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The Mystical Impact of Near-Death Experiences

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ONCE REGARDED AS MEANINGLESS hallucinations, near-death experiences (NDEs) have become the subject of serious study by medical and various other researchers in recent years. Descriptions of near-death experiences can be found in the folklore and writings of European, Middle Eastern, African, Indian, East Asian, Pacific, and Native American cultures. In 1892, geologist Albert von St. Gallen Heim published a collection of personal NDE testimonies from mountain climbers who had fallen in the Alps (as he himself had), soldiers wounded in war, workers who had fallen from scaffolds, and those who had nearly died in drownings and other accidents. NDEs continue to be reported by individuals who were pronounced clinically dead but then were resuscitated, by people who in the course of accidents or illnesses feared that they were near death, and by some who actually died but were able to describe their experiences in their final moments (“deathbed visions”).

PHENOMENOLOGY OF NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

Raymond Moody, the psychiatrist who coined the term “near-death experience” in the mid-1970s, identified 15 elements that seem to recur in near-death experiences: ineffability, hearing oneself pronounced dead, a feeling of peace, hearing unusual noises, seeing a dark tunnel, being out of the body, meeting spiritual beings, encountering a bright light or being of light, a panoramic life review, a realm where all knowledge exists, cities of light, a realm of bewildered

spirits, a supernatural rescue, a border or a boundary, and coming back into the body. After further study he added four recurrent aftereffects: frustration upon relating the experience to others, broadened or deepened appreciation of life, elimination of the fear of death, and corroboration of out-of-body visions. Moody also noted that no two NDE accounts were the same, no experience in his collection included more than 12 of the original 15 elements, no one element appeared in every narrative, and the order in which elements appeared varied from one experience to another.

The most common features of NDEs can be grouped into four components:

Cognitive features reflect changes in thought processes, including distortions in the sense of time, acceleration of thought, a life review or panoramic memory, and a sense of revelation or sudden understanding. **Affective features** reflect changes in emotional state, including a sense of peace and well-being, joy, a sense of cosmic unity, and an encounter with a brilliant light that seems to radiate unconditional love. **Paranormal features** are psychic phenomena, such as extraordinarily vivid physical sensations, extrasensory perception, recognitive visions, and a sense of being out of the physical body. **Transcendental features** are apparent otherworldly phenomena, such as travel to a mystical or unearthly realm or dimension, an encounter with a mystical being or presence, visible spirits of deceased or religious figures, and a border beyond which one cannot return to earthly life. Most NDEs include features from all four, although many experiences are dominated by one or more component. ➞

EXPLANATORY MODELS

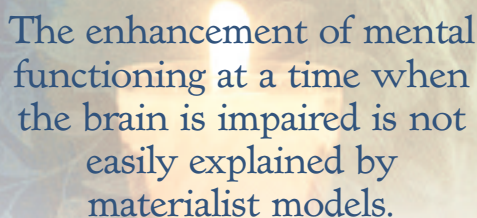
How can these phenomena best be understood? No variables that have yet been studied—such as age, gender, race, or history of mental illness—predict either the occurrence or type of NDE. Very little data exist to support the ample speculation about the cause of NDEs. One plausible physiological model attributes them to decreased oxygen (hypoxia) or to a complete lack of oxygen (anoxia), which appears to be the final common pathway to death. However, hypoxia or anoxia generally produce idiosyncratic, frightening hallucinations and lead to agitation and belligerence, quite unlike the peaceful near-death experience. Studies of persons near death have also shown that those who have NDEs do not have lower oxygen levels than those who do not have them. Another frequently cited physiological model attributes NDEs to the medications given to dying persons. Although some drugs may on occasion induce experiences that bear superficial similarities to a near-death experience, comparative studies show that patients who receive medications in fact report fewer NDEs than do those who receive no medication.

