BOOK REVIEW

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Barbara Harris Whitfield’s post-operative near-death experience (NDE) in 1975 transformed her from a materially-oriented housewife and mother into a spiritual crusader. She went back to college to become a healthcare professional, studied NDE aftereffects with me in the 1980s, became the first woman elected to the IANDS Board of Directors, co-founded one of the longest-running Friends of IANDS support groups, embraced the “child within” model of spiritual development and applied it to NDErs, taught college courses in psychospiritual recovery from trauma and addiction, and published four previous books and a host of articles on spiritual growth. The Natural Soul, her most recent offering, pulls together her life’s work into an insightful and practical guide to living from our soul rather than from our ego. This book is not about an instantaneous spiritual transformation that occurred when Whitfield awoke from her NDE 35 years ago. It is rather about a gradual accumulation of insights, a spiritual journey that was initiated, in her case, by the NDE, but that evolved over decades.

Whitfield used NDEs to illustrate what it means to live from the soul rather than from the ego. For example, the life review in NDEs is often described as if it were a reminiscence in anticipation of dying, a psychological summing up of the value of one’s life (Butler, 1963; Noyes & Kletti, 1977). It is those things, but Ian Stevenson and Emily Cook (1995) concluded from a systematic review of NDEs with life...
reviews that they have deeper implications and that they make sense only in the context of a life beyond this material one. Whitfield in *The Natural Soul* explored that context in depth. She revealed the life review as not just a recall of memories but a first-hand experience of oneness with others, as the experiencer relives the events not only from one’s own perspective but also through the eyes of others involved:

In every scene of my life review I could feel again what I had felt ... and I could feel everything that everyone else had felt as a consequence of my presence and my actions. Some of it felt good and some of it felt awful....

The information came in, and then love neutralized my judgments against myself. No matter how I judged myself in each interaction, being held by God was the bigger interaction. God interjected love into everything....

This was when I first realized that we do not end at our skin. We are all in this big churning mass of consciousness. (pp. 5–8)

In this sense, the life review is far more than just a reassessment of life events. It is a lived encounter with the fact that we humans are all one, which puts the death of the individual in a very different light. Indeed, Whitfield showed how the life review can be a means of seeking (or creating) meaning in the problems and conflicts of life. In the Foreword to this book, her husband Charles Whitfield noted that this act of “making meaning from our everyday experiences and conflicts” is an important part of soul work that enables us “to rise above the limited and often painful episodes of our life” (p. ix).

But although Whitfield made good use of NDEs as an exemplar of spiritual interactions, her message extends far beyond NDEs – in fact, far beyond mystical experiences in general – to encompass how we negotiate our daily lives. So much has been written and said about the soul. In this book, we are shown the soul. Whitfield illustrated how to live from our soul and relate to the souls of others. The central concept that pervades this entire book is the differentiation between the voice and traits of the soul – who we really are – and of the ego – the character we play in our daily drama.

If the soul is who we really are, then where does the ego come from and why do we adopt it as our identity? Whitfield wrote that the soul constructs the ego as an executive assistant to help it live out this human experience: balancing the checkbook, keeping us on time for appointments, and negotiating our way through the physical world.
However, when the ego takes over and controls our lives, we tend to forget who we really are. Because the ego is a construct created to negotiate our way through the physical world, it is no longer needed and dissolves when the body dies. If we make the mistake of thinking we are our egos, then we make the mistake of believing that we dissolve when we die.

Whitfield suggested a simple test to tell if you are living from your ego or from your soul, your true self: Notice what happens when you relax into “doing nothing.” If you feel bored and restless, that is your ego complaining because, when you are not engaged with the physical world, it has nothing to do. On the other hand, if you have a quiet feeling of peaceful being deep within you, that is your “true self” just being. Whitfield pointed out that linear time is a construct of our intellect that moves us to living on a horizontal line. With natural spirituality, we experience time in a vertical fashion and live in the eternal now. We still meet our appointments on time, but our perception of time changes to give us a peaceful experience whereby we can focus on the task at hand and be totally present with it.

Whitfield wrote that the real love of our life is our own sacred person (of which our soul is one part), and that no other can make us whole or make us feel loved. We do that for our self in relationship with our higher power. This is “true love.” In putting into words what our egos struggle to understand (but what our souls innately know), Whitfield suggested that both science and religion miss the boat in explaining what life is about. Science tries to analyze, and religion tries to codify, truths that seem so arcane to the ego, but that come naturally, requiring neither analysis nor codification, to the soul.

Whitfield punctuated her book with a series of “aha’s” as she gradually learned these truths. If my experience is at all typical of other readers, we will all experience a series of “aha’s” as we follow her journey through these pages. Because that journey ranges over more territory than I can cover in a short review, I’m going to focus, for illustrative purposes, on three such “aha’s” that most intrigued me as a psychiatrist and near-death researcher: those related to grief, child-rearing, and death.

