BOOK REVIEW

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Robert Perry is one of an increasing number of people who are spiritually attuned yet think in terms of scientific evidence. Trained in experimental psychology, he has been a leading teacher of A Course in Miracles (1976). In his book Signs, he asked the provocative question, “What if God is talking to us, but nobody’s listening?” However, Perry’s provocative point need not be put in theistic terms. One could as easily rephrase it as, “What if there is a moral order to the universe that we have overlooked?”

The idea of guidance from a higher source is not new; it is an assumption of virtually every religion. But Perry suggested that people no longer have to take this assumption on faith. His premise is that meaningful coincidences in everyday life provide objective, empirical evidence of this guidance, evidence that is both scientifically verifiable and accessible to anyone. People usually interpret the meaning of an experience based on intimate feelings associated with the event. But how do they know they are not fooling themselves? In tackling this question, Perry came up with objective criteria for helping us decide how seriously to take the notion that a coincidence reflects a greater intelligence and purpose.

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Others, most notably Carl Jung (1973), have speculated about meaningful coincidence, and in a spate of books in recent decades, authors have explored the meaning and use of synchronicity (e.g., Combs, 2000; Koestler, 1972; Mansfield, 1995; Peat, 1987; Progoff, 1973; Storm, 2008; Vaughan, 1979). Despite this vast literature, however, very few authors have attempted to quantify coincidence – or even to define it with any empirical rigor. William Braud (1983) proposed a primitive methodology that reduced synchronistic events to single words, the frequency of which could then be compared with published norms of word frequency, though he had to acknowledge that many of the more interesting synchronicities he came across could not be reduced to single words. Most recently, Stephanie Coleman and Bernard Beitman (2009) developed a Weird Coincidence Scale to quantify experiences in which external events match internal thoughts and feelings.

What Perry has in mind, however, is more than just simple instances of alignment between an internal experience and an external event. Perry differs from other investigators of synchronicity not only in the rigor with which he defines meaningful coincidences but, more importantly, in his empirical criteria for determining when one has occurred. He has labeled his brand of coincidence “conjunctions of meaningfully parallel events,” or CMPEs, which he truncated to “signs.” But this term is misleading, because “signs” in common parlance usually signifies single events, whereas the compelling feature of CMPEs is that they are not in fact single events. Single events, no matter how attention-grabbing, can often be dismissed as random occurrences. In contrast, Perry’s “signs” are conjunctions of multiple events so parallel that they push the hypothesis of randomness beyond the breaking point – “a sort of super-synchronicity in which the skeptical explanation becomes extremely strained” (p. 8). Perry started by pointing out the evidence of seemingly random coincidences in our daily lives, and he then proceeded to analyze them through the lens of meaningfulness.

Perry had two independent goals in this book: The first was to encourage the use of CMPEs as a powerful tool for guidance, and the second was to provide evidence regarding the nature of ultimate reality and the existence of God. He saw these two goals as inextricably linked, although he acknowledged that they need not be. In fact, he argued that the CPME “requires no faith assumptions. Rather, it can and should be investigated on its own merits” (p. 187).
Perry suggested that even if CMPEs do not provide irrefutable evidence for God, their very appearance makes them “a natural participant in the conversation about” whether God exists (p. 187). But whatever the effect of CMPEs on one’s view of reality and of God, they remain a practical tool.

Perry’s claim, based on his own life and others he has helped, is that CMPEs can provide invaluable guidance for people’s lives and can potentially change our understanding of reality. He acknowledged that appreciating synchronicity has a subjective component. That is, a believer perceives patterns and infers meaningful coincidences, whereas a skeptic looks at the same events and sees no meaningful patterns, let alone any evidence of a higher design: “He sees the same dots; he just feels no compunction to connect them” (p. 4). Perry, to his credit, acknowledged the subjectivity involved in perceiving patterns in one’s life and presented the skeptical perspective as well, as uninspiring as he found it. In fact, he went so far as to admit that these patterns may not seem particularly convincing unless one is already a believer and does not need convincing. But he argued that perceptual bias based on one’s predisposition to believe may affect believers and skeptics alike: “Unquestionably, the believer’s mind sometimes sees patterns that aren’t there, but could it also be that the skeptic’s mind overlooks patterns that are there?” (p. 5).

