

# 154. NEUROSURGEON DR. EBEN ALEXANDER'S NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE DEFIES MEDICAL MODEL OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Posted on Nov 22, 2011 in [near-death experience](#) | [216 Comments](#)

**Interview reveals how a near-death experience changed everything neurosurgeon Dr. Eben Alexander thought he knew about consciousness, spirituality, and life after death.**

Join Skeptiko host Alex Tsakiris for an interview with neurosurgeon Dr. Eben Alexander. During the interview Dr. Alexander discusses letting go of our simplistic view of consciousness:

**Alex Tsakiris:** Can we really then hope to get out of the consciousness loop that we're in now? Or is there something fundamental to the way that we're constructed that's going to keep us limited in how much we can really?

**Dr. Eben Alexander:** What I think is going to happen is that science and spirituality, which will be mainly be an acknowledgement of the profound nature of our consciousness, will grow closer and closer together.

One thing that we will have to let go of is this kind of addiction to simplistic, primitive reductive materialism because there's really no way that I can see a reductive materialist model coming remotely in the right ballpark to explain what we really know about consciousness now.

Coming from a neurosurgeon who, before my coma, thought I was quite certain how the brain and the mind interacted and it was clear to me that there were many things I could do or see done on my patients and it would eliminate consciousness. It was very clear in that realm that the brain gives you consciousness and everything else and when the brain dies there goes consciousness, soul, mind—it's all gone. And it was clear.

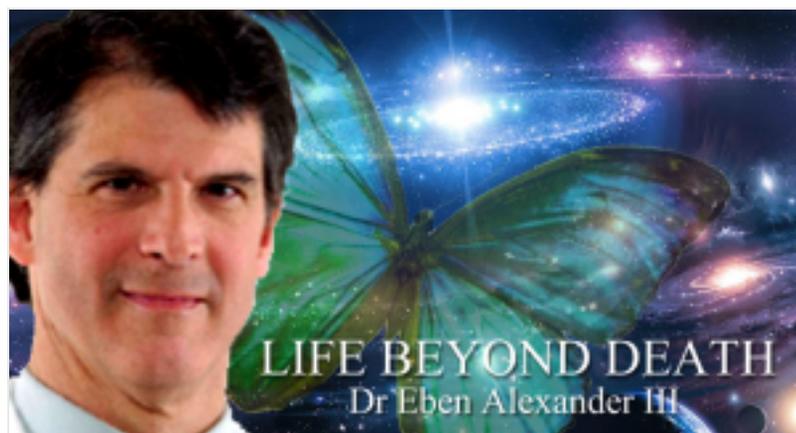
Now, having been through my coma, I can tell you that's exactly wrong and that in fact the mind and consciousness are independent of the brain. It's very hard to explain that, certainly if you're limiting yourself to that reductive materialist view.

[Dr. Eben Alexander's Website](#)

**Play It:**

[Download MP3 \(52:00 min.\)](#)

**Read It:**



Today we welcome Dr. Eben Alexander to Skeptiko. Dr. Alexander has been an academic neurosurgeon for more than 25 years, including 15 years at Harvard Medical School in Boston. In November of 2008, he had a near-death experience that changed his life and caused him to rethink everything he thought he knew about the human brain and consciousness.

Dr. Alexander, welcome to Skeptiko.

**Dr. Eben Alexander:** Thank you. It's good to be here.

**Alex Tsakiris:** Well, your story is really quite amazing. For those who haven't heard of it and aren't aware of what you went through, do you want to tell us a little bit about your experience?

**Dr. Eben Alexander:** Yes. It really struck out of the blue. I'd been quite healthy up until that time. In fact, I was in reasonably good shape because my older son had been putting me through a big workout, anticipating a climb of a 20,000 foot volcano in South America.

**Alex Tsakiris:** Wow.

**Dr. Eben Alexander:** Luckily I was in pretty good shape. At 4:30 in the morning, November 10, 2008, I got out of bed. I was getting ready to go up to work. I was working in Charlottesville at the time and I had severe sudden back pain, much worse than I had ever experienced. Literally within 10 or 15 minutes, it got me to a point where I could not even take a step. I was really in tremendous agony.

