documentary.³

Sabom first interviewed Reynolds in November 1994. Hearing that she knew details of the operating room that she could only have seen while deeply unconscious, he contacted the medical staff and took other steps to try to verify them.

Pam Reynolds's Experience

In 1991, aged 35, Reynolds experienced symptoms of dizziness, loss of speech and difficulty moving her body. A CT scan revealed a giant aneurysm at the base of her brain. The neurologist to whom she was referred predicted little or no chance of survival;⁴ because of its size and location, regular neurosurgical techniques to excise it would not work. She was then referred to Dr Robert Spetzler in Phoenix, Arizona, who had pioneered a surgical procedure, hypothermic cardiac arrest, that would make the aneurysm operable. This involved cooling the patient's body to sixty degrees Fahrenheit, stopping the heartbeat and breathing, and draining all blood from the brain.

More than twenty doctors, nurses and technicians took part. The operation required Reynolds's vital signs and body temperature to be very closely monitored by multiple instruments placed in various locations on and within her body. Molded speakers were placed in her ears, producing clicks at regular intervals, so that other instruments could detect her brain's reactions to them.

Reynolds was awake when she was brought into the operating room at 7:15 am. She felt a 'loss of time' and blanked out as the general anaesthesia took effect. Then she became aware of a musical tone that seemed to pull her out of the top of her head.

The further out of my body I got, the more clear the tone became. I had the impression it was like a road, a frequency that you go on ... I remember seeing several things in the operating room when I was looking down. It was the most aware that I think that I have ever been in my entire life ... It was brighter and more focused and clearer than normal vision ... There was so much in the operating room that I didn't recognize, and so many people.⁵

She recalled being surprised that the team had only partially shaved her head. She also recalled seeing the bone-saw Spetzler used to excise a section of her skull:

The saw thing ... looked like an electric toothbrush and it had a dent in it, a groove at the top where the saw appeared to go into the handle, but it didn't ... And the saw had interchangeable blades, too, but these blades were in what looked like a socket wrench case ... I heard the saw crank up.⁶

She found this sound unpleasant.⁷ 'Someone said something about my veins and arteries being very small,' Reynolds recalled, adding that it was a female voice. At this stage in the operation, a female cardiac surgeon, having determined that the arteries in Reynolds's right leg were too small to handle the degree of blood flow required by the heart-lung machine, opened the left leg as well.

Spetzler assessed the aneurysm and ordered hypothermic cardiac arrest to be performed. Commencing at 10:50 am, blood was removed via tubes from the femoral arteries and veins, chilled in reservoir cylinders and returned to her body. As Reynolds's core temperature fell, her heartbeat changed to fibrillation, then stopped entirely. Her brainwaves flattened, then, as her core temperature reached sixty, the brainstem shut down. By standard definitions she was clinically dead.

At 11:25 the heart-lung machine was turned off, the operating table was tilted and blood was drained from her body. The sac of the aneurysm, now empty, was easily excised. The heart-lung machine was then reactivated and warmed blood reinfused into Reynolds's circulatory system. The brainstem slowly began showing activity again, then her higher brain also, as the warming process continued. At noon it became apparent that her heart would not resume beating by warming alone; electrical jolts from a defibrillator were used to shock it into starting. Having been clinically dead for about an hour, Reynolds was returned to the recovery room in a stable condition at 2:10 pm.

As cited by Sabom, Reynolds's next recollections fall between the mention of her arteries being too small, and the time Spetzler's younger assistants were closing her incisions:

There was a sensation like being pulled, but not against your will. I was going on my own accord because I wanted to go. I have different metaphors to try to explain this. It was like the Wizard of Oz – being taken up in a tornado vortex, only you're not spinning around like you've got vertigo. You're very focused and you have a place to go. The feeling was like going up in an elevator real fast. And there was a sensation, but it wasn't a bodily, physical sensation. It was like a tunnel but it wasn't a tunnel.

At some point very early in the tunnel vortex I became aware of my grandmother calling me. But I didn't hear her call me with my ears ... It was a clearer hearing than with my ears. I trust that sense more than I trust my own ears. The feeling was that she wanted me to come to her, so I continued with no fear down the shaft. It's a dark shaft that I went through, and at the very end there was this very little tiny pinpoint of light that kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger.

