

NEW LIGHT ON THE NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE?

Unique research of Dutch cardiologist Van Lommel gets worldwide attention

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2001 Dutch cardiologist Pim van Lommel[1] caused a sensation by getting his research on people who had had a Near-Death Experience (NDE) published in *The Lancet*, the British bastion of regular medicine.[2] ([Click here](#) for the original article.) Since then he is a much sought after speaker on this topic, both in the Netherlands and abroad. At the end of 2007 he published a massive tome (in the Dutch language) called *Endless Consciousness: A Scientific View on the Near-Death Experience*.[3] Currently, it appears high on the best sellers lists[4], which is remarkable for a book of this level of complexity. But then again, life after death is a subject that speaks to everyone of us.



In this book, Van Lommel not only reports on the research he did, but places it also within the larger context of science and philosophy/religion. He also ventures on speculations on the nature of human consciousness and turns for this, following other scientists, to quantum

physics. On March 26 2008, the Dutch television featured this doctor/scientist in an episode of a series called "Profile" under the title "The mission of Pim van Lommel".[5] In this documentary a few critical comments were aired, through the neurologist Dick Swaab. Especially in Belgium this topic was discussed at the academic level, soon after the *Lancet* publication, at a symposium at Leuven.[6] On the Internet some individual but interesting comments can be found as well.[7]

Briefly stated, according to Van Lommel his research has shown that:

1. people who suffer a cardiac arrest and the have zero brain function can have very clear and complex experiences,
2. human consciousness may therefore not always be identical to the physical brain (contrary to what neurology tells us) and
3. this consciousness can perhaps survive the death of this body, like all the religions of the world reach us.

His opponents consider this to be both impossible and unlikely. This essays contains some personal reflections on Van Lommel's book and the discussions which ensued.

2. THE NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

Everybody knows the expression "near-death experience" and the related imagery of the tunnel and the Light. However, "the" near-death experience doesn't exist. It is a gradual affair. Van Lommel considers the following subsequent elements as characteristic of a "complete" near-death experience:

1. Ineffability
2. A feeling of peace and rest; no pain is experienced
3. The awareness of being dead
4. An out-of-the-body experience (OBE)
5. One abides in a dark space
6. The tunnel experience
7. A scary Near-Death Experience
8. The perception of a non-earthly environment

9. The meeting and communication with deceased persons
10. The encounter with a radiant light or being of light
11. A retrospective vision life review
12. A prospective vision or "flash forward"
13. The perception of a border line
14. The conscious return to the body

By far not everybody who has an NDE experiences all these elements. Maybe one could compare it to a visit to a swimming pool. For one person, a "swimming pool experience", this would consist of a jump into deep waters, for somebody else it would be a dip into the surface, playing in the water for hours, or swimming over a long distance. They have all experienced the water - a nice old symbol for the astral world or the hereafter.

What is remarkable as well: only one out of every five persons turned out to have had a more or less complete near-death experience. Why four out of five did not had this (or could not remember it) remains unexplained even in Van Lommel's research. The most important result of Van Lommel's research - actually the absence of a result - is that people who have experienced a NDE during a cardiac arrest were not much different from those who lacked this experience. Therefore, this experience cannot simply be explained by oxygen deprivation - a widely heard explanation put forth by skeptics - because all of the people involved had this condition more or less.

Van Lommel's research is called "prospective", because it has tracked the respondents in the years following their experiences, even up to eight years. The only clear difference between both groups was that the NDE-ers were no longer afraid of death, even after many years. I would not feel like that if I had the idea that I had left my body. But evidence for survival is something entirely different.

3. PARAPSYCHOLOGY AND TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY

The research done by Van Lommel can be seen as a form of transpersonal research (he has been a member of the Dutch transpersonal association ITANT). According to many, it bridges the gap between science and spirituality. But there is another scientific discipline which studies extraordinary human experiences: parapsychology. Therefore, we have to establish a demarcation line between these two fields of science. A near-death experience does contain paranormal elements (for example, the perception of deceased persons, the leaving and perception of one's own body, extra-sensory perception of physical objects and even the perception of higher worlds, etc.) One could compare this distinction as the difference between what was called in earlier days mysticism and occultism. Mysticism is about the experience of unity with the Divine, feelings of bliss and peace, and also of a union with other people. Occultism is about the perception of higher realities, including aura's, higher beings such as angels and also the deceased. In my opinion the near-death experience is by and large a paranormal experience, and therefore has to be judged by that discipline. Only the aspect of the experience of light and peace, and the deeper feeling of union with others could be called a mystical experience.