My wife, Holly, was rubbing my back. Then my younger son, Bond, came in and saw I was in a lot of distress and he started rubbing my temples. I realized when he did that that I had a severe headache. It was like he took a railroad spike and put it through my head. But I was already really going down very quickly. I didn't know it at the time.

I found out much later that I had acute bacterial meningitis and it was a very unusual bacteria. One that the incidence of spontaneous E. coli meningitis in adults in the U.S. is about 1 in 10 million per year. So it's really rare. We never found out where it came from. But at any rate, it was in about 2 to 2-1/2 hours it drove me deep down and in fact, my last words really were to my wife, "Don't call 911. Trust me, I'm a doctor."

Luckily she overruled that and she did that because she saw me having a grand mal seizure on the bed. Of course I don't remember that and I really don't remember anything that happened for the next week because I was gone. I was very sick during that time as I heard later. In fact, I was so sick that I was on a ventilator the whole week.

They did several lumbar punctures trying to guide therapy. I was on triple antibiotics very early on, due to a very good medical team. They did a lumbar puncture about the second or third day into this and my cerebral spinal fluid glucose, which is normally around 60 to 80 and in a bad case of meningitis might drop down to about 20, well my glucose went down to 1. So I was really sick.

**Alex Tsakiris:** So at this point, nothing should be going on in your brain and yet something was happening in your conscious awareness.

**Dr. Eben Alexander:** Yeah, I'd say that's correct. To me, and I've spent a lot of time in the last three years trying to explain this and that explanation initially, all I was doing was trying to explain it neuroscientifically. Meningitis is very helpful because it's probably better than anything else at really diffusely wiping out the neocortex. But one can always argue that there's some idling function at a deep level that might still survive.

In fact, one of the hypotheses that I entertained about all this was because the experience that I'll describe to you seemed very hyper-real and extremely crisp and vivid, much more real and interactive than sitting here and talking with you right now. I mean, it was extraordinary. That is something that is often described in near-death experiences and of course one of my early hypotheses was well, maybe there's some differential effect against inhibitory neuronal networks that allowed over-expression of excitatory neural networks and gave this illusion of kind of a hyper-real situation.

I can tell you from having lived through it that it was so powerful and so beyond that kind of explanation that I wasn't very hopeful that that would work out in the end. But I figured I needed to give it a chance and look at the microanatomy in the cortex and the different connections with the thalamus and basal ganglia and see if I could come up with some way that one might have an illusion of hyper-reality.

I can tell you because of the kind of content of the experience and the powerful, overwhelming nature of it and the fact that it was so complex, I think much of what I remembered from that experience, I don't think my brain and mind could possibly manage that even now.

I mean, the kind of mental function that occurs when you're in that hyper-real state, the way that information comes in from spiritual beings and kind of the interaction with them is so intense and extraordinary, it's really inexplicable in earthly terms. But it would basically outrun any of those kind of theories. That was something I was looking for. In fact, I never found an anatomic distribution that would support that over-activity of excitatory pathways.

**Alex Tsakiris:** Great. Thanks for doing that. I think we've jumped a little bit ahead of the story. For those who don't know, tell us a little bit about your NDE.

**Dr. Eben Alexander:** Okay. Well, you were asking what it is like when one has their cortex shut down like that, and in fact, for one thing I was surprised that I remembered anything because as a neurosurgeon having had many patients who were in comas for various reasons and had a lot of them recover, my understanding was that in general you don't really remember anything.

Even when the patients seem to be interacting I knew that usually if they'd been sick, for instance with meningitis, that they really wouldn't remember much of it. Occasionally there were exceptions to that.

You'd have patients who would remember very remarkable things from deep inside, but before I had always kind of explained that away with the standard answers. "Oh, that's what the brain does when it's very sick."

What I do remember from deep inside coma, for one thing my first awareness was I had no memory whatsoever of my life. I had no language, no words. All of my experience in life, knowledge of humans, Earth, the universe, all of that was gone. The only thing I had was this very kind of crude existence. And I call it in my book the "earthworm's eye-view," because it really was just a crude, kind of underground.