The heart of this book is that the CMPE model can reconcile the believer and the skeptic. Perry suggested that CMPEs as he defined them meet the skeptical criteria of our more scientific, analytic side, but then, having done so, provide concrete evidence of a meaningful plan to the universe.

Perry suggested that as striking as CMPEs can be, most of them are almost certain to go unnoticed unless we are looking out for them, and that without this model, we have no reason to identify them and no framework in which to use them. Instead of just saying, “Huh, that was weird,” and moving on, if we pay attention to these CMPEs, we can identify patterns at work in our lives and, if Perry is correct, learn from the guidance they provide. Although some people may not have CMPEs as Perry defined them, other people may have many every year. Perry stated that, just as it can take decades to really understand the people in our lives, so it has taken him decades to understand CMPEs.

Perry’s CMPE model has four components: the events, the parallels, the “subject situation,” and the interpretation. For the events, Perry
requires at least two strikingly similar yet distinct events that occur within hours of each other. For the parallels, he requires several specific and unlikely elements – usually around eight but sometimes as many as 30 – that are shared by both events. By “subject situation,” he means some theme of personal relevance in the experiencer’s life; that is, the CMPE has to be about something significant. Finally, the interpretation is the CMPE’s commentary on the subject situation; this is not simply a projection of the experiencer’s expectations but should be sufficiently obvious from the CMPE itself so that independent observers would arrive at the same interpretation. The four-point model can thus be summarized as:

A CMPE (or “sign”) consists of at least two events occurring within hours of each other that, seemingly by chance, are strikingly similar – they share an impressive list of parallels. Through the relationships between the two events, the CMPE highlights a situation in our lives and communicates a definite perspective on that situation. (p. 10)

Perry elaborated this model in great detail, outlining the criteria he has developed over decades. With regard to the two or more independent but similar events, he noted that about a third of CMPEs actually include three or more events, and he occasionally has had CMPEs with five, six, seven, or even eight independent events. He warned that many conjunctions of parallel events fail the test of independence. That is, a second event that at first appeared to be independent actually turns out to have been influenced by the first. Despite Perry’s highlighting this pitfall for readers, I found some of his examples of CMPEs open to question on this very point. With regard to the temporal proximity of the events that comprise CMPEs, he noted that in more than half of cases, the events occurred within a half hour; in 90% of CMPEs they occurred within five hours; and in no case were they more than 12 hours apart.

Perry noted that the hardest part of identifying CMPEs is simply paying attention to patterns and not just dismissing one’s “Huh, that was weird” reaction as an amusing but meaningless happenstance. He provided a simple algorithm for evaluating potential CMPEs. First, one asks whether there were in fact at least two distinct, time-limited events, rather than one event superimposed on an ongoing situation. If there were at least two, then one asks the second question: whether the distinct events were truly independent, rather than one influencing the other or both being influenced by a third event. If they were independent, then one asks the third question: whether the events
occurred within 12 hours of each other. One’s confidence in the CMPE can be strongest if the events actually occurred within a half hour, and may be weakened if they were more than five hours apart. If the events occurred within 12 hours, then one asks the fourth question: whether the events shared an objective similarity, rather than just a subjective resemblance.

If a conjunction of events passes all these tests, Perry suggested that one write a fairly complete account of the potential CMPE, noting the parallels and the timing, identifying the subject situation that the CMPE seems to be addressing, and trying to interpret the message. He noted that the events should have not one but a series of specific parallels; in his experience, CMPEs average around eight.