In discussing our tendency to live as egos rather than as souls, Whitfield tackled head-on the spiritual malaise that is endemic to our materialistic society. She pointed out that labeling our grief as “depression” can make it harder for us to move through it to resolution. We medicalize a normal human experience, numb
ourselves with pills to distract our attention from our feelings, and reinforce our sense of being victims stuck in a painful situation. In grief, even though we may be overcome with sadness, we eventually move through it and make meaning out of our loss. By contrast, in depression, we are numb and do not move through the feeling. If we mislabel grief as depression and try to “treat” it with drugs, we interrupt our grief work until we stop the drugs and allow ourselves to feel the pain.

The spiritually rich growth that comes from working through grief requires us to stop trying to control the process and stop defending ourselves from our feelings. As a clinical psychiatrist, I applaud this message that the resolution lies not in denying or avoiding grief but, rather, in accepting and moving beyond it, creating a meaningful life in spite of our pain. Grief, she wrote, teaches us how to be natural and get into the flow of our inner life. It is sadly ironic that psychologists devote considerable resources to investigating the source of human happiness. As Whitfield pointed out, happiness is in fact the natural state of the soul. It is our ego that associates peace and joy with sex, drugs, and power, so that we end up wondering what it takes to satisfy us.

Turning to child-rearing, Whitfield suggested that babies are born wide awake with full contact to the divine source, but that after two or three years of confinement in physical bodies and psychological egos, they lose that sensitivity and connection, as well as the memory of who they are as souls – which she labels “soul amnesia.” Whitfield described what she calls “soul parenting,” a spiritual role adults can play in the lives of infants and children. She suggested that we can influence future generations so that they will grow up in touch with their souls rather than having to seek them as adults. She pointed out that bonding doesn’t necessarily happen if infants have to follow what we want to do with them; it happens when we “just be” with them, play on their terms, and love them unconditionally. Likewise, sending children away to “shape up” when they act upset only adds abandonment to their already hurting self.

I found myself wondering what our world might be like if an entire generation were soul parented in the manner Whitfield outlined. Are our current epidemic of societal malaise and our addiction to prescription medications the result of our grief we were not allowed to express as children? Paradoxically, in the process of “soul parenting” the next generation, we can end up re-parenting our own souls. That is, through their eyes we get to see the world afresh and we can remember
the awe of our own child-like selves. This remembrance is important because even if, as Whitfield wrote, we are here to learn to give and receive love, we cannot do so until we heal enough to be real.

Just as being with children is an opportunity to re-experience ourselves as our souls, so too being with someone who is dying provides an opportunity to help us practice being real and feeling connected. Whether we are the person dying or the person assisting in the transition, this process is a chance to put aside our egos and practice living from our souls.

Whitfield quoted from the introduction to A Course in Miracles (1975): “What is real cannot be threatened/What is unreal does not exist./Herein lies the peace of God.” She wrote that if all that is real is God’s world, the world of the soul, then the ego and its world are not real and, therefore, do not exist. When we make this differentiation between identifying with our true self and our false self, we learn the way to peace and serenity. However, people today have become distracted by materialism and have fallen asleep to the real world of the soul. They often wake up to their true identity and realize that they are not just their body as they about to die. At that point, they experience a sense of joy at the knowledge that the dying body is going to drop away, that suffering and death are happening to the body, not to them. When we recognize this, we can release our clinging to our false self.

Whitfield adopted Aldous Huxley’s analogy from The Doors of Perception (1954) of the brain as a reducing valve, allowing the flood of too much reality to flow in a gentle stream so we can handle it without exploding. Helping someone die is usually as close as we get to the reality that is beyond our ego’s ability to perceive; we do that by allowing ourselves to experience death with openness and without ego. Allowing ourselves to feel vulnerable is not bad once we recognize that we won’t be destroyed, but that it is only the ego that is destroyed, while we evolve and grow. Whitfield explained that the reason people on their deathbeds see deceased relatives, and the reason she knows that no one dies alone, is that our separateness from each other is an illusion of the ego. We are our souls when we die, just as we were when we were born. To be our soul again is what we yearn for now: The divine existence we seek after death is not some place in another dimension but is who we experience ourselves as in that dimension.

Whitfield wrote that when she hears that ego voice in her head worrying that she is not qualified to help someone die, she turns the
task over to the universe and asks for help to get her ego out of the way. The secret here, as elsewhere, is to relinquish control over this unpredictable process and to allow the spiritual agenda to orchestrate the transition.

The style of writing in *The Natural Soul* is clear and very accessible, just as it is in all of Whitfield’s books. And, just as in all her previous books, this one pushes the reader a bit further than the last one did. Whitfield reminds us why NDEs are important phenomena. What I have not conveyed in this review of the major concepts in this book are the personal examples with which Whitfield illustrated these concepts. *The Natural Soul* overflows with intimate vignettes that bring the ideas alive.

Toward the end the book, Whitfield wrote that she has come to regard synchronicities, those meaningful coincidences that crop up in our lives, as “cosmic postcards” that remind us there is more going on than our egos are willing to believe. Her advice, when we receive one of these momentary flashes of insight into the universe, is to “smile, say a quick ‘thank you’ and go on.” I have come to regard this book as a postcard from Whitfield’s soul to ours, and my advice is to read it, say “thank you,” and put it into practice.

**References**