I have a vivid memory of dark roots above me and there was a kind of monotonous pounding, a dull sound in the background pounding away eternally. It was just murky and gross. Every now and then a face, an animal or something would boil up out of the muck and there might be some chant or roar or something. Then they'd disappear again.

It sounds very foreboding to talk about it right now, but in fact, since I knew no other existence I don't remember being particularly alarmed when I was in that setting. I think that that was the best consciousness that my brain could muster when it was soaking in pus. It turns out that that seemed to last for a very long time. Given that it was my first awareness of anything, it actually seemed to be years or eternity. I don't know. It seemed like a very, very long time.

Then there was a spinning melody, this bright melody that just started spinning in front of me. Beautiful, beautiful melody compared to that dull pounding sound that I'd heard for eons. It spun and as it spun around, it cleared everything away. This was the part that was so shocking and so hard to explain. It was as if the blinders came off and the reality there was much more crisp, real, and interactive and fresh than any reality I've ever known in this earthly existence. That part is very shocking and hard to explain when you go through it, and yet what I've found since then is that a lot of people who have had NDEs discuss the same kind of hyper-reality. But it's very shocking to see it.

For me, I was a speck on a butterfly wing. I had no body awareness at all. In fact, I had no body awareness through this entire kind of deep coma experience. I was a speck on a beautiful butterfly wing; millions of other butterflies around us. We were flying through blooming flowers, blossoms on trees, and they were all coming out as we flew through them.

Beside me on the butterfly wing was a beautiful girl. I remember her face to this day. Absolutely beautiful girl, blue eyes, and she was dressed in—what I was trying to write all this up in the months after I came back—I described as a kind of peasant garb. I can remember the colors very well. Kind of a peach/orange and a powder blue, just really beautiful.

She never said a word to me and she was looking at me and her thoughts would just come into my awareness. Her thoughts were things like, "You are loved. You are cherished forever. There's nothing

you can do wrong. You have nothing to worry about. You will be taken care of.” It was so soothing and so beautiful, and of course as I said, my language wasn’t really working then. So those particular words were words I had to put on it when I came back out. But a lot of this flowed perfectly when I came back out.

In fact, I didn’t read anything about near-death experiences or about physics or cosmology because of the advice my older son, Eben IV, who was majoring in neuroscience at the University of Delaware advised me. Three days after I left the hospital, when he came home for Thanksgiving back in 2008, he said, “Well, if you want to write this up as a useful report, don’t read anything. Just write everything down you can remember.”

I spent the next two months typing everything I could remember in the computer. It came out to about 100 pages of memories from this deep experience within the coma. I think from that beautiful valley scene on the butterfly wing, waterfalls, pools of water, indescribable colors, and above there were these arks of silver and gold light and beautiful hymns coming down from them. Indescribably gorgeous hymns. I later came to call them “angels,” those arks of light in the sky. I think that word is probably fairly accurate.

On this butterfly wing, the first time I was there, I remember having this sensation. It was as if there was a warm summer breeze that just blew by. Then everything changed and the scene stayed the same but I became aware. Again in looking back on it, that was my awareness of a Divine presence of incredibly indescribable, kind of a superpower of divinity. Then we went out of this universe.

I remember just seeing everything receding and initially I felt as if my awareness was in an infinite black void. It was very comforting but I could feel the extent of the infinity and that it was, as you would expect, impossible to put into words. I was there with that Divine presence that was not anything that I could visibly see and describe, and with a brilliant orb of light. There was a distinct sensation from me, a memory, that they were not one and the same. I don’t know what that means.

In my awareness, when I say I was aware, this goes far, far beyond the consciousness of any one—this is not Eben Alexander’s consciousness aware of being in that space. I was far beyond that point, way beyond any kind of human consciousness, and really just one consciousness. When I got there they said that I would be going back, but I didn’t know what that meant.

They said there were many things that they would show me, and they continued to do that. In fact, the whole higher-dimensional multiverse was that this incredibly complex corrugated ball and all these lessons coming into me about it. Part of the lessons involved becoming all of what I was being shown. It was indescribable.

But then I would find myself—and time out there I can say is totally different from what we call time. There was access from out there to any part of our space/time and that made it difficult to understand

a lot of these memories because we always try to sequence things and put them in linear form and description. That just really doesn't work.

