

BOOK REVIEW

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Spiritual Awakenings: A Guidebook for Experiencers and Those Who Care About Them, by Barbara Harris. Baltimore, MD: Stage 3 Books, 1993. 118pp. + ix, \$8.00 pb. (To be reprinted by Health Communications, Dearfield Beach, FL, in 1995.)

Spiritual Awakenings breaks new ground both for Barbara Harris and for the field of near-death studies. Writing from her heart, from her own experiences, and from her years of working with other NDErs, Harris challenges us to stretch beyond the limits of who we think we are and to bring what she calls our Higher Nature into our daily lives. She encourages us to think of ourselves not as human beings occasionally having spiritual experiences, but as spiritual beings currently having human experiences.

Harris's first book, *Full Circle* (Harris and Bascom, 1990), was written after she had escaped a static marriage that could not accommodate her near-death experience. Living essentially on her own at the time, she portrayed in *Full Circle* the full range of near-death after-effects, not only the joy but the trauma as well. Now, having established herself as an individual and formed a more resilient and receptive relationship, she is able to complete the story by addressing the recovery process.

This book may not convince skeptics that emotional problems after a mystical experience often have a spiritual component, but convincing skeptics is not Harris's goal. *Spiritual Awakenings* is written for those

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who have experienced these difficulties firsthand—or secondhand, through loved ones—and its purpose is to help the experiencer work through them. She describes the dilemma of “life as a practical mystic” as learning how to apply on the physical plane the Grace experienced in the NDE:

The challenge is to keep our feet planted firmly, to live in both worlds, and bring the attributes of spirit here—to be an instrument of God. And at the same time functioning here, taking care of ourselves and paying our bills. To achieve this balance we can live by our own inner laws rather than outer pressures—to operate in this world but not be of it. (p. 99)

When Harris was seeking a publisher for this book, one agent told her the book was not marketable because it was not logical. Harris responded by inserting the provocative announcement in boldface on page viii of her introduction: **Warning: This Book is not Logical.** This book was written as a guide for people who are experiencing for the first time the mystical side of their nature, and that, Harris writes, is not a logical subject.

The organization of this book into three roughly equal parts, however, is quite logical. The opening section, “First Connection,” describes the process of spiritual awakening. Harris writes that there are four ways to grow psychospiritually: through regular spiritual practice; through living unconditional love; through pain and suffering; and through spiritual awakenings, such as NDEs.

Harris starts the journey by recounting her own spiritual awakening through an NDE. Though versions of this story have appeared in books before, first in Kenneth Ring’s *Heading Toward Omega* (1984), then in Charles Flynn’s *After the Beyond* (1986), and finally in Harris’s earlier *Full Circle* (Harris and Bascom, 1990), its focus improves with each retelling. Though I have heard Harris share her NDE with more audiences over the years than I can count, the version in *Spiritual Awakenings* bears witness to her continued growth over the years.

In a brief but critical section on ego inflation, Harris describes the temptation to identify with the infinite power NDErs and others encounter, and to feel superior to unenlightened friends and family. She correctly prescribes as the antidote to this ego inflation (and as the reward for having transcended it) humility, a cardinal sign of true spirituality in both Eastern and Western traditions. She uses the term “spiritual bypass” for the premature sense of enlightenment without going through the necessary inner work.

Harris describes in some detail the importance of working with the energy liberated by a spiritual awakening. While she uses the term "kundalini," she acknowledges the debate among scholars as to whether these energetic phenomena are truly manifestations of that hypothesized intelligent force, or simply a reflection of disturbances in the life energy, or "prana." Ultimately, as a body-based therapist, she declares that the name is unimportant; what matters is being able to use the energy to heal.

The middle third of *Spiritual Awakenings*, "Connecting Again," addresses directly the experiencer's struggle to readjust to mundane existence. Harris characterizes the "old paradigm" of mental health, in which spiritual awakenings are regarded as psychotic breaks, as one in which details of the healing process are hidden from the patient by the therapist. The new paradigm, which she sees starting to take hold in medicine, demystifies healing and includes the spiritual realm as coequal to the physical and mental. I agree wholeheartedly with that, as do an increasing number of physicians and psychologists. This is not repudiating the old paradigm, but rather transcending it, acknowledging that its goals are limited. As Harris accurately puts it, the goal of the old paradigm is to help us become "normal," while the goal of the new paradigm is to help us move beyond "normality" and become "whole."

Much of this middle third of the book draws on the models and language of the "adult-child movement," or the "recovery movement," particularly as it has been developed by Charles Whitfield (1987, 1991a, 1991b). While Harris's growth since her first book is evident from the first page of *Spiritual Awakenings*, it is most obvious in this section.

Much of the wisdom brought back from the NDE is experiential and cannot be put into words. Many NDErs try to verbalize their experiences nevertheless, warning as they do so that their verbal descriptions are not accurate—or they try to communicate their insights through music or art or service. Harris has found the language of the recovery movement to be right for her—and I suspect many readers will also; spiritual seekers are often drawn to the recovery movement because addiction is often rooted in spiritual longing.

Harris writes that she found her way "home" mapped out in the adult-child movement. She writes that her "soul" or "core"—the part Ring identified as participating in the "core NDE"—IS the "child within" of the adult-child movement. One reason Harris has embraced the inner-child metaphor is the connection, drawn by Ring (1984), between abuse and dissociation and then between dissociation and

access to nonordinary realities. There is a fair amount of clinical evidence to support both hypotheses: that repeated trauma teaches a child how to dissociate, and that the ability to dissociate from ordinary reality fosters awareness of other dimensions.