As for the process of identifying the subject situation, Perry suggested that one look for a situation in one’s life that fits the general pattern of the parallels, a situation that is current and uncertain, so that one feels the need for guidance in resolving it. Then look for that situation being contained in the events, often in an event that was emotionally significant or contained a pressing question or new idea. He noted that CMPEs do not address just any situation, but seem responsive to one’s needs, aimed at an important situation for which one needs some counsel. Perry stated emphatically that if a CMPE passes all these tests – has a pair (or more) of independent events, a strong list of specific parallels, and a subject situation – then it will also have one clear interpretation. If one sets aside one’s desires for a specific outcome, the CMPE will speak for itself – and the message may or may not be to one’s liking. If the subject situation is described in the parallel events in a symbolic rather than literal way, that symbolism likely contains some meaningful commentary on the subject situation.

In other words, the interpretive process is not guided by the experiencer’s imagination but follows certain rules. First, the parallels will tell a story that frames the subject situation in a certain way. This story puts a certain “spin” on the subject situation. Second, one of the events comprising the CMPE often contains a “symbolic situation,” which is not the same as the subject situation but eerily mirrors it. This symbolic situation also frames the subject situation in a particular way, and these two framings will converge to produce one interpretation.

Although this process of interpretation may sound subjective, Perry suggested that once a person has correctly identified the parallels and
the subject situation, one single interpretation will jump out at any trained observer. This is an important point: Perry insisted that identifying, describing, and interpreting CMPEs is a rule-based process through which different interpreters should come up with basically the same interpretation. Indeed, Perry provided examples in Signs in which his interpretation and another person’s were essentially the same. This confirmation assures that the message we receive is not only in our minds but also in the very structure of the CMPE itself. The parallels and symbolic situation will tell a story that contains the truth about the subject situation. I found interpreting the CMPE’s message less clear-cut than Perry implied because of the difficulty in putting aside one’s own desires and expectations. Perry wrote that with practice that process becomes easier, and eventually the messages become so clear that they are inescapable. I would warn readers that Perry has had some 30 years of practice and that they may have some difficulty at first separating their wishes for a certain message from the true “voice” of the CMPE.

I mentioned above that I found some of Perry’s examples of CMPEs open to question on the independence of the parallel events. Part of the problem is that, whereas temporal proximity can easily be quantified – for example, 90% of CMPE events occur within 5 hours of each other – no objective units exist for measuring independence. Perry suggested that one ask oneself whether any normal cause-and-effect chain could possibly account for the two (or more) events being similar, but different people may have different criteria for “normal cause-and-effect” chains, and one has no way of quantifying how independent two events must be to be considered “independent enough.” Let me illustrate how difficult this criterion can be.

Perry calls one of his CMPE examples the “Bucket Brigade Sign.” A meeting of his staff to discuss some administrative problem led to a resolution that was symbolized by a bucket brigade metaphor, with each member doing one part of the task and passing it along to the next. The meeting was interrupted by an announcement that water was leaking through the roof in another room. The staff rushed to the scene of the flood and saw a straight 10-foot line of cascading water and a stack of plastic buckets three feet away. “Without thinking” (p. 3), they unstacked the buckets and laid them out in a straight line to catch the water. Perry wrote that this solution was the only logical thing to do, that it had nothing to do with the bucket brigade discussion they had been having and everything to do with the
pressure of sheer necessity, that in the crisis of the water leak the last thing on their minds was that discussion.

Perhaps the bucket brigade discussion was not at the forefront of their consciousness in the midst of the water crisis, but as a psychiatrist I wonder whether that discussion rolling around in their unconscious influenced their thought processes in responding to the crisis. There may have been no choice but to catch the water, but there may have been a choice in how to do so, and if the recent bucket brigade discussion led unconsciously to their collective decision to unstack and line up the buckets, then the two events in that CMPE are much less independent.

Perry called another CMPE example the “Treasure House Sign.” He and his wife had been considering buying a house; she had had dreams about a “Treasure House” (albeit two or three years earlier); and a “Treasury” document from his folder of old class notes “jumped out” at him prompting him “off-handedly” to send it out as his mandatory weekly e-mail to a class he was teaching (pp. 55–57). Again, despite the absence of any conscious association between these events, knowing of his wife’s old dreams and their current dilemma about buying a house might have unconsciously influenced his decision to e-mail the “Treasury” document, or conversely e-mailing that document might have unconsciously influenced his identification of the house they hoped to buy with his wife’s old “Treasure House” dreams.