But suffice it to say that I would find myself back at the earthworm eye-view. What I learned was that if I could recall the notes of that melody, the spinning melody, that would start the melody spinning again and that would take me back into that beautiful, crisp, clear hyper-real valley on the butterfly wing. My guardian angel was always there and she was always very comforting.

Then we would go out into what I came to call "the coral," which was outside of the entire physical universe. Again, they would show lessons and often those lessons would involve becoming a tremendous part of what they were demonstrating.

So much of it is just indescribable and so much of it there are reasons why we cannot bring a lot of that back. And there are reasons, in fact, it's why I've come to see that we're conscious in spite of our brain. To me that makes a lot more sense.

I go into detail about all that in my book, but it turns out that I would oscillate from this beautiful, idyllic place in the core, coming back down into earthworm eye-view, and it seems it was three or four times. Like I said, sequencing was so strange because when I was in the earthworm eye-view, everything seemed to be one kind of soup of just mixed foam. It was very hard to put sequence on it but it was very clear to me that several times I would use the memory of those notes and spin that melody and go back in. They would always say, "You are not here to stay."

**Alex Tsakiris:** Dr. Alexander, a couple of questions. First, what is the title of your book?

**Dr. Eben Alexander:** Okay. Well, I'm going through several possible agents right now. I don't have a publisher and I have a feeling that agents and publishers will have their own ideas. What I can tell you is that the tentative working title right now, and this could easily change, is *Life Beyond Death: A Neurosurgeon's Life-Changing Near-Death Odyssey*.

**Alex Tsakiris:** Let me hone in on a couple of things. It's an amazing experience, an amazing account. Tell us a little bit about coming back into this world. I want to hone in on a couple of things that we need to nail down if we're going to really try and understand this account from our world.

One thing I want to nail down is the time perspective. How do we know that these memories were formed during the time when you're in a coma? You've already laid out a couple of points about that in that normally we wouldn't even expect you to have a lot of clear, coherent memories three days after coming out of this coma. But you said that's when you started writing down this account. You also said you tried not to contaminate your memories with talking to other people. So those are good parts of your story.

What are some other aspects of it that you can tell us that make you confident that these memories

were formed while you were in this severely compromised mental state?

**Dr. Eben Alexander:** I can tell you that when I first started waking up, it was very shocking because as I said, I didn't have memories of my life before and my family, loved ones, sisters, my wife and sons, they were there. So initially I have a very distinct memory as I was emerging, which was on the seventh day of coma. I was still on the ventilator and still had the endotracheal tube in.

My awareness was of several faces. I remember one was my wife and one was a good friend of ours who is also my infectious disease doctor and a neighbor, Dr. Scott Wade. Then one was also my 10-year-old son. These faces were there. I did not recognize them. They would say words. I didn't understand the words, but I had a very powerful visual memory. They would kind of boil up out of the muck and then they'd go away.

I'm fairly sure that was Sunday morning because much, much later, after I'd written everything down and I did start asking people about things that had happened, it seemed that that's when people were doing that. Now in fact, they'd been doing it all week but I think I was unaware of it during the week. That's mainly based on the people that I do remember seeing who only those who were there that Sunday morning were.

My language started coming back very quickly and so did my visual cortex, because I think—again, it's so hard to put a time label on this. But in talking with people who were there, I think that probably over an hour or two or three I started getting language back quickly. My auditory cortex started coming online. My ability to understand speech, so what's called Wernicke's area in the dominant temporal lobe was starting to come back up to speed and I can understand things. I could then start making speech.

So I was having a very rapid return of cortical function, but I was still kind of in and out of reality. In fact, in my book I go into great detail describing what I call the "nightmare," which was kind of a paranoid, crazy thing where I was halfway in and out of reality. My younger son, Bond, he can describe it to you. It was kind of a very frightening thing because I would seem to be with it and then I'd be saying things that were just out of my mind.

Of course, initially as I explained to some of my physicians, what I remembered was this incredibly powerful hyper-real spiritual experience. They would say, "Oh, yes, well you were very, very sick. We thought you were going to die. I can't even believe that you're back." They were predicting that I would have two to three months in the hospital and then need chronic care for the rest of my life. So they were obviously quite shocked that I came back like I did. It was just so strange.

