

BOOK REVIEW

**Heading Toward Omega:
In Search of the Meaning of the Near-Death Experience**
by *Kenneth Ring*
William Morrow, 1984, 347 pp., \$15.95

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*"We seem to be journeying along Death's road
to the Garden of Paradise," said the Prince,
but the East Wind never answered a word.*

—Hans Christian Andersen
The Garden of Paradise
(1974)

Kenneth Ring's early work began to map scientifically the near-death experience (NDE); his new book, as shown by its subtitle, is a "search for the meaning" of the NDE. Based on near-death data, especially on unusually deep experiences studied intensively by the author, *Heading Toward Omega* speculates boldly on what the near-death phenomenon may portend for the future of humanity. It offers, frankly and unabashedly, a vision of hope. It is, in my view, an example of a growing genre of books comprising what we might call *the new literature of hope*.

The opening chapter makes several important claims and distinctions. To begin with, Ring asserts that since the onset of near-death research "much of the Western world has come to look at death with open eyes unclouded by fear" (p. 17). While there is reason to believe that NDErs learn to look at death with reduced anxiety, it seems, despite the publicity NDEs have received in the media, somewhat of an overstatement that "much of the Western world" shares this dramatic shift of attitude.

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The change of outlook—however extensive it may be—is due to the emergence of an interior view of death (p. 21). Near-death studies help dramatically to underscore the distinction between externally observable *behavior* and internally nonobservable *experience*. The observable spectacle of a dying (or even dead) person is one thing; the invisible experience may (quite literally) be worlds apart. Ring, however, makes a distinction that eludes me. He speaks of a “traditional view,” which he identifies with the external view of death, and “all its negativities” (p. 21); i.e., the image of death as the “grim reaper.” This seems to suggest that a positive image of death never existed prior to near-death studies, but traditional mythologies of death have their imageries of paradise. Moreover, the rich lore of mediumship, often evidential for the survival hypothesis, also sometimes portrays death as illumination, enlightenment, ecstasy, and so forth.

Chapter 1 raises several methodological points. The meaning of the NDE is perhaps best grasped through the “unusually deep” (p. 26) cases, especially through the aftereffects they produce. Ring likens them to *seed experiences*. Notably, 72 percent of Ring’s subjects were women; women seem to be more willing to discuss and confront the meaning of their psychic experiences and hence are more fertile ground for the near-death *seed*. One wonders if women in general are more receptive to aspects of the human psyche normally ignored or repressed by men.

There is much one might say about this. I merely note in passing another important gender gap observers say is emerging in recent American politics: more women are aligning themselves with the Democratic party, more men with the Republican. Democratic sentiment is generally concerned with the plight of the poor and with the dangers of an escalating arms race. The gender gap observed in Ring’s data *may* reflect the political gender gap; in short, attitudes toward power and attitudes toward the psyche may be linked in important ways. Since Ring’s book speculates on the evolutionary potential of the NDE, the question of gender gap needs to be looked at more closely. Indeed, I have a hunch that the psychospiritual evolution of humankind, if such a thing ever comes about, will be marked by the liberation of aspects of the feminine psyche, held in bondage for millennia by the prevailing patriarchal societies.

On page 29 Ring disarms the critical reader by citing the methodological shortcomings of his study: smallness of and possible bias in the samples, and lack of randomness and controls. Indeed, Ring is open to the charge that his findings are the product of a huge

experimenter effect, especially since, as he frequently reminds us, his subjects also became cherished friends. Thus, in the transcript of an interview with one subject, the interviewer (presumably Ring) says: "And you really did experience the real you in this state, it seems." And the interviewee responds: "Yeah, I knew at that point that I had met myself" (p. 107). This could be construed as a perfect illustration of experimenter effect.

In defense of Ring, two things may be said. First, an especially fine-tuned receptivity may have been necessary to get the subject to share his or her experience. Examples are cited (and plenty more are available in the literature) in which curt, unreceptive attitudes helped to invalidate the experience and undermine the sense of its importance. Secondly, Ring is dealing with the scientifically elusive domain of *meanings*. Since an element of social validation is crucial to the meaning-endowing process, one may think of Ring as midwife to the birth of the meaning of his subject's experiences.