NDEs have also been speculatively attributed to neurotransmitters or activities in specific locations in the brain, but there is little if any empirical evidence for these neurological mechanisms—which may suggest brain pathways through which NDEs are expressed or interpreted but which do not necessarily imply causal mechanisms. Psychological models assign defense mechanisms, depersonalization, wishful thinking, retroactive confabulation, and expectation, but none of these plausible models is supported by empirical evidence. And while expectations likely influence an experiencer's interpretation of certain features of the NDE, they do not appear to influence the experience itself. Studies show that children who are too young to have internalized expectations of death or an afterlife describe the same NDE features as do adults. Also, cross-cultural studies show few differences in NDE content from differing societies, and still more research finds NDE descriptions that are not affected by experiencers' expectations of NDEs, the dying process, or an afterlife. In short, the

enhancement of mental functioning at a time when the brain is physiologically impaired, as well as the paranormal and otherworldly experiences that can occur, are not easily explained by materialist models.

TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACTS

Many of the experiential features of mystical experiences in general are similar to those of NDEs. The feelings of peace and joy, the ineffability of the experience, the sense of being in the presence of something larger than or transcendent of oneself, and the experience of a bright light or being of light are features common to both NDEs and mystical experiences. Protestant theologian Judith Cressy has compared typical NDE phenomenology and aftereffects to the mystical experiences of St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross and concludes that they both had ecstatic out-of-body travels, visions of God, clairvoyance, loss of the fear of death, and healing transformations. She notes that nearness to death has always played a role in the spiritual path, and that for



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Saints Theresa and John mysticism was a preparation for death. Cressy also points out that, unlike mystics, near-death experiencers (NDErs) are thrust suddenly into spiritual consciousness without any preparation and then returned to a community in which such experiences are not valued. British theologian Paul Badham also concludes that the NDE “shares many of the characteristics of the deepest religious experiences known to humanity” and further points out that modern resuscitation techniques have made available to ordinary people mystical enlightenment that formerly was available to people only on rare occasions.

Walter Pahnke, a minister and psychiatrist, and William Richards, a theologian and psychologist, delineated nine aspects of mystical experience based on the work of William James and British philosopher Walter Stace: a sense of cosmic unity or oneness, transcendence of time and space, deeply positive mood, sense of sacredness, noetic quality or intuitive illumination, paradoxicality, ineffability, transiency, and persistent positive aftereffects. All nine of these features are commonly reported as part of the NDE.

Perhaps the most important feature common to both

mystical experiences and NDEs is the transformative impact of the experience. NDEs generally have a profound and apparently lasting impact on many who experience them, often precipitating a significant change in values and attitude toward death and a new sense of purpose or meaning in life. Similarly, mystical experiences have been recognized as leading to sudden and lasting changes in character and values, including changes in the person's relationship with God, perception and appreciation of nature, attitude toward self, and, perhaps most significant, attitude toward other people.

This transformative aspect of NDEs is never reported in connection with the various fragmentary experiences that are sometimes equated with NDEs, such as the "dreamlets" induced by hypoxia or other abnormalities of blood-gas concentrations, or experiences reported by patients receiving temporal-lobe stimulation. Moreover, the transformative features associated with NDEs differ from those associated with the experience of coming close to death but not having an NDE. Clearly, the profound transformative aspect of NDEs suggests that we need some explanation that goes beyond the physiological models we have so far and even beyond the psychological experience associated with coming close to death.

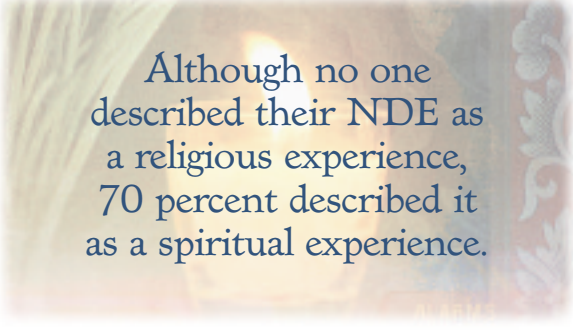
SPIRITUALITY BEFORE AND AFTER

Because religion addresses fundamental human concerns such as death and dying, one might speculate that there is some relationship between religious orientation and NDEs. Are persons of different religious beliefs more or less likely to have NDEs or to have specific types of NDE? One skeptical view of the NDE is that it represents essentially a religiously inspired illusion; as psychologist Kenneth Ring put this hypothesis, "Believing is seeing."

Several studies have searched in vain for associations between religiosity and subsequent NDEs. In a cross-cultural study in the United States and India, for example, psychologists Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson did not find any straightforward relationship between religiousness and deathbed visions, although they did find that an individual's belief system influenced the *interpretation* of the experience.