Initially I thought, "Gosh, it was almost too real to be real." That hyper-reality that people describe, I just wish we could bottle that up and give it to people so they could see what it's like because it is not something that is going to be explained by these little simplistic kind of talking about CO<sub>2</sub> and oxygen

levels. That just won't work. I promise you that won't work.

**Alex Tsakiris:** That's an interesting point because as you mentioned briefly, you know it won't work because you actually went and tried to see if there was a model that you were aware of from your training that could fit your experience, right?

So you became a near-death experiencer who became a near-death experience researcher from a neurophysiological standpoint. I think that's one of the things that really draws people to your story. Tell us a little bit more about your quest to understand this from the perspective of your background as a neurosurgeon.

**Dr. Eben Alexander:** Okay, well I can tell you that I mentioned a few minutes ago that initially I was getting the message from my physicians that I was extremely sick and it doesn't surprise them that I had very, very unusual memories. There was one other thing that really got my attention that I'll mention, and that is I told you about the faces I saw kind of floating in the muck, which I think—again, it's hard to put a time on it. I know that some of them appeared that Sunday morning and maybe the Saturday afternoon. Some could have been earlier.

There was one that I think was earlier, although she seems like all the rest. Her name is Susan Reintjes and she's a friend of my wife's. They worked together 25 years earlier teaching in Raleigh. Susan's had a lot of experience helping coma patients. She wrote a book called, *Third Eye Open*. It's about her going into a state or trance and then going to them in whatever fashion. That's not something I claim to understand. But not through the physical material realm.

In fact, she had done that with a lot of patients and she discussed that in her book. Holly called her up, I think it was Thursday at night that Susan heard all this and said, "Yes, I'll try and help." I remember her being there very clearly. I mean, just like all the rest. She was there and she never was physically there. She did this from Chapel Hill where she lives.

Of course, in the first few days as I was coming around and I told my wife about the six faces that I remembered, that does not include my guardian angel who I still didn't know at that time, but those six faces. And Susan Reintjes was there. Holly said, "She did come to you channeling. She came to you in the psychic realm." I can tell you when Holly told me that I said, "Of course. Don't need any explanation for that."

Of course, as I healed—it probably took three or four weeks for a lot of my neuroscience and neurosurgical training to come back—all along that time I was still writing all this down and not reading anything. I was very tempted but my son had told me, "You want this to be worthwhile, don't read anything else. Just write it all down." I just was shocked; I was buffeted because my neuroscience mind said, "No, that couldn't happen." The more I heard about how sick I was, my cortex shut down, "No, that's impossible, your cortex was down."

Of course, for a while I was going after the hypotheses that involved formation of these very complex, intricate memories either right before my coma or right coming out of it. That really did not explain it at all. Part of the problem, when you get right down to it, is that whole issue of remembering the melody because that was a very clear part of it. I remember the elation when I figured that I could just remember that melody and that spun the melody in front of me.

Then all of a sudden, boom! Everything opened up and I went back out into that valley, so crisp and beautiful, and my angel was with me, as I came to call her, my companion on the butterfly wing. And then out into the core, outside of the universe. Very difficult to explain in that fluctuation.

I guess one could always argue, “Well, your brain was probably just barely able to ignite real consciousness and then it would flip back into a very diseased state,” which doesn’t make any sense to me. Especially because that hyper-real state is so indescribable and so crisp. It’s totally unlike any drug experience. A lot of people have come up to me and said, “Oh that sounds like a DMT experience,” or “That sounds like ketamine.” Not at all. That is not even in the right ballpark.

Those things do not explain the kind of clarity, the rich interactivity, the layer upon layer of understanding and of lessons taught by deceased loved ones and spiritual beings. Of course, they’re all deceased loved ones. I’ve kind of wondered where it is that these people are coming from. They say, “The brain was very sick but it was very selective and made sure it only remembered deceased loved ones.” They’re just not hearing something.

**Alex Tsakiris:** You know, I think that brings up a very interesting point and one that we’ve covered a lot on this show. To be fair—well, not only to be fair but to really understand the entire phenomena and understand how it fits in our culture, in our society, which I think is important because here you are, someone like yourself with your obvious intellectual capabilities but also medical understanding and you have this experience and you have to come back and try and make it make sense with all your training.