Ring stresses that his book is not about the afterlife implications of NDEs (p. 32). The problem is tricky, to be sure, but part of the meaningfulness of the NDE depends on the subjective conviction it produces that there is a life after death. On the last page of the book, Ring asserts the importance of "subjective proof" that NDErs obtain from their experience. Now, subjectivity may suffice for the experiencer, but for a scientist the idea of "subjective *proof*" is not even coherent. Intense subjective conviction is compatible with sheer error. If indeed we want to construct a new scientific mythology of life and death, we may have to look for ways of bypassing certain inappropriate limitations of traditional scientific method, but we cannot avoid basic questions of truth and falsity. It is either true or false that we survive bodily death; we can suspend asking for a decisive answer to that question, but its disjunctive logic remains unalterable.

Chapter 2 is a brief summary of what is known about the near-death experience and is meant to lead the reader to the next chapter, which states the hypothesis that the NDE is essentially a spiritually awakening experience. Here the author begins to let his subjects speak for themselves. He takes pains to warn the reader to listen attentively, and doing so one indeed detects the stirring afterglow of these brilliant transformative experiences. Descriptions of deep NDEs sometimes suggest comparisons with other sources, perhaps remote from the experiencer's knowledge. The description on page 63, for instance, struck at least this reviewer as remarkably similar

to Plato's theory of knowledge as recollection. Many reports claim a subjective conviction for the existence of God (as others do of immortality). "Thus, NDErs unanimously express the strongest belief possible in God following their experience" (p. 86). I share with Ring the suspicion that these reports reflect encounters with some universal source of being or consciousness—*perhaps* the same source that is the basis of all claims of transcendent reality.

Other characteristics cited with specific spiritual significance were the experience of pure love, total acceptance of self and others, and readiness to forgive. The chapter ends with a subject's description of the "transmission" of a Golden Light Energy, a direct projection of spiritual energy resulting from the near-death encounter. It is this direct transmission of spiritual energy that, in Ring's view (p. 89), plants the "seed" and sets into motion the process of spiritual unfolding. Again, it would be easy to provide examples and parallels from the world's spiritual traditions of a similar process of direct spiritual transmission.

The chapters that follow detail the aftereffects of this spiritual awakening. Chapter 4 describes the radical personal transformation that often occurs in deep NDEs. First, there is the problem of adjusting to mundane reality after tasting divine perfection. The return is often deflating and frustrating; for one thing, it is difficult to gain a sympathetic ear for one's experience, which in effect starves its growth potential. Compared to the glories glimpsed in near-death epiphanies, ordinary intimate relations may seem hollow. One penetrates more easily the masks of inauthenticity. A case is cited of a man's inability to stomach the violence and false consciousness generally projected on our national television screens. Again, an analogy from Plato springs to mind; in the Allegory of the Cave (Book Seven of the Republic [1955]), it is said that after a person escapes the cave, and comes out into the true light of being, return to the cave is profoundly painful and disorienting.

After NDEs, experiencers often report liking themselves more (p. 102). This item seems perhaps to contrast with the classic conversion experience, where experiencing the numinous often leaves one overwhelmed with a sense of holy humility. Learning to like oneself sounds more like an aspect of self-actualization than of self-transcendence. Ring's interpretation of this effect is that the experiencer, having encountered unconditional love, cannot help coming away with a feeling of enhanced worthiness. In general, subjects report enhanced self-concepts and personal identities; the chapter ends with three vivid illustrative cases.