Transpersonal psychology was established to study in a scientific way spiritual experience such as can arise during meditation or LSD consumption. It has not been started, in my opinion, to support or legitimize religion, or build a bridge between science and spirituality, or whatever expression one wants to use. It does not lead to better science, or better spirituality, for that matter.

Parapsychology exists for over a century, but unfortunately after all these decades it cannot supply any well-established results. What is more, among those who study this field there are - in military terms - two groups: the hawks and the doves, or the skeptics and the believers. The believers state that the evidence for the paranormal is "overwhelming", and that those who after all these years still doubt it are members of the dogmatic Church of Science, are

afraid of a paradigm shift, etc. On the other hand, skeptics state that the so-called evidence is shaky, often has a strong anecdotal flavor and does not hold up to scrutiny.

Sometimes, I have the idea that this could in large part be a matter of temperament. Some people are completely at home with the idea that ultimately everything can be reduced to matter (the materialist is philosophically an extravert); others attribute reality to their subjective feelings and thoughts (they are the philosophical introverts). May be there is a psychological for this fruitless battle between skeptics and believers, which frustrates the progress of this discussion. Both rationalize their emotional choice with ad hoc arguments, which make them feel comfortable. I myself am a dove who is very much interested in what hawks come up with...

4. CRITICISM AND REPLIES

The first thing to notice, I think, is that what is *not* debated is:

1. people under certain life-threatening circumstances, such as a cardiac arrest, can have certain extraordinary experiences, and
2. these experiences can deeply influence their view of life, even after many years.

This is in fact what Van Lommel and his team has studied and extensively documented. This is not disputed.

Incidentally, Van Lommel found that also those who during a cardiac arrest did not have a NDE had a different outlook on life. Probably they felt they had been "lucky", and will live their life more carefully. A near-accident on the street can have the same effect, I suppose.

What *is* disputed by critics of Van Lommel's research is:

1. what is the cause of these experiences (are they produced by the human brain, or by a non-bodily, perhaps even a spiritual source)?
2. can they teach us anything about the nature of reality (or are they purely subjective)?

These are questions which defy a simple scientific answer. They can be called the metaphysical implications of this type of research. The next paragraph touches on that subject.

Dick Swaab stated in the television documentary mentioned above that with his book, Van Lommel has left the field of science and entered the field of philosophy/religion. (Not coincidentally, the book has been published by Ten Have, a theological publishing house). More specifically Swaab formulated his objections as follows: Van Lommel states that during a NDE people have zero brain function, but it is not at all impossible that at a deeper level of the brain some activity can occur. An experience which is independent of any brain function is out of the question. In his book *Endless Consciousness* Van Lommel has replied to this criticism:

According to me, the often voiced counter-argument that the stopping of the blood supply and a flat EEG don't exclude some minor activity somewhere in the brain, because an EEG registers primarily what goes on in the cortex, misses the essence. Because, the point is not that somewhere some un-measurable activity could be going on, but whether the specific brain activity that according to modern neurology is necessary for the experience of consciousness exists.

It is a pity that in the Netherlands there hasn't been a true public debate on this subject. Shouldn't we arrange an evening television about it? We will only book progress if those for and against enter into dialogue with each other, and we don't have to do with sound bytes in front of the camera. When truth finding is considered more worthwhile than justifying one's own opinion.

Another strong point Van Lommel brought up during the documentary is that according to the current demands of science, our subjective feelings and thought cannot exist – for sure, we cannot detect them with the available scientific instruments? Apparently some part of us already eludes a scientific approach. This could be formulated in this way: if we have a soul *now*, we will

have it after death as well – and vice versa: if we don't have it now, we won't have it later on. So we have to figure out how what we are made of *now*.