I think all the rest of us are right there with you trying to make sense of these completely counter-intuitive experiences and then trying to jam them back in our head and in our experience. In that sense, I do have a lot of empathy and appreciation for the NDE researchers, both the skeptical ones and the non-skeptical ones. So let me talk a little bit about that NDE research and get your perspective on it. Of course there are a few of these brave researchers out there who have stuck their neck out—really only a very few—and have tried to tackle this.

It seems to me that they’re really barely making a dent in the medical model that we have. The medical model that we have sees us as these biological robots and death as kind of the ultimate Boogeyman. Can we really believe that we’re really going to change such an entrenched system?

**Dr. Eben Alexander:** I think so. I think that is very much a possibility. There’s this whole issue of

mind and brain and duality versus non-dualism and the physical material reductivist models. I go into this in great detail in my book but I think you have to go back about 3,000 years to really get to the beginning of the discussion and to start to see why certain things have transpired.

I think most importantly was the part of this discussion that happened between Rene Descartes and Spinoza back in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. They started us into our current era. Our current era is one of mind/consciousness/our soul has been put in the realm of the church more-or-less. There was kind of a truce of sorts that I guess Descartes came up with back then to say there's mind and then there's body and just let the natural scientists, those with an interest like Francis Bacon and Galileo and Newton, let's not burn them all at the stake. Let some of them survive.

So I think it was a good thing to have that truce so that science survived. I mean, I'm a scientist and I love science and the scientific method. I've just come to realize that the universe is much grander than we appreciate. So I have to simply broaden my definitions.

I think science is still very important to get us there. Getting back to that mind/brain issue, what happened over time is science kind of grew up and got to be more and more powerful at giving us many things. Science has been a real wonder. But I think that it's been somewhat at a price and that price came from splitting out mind and body back then and that dualistic approach because as science gained more and more of an upper hand, people were losing track of the kind of mind part of it, the consciousness part.

**Alex Tsakiris:** Let's talk about that a little bit right now because part of that does seem to be contradictory to your experience and the experiences we've heard from other folks who have had these transformative spiritual experiences in that if there is this broader knowing—and much broader—broader doesn't even begin to describe it but that we hear over and over again.

We hear it from your account; we hear it from many near-death experience accounts. We also hear it from all sorts of transformative spiritual accounts, kundulini accounts, spontaneous spiritual awakenings. There's this sense of knowing, much, much greater knowing that then must be crammed back into our body and it doesn't fit, you know? So your account says that and others do, as well.

Can we really then hope to get out of the consciousness loop that we're in now? Is it just going to be a matter of a philosophical shift like we had back in the 1700's? Or is there something fundamental to the way that we're constructed that's going to keep us limited in how much we can really tap into and understand that knowing that you experienced?

**Dr. Eben Alexander:** In my view, what I think is going to happen is that science in the much broader sense of the word and spirituality which will be mainly an acknowledgement of the profound nature of our consciousness will grow closer and closer together. We will all move forward into a far more enlightened world. One thing that we will have to let go of is this kind of addiction to simplistic,

primitive reductive materialism because there's really no way that I can see a reductive materialist model coming remotely in the right ballpark to explain what we really know about consciousness now.

Coming from a neurosurgeon who, before my coma, thought I was quite certain how the brain and the mind interacted and it was clear to me that there were many things I could do or see done on my patients and it would eliminate consciousness. It was very clear in that realm that the brain gives you consciousness and everything else and when the brain dies there goes consciousness, soul, mind—it's all gone. And it was clear.

Now, having been through my coma, I can tell you that's exactly wrong and that in fact the mind and consciousness are independent of the brain. It's very hard to explain that, certainly if you're limiting yourself to that reductive materialist view.

Any of the scientists in the crowd who want to get in on this, what I would recommend is there's one book I consider the bible of this. It's a wonderful book but it is really for those who have a strong scientific interest in it. It's called *Irreducible Mind*, Edward Kelly, Emily Williams Kelly, Bruce Greyson, Adam Crabtree, Alan Galt, Michael Grassa, the whole group from Esalen and also based in the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia, have done an incredibly good job.