Kenneth Ring interviewed 102 survivors of near-death crises, asking a number of questions that collectively provided an overall index of religiosity, including questions about degree of religiosity, strength of belief in God, degree of certainty about life after death, and belief in heaven and hell. He too found no association between prior religiousness and quantitative measures of the NDE. However, Ring did find, as did Osis and Haraldsson, "that the interpretation that was placed on the experience by the individuals was markedly influenced by their religious belief system."

If NDEs are not influenced by prior religious belief, do people become more or less religious or spiritual after an NDE? If so, how is that effect manifested? Several studies have documented that for many, an NDE permanently and dramatically alters their attitudes, beliefs, and values, often leading to beneficial personal transformations. Near-death experiencers tend to see themselves as integral parts of a benevolent and purposeful universe in which personal gain, particularly at others' expense, is no longer relevant. Aftereffects most often reported include increases in



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spirituality, concern for others, and appreciation of life; a heightened sense of purpose; and decreases in the fear of death, materialistic attitudes, and competitiveness. These changes meet the definition for spiritual transformation that Arthur Schwartz offers in his work *The Nature of Spiritual Transformation* (Templeton Press, 2000): "a dramatic change in religious belief, attitude, and behavior that occurs over a relatively short period of time."

In his interviews with survivors of near-death crises, Ring found that while NDErs describe themselves as more religious than they were before, near-death survivors who reported no NDE did not report any change in their religiosity as a result of their close encounter with death. Also, he learned that NDErs do not subsequently attend church more often or participate in other modes of formal religious worship; rather, Ring reports, "There is a heightened *inward* religious feeling . . . which does not seem to require a conventional religious format for it to be manifested." He also found that even though NDErs expressed indifference toward organized religion, they also described "an overall tolerance for all ways of religious worship." ☺

The International Association of Near-Death Studies

For almost thirty years, the International Association of Near-Death Studies (IANDS) has been educating the world about near-death and similar experiences. An important networking venue for researchers and academics in the field, IANDS also consults on the subject with radio, television, film, and print media. The organization provides publications, holds conferences granting Continuing Education Units, sponsors local groups, has sent hundreds of speakers to audiences worldwide, and reaches out in person and online with information and support to near-death experiencers and their families. Because these individuals face many challenges and transformations after their brush with death, worldwide support groups offer them opportunities for sharing and learning.

“IANDS has helped change the public’s perception of what it may be like to die,” says Yolaine Stout, president of the organization. Professional members and IANDS subscribers receive a quarterly newsletter and the peer-reviewed *Journal of Near-Death Studies*. The IANDS’ website offers research-based articles, books, DVDs and audios from past conferences, as well as a forum for near-death experiencers. For more information, visit www.iands.org, email services@iands.org, or call 860-882-1211.

British philosopher David Lorimer points out that the moral assessment that takes place in the life review provides NDErs with an experiential moral order that is based on “empathic resonance” with other people, meaning the direct perception of an intrinsic interconnectedness and interdependence among all living beings. Near-death experiencers know firsthand how their thoughts, feelings, and actions affect others. The ego-shattering effect of NDEs reveals the illusion of separate individual egos by inducing direct experience of cosmic unity.

Australian sociologist Cherie Sutherland interviewed fifty NDErs and specifically asked them to differentiate changes in their spirituality from changes in their religiosity. Participants largely rejected describing themselves as “religious” but did describe themselves as “spiritual.” They reported “dramatic change in religious affiliation, especially from organized religion of whatever denomination to no religion.” Although no one described their NDE as a religious experience, 70 percent did describe it as a spiritual experience. The most common response to an open-ended question about the most significant change resulting from the NDE was “spirituality” or “spiritual growth.”

On the other hand, after completing a rigorous study of 116 NDEs and also observing NDEs and their aftereffects in his patients over twenty years as a cardiologist, Michael Sabom found that NDEs produced a stronger faith and a higher level of commitment to traditional religious practice, which he thought, in turn, affected patients’ medical outcome. Sabom’s finding that NDEs led to stronger traditional religious faith, in contrast to the findings of Sutherland, Ring, and other researchers, may reflect the particular regional cultural characteristics of Sabom’s patient population. Although Sabom originally approached the study of NDEs as a skeptical medical scientist, expecting to find that these experiences were misfirings of a dying brain, he eventually concluded that they were instead powerful spiritual experiences whose underlying message was consistent with divine revelation from more traditional sources.