During the Leuven symposium it was put forward that it is not at all certain that people with a cardiac arrest show no brain activity at all. This could very well be the case, much longer than the few seconds Van Lommel mentions. Also, it was stated that many elements of a classical NDE can be triggered artificially by the stimulation of certain brain parts. De reply by Van Lommel that in this way a "complete" NDB can never be accomplished has been answered by commenting that also in Van Lommels research group a complete NDE is relatively rare. So, when these specialist details are still under debate, what can a layman do? This is something for specialists to probe.

Perhaps the most fatal criticism regarding Van Lommel's hypothesis comes from the Dutch anesthesiologist Woerlee, author of the book *Mortal Minds*, who states that about 15% of people who get reanimated have a higher than average blood pressure compared to the others, which could still supply the brain with oxygen. Isn't this exactly the number of people that reported a NDE? And would this not exactly explain why someone reports a NDE, and someone else doesn't?

In general, resistance to Van Lommel's hypothesis is fed by the conviction that a non-materialist explanatory model, which takes refuge in a spiritual reality, is both incomprehensible and scientifically unfruitful. Would biology have made any progress, had it stuck to vitalism? True again. Susan Blackmore echoes the same sentiment in her book *Beyond the Body*, in which she evaluates a century of research on out-of-the-body experiences and is forced to conclude: "Nothing leaves the body".[9] According to her, an out-of-the-body experience is a temporarily distorted body image, during which fantasy runs free. Theories about an astral plane are incomprehensible for her. Spicy detail: Blackmore had out-of-the-body experiences at a young age (when she

still believed in the paranormal), but moved over to the sceptics camp after years of disappointing psychical research.

Dutch biologist Gert Korthof, who claims to have found many scientific blunders in Van Lommel's book, ends his online critical review of *Endless Consciousness* in the same skeptical spirit[7]:

Van Lommel's book goes much and much further than his *Lancet* article. In his book, he leaves the paths of regular science and ventures on thin ice, and unknown territory. What is more, he enters the field of philosophy/religion. With this book he has associated the NDE for good with inferior science, reincarnation and communication with the dead. By doing this he has done a disservice to the group of NDE patients in the Netherlands. On the contrary, it hurts this group. The very group he intends to help. If he had stuck to a translation of and commentary on the *Lancet* article, it would have been useful for the "recognition" of the NDE phenomenon and even interesting.

5. NEW PHYSICS, METAPHYSICS OR POST-METAPHYSICS

Let's turn to the spiritual side of the matter for a moment. Van Lommel discusses in his book also the religious views on life after death, and comments that a certain form of survival has been acknowledged in Christianity. Scientifically, this does not prove anything, of course. Also, we should not forget that the doctrine of bodily resurrection might be more representative of Christian theology than the doctrine of the immortality of the soul – whatever religious believers have come up with.

Reviewing the various philosophical options regarding survival, one finds that there are three possibilities[10] (see also my essay "[Three Models of Immortality](#)" posted on this site):

1. The doctrine of "resurrection" of the body – we are identical to our bodies and will cease to exist after death, until God "wakes us up" again and supplies us with a new body..
2. The doctrine of the "immortal soul" – we have a soul, which survives the death of the body in another world. This is called "dualism". The relationship between soul and body is mysterious.

3. The doctrine of the "shadow-man" – we have other bodies beyond our physical body (astral, mental, causal, etc.), in which we can live on in other worlds.

This third option, which is rarely discussed, looks very much like what Van Lommel's patients have reported about their NDE-experiences. It also features in theosophical teachings. Oddly, Van Lommel does not explore these sources extensively. Rather, he turns to quantum physics for help. This leads me to the following.

In pre-scientific times all cultures and religions acknowledged the existence of worlds beyond the known visible world. These heavens and hells were not only the home of the deceased, but also formed an integral unity with the earthly world. Every now and then, these higher worlds entered everyday reality, something which was experienced as sacred. Pre-scientific man saw the earth as embedded in an omnipresent divine reality. Reality, in those days, had endless *depth*

When science arrived on the scene, this metaphysical view of reality was quickly discarded. From then on, only matter existed, which can be studied scientifically. At first this scientific research of nature occurred somewhat undirected, but in the course of centuries the expectation was voiced ever more loudly that science could, some time, give us a "theory of everything". What our worldview has lost as to its *depth*, it gained as to its *spaciousness*: instead of a heaven world attuned to the earth we discovered an endless physical space, in which every star turned out to be a kind of sun (and even more impressive: between these stars vague spots were found to be complete galaxies).