Some readers may take issue with the notion that a history of trauma and dissociation is the only path to alternate realities—or even the most common. Lest we get hung up on models, however, Harris reminds us that the map is not the territory—and she proceeds to demonstrate that inner-child metaphors can be used to convey considerable wisdom. As the fictional Swami Beyondananda wrote, “if you feel blocked, ask your inner child for help. Your inner child loves to play with blocks!” (Bhaerman, 1989, p. 68). Whether or not one is enthusiastic about the “map back home” that Harris found in the adult-child movement, the territory it charts is a critical and often ignored region, and it allows her to describe the difficulties faced by spiritual beings trying to survive in a material world, and to prescribe guidelines for survival.

A concrete example of the pitfalls awaiting the awakened individual is what Harris calls “romantic projection.” During heart openings, we can find ourselves bonding spiritually to others whom we may label as “soul mates” or “soul twins.” Since a heart opening enables us to experience bonding as never before, we may feel truly one with our “soul twins.” Literally enchanted by this bond that includes spiritual, emotional, and mental components, we may be tempted to actualize the sense of unity physically in a romantic relationship.

This can often lead to disaster, not only for the enchanted individual’s significant others, but for the spiritual bond to the “soul twin” as well, as the romantic involvement reintroduces into the relationship the ego-based emotions—jealousy, guilt, fear, shame, hurt, etc.—that are part and parcel of physical romance. The answer to this dilemma, Harris writes, is recognition that the unconditional love of a heart opening, so unfamiliar to most of us, does not need (in fact, cannot be restricted to) a particular love object; we are essentially falling in love with the universe and with our own “core” (after a heart opening, it can be difficult to distinguish the two).

I found Harris’s section on boundaries to be one of the most helpful, as it quite clearly discusses an issue both critical and sensitive to many NDErs. P.M.H. Atwater (1984) has highlighted how difficult it may be for NDErs to respect boundaries after an experience with the infinite; now Harris has offered some suggestions as to how to cope with that difficulty. She points out that telepathic rapport, often described by NDErs, flourishes when we experience no boundaries. However, this sense of boundlessness leaves us vulnerable to abuse, no matter how

“psychic” we may be. Abused children, she notes, never learn to form healthy boundaries, and without boundaries we tend to absorb others’ pain. Drawing on her own experiences, Harris illustrates the importance of developing healthy boundaries for healthy relationships; even after we realize that we are all connected, we still need to differentiate our conflicts from other people’s.

The final third of the book, “Living the Connection,” nicely brings together the spiritual and the mundane, and the problems inherent in trying to live in both worlds. Harris notes here that committing oneself to loving service can feel “selfish” to the NDEr—which is actually the recognition on a deep emotional level that we’re all in this together. “We recognize in everything we do,” she writes (p. 99), “that the physical and psychological are only half the picture”; and in this recognition is the proof (but, alas, only for the experiencer) of a spiritual realm.

Realization that the physical realm was not the whole story led a century ago to exploration of the psychological realm. While we couldn’t “see” psychological processes through our physical senses, we could see the effects on the body of a subtler realm, and from those effects inferred the existence of the psyche. Now, as Harris tells us, we face a comparable situation: we know the physical and the psychological are not all there is, because some of us are made aware of the effects on the psyche of a still subtler plane—and from those effects we can infer the existence of spirit.

In this section Harris turns the concept of dissociation as pathological on its head and shows how “spiritual philanthropists”—experiencers seeking to share with others the heart connection they enjoyed with the Infinite—can use it not to escape from reality but to enhance it. The wounded child learns to focus outside of this reality and become absorbed in an alternate one. The experiencer transforms this dissociative trait into an ability to become absorbed in this reality while staying connected to the source of unconditional love. Practical mystics, she writes (p. 102), “don’t just look up to God. We look within and around!”

In her discussion of spiritual sexuality, Harris notes that once she dared to bring up in public talks transcendent sexual experiences as a path to spiritual awakening, she found audiences freely shared their own accounts. The essential spiritual nature of these experiences makes irrelevant the inhibitions and embarrassment often associated with intimacy. In describing spirituality and sexuality as two sides of the same coin, she broaches a heretical idea: that we can directly experience spirit through our bodies.

Both Eastern philosophies and Western mystical disciplines have tended to view the physical world as either a distraction or a necessary

intermediate step that must be transcended on the path to spirituality. Harris sees our physical incarnation not as a distraction or barrier, but as a legitimate vehicle for spiritual evolution. She is by no means condoning sexual addiction here; but rather advocating using the body (since we're there anyway) as an arena for our struggle with ego. Being genuinely present and intimate with another forces us to let go of self-centeredness. By trusting enough to lose ourselves to our partner, we transcend ego.

Harris wasn't being entirely truthful when she warned that this book is not logical. It does indeed have a logic, but just doesn't always feel constrained by it. It strives rather for wholeness; it has tables for the left brain and poetry for the right, and for those who want more, an appendix of helpful organizations and a bibliography.

Spiritual Awakenings is an easy book to read, and for that reason it is also an easy book to underestimate. But it would be a mistake to dismiss this book as lightweight simply because Harris writes in plain English and popular metaphors. Once again, the map is not the territory. This is a much-needed book, one that finally offers some guidelines for the painful side of NDEs. The near-death "movement" has tended to idealize NDErs, putting them on a pedestal at the risk of ego inflation. We tend to ignore their unique burdens and vulnerabilities. The recovery movement has a large library of books that focus on the dark side, on our wounds and how to overcome them. Now, in *Spiritual Awakenings*, the near-death movement has one, too.

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