The light was incredibly bright, like sitting in the middle of a lightbulb. It was so bright that I put my hands in front of my face fully expecting to see them and I could not. But I knew they were there. Not from a sense of touch. Again, it's terribly hard to explain, but I knew they were there ...

I noticed that as I began to discern different figures in the light – and they were all covered with light, they *were* light, and had light permeating all around them – they began to form shapes I could recognize and understand. I could see that one of them was my grandmother. I don't know if it was reality or projection, but I would know my grandmother, the sound of her, anytime, anywhere.

Everyone I saw, looking back on it, fit perfectly into my understanding of what that person looked like at their best during their lives.

I recognized a lot of people. My uncle Gene was there. So was my great-great-Aunt Maggie, who was really a cousin. On Papa's side of the family, my grandfather was there ... They were specifically taking care of me, looking after me.

They would not permit me to go further ... It was communicated to me – that's the best way I know how to say it, because they didn't speak like I'm speaking – that if I went all the way into the light something would happen to me physically. They would be unable to put this me back into the body me, like I had gone too far and they couldn't reconnect. So they wouldn't let me go anywhere or do anything.[8](#)

Then they were feeding me. They were not doing this through my mouth, like with food, but they were nourishing me with something. The only way I know how to put it is something sparkly. Sparkles is the image that I get. I definitely recall the sensation of being nurtured and being fed and being made strong. I know it sounds funny, because obviously it wasn't a physical thing, but inside the experience I felt physically strong, ready for whatever.[9](#)

My grandmother didn't take me back through the tunnel, or even send me back or ask me to go. She just looked up at me. I expected to go with her, but it was communicated to me that she just didn't think she would do that. My uncle said he would do it. He's the one who took me back through the end of the tunnel. Everything was fine. I did want to go.

But then I got to the end of it and saw the thing, my body. I didn't want to get into it ... It looked terrible, like a train wreck. It looked like what it was: dead. I believe it was covered. It scared me and I didn't want to look at it.

It was communicated to me that it was like jumping into a swimming pool. No problem, just jump right into the swimming pool. I didn't want to, but I guess I was late or something because he [the uncle] pushed me. I felt a definite repelling and at the same time a pulling from the body. The body was pulling and the tunnel was pushing ... It was like diving into a pool of ice water ... It hurt![10](#)

The assistants finished the operation to the sound of rock music, Reynolds recalled:

They were playing 'Hotel California' and the line was 'You can check out anytime you like, but you can never leave.' I mentioned [later] to Dr Brown that that was incredibly insensitive and he told me that I needed to sleep more. [laughter] When I regained consciousness, I was still on the respirator.[11](#)

As measured by the Greyson NDE scale, Reynolds's NDE was particularly deep. The maximum score possible is 32, the average score among Greyson's subjects at the time of Sabom's writing was 15, and the average among the subjects in Sabom's study was 13.3. Reynolds scored 27.

After her experience, Reynolds lost all fear of death. She said, as quoted in a MSNBC broadcast: 'If death is the worst thing that happens to us, what an incredible thing! If at the end of our lives, this is what's going to happen to everyone, I don't see the problem, I really don't get it. I fear pain, but I don't fear death'.[12](#)

Pam Reynolds recovered fully from the operation and lived a healthy life until 2010, when she died aged 53 of heart failure.

See also [Near-Death Experiences - Paranormal Aspects](#)

Verifications

Having examined the operative report and interviewed Spetzler, Sabom determined that Reynolds's experience could not have been the result of a temporal lobe seizure, as no such seizure had been recorded. The report referred to a female doctor referring to the small blood vessels, apparently confirming Reynolds's memory of having heard the comment. Significantly, Reynolds could not have heard the comment normally, as by this time her ears had been stopped up by the molded speakers that were generating loud clicks. Sabom also learned that the comment was made at about the same time that the saw was started up.

Sabom was unfamiliar with the bone saw used in the operation, and was not in a position to confirm Reynolds's description of it resembling an electric toothbrush and its case resembling a socket-wrench case. He contacted the manufacturer, who sent him pictures of both. The resemblances were clear.[13](#)

Media Coverage

Reynold's NDE eventually became the subject of multiple television news segments and newspaper articles. On the radio show Coast to Coast AM, which focuses on

unexplained phenomena,¹⁴ Show host Art Bell conducted an in-depth 90 minute [interview](#) with her in 2002. A 2009 segment from National Public Radio includes a short clip from a rock song Reynolds wrote based on her experience.¹⁵ A few days before her death, Reynolds gave more details of the experience in an [interview](#) transcribed by anaesthetist and NDE sceptic GM Woerlee.¹⁶

Criticisms

In 2007, the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* published three papers by philosopher Keith Augustine questioning the validity of NDEs with claimed veridical memories, and dismissing them as fantastical. The issue included responses by NDE scholars including Sabom, Greyson, Kenneth Ring and Raymond Moody.