Chapter 5 details the value changes induced by NDEs. People sometimes suppose that the study of near-death phenomena is morbid and life-negating; the truth, however, as Ring shows in this chapter, is that the aftereffects of NDEs are life-enhancing. One of the chief value shifts noted is an intensified capacity to appreciate the concrete particulars of the natural world. Deep NDEs do not reduce enjoyment of or care for our mundane world. On the contrary, the illumination encompasses both the "beyond" and the "here and now." Nor does the near-death illumination stop at "liking oneself"; it extends to sympathy for others. Ring's data show a trend among his subjects toward attitudes of "helping, compassion, patience, tolerance, love, insight, understanding, and acceptance" (p. 125). Other values diminish, such as the need to impress others and to accumulate material objects, understood as "symbols of worldly success" (p. 131).

These value changes observed by Ring in his near-death subjects are important for a theory of culture. Observers of the human predicament have focused on the denial of death and its distorting existential and political consequences. The dread of nothingness is magically mollified in the struggle to master material reality; humiliated, rendered impotent by the idea of death, one strives to compensate by frantic efforts to make a mark on the world. One tries to immortalize oneself by creating symbols of worldly power and success. The keener the death anxiety, the harder the drive toward "showing off before the Computer of Excellence" (Harrington, 1969). In light of this, the importance of a new scientific mythology, as might be emerging from near-death studies, is clear: the new myth (imagery derived empirically) reopens the door to transcending death, thus easing the need to overplay our hands in the game of worldly existence. Freed from constricting death anxiety, one may now enjoy the world, be receptive toward the being of others, and let go of the will to power.

Discussed in chapter 6, Ring's "Omega" questionnaires were designed to elicit information about the spiritual and religious aftereffects of deep NDEs. Ring found some striking trends: basically, his subjects experienced a deepened *spirituality*; their direct, inner sense of the presence of the Transcendent was enlivened. As a result, allegiance to the outer, conventional forms of *religious* life was often markedly attenuated. In line with the liberal trend of transpersonal psychology, one may welcome this data as supporting a philosophy of a universal "religion." This is the sense of Ring's subjects and, one feels, of Ring himself. Deep NDEs provide a type

of empirical backing for the popular (and I suspect ultimately sound) thesis of *philosophia perennis*. Against the more virulent forms of religious fundamentalism ravaging the world today, I can think of no better antidote.

However, a few qualifying remarks seem in order. First, a point of religious history. As Ronald Knox has shown in his masterful study *Enthusiasm* (1950), a tension, if not a conflict, between creative inspiration and the constraints of religious tradition is as old as, and is indeed a permanent part of, Christianity. Historical Christianity, in my view, is an ongoing process of fresh inspiration straining against old and seeking new forms. I would go a considerable step further and say that the dialectic between inward inspiration and outward form plays an essential part in the creative process, whether in religion, science, or art. Forms deaden *and* inspire; many a hack has plied his way through the sonnet, but the same form was a vehicle for some of Shakespeare's finest meditations.

Ring tends to contrast the near-death "enthusiast" or visionary too baldly with what he repeatedly refers to as "mainline" Christians. An unfortunate solecism, "mainline" is slang for absorbing narcotics directly in the blood stream. Ring, of course, means to say "mainstream." But difficulties remain. The current of Christian life today has many diverse and often antithetical tributaries, and everywhere displays the creative tension between inward inspiration and outward form—theology of liberation and the charismatic movement, for instance. Near-death gnosticism is one among many signs of ferment in current upheavals of spiritual life.

More to the point: the mother forms are not to be entirely despised, since they themselves provide conditions for their own creative transcendence. The mother forms of any spiritual tradition are not *only* oppressive and authoritarian (in a pejorative sense); sometimes they do embody the wisdom of long experience, and help guard against inflated and divisive egoism. Surely, we have to measure the dogmatic claims of NDErs that they just "know" they have met God and that the soul is immortal against the wider tradition of such claims. In a few examples, NDErs speak in an unpleasantly fundamentalist tone. For instance, on page 155 we learn from one enthusiast that "religions per se" are indeed the "antithesis" of the sacrosanct NDE—an assertion whose ignorance is matched only by its arrogance. Ring is aware of these uncharitable excesses; his own concern is to bring out the universal message of the near-death experience.