*Toward a Psychology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* is the subtitle and that's exactly what it is.

I felt their book was quite illustrative and of course it caused a huge splash when it came out in 1987, but again a lot of the reductive materialists like myself were not really going to put in the work to go through all of that. We just thought, "We can't understand it so it can't be true."

**Alex Tsakiris:** I think you're being a little bit too generous there because some of the folks do do the work. Do tap into the research and still come out the other end holding onto that materialistic model that we're stuck with here because there's a lot invested in it. With that, what I wanted to do was I sent you a couple of audio clips that I thought you might like to respond to because it fits in with what you were just talking about—people who have walked in your shoes and are still there in that model.

The first clip I'd like to play for you is a former guest on this show, Dr. Steven Novella, who is a clinical neurologist at Yale University. He's a well-known and outspoken skeptic of near-death experiences but a nice guy who's willing to engage the topic. What I thought I'd do is play this little clip and see any response you might have to it, okay?

**Dr. Eben Alexander:** All right.

**Dr. Steven Novella:** *The three basic kinds of explanations are one is spiritual; that it represents the fact that the mind can exist separate from the brain. The second one is a psychological experience of some sort. And then the third is that it's organic; it's neurophysiological. The evidence and some of the best explanatory models that people are putting forward are blending the second two, the psychological and the organic, the neuroscientific. I think what we're seeing is that there's a core*

*experience that's primarily organic. It's just the kinds of things that can happen to the brain under various kinds of stress.*

**Alex Tsakiris:** Now, I've got to add that if you really listen to the whole interview with Steve and the follow-up that we had, what he's talking about is really a bunch of fluff. [Laughs] There really isn't any research that shows any neurophysiological cause for near-death experience. I really held his feet to the fire and he was unable to produce anything of any real substance about that research.

But maybe you can talk because it speaks so much to the position that you were in just a few years ago, about that position and that kind of entrenched "It has to be in the brain" kind of thing and how you think that relates to near-death experience.

**Dr. Eben Alexander:** I would say for one thing I think that a healthy skeptical approach to all this is a good thing because it helps us get to the truth. It helps us know the answer. What we have to be careful of, of course, is not getting in the trap of having our prejudices rule the day. A lot of these experiments and studies, how you interpret them will depend a lot on what your prejudices are going in.

I found early on in my experience, I had to do as Descartes recommended when he was talking about getting to the truth, and that was to really ignore or to reject everything I had ever accepted as real. That was the only way to start getting to where I could figure any of this out. I

know that a lot of the reductive scientific crowd out there—I have a favorite quote from Stephen Hawking. He says, "There's a fundamental difference between religion, which is based on authority or imposed dogma and faith, as opposed to science which is based on observation and reason." What I would say is I think his statement is true as a general statement but that science, and certainly those who believe in science and scientists, are as prone to addiction to imposed dogma and faith as our religious zealot. So one has to be very careful to really step back and want to know the truth. That's what I think we all would like to know.

**Alex Tsakiris:** In this case, if we really do step back one of the things that's troubling to me, and you touched on it a minute ago, is how overwhelming the evidence seems to be. At this point, we can confidently say that near-death experiences didn't just start happening in the last 20 years since we had advanced resuscitation techniques.

We can confidently say that 4% to 5% of everyone who has a cardiac arrest is having this. There's obviously hundreds of millions of people over time who have had these accounts and we have thousands and thousands of well-documented, consistent accounts across cultures, across times. These are the measures that we would normally use to say, "This is a real phenomenon."

And then when the skeptics, and really the mainstream scientists have pounded against it for 20 years with really what amounts to a bunch of very silly explanations but ones that have been carefully looked

at and dismissed—was it CO<sub>2</sub>, a fear of death, other psychological factors? Is it all the different things like REM intrusion? All these things.

Clearly this would normally be something where we'd be putting a lot of attention into it. Or that it would then become the presumed explanation for it. But none of that's happening. They have managed to hold back the dyke, you know? So what do you make of that?