These days, we cannot speak anymore of high and low – the vertical dimension seems to have disappeared from our worldview – only of small and large, and in physics this really means very small and very large. Some feel this is too restrictive. In modern times, two counter cultural movements exist which try to restore this religious perspective. At the end of the nineteenth

century we had Theosophy, which tried to restore the ancient worldview by pointing to the existence of higher worlds or planes, which are intimately connected to our interior consciousness. These worlds may be invisible to the physical senses, but not for clairvoyant perception. A clairvoyant is able to observe and describe these supersensible (not supernatural!) aspects of man and reality. Many of these higher worlds are said to exist, until they disappear in the Light of the Divine. This is a great vision, full of gradual transitions – an important point.[11]

The second countercultural current which has tried to bring science and religion closer to each other is of more recent date: the New Age looks for a "holism" (against "atomistic" and "reductionistic" science). Remarkably, it turns to science, especially quantum physics, which does not speak so much about particles as about omnipresent Fields. Physicists such as Lazlo speak about the Zero Point Field, which unites everything with everything else (few know it is -273.15 degrees Celsius below zero out there...) The connection between this Field and Brahman is easily made. In this view, the New Physics has scientifically proven the unity of reality (something which all religions had taught before).

This popular viewpoint has been severely criticized by those belonging to the first movement mentioned above. Ken Wilber, for one, sees the whole atomism/holism debate as a side issue, which by nature is limited to the perceptible world of physics. None of these will ever reach the depth as described in the ancient traditions (i.e. our interior consciousness with its many layers). Whether the physical world consists of small particles or one Big Field, this knowledge will never throw light on our subjective feelings and thoughts (except in a metaphorical way), not to mention consciousness as such. Of course, this is metaphysical criticism, which will not bother any scientist, but it places the whole discussion in a wider context. Attempt to link human consciousness (or even to explain it with) subatomic particles or a

universal quantum field have never convinced me personally. If that is our post-mortem future, I'd rather die normally! God does not live among photons, but He has created a world in which photons exist, and many other soul and spirit worlds. *This* view, or materialism, are the only real alternatives, I believe.

In his attempt to explain the NDE, or consciousness in general, Van Lommel likewise turns to modern physics, which has discovered the phenomenon of non-locality. In his view, human consciousness transcend the physical body (and the brain) and belongs to a non-local reality. He therefore follows the New Age track: behind the world of phenomena there's a unifying Field, in which all people partake as individuals. The more we connect to this Field, and in a NDE-experience this seems to be the case, the more clarity their awareness will have. How this actually works is also for Van Lommel a matter of speculation. How, for example, can we distinguish in this Field between my memories and yours? Again, with some kind of locality? According to Van Lommel our DNA (and especially the so-called junk-DNA, the largest part of our genome which does not seem to have any clear function) takes care of the communication between our brains and the one Field. Can this be substantiated in any way?

In my opinion, this attempt to look for the origin of consciousness in the exotic phenomena of the new physics, is a rather hopeless undertaking, because it projects the depth of reality onto the flat surface of matter; whichever take no matter one ultimately has. It never transcends the limited context of physics – old or now does not really matter. But even more serious, an absolute dualism is created between the visible body/individual on the one hand, and the one Field on the other. The finite body is contrasted with the infinite or endless consciousness. Compared to this, the theosophical view is much more gradual. The transition to the astral world is seen as a relatively unimportant one, which will be followed by many transitions (read:

subsequent deaths, no which every time a certain body is left behind) to higher worlds. And the boundary between the individual and the universal is drawn at a much higher level, which makes it easier to speak of an individual survival after death. Phenomena reported by Van Lommel such as out-of-the-body experiences, communication with the dead, etcetera, fit seamlessly into this larger framework. Calling consciousness "endless" or "omnipresent" is a too premature of mystical solution, at least according to my tastes.

Finally, we arrive at the vexed mind body problem. About 99.99% of the scientists hold on to a materialistic or "naturalistic" view of consciousness. As an exception, philosopher of mind David Chalmers[12], quoted by Van Lommel, defended in *Scientific American* the thesis that a materialistic explanation will never touch on the experiential aspects of consciousness. Incidentally, his alternative is problematic as well: he thinks that consciousness is a still unknown, but physical force. There is nothing mystical or spiritual to it, he assures us[13]. Upon which, the problem remains, if you ask me.