A third example involved what Perry called the “Truth of Symbolism Sign.” He took a break from writing a discussion about symbolism and metaphor and opened a book he had been reading. The bookmark noting the page where he had left off reading was at the start of a section entitled “The Truth of Metaphor.” Perry viewed that as an independent event reinforcing his writing on symbolism and metaphor. Indeed, if a friend had handed him that book opened to that page, it might have been an independent event. But the fact that he himself had left the bookmark on that page opens the possibility of a causal connection between a section title he might have seen, though not consciously remembered, and his writing on symbolism and metaphor.

Perry did acknowledge the difficulty in establishing the independence of events in a CMPE, but he considered it a relatively minor difficulty:

Another possible explanation for these occurrences is that there is more going on here than chance, but that this “more” is simply the unconscious behavior of the people involved. In this scenario, the first
event unconsciously influences the person involved to cause a second event to occur that is similar. Or knowledge that the second event is going to occur influences the person to cause a similar first event to occur. This explanation, in other words, claims that the events are never truly independent.

It is reasonable to raise this question with many CMPEs, but most end up being immune to this explanation. For instance, with “Full Circle,”… no sound could reach me from the TV, as I was tucked away in the basement while the television was upstairs, at the opposite end of a large house. (p. 170)

In the “Full Circle Sign” that Perry cites here, his physical distance from the television may rule out unconscious auditory influence on his thoughts and behavior, but not unconscious clairvoyant influence. The question here becomes whether the hypothesis of extrasensory perception is more or less plausible than Perry’s hypothesis of divine guidance; and at this point, one’s choice of explanations may be a matter of preference rather than of evidence.

In questioning whether some of Perry’s examples of CMPEs involve truly independent events, I am not discrediting the entire concept of CMPEs, which I still find well documented and holding out great promise. Indeed, I have selected those few CMPEs from Perry’s collection in which there might have been an unconscious link between the two events. In most of the CMPEs Perry described, I could detect no such links between the events. But I raise this point because I think the independence criterion is the weakest link in the model and needs further work to operationalize it in a less subjective way. To his credit, Perry acknowledged this weakness, as well as other potential ambiguities in his model. Perry presented the CMPE model as a work in progress, and it is to be hoped that publishing it now in Signs will encourage readers to play around with these concepts and come up with suggestions for quantifying and objectifying these necessarily ambiguous phenomena. Indeed, Perry has taken a proactive role here and assembled a group of researchers from across the country to refine a scale that would bring greater rigor to the definition and identification of CMPEs and to develop a program to train people to analyze and interpret their CMPEs.

Up to this point, the concept of CMPEs is intriguing in its simplicity, but it is about to get more complicated. Perry acknowledged that his entire model rests on the appearance that there is indeed something nonrandom going on, and he admitted that unlikely events will happen occasionally based on the laws of probability. But he argued
that, although chance may be a reasonable explanation for individual coincidences, **CMPEs are not individual.** Not only are they by definition conjunctions of at least (and often more than) two events, but **discrete CMPEs are often linked with other CMPEs**, so that a network of CMPEs over time repeats the same message. In Perry’s experience, this interconnectedness between CMPEs is not an occasional happening but, rather, part of their essential nature.

It is this interconnection between CMPEs that Perry has found most convincing, as if the sequence of CMPEs expresses a consistent vision about one’s life. Why, Perry asks, should one expect a series of random events to express a consistent vision, implying a consistent system of ethical values? Conversely, he asks, how can one attribute this kind of consistency to random events?

Perry’s answer is that one would not expect random events to produce a consistent vision, and one cannot attribute ethical consistency to random events. And this leads to his conclusion that CMPEs make sense only as evidence of an intelligent process that provides people with a moral compass. CMPEs, he wrote, “give us the sense of a higher hand at work, as if some invisible organizing principle is literally shaping physical circumstances” (p. 3). And this, he concluded, is the ultimate importance of CMPEs: They provide objective, scientific evidence of an overarching spiritual order in the universe.