Chapter 7 examines NDEs and psychic development. Ring's use of

“psychic” includes (a) phenomena that parapsychologists would call paranormal, such as clairvoyance, telepathy, and precognition and (b) evidence for internal states *conducive* to the paranormal, such as out-of-body experiences and dreams. As for (a)—*psi* in a strictly paranormal sense—two remarks may be made. First, Ring’s examples, by and large, are not authenticated; he is happy with reporting on what his subjects *believe* about their increased psychic development. He does show, however, that belief in *psi* is increased after the NDE. And since belief is a well-known *psi*-conducive variable, Ring is justified in concluding that the NDE probably speeds up psychic development in the strong sense. But the actual evidence presented for *psi*, though suggestive, is weak.

Second, the questionnaire is a bit hazy in phrasing. For example, telepathy is defined as “knowing what somebody else is thinking without that person telling you” (p. 286). Now that is a poor definition of telepathy. First of all, “knowing” is too strong. In any case, I might “know” (guess, infer, sense, intuit) what you are thinking, without you “telling” me anything, just by observing your nonverbal behavior (a wince or a smile may tell me a great deal). I don’t mean to be captious here, but questionnaires must be worded precisely, or else one might be tempted to dismiss the findings. Ring does succeed in showing that NDErs have *increased receptivity* to the deeper potentialities of the psyche. That, combined with the suggestive examples he gives, and his review of other recent studies of the *psi*-NDE connection, helps to make the case for a near-death connection with spiritual and psychic development.

Ring notes that the connection between psychic development and spiritual awakening is known to the great spiritual traditions, and suggests that the psychic is a byproduct of the spiritual, an important thesis mainstream *psi* researchers have tended to disregard. By focusing on the NDE as a matrix for spiritual awakening and psychic development, Ring puts the question of *psi* in a fresh perspective. Perhaps, as he suggests in the final chapters, this whole awakening process is *directed*. Perhaps it bears on the evolution of human consciousness. If this were indeed true, then we could hardly overestimate its importance.

Chapter 8 deals with the planetary visions of near-death experiencers, a small but theoretically provocative class of NDEs. In this chapter Ring describes a form of thought (in a spontaneous, secular setting) that we may call the prophetic “archetype.” In using this troublesome word, I mean that the pattern seems indigenous to

mind as such: it appears spontaneously among different NDErs, as well as in other cultural and historical epochs. The basic pattern of Ring's near-death prophetic visions appeared among the ancient Hebrew prophets; it recurs in the eschatological literature of Christianity; in current times we observe it in that curious family of psychic oddities called Marian visions as well as in cases of *deep* UFO visions (Grosso, in press). It is basically a pattern in which, first, collective calamity, and then, a new age of spiritual human solidarity, are envisioned. The visionaries acquire a missionary fervor, their lives are transformed, and they often display unusual psychospiritual powers.

The prophetic pattern seems first to have emerged among the Hebrew prophets: Joel, Micah, Isaiah, etc. Its peculiar function is to address the question of justice. It is an archetype of transformation: not content merely to contemplate the world, it seeks to change it. Prophecy, we might say, is the dynamism of the collective unconscious, entrusted with the psychospiritual evolution of humankind. Wherever it breaks through the crust of the ordinary mind, trapped as the latter is by the concerns of its own personal survival, it creates a powerful psychosocial force. As with all archetypal patterns of human experience, personal variables determine fluctuations of style and expression. Nevertheless, the basic function of the prophetic vision is to warn and transform, the tribe in primitive times, the whole of humanity currently.

Ring's subjects seem almost to refine consciously the older forms of the archetype. For instance, in one case, a near-death prophetic visionary made it a point to say that the painful upheaval to come, which must precede the new age of peace and unity, should not be ascribed to "the vengeance of an indignant God" (which would be the way an Old Testament prophet might put it) but rather to the violation and ignorance of a higher natural law.