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Mainstream theologians have had little to say about near-death experiences. British religious scholar Mark Fox speculates on the reasons for what he calls this “deafening silence,” suggesting that perhaps some theologians regard NDEs as so expected at the point of death that they do not

merit discussion, whereas others ignore the phenomenon out of general academic distrust of any paranormal phenomena. Religious scholar Carol Zaleski suggests that many theologians feel more comfortable regarding NDEs as metaphors or literary motifs than as actual divine encounters, and religious historian Ioan Couliano places NDEs within a continuing cross-cultural tradition of fantastic accounts of otherworld journeys. Indeed, the Buddhist perspective on visions of the dying, as described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, is that they occur in the mind of the experiencer. Similarly, Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng regards NDEs as psychological experiences of dying that have no bearing on what happens after death.

Whatever the reason for the disinterest in NDEs among theologians, the result is that most of what has been written about the implications of NDEs has come from psychologists who argue that NDEs *should* have relevance to theology. Mark Fox agrees: “Many of the claims that near-death experiencers have made in the last quarter-century are such that they may well be said to *demand* a response which goes to the very heart of the West’s understanding of what it is to be human and what it is for human beings to die.”

Some religious adherents have claimed NDEs as empirical support of their particular doctrines. It has been argued that NDEs provide striking parallels to the teachings of the Hindu Upanishads and to early Babylonian, Egyptian, and Zoroastrian texts, as well as to shamanism, Taoism, Tibetan Buddhism, Gnostic Christianity, medieval Christian religious treatises, Mormonism, and Christian Universalism, among other faiths. Others view NDEs as satanic deceptions that contradict Christian teachings.

Others argue that unconditional forgiveness offers “cheap grace” without any contrition for our past sins. But Ring points out that the unconditional love NDErs report in their experiences does not gloss over their sins or excuse their future behavior. Quite to the contrary, NDErs experience the painful consequences of their transgressions and return to earthly life with an intimate understanding that what they do does indeed matter. Far from encouraging indiscriminate behavior, the unconditional love NDErs experience confers on them the self-esteem, courage, and self-knowledge to bring about change in their behaviors.

Cressy points out that NDEs differ from many other mystical experiences in that they do not occur in the context of a conscious search for meaning or the resolution

of a spiritual crisis. A single encounter with mystical consciousness may start a near-death experiencer on a spiritual path, but, Cressy says, “One mystical experience does not make a mystic.” The empirical data support her view that not all NDEs lead to immediate transformation. Expanding on this, Ring developed a hypothesis of NDEs as “spiritual catalysts” fostering spiritual awakening and development.

UNLOCKING OUR POTENTIAL

Social critics as diverse as historian Arnold Toynbee, psychiatrist Carl Jung, and theologian and medical missionary Albert Schweitzer have written that “nothing short of a worldwide spiritual revolution will suffice” to save human civilization. Ring suggests “that the NDE can be viewed as an *evolutionary device* to bring about this transformation” and that NDEs and similar mystical experiences may point the way toward unlocking humankind’s dormant spiritual potential. He speculates that with increasing resuscitation technology enabling more and more individuals to return from the brink of death, the cumulative impact of their uplifting testimonies may foster the spiritual evolution of the collective consciousness of humanity. The title of Ring’s book on NDE aftereffects, *Heading Toward Omega* (Harper Perennial, 1985), comes from Jesuit philosopher and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s notion of the “Omega point”—a hypothetical endpoint in human history representing an evolutionary culmination in the highest strivings of human culture.

At the very least, near-death experiences should foster spiritual growth by leading us to question some of our basic assumptions about mind and brain, about our relationship to the divine, and about the universe and our role in it. 🌐

—An extensive discussion and comprehensive collection of references on this subject can be found in Bruce Greyson’s article “Near-Death Experiences and Spirituality,” published in *Zygon* 41 (2) in June 2006.

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