Are we fully reducible to matter, or doe we have an interior consciousness which can't be reduced in such a way? Ken Wilber thinks, in his customary confident way, that he has solved this problem, by simply postulating that interior and exterior cannot be reduced to each other. But how exactly do these dimensions interact is not something he can answer (other than that they do).[14] His argument is: neither materialists, who deny the mind, nor dualists, who believe in a mind, have come up with a solution, so let's at least acknowledge both dimensions. His point of view is very similar to the so-called double-aspect theory, which states that body and mind are two aspects of a third (unknown) principle. Since 2001 Wilber has scrubbed his system clean of metaphysical elements and called it "post-metaphysical".[15] However, he does have room within his four quadrants model for the interior dimension. But what implications this has for our worldview (where does this

interior dimension ultimately belong, if it can't be reduced to the brain?) stays unexplained. He does leave open the possibility of subtle bodies and energies. [16] Incidentally, Wilber has recently experienced a near-death experience himself.[17]

6. CONCLUSION

Having seen all this, what are we to finally make of the near-death experience?

Within a naturalistic interpretation, this all remains a matter of imagination and memories, which get stimulated during a life-threatening situation. But why is this imagination so complex and so constant? Why is there not much more variation among the reports? And do we actually know what imagination is? Isn't this precisely the Achilles heel of science: subjective awareness eludes any scientific explanation. We know everything about the outside world – from the very small to the very large – but we know next to nothing about the inside world of a human being, which seems to obey different laws. Ironically, even if one interprets the NDE as an opening to another reality, imagination plays its role. Obviously there isn't a tunnel out there through which everybody must pass – everybody creates his or her own tunnel experience.

An explanation of the NDE in terms of the new physics and the quantum world could ironically be called "naturalistic" as well. Because nowhere in it refuge is sought to supernatural principles. But as explained above, a quantum-explanation of the NDE seems somewhat forced. On the one hand one does want to go beyond the lines of normal science, but at the same time one does not want to leave science behind altogether. The one Field is used as a magical solution for everything we don't (yet) understand about human consciousness. I even read on a recent website that the Zero Point Fields helps against a burn out!

Compared to this, a metaphysical interpretation of the NDE is much more natural. During a NDE we leave our bodies and contact another reality. The story which arises from Van Lommel's research not only shows a substantial likeness with what other NDE-researchers have reported, what is more important, the NDE-reports are corroborated by other paranormal phenomena (such as mediumship, out-of-the-body experiences, apparitions, reincarnation memories, death-bed observations, cases of possession, etc.) [18] These are all phenomena which point in a certain direction – the visible, physical world is part of a larger, metaphysical world, of which we form part with our interior consciousness, even now – which mutually support each other, even though all this is very difficult to prove in an objective way. But at the end of the day, these are all date of human experience.

Perhaps, after all, it is ultimately a matter of the metaphysical assumptions we have. But there is one, though perhaps meagre, comfort regarding the question of life after death: we all will know the answer some time. And before that moment comes, pondering this issue is not a waste of time. Did not Heidegger say, that our life is a *Sein zum Tode*, and that our lives will be more authentic the more we realize this fact?

Every moment will then be a near-death experience.

NOTES

1. See the website of the author www.pimvanlommel.net and the site of the Merkawah Foundation he helped found in 1988, which forms part of the International Association for Near Death Studies (IANDS), www.merkawah.nl
2. Lommel, P. van, Wees, R. van, Meyers, V. & I. Elferrich. (2001). Near-death experiences in survivors of cardiac arrest: A prospective study in the Netherlands. *The Lancet*, 358, 2039-2045.
3. Pim van Lommel, *Eindeloos bewustzijn: Een wetenschappelijke visie op de bijna-dood ervaring*, UitgeverijTen Have, 2007. 403 blz., with glossary, notes, sources and index.