Visions of world-renewing calamity tend to occur during periods of cultural stress and transition. These visions may have peculiar psychological dangers in the modern world, which, as every school-child knows, is sitting on a nuclear powderkeg. The fundamentalist cast of mind, as it operates through extremist Islamic and Christian factions, increasingly inserts itself into the political process today. The archetypes, as Jung always stressed, are bipolar, having their destructive as well as their creative side. In his essay "Wotan" (1964), he tried to show how certain primeval myths and images psychologically influenced the rise of the Nazi movement. In our

own day, Robert Jay Lifton (Lifton and Falk, 1982) has called attention to the danger of the Bomb itself turning into an imagined path to transcendence. Bearing all this in mind, I cannot help feeling a little uneasy when I learn that, as Ring notes: "The common view of the NDErs who have these PVs is that not only is the scenario inevitable [a scenario that includes a heightened prospect of nuclear war], but, properly understood (in the light of its outcome), it is desirable and necessary" (p. 205). Now while Ring himself does not adhere to a rigidly deterministic interpretation of these prophetic visions, we do need to call attention to a danger here, especially since near-death millennial fantasies may be a symptom of a more widespread tendency. (Suppose the Man with his finger on the nuclear trigger "knows" that global catastrophe is necessary to promote the evolution of the greater consciousness.) As I try to show elsewhere (Grosso, in press), by imagining in realistic detail a post-nuclear-war consciousness, there is little reason to suppose that a new and higher type of humanity will emerge from it. On the contrary, the more plausible scenario is a return to barbarism.

Ring concludes this fascinating, if unsettling, chapter with a discussion of different theories of precognition and opts for a view that, mercifully, leaves the future open.

In chapters 9 and 10, Ring examines the biological and evolutionary import of his findings. Chapter 9 sets forth the *kundalini hypothesis* and its possible use in the interpretation of NDEs. "The idea that this energy, which is held to be both divine *and* divinizing, is responsible for humanity's evolution toward higher consciousness is called *the kundalini hypothesis*" (p. 230). Ring acknowledges that the kundalini concept is outside mainstream modern Western science, and thus offers it in a tentative vein, suggesting it may prove useful in the long run.

Unfortunately, the concept, as it stands, is not entirely clear to me. It seems to combine two diverse categories: the *divine*, a term either theological or phenomenological, and *energy*, a physical concept, as it is normally used. Ring says that the kundalini process is known by its "effects" (illumination, sense of burning, possible increased psi ability, etc.), and that these effects are similar to NDE effects. Actually, there are other contexts where these so-called kundalini effects manifest, but in different descriptive frameworks. For instance, I could document at length the same "effects" in the lives and spiritual adventures of the great saints; only there the "energy" is called the Holy Spirit. In Mark (5:30) it is alluded to as *dynamis*, power. The energy in question is, as Ring knows, a

bioenergy, or vital force, and there are many names for the cause of this family of widely observed psychological and physiological effects: ki energy, orgone energy, odic force, animal magnetism, eros (among the Greek philosophers), *elan vital* (Bergson), *Geist* (Hegel), etc. Parapsychologists might speak of *psychokinesis*, in which physical work seems to be done *directly* by mental agency.

The hypothesis seems to assert at least three things. First, there exists an *energy*, or capacity for “work” or change, inner and outer, that is vital and distinct from the energy systems known to physics or chemistry. Although most biologists reject vitalism today, modern Darwinian theory is increasingly under attack, and the idea that new principles of explanation are needed to account for the origin and evolution of life is far less outrageous today than it was, say, thirty years ago.

Second, the hypothesis asserts that this energy somehow changes brain structure, which allows for the occurrence of higher states of consciousness, including the near-death experience. How this might occur is not made clear. One possibility may be this: if the brain, as Henri Bergson (1962) said, is a “filter” of consciousness, a device for adapting to the plane of life; and if, as we may readily assume in near-death experiences, the normal efficiency of the brain is reduced and the filter temporarily dismantled, then we might indeed *predict* that the NDEr is *likely* to open up to a transcendent world, a world of mind at large, mind unrestricted by the categories and restraints associated with the normal drive toward personal survival.