What is so great about these signs is that they are a coming together of both worlds. On the one hand, they apply our intellect to the data of the physical world. On the other hand, this yields concrete evidence of a divine plan at work in our lives, a plan that cares, that wants our happiness.... (p. 163)

In other words, CMPEs ultimately derive their value from the guidance they have to offer us and from their implications for the nature of reality. His experience with CMPEs suggests that they cannot be used to rationalize our mistakes and character defects. Instead, they reliably point out solutions to our problems and reinforce ethically mature decisions and behavior (which may not be what we want to hear). He argued that CMPEs properly interpreted consistently guide us toward a more loving and altruistic philosophy that is consonant with the higher teachings of virtually all religions.

Perry did not stop at the observation that all the CMPEs in his life (and the lives of his close associates) seem to point toward one coherent message: “That’s as far as my horizon goes. But if all I can see
is clockwork-like consistency all the way to that horizon, why should I assume it stops there?” (p. 102). If we assume, as Perry did, that this consistency extends beyond his personal experience, then the implication is that “all CMPEs, the world over, are tiny pieces of a single colossal puzzle, a single plan for the world as a whole” (p. 102). And that, he argued, affects our understanding of the nature of reality and the purpose of life.

This conclusion brought Perry to the question of the source of this guidance, and here he wandered from the realm of pure empirical analysis into more speculative territory. For Perry, CMPEs are evidence for the existence of God, although he acknowledged that other people may not reach that same conclusion. Indeed, he stated clearly that “this is not a phenomenon that presumes belief in God. It is a phenomenon in its own right…. and it just happens to people regardless of their belief in God” (p. ix). Perry presented CMPEs as evidence of “an unseen pattern in the events of our lives.... some sort of design or plan behind what looks like chaos” (p. 3), but he did not demand that we accept his attribution of that design to God. What is important, he wrote, is that we recognize CMPEs as reflecting some meaningful design in the universe and, by implication, some meaning to our existence. CMPEs, as Perry understands them, give us reason to believe that we are part of something greater than ourselves, that we are here for a purpose, and that we are not “left alone in a random universe, adrift on a sea of meaninglessness” (p. 4).

When Perry expands his discussion beyond empirical observations, he gets into increasingly speculative conjecture, influenced perhaps by the spiritual belief system in A Course in Miracles (1976). I want to draw a clear distinction here between his inferences regarding the source of CMPEs, which may be untestable, and his empirical observations about CMPEs, which are definitely testable and potentially invaluable to humanity.

Perry argued that the consistency of CMPEs could arise only from a mindful and purposeful intelligence. But it is not obvious to me why a mindless and purposeless universe could not still be orderly. If we accept that consistent physical laws such as gravity can arise out of the natural order without postulating a guiding intelligence (which, admittedly, some people do not accept), then why can’t consistent moral laws such as karma arise out of the natural order without postulating a guiding intelligence? Perry argued that “such an integrated constellation of parallels [such as in CMPEs] is very
difficult to explain as the product of chance” (p. 168), but “chance” is not the only alternative to purposeful intelligence. I agree that CMPEs could not likely result from chance, but I am not ready to rule out a non-chance (yet non-intelligent) orderliness. Perry argued further that CMPEs cannot be random because they appear to be responsive to our needs and address things that matter to us. But again, there can be nonrandom orderliness: white blood cells rushing to the site of an infection are responsive to our needs and address things that matter to us, but we do not think of them as being “intelligent.”

Perry sees CMPEs not only as meaningfully orderly events but as communications from an intelligence that is mindful of, and indeed responsive to, our concerns. This is akin to Barbara Harris Whitfield’s regarding synchronicities as “cosmic postcards” that remind us there is more going on than our egos are willing to believe (Whitfield, 2010). Perry argued that the hallmarks of intent in these apparent communications, containing value judgments and goals rather than just factual observations, suggest divine intervention rather than “just the turning of mindless gears” (p. 172). He stated that any explanation of CMPEs must take into account their appearance suggestive of a communication from another source.