4. www.bol.com, 2nd place in the non-fiction top 25. 18 mei 2008.
5. 'KRO Profiel': De missie van Pim van Lommel, 24 maart 2008.
6. See for example: "Bijna-dood ervaringen: Het rechtstreekse debat, www.skepp.be
7. See for example: Gert Korthof, "Fouten in het boek van Pim van Lommel", een blog in 5 delen, evolutie.blog.com.
8. See for example: the Winter 2007 issue of *Skepter*, which contains contributions by Woerlee, Nienhuis, Korthof and Sluijter, who demolish Van Lommel's hypothesis.
9. Susan Blackmore, *Beyond the Body: An Investigation of Out-of-the-Body Experiences*, Granada, 1981 (Published on behalf of the Society for Psychical Research) and also her recent *Dying to Live: Science and the Near-Death Experience*. Grafton, 1991. For a critical look at Blackmore see: G. Stone, "A Critique of Susan Blackmore's Dying Brain Hypothesis", <http://www.near-death.com/experiences/articles001.html>
10. See: Anthony Flew, 1967, "Immortality", *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 4, p. 139-150.
11. See: Frank Visser, *Zeven sferen: Theosofie als leidraad voor psychologie en levensbeschouwing*, Uitgeverij der Theosofische Vereniging in Nederland, 1995.
12. David Chalmers, "The Puzzle of Conscious Experience", *Scientific American*, December 1996 en *The Conscious Mind*, Oxford University Press, 1996.
13. David Chalmers, "Facing Up to the Problem Consciousness", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1995, pp. 200-219, in which he states: "There is nothing spiritual or mystical about this theory – its general form is that of a physical theory."
14. Ken Wilber, *Integral Psychology: Consciousness, Spirit, Psychology, Therapy*, Shambhala, 2001, especially chapter 14: "The 1-2-3 of Consciousness

Studies", and Frank Visser. Ken Wilber: Denken als passie, Lemniscaat, 2001 (US edition: Ken Wilber: Thought as Passion, SUNY Press, 2003).

15. Ken Wilber, "On the Nature of Post-Metaphysical Spirituality: Reply to Hans-Willy Weiss", wilber.shambhala.com, 2001.

16. Ken Wilber, "Excerpt G: Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Subtle Energies", wilber.shambhala.com, 2003.

17. See: Steve Paulson, "[You are the river: An interview with Ken Wilber](#)", www.salon.com, April 2008. See Appendix below.

18. See: John White, *A Practical Guide to Death and Dying*, Quest, 1980.

APPENDIX: THE NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE OF KEN WILBER

At the end of the recent www.salon.com interview with Ken Wilber, we read:

About a year ago, you nearly died from a grand mal seizure, which triggered more seizures. From what I heard, you were on life support systems. You almost bit off your tongue. Weren't you unconscious for several days?

I did have 12 grand mal seizures in one evening. I was rushed to the E.R. comatose. I was in a coma for four days. During that time, I had electric paddles put on my heart three times. I was on dialysis because my kidneys had failed. I developed pneumonia. Ken Wilber was unconscious but Big Mind was conscious. Ken Wilber came to on the fourth day.

Are you saying some part of you was aware of what was going on, even though you were unconscious?

Yes. This is a very common experience of longtime meditators. There is an awareness during waking, dreaming and deep sleep states.

I'm having trouble understanding this. Some part of you was aware of the people moving around you?

There was a dim awareness of the room. It did include people moving in and out of the room and people sitting by the table. It did include certain procedures being done. But there wasn't a Ken Wilber as a subject relating to things that were happening. There was no separate self. Ken Wilber, if he were conscious, presumably would be upset or would be happy when the heart started beating again. But there were none of those reactions because there was just this Big Mind awareness, this nondual awareness.

The way you talk about this, it doesn't sound like such a bad experience! I would've thought this would be horrible.

[Laughs] Exactly. When you listen to more conventional near-death experiences, they don't sound so bad either. In any event, I was told that I would take quite a while to recover. But I walked out of the hospital two days later, with everything normal. So I put that down in part to my own spiritual practice and the rejuvenating capacity that this awareness has.

Does the prospect of dying frighten you?

Not really. What comes up is just thoughts of how much work in the world there is still to do. And with this recent experience – letting me know that Big Mind is what there is – that fundamental fear of dying has basically left. Still, when someone asks if I have a fear of dying, I find myself hesitating. What goes through my mind is positive stuff – friends that I would lose and work that needs to be done.