The debate continued into the following year, and restarted in 2011 with a critical paper in the same journal by Woerlee. He contends that Reynolds retained sufficient conscious awareness, even under anaesthesia, to hear the sound of the saw, the cardiac surgeon's comments about blood-vessel size and the song 'Hotel California'. Alternatively, he speculates, the sound of the saw could have reverberated through her skull, and she might have guessed the blood-vessel comments as she was aware she had small blood vessels.¹⁷ Countering this, according to Sabom, the technologist who inserted the speakers pointed out that the tape and gauze used to keep them in place covered the entire ear entrance, making normal hearing of an operation room conversation impossible.¹⁸

Augustine argues that Reynold's visual recall of the bone-saw is confused on one point and therefore likely incorrect. He suggests she might have guessed what it looked like from experience with dental drills. He posits that her out-of-body experience began and ended before the period of cardiac arrest commenced, and therefore she could still have been slightly conscious and able to physically perceive aspects of the operating room. He argues that her memories might have become contaminated with knowledge of such details gained during the three years that elapsed between the experience and her first interview with Sabom.¹⁹

Sabom counters that while Augustine is correct with regard to the moment when the out-of-body experience commenced – when the saw started up – Reynolds herself identified its conclusion as the operation being brought to a close by the assistants, during the playing of 'Hotel California', confirming that it was underway during the time of cardiac arrest.²⁰ With regard to the point about her allegedly confused memory of the saw, parapsychologist [Charles Tart](#) counters that a minor error in recall of an unfamiliar instrument is not sufficient to dismiss her memory of having seen it as having never occurred. With respect to the three-year delay, Tart points to statistical evidence that memories of NDEs tend to remain consistent over time.²¹

The account Reynolds gave in her final interview suggests that the first verifications of her out-of-body memories were actually provided by the medical staff very soon afterward:

I thought I had hallucinations and when I talked with my family and my husband, we were joking. That made everyone laugh with the exception of

nurses, the doctor, the anesthesiologist and neurophysiologists ... They did not seem to find it funny and they hardly dared to look at me. In fact, they knew that I was not hallucinating and that this had occurred. They had never heard of such things before. I thought maybe it was my imagination and I had a dream, but they told me that this was not the case and what I saw really happened ... They kept telling me that it was not a hallucination.[22](#)

Spetzler confirms this as quoted on MSNBC: ‘What she related so quickly after surgery was remarkably precise as to some details that went on in the surgery’.[23](#)

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Literature and Media

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Greyson, B. (1983). The near-death experience scale: Construction, reliability, and validity, *Journal of Nervous & Mental Disease* 171, 369-75.

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.](#) Greyson (1983).
- [2.](#) Sabom (1998). All information in this article is drawn from this source except where otherwise noted.
- [3.](#) See Broome (2002); the segment on her begins at 17:40.
- [4.](#) Broome (2002), 18:50. Imaging of the aneurysm at 20:29. Spetzler explains its location through the use of a model brain and sample brain tissue starting at 20:37.
- [5.](#) Sabom (1998), 41.
- [6.](#) Sabom (1998), 41.
- [7.](#) Broome (2002), 23:20.
- [8.](#) Sabom (1998), 43-5.
- [9.](#) Sabom (1998), 45.
- [10.](#) Sabom (1998), 46.
- [11.](#) Sabom (1998), 47.
- [12.](#) MSNBC (n.d.).
- [13.](#) See also Broome (2002), 24:10 for Reynold's description of the bone saw, plus photographs of a saw of the same type and its case.
- [14.](#) See show archive [here](#).
- [15.](#) Hagerty (2009).
- [16.](#) Woerlee (2010).
- [17.](#) Woerlee (2011).
- [18.](#) Sabom (2007), 259.
- [19.](#) Augustine (2007).
- [20.](#) Sabom (2007), 258.
- [21.](#) Tart (2007).
- [22.](#) Woerlee (2010).
- [23.](#) MSNBC (n.d.).