Perry considered two alternatives that do not invoke divine intervention to explain the occurrence of CMPEs in our lives: first, that similar events cluster in time and space according to some unknown natural law, possibly related to quantum physics; and second, that CMPEs are a physical manifestation of a higher wisdom within our own consciousness. He rejected the first because he felt it could not explain the consistency of CMPEs: Each CMPE “would be a new roll of the dice” (p. 175). But why must we assume that the unknown natural law would function as capriciously as a roll of the dice? Certainly there is incredible consistency in known natural laws: Every time you let go of a suspended object, you know which way it will fall.

He acknowledged that the second alternative – that the source of the communication in CMPEs is some wise element in our unconscious mind – is plausible, but he felt it cannot explain the consistent ethical message of CMPEs occurring to different people. That is, CMPEs occurring to different people but commenting on the same situation always yield the same solution. He argued that if CMPEs originated in our unconscious, then your CMPEs and mine should reflect the unique properties of your unconscious and mine. Perry allowed that this
alternative hypothesis would work if your CMPEs and mine both originate in a transcendent part of the unconscious that we share—a collective unconscious that is wise and not bound by individual differences—and that we would expect to speak with a consistent voice.

However, he ultimately rejected the collective unconscious hypothesis because, for it to work, such a unified unconscious would have to be extremely consistent over time, see into the future, see deeply into situations and offer wise counsel, and promote a consistent set of higher values. And such an omniscient, wise, ethical unconscious, he argues, is simply another word for God. He contended that if we attribute CMPEs to an all-knowing and all-caring collective conscious, “we are just avoiding the obvious. We are jumping through hoops to get around saying the word ‘God’” (p. 178). But I think Perry dismissed an important distinction here: An omniscient and ethical collective unconscious has some God-like qualities, but it does not require an “other,” an external deity with whom we relate in a dyadic relationship. A comparable distinction sometimes arises in discussions of NDEs: Is the Light that seems to radiate unconditional love our higher self, or is it a separate divinity?

In contrasting the hypotheses that CMPEs are communications from God or from our collective unconscious, Perry preferred the God hypothesis because

it seems as if some unseen presence is mysteriously orchestrating events so as to shape them into a message for us. This presence seems responsive to our needs, since it speaks to situations in which we need counsel. By giving us this counsel, it displays the characteristics one would associate with a counselor, a guide, or a parent.

It seems to have our welfare in mind, since it apparently tries to move us in the direction of achieving successful outcomes and realizing our own highest potentials. (p. 179)

But are these not the very characteristics that would be expected of an unconscious, as well as of a loving God? Perry noted that CMPEs do not depend on religious faith; rather, they happen to believers in God and to nonbelievers alike. Although this finding is far from evidential, it seems to argue against the God hypothesis, and for the collective unconscious hypothesis.

Perry argued further for God as the source of CMPEs on the grounds that the apparent communicator seems to stay focused on “the big picture, ...our realization of some of the highest values humanity has
known” (p. 179). He added: “Maybe you can read that without thinking of God, but I can’t” (p. 180). Whereas that modus operandi does indeed bring to mind our common understanding of God, it is equally consistent with more parsimonious explanations. Contemporary parapsychologists have argued that this guidance toward higher moral values is precisely the purpose of our unconscious psychic abilities (e.g., Kennedy, 2004; Taylor, 2003). And indeed Perry acknowledged that, although he favors the God hypothesis, that is not the only possible explanation for the consistent message of CMPEs:

CMPEs could be the product of some incredibly advanced alien race that can control physical events without us seeing the strings being pulled. They could be the product of the devil – though it would be a strange devil that tries to influence us in such saintly directions. Or as I said earlier, they could be the product of some global committee of our own unconscious minds. (p. 180)

If we think Ockham’s razor is a legitimate criterion for choosing between alternatives, then it would seem that parsimony would favor a collective unconscious over God or the devil or an alien race. Lacking some empirical basis for making the distinction, though, this choice is really a matter of personal preference. But ultimately the source of CMPEs may be beside the point: Perry’s primary emphasis is a utilitarian one. He was seeking guidance for his life, and CMPEs seemed to him to know more than he did.