In short, once I am past caring about my merely personal survival, I am more likely to experience forms of consciousness that transcend the constraints that normally operate on particular bodies. The kundalini effects would result from the filter breaking down. An individual would then be able to descend into the memory pool of the race, into the collective mind or mind at large. Oriented toward the life of the race, sensing more vividly the universal flow of vital force, one might be free to receive prophetic insight into the future of human evolution.

The third point is that this vital energy lies behind the ascent of evolving consciousness—the subject of Ring’s final chapter on NDEs and evolution. Ring here wonders if the larger meaning of NDEs is that they “collectively represent an evolutionary thrust toward higher consciousness for humanity at large” (p. 255). In this chapter Ring rightly sees the NDE as one among many forms of spiritual awakening, and touches on the thought of Teilhard de Chardin, Rupert Sheldrake, and John White’s visionary projection of *Homo*

noeticus. This is indeed a heady chapter, and one that I can only offer a few comments on.

If Ring is right, and the near-death consciousness is a potential form of human evolution, its importance would equal the evolution of human language. If language made possible the symbolic community of human experience, the NDE would provide a more immediate access to the life of that community, a kind of sensorium or intuitive awareness lacking in the indirect forms of symbolic consciousness. Symbols harden into formulas, die into dogmas, turn into weapons. The love, so often cited among the effects of near-death transformation, may be the affect (and effect) produced by the evolutionary kundalini energy dissolving the filter of the concept-ridden brain, which would permit us to see the world and our place in it more directly.

Evolution takes place, according to the orthodox theory, to adapt to changes in the environment; evolutionary changes have survival value. Our universally oriented *Homo noeticus* would have greater survival potential in our new manmade environment rigged for mutual assured destruction. Aggressiveness and paranoia, insensitivity to the inner life and needs of others, indifference to justice, love that is ideological rather than cosmic: these must have low survival value in a world primed for atomic holocaust. The problem is not merely the *political* dynamics of disarmament. The problem is how to effect *inner* disarmament, how to generate the *disposition* toward peace. This would call for a new mode of psychospiritual consciousness—for example, the omega consciousness that unfolds after a near-death experience.

Now if indeed life as a whole is guided by a type of transcendent intelligence—an increasingly attractive hypothesis to many thinkers—it must be disposed to prod this higher strain of consciousness into full awakening in humanity, which for better or for worse, has become the custodian of life on earth. Moreover, the archetypal theory of NDEs lends a hand in making a case for their evolutionary potential. Assume that the NDE projects a collective or transpersonal level of human consciousness; as such it would express an alternate *type* of humanity, a latent form of the total potential human self. The prophetic, mystical, and other near-death related types of archetypal experience express transformations of a new type of human functioning. It is the collective nature of near-death mental functioning that suggests we are observing a process of evolution toward a new type of humanity. Thanks to its holistic tendencies, it would be a type with greater survival potential. NDEs offer a

vivid empirical model for the evolution of consciousness, and Ring has begun to map aspects of this model, using the language of science. This takes the concept of higher consciousness out of the realm of speculation and moves it into the realm of phenomenology and the quantitative methods of science.

There are difficulties, however. For instance, kundalini is said to be a form of bioenergy “coiled” in the lower *chakras*, but how is this energy to account for *evolution*, especially the evolution of consciousness? A vital energy, it would seem to me, could at best propel or accelerate an already existing form or function. Evolution proper, by contrast, requires new form and higher degrees of order. Kundalini energy is a questionable candidate for being the agent of evolution, if it is treated mechanistically. Perhaps an analogy will illustrate: to love with passionate intensity is not necessarily to love wisely, nobly, or beautifully. The ascent upward is a more complexly orchestrated affair. We need insight into *how* this energy works to produce its effects.

Further, we might try to test specific claims. For instance, Gopi Krishna (whom Ring draws on) claims the kundalini energy he experienced so profoundly is a source of creative genius. He has written a mass of poetry and has challenged others to match the *speed* with which he executed these works. Speed, of course, is a mechanistic notion and has no bearing on the quality of the results. Indeed, I would have to say, in accord with William Irwin Thompson (1974), that Gopi Krishna’s poetry is *not* evidence that kundalini experiences inspire flights of creative genius; unfortunately, much of his work rarely rises above the level of doggerel.