**Dr. Eben Alexander:** Okay, I think in trying to get back to your original question with the previous guest, to me one thing that has emerged from my experience and from very rigorous analysis of that experience over several years, talking it over with others that I respect in neuroscience, and really trying to come up with an answer, is that consciousness outside of the brain is a fact. It's an established fact.

And of course, that was a hard place for me to get, coming from being a card-toting reductive materialist over decades. It was very difficult to get to knowing that consciousness, that there's a soul of us that is not dependent on the brain. As much as I know all the reductive materialist arguments against that, I think part of the problem is it's like the guy looking for his keys under the streetlight. Reductive materialists are under the streetlight because that's where they can see things.

But in fact, if your keys are lost out in the darkness, the techniques there are no good. It is only by letting go of that reductive materialism and opening up to what is a far more profound understanding of consciousness. This is where I think for me as a scientist, I look at quantum mechanics and I go into this in great detail in my book, is a huge part of the smoking gun. It shows us that there's something going on there about consciousness that our primitive models don't get. It's far more profound than I ever realized before.

That's where I'm coming from because my experience showed me very clearly that incredibly powerful consciousness far beyond what I'm trapped in here in the earthly realm begins to emerge as you get rid of that filtering mechanism of the brain. It is really astonishing. And that is what we need to explain. Thousands or millions of near-death experiencers have talked about this.

Not only that but as you mentioned a few minutes ago, people don't even have to go to a near-death situation. There are plenty of mystical experiences that have occurred over millennia that are part of the same mechanism. That's why all this talk about oxygen, tension, CO<sub>2</sub> and all that you can pretty much throw out the window. You really need to be working towards explaining all of those phenomena. Part of the problem is they're hard to explain but that is a clue.

Willy Lomans was asked, "Why do you rob banks?" He said, "Because that's where the money is." Well, same kind of thing. They are hard issues and the whole understanding of what consciousness really involves. I came a lot closer to that in my coma experience and coming out of it and in doing all the very intense homework for the three years since then to try and understand it. It's a difficult question

because it's close to the real truth that we're going after. If it were easy it would be widely available. It would already have been written up by somebody who wanted to publish or perish. That's not how it works. It's not that easy.

**Alex Tsakiris:** Dr. Alexander, in the little bit of time we have left what's it been like being so public about your experience?

**Dr. Eben Alexander:** Well, many people have come up to me and said, "Wow, this takes a lot of courage to do this." You know, it probably would have taken courage to talk like this right after I came out of it. I learned to put the lid on it but then as I did more and more work and talked with more people and started realizing, "Oh my gosh, this is all real." Then I can tell you, it takes no courage at all. It simply is so powerful to know this.

One thing I'm trying to do in my book is to show why it's so logical, why this is a very rational way for things to work, especially when you really delve into the profound mystery of conscious existence. Again, I'd recommend *Irreducible Mind* to any people with a scientific bent who really want to get into it.

Go in there because the whole issue is far, far deeper than we would like to think. It's absolutely wonderful to realize this. I think it's going to change this world in wonderful ways. But a big part of it, of course, is to try and broaden the boundaries of science and of what we accept and will use to get towards truth. I'm very hopeful that science and spirituality will come together hand-in-hand and go forward to help with getting these answers and help people to understand the true nature of our existence. A side effect will be that humanity and the grace and harmony that we will see around this world will expand tremendously as we move forward in that fashion.

**Alex Tsakiris:** Great. It's certainly an amazing account and you do a great job of bringing forth this information. We wish you the best of luck with that and we'll certainly look forward to your book, coming out when? Probably next year maybe?

**Dr. Eben Alexander:** I certainly hope so. I'm hoping to finish it now. I do have a web page which is [lifebeyonddeath.net](http://lifebeyonddeath.net) for any people who have an interest. I tell you, I'm so busy on the book. You can send me email or sign up for the newsletter or whatever, but I won't be responding for a few months. If people are interested, they're welcome to get in touch and sign up for the newsletter, which won't come out until I'm done on the book. Then we'll move from there.

It's just a wonderful gift and I think people will see that it actually makes more sense than anything else has so far. That's why I think it's of inestimable value to get this out to the world.

**Alex Tsakiris:** Thanks so much for joining us today.

**Dr. Eben Alexander:** Thank you very much. I appreciate it, Alex.