What does all this have to do with near-death experiences (NDEs)? First, near-death experiencers (NDErs) report far more meaningful coincidences in their lives than do other people, and far more than they did prior to their NDEs. Whether NDErs actually have more synchronicity in their lives or whether the NDE merely opened their eyes to notice such events more than they did before is unclear. In my unpublished data derived from more than 100 NDErs who completed Coleman and Beitman’s (2009) Weird Coincidence Scale, people reported 50% more synchronicities after their NDEs than before their NDEs. Their rate of reported meaningful coincidences was comparable to that of the general public before their NDEs but significantly higher after the experience.

But perhaps more importantly, Perry’s model for making sense of CMPEs may be applicable as well to validating NDEs. Perry is proposing a technology for differentiating self-delusion from objectively real spiritual events – objectively real in the sense that anyone else can apply his criteria and replicate the finding of meaningfulness. In NDEs
as well as in CMPEs, a critical factor is how we assign meaning to the experience. With regard to CMPEs, one can ask whether coincidence is merely a random juxtaposition of events or whether it is a meaningful synchronicity that reflects divine action – or at least something beyond the individual ego. Likewise, with regard to NDEs, one can ask whether they are artifacts of chemical changes in the brain or, again, a reflection of the action of something beyond personal ego.

Perry argued that CMPEs are real phenomena that deserve to be studied and brought into the public eye. The International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) has been making that argument about NDEs for more than three decades. Furthermore, Perry claimed that the implications of CMPEs are potentially revolutionary: “CMPEs have immense riches to give humanity both in terms of the guidance they have to offer and in terms of what their existence implies about the nature of reality. In the end, they offer concrete evidence for the existence of a higher plan for human life” (p. 184). The same could be said (as has been) about NDEs.

Perry imagined a future cohort of researchers who would investigate whether CMPEs happen to certain people more than others and, if so, why; whether CMPEs really do convey consistent overall messages, and the degree to which trained interpreters are able to interpret the same CMPEs in the same way; and whether predictions made by CMPEs turn out to be accurate. This sounds very much like an agenda for NDE research as well.

Whom will this book interest? Perry suggested that everyone will find it thought-provoking and helpful, and I agree. He envisioned a future in which increasing numbers of people turn to CMPEs for guidance and researchers compile large databases of CMPEs and their messages. In Perry’s dream of this future world:

People want this information, even people who don’t believe CMPEs are from God, for by now it is collectively evident that something appears to be speaking to us. Whatever this voice is – God, extraterrestrials, the collective unconscious – how can we not be intrigued? How can we not want to discover its message for us? (pp. 190–191)

In Signs, Perry outlined a coherent rationale and a straightforward methodology for discovering these messages. The CMPE model is specific and rigorous enough to be tested by anyone willing to look closely at his or her life. At the end of each chapter, Perry provided helpful exercises to guide readers through steps detailed in that
chapter, exercises that are clear and simply stated, although some of them demand considerable thought and effort.

The style of writing in Signs is clear and accessible to anyone. Perry applied scientific thought processes to spiritual concepts, but his writing does not presume a background in either domain. An NDEr friend who recommended this book to me complained that she found the book “too left-brained.” I wished it had been even more so, which probably means it is right on target. CMPEs are by their very nature mystical and subjective, and those aspects need to be honored. My desire for tighter rules for identifying and interpreting them (and my friend’s wish for fewer rules) are not about the CMPEs but, rather, are about us and how we interpret them. Making the operational criteria for CMPEs more specific will constrain not the CMPEs themselves but, rather, how we perceive and make sense of them. Perry is not telling God how to communicate; he is showing us how to listen.

References