Finally, I have difficulties with the very notion of the evolution of “higher” consciousness. This higher consciousness includes things such as esthetic awareness of ordinary objects, heightened moral sensibilities, and all-embracing love and empathy for sentient beings. But it is hard to imagine an analogy between biological evolution and the psychospiritual evolution under consideration. For instance, what would an *organ* for justice or love be like? Will noetic man *automatically* love his neighbors with his newly evolved organ (however subtle) of love, as currently we automatically see the blue sky with our human evolved eyes? A love not given freely would be mechanistic, and all its higher value would thereby be destroyed. But if love is given freely, it may not be given at all, and thus we are plunged back into a world where the higher type of love is once again a rarity and an anomaly.

Again, the capacity to see color might be a property evolved by

the race; the capacity to use one's color sense creatively the way Van Gogh did was something only an individual man could do. Van Gogh's art is great precisely because it is not collective, marks no mere residue of the whole species, but is the unique product of an unrepeatable, anomalous, *personal* evolution.

Indeed, if we accept Bergson's notion of duration, it follows that it is the nature of consciousness to evolve. Every personal consciousness is evolving from moment to moment, and every individual is a microcosm of the evolutionary process. From this view, there could never be an omega point, a final state, or even a fixed, defined direction for consciousness to evolve toward. Consciousness is essentially unstable, "free" we might say. Every personal consciousness, expressing a unique perspective on possible experience, is always surging toward novelty. But there could be no summit, no end-point in the process; that would be tantamount to loss of freedom, descent into thinghood. As Pico della Mirandola (1956) said, the peculiar glory of being human is to be *permanently* suspended between beasthood and godhood. For better or for worse, we remain radically and essentially free to make a heaven of hell or a hell of heaven. This doesn't mean that talk of evolution has no value here, only that we have to be clear about what we mean by evolution *in the sphere of consciousness*. Talk of evolution, for instance, might yet be useful as part of the rhetoric of self-transformation.

Let me finish with some comments on the idea of a new literature of hope. *Heading Toward Omega* illustrates, in my opinion, a growing genre, a type of book expressing, as Ring himself says, a *cri de coeur*, and is in a way a kind of prophecy, garbed in the habit of science, decorated with statistical tables and the caveats of reason. Its function is to warn and transform; cool *theoria* yields to the burning demands of *praxis*. Conflict is evident in the style. The author, aware of the scientific shortcomings of his study, nevertheless wants us to listen very carefully to his subjects, urging us to make ourselves receptive to the message. "Listen to this, Humanity!" he seems to be saying, "and allow the seeds to drop into the soil of your consciousness." The style itself is warm, sparkling, often colloquial, always energetic and engaging. This may be protoscience, our raconteur of tales of transformation is saying, but the urgency and importance of the message demands that we pay special heed.

The new literature of hope is consciously opposed to the zeitgeist of despair. It plays up the evidence of what is promising for the

human adventure. It does so in the full consciousness of the growing danger of nuclear war, accenting the idea that we are at a crossroads of history, a point of no return. The new literature of hope is a response to what we might call the evolutionary imperative. It reinforces the belief shared by many that radical change in the quality of life is essential to the survival of life on earth.

It uses science to discover and validate data, which in turn are passionately swept up in the construction of a new holistic mythology of life and death. The final goal is to create a believable Image—with Ring, Death as the Beloved—a stimulant to the right hemisphere of the brain. It acknowledges the need for an integrative myth. Ring, for instance, endorsing John White's portrayal of *Homo noeticus*, citizen of the cosmos, presses his data into the service of validating the construct of a higher type of humanity.

In effect, the new literature of hope aspires to *eroticize* science (in the platonic sense in which the "erotic" represents the quest for the wholeness of human and divine). Is this bad? Well, it depends on how you see the world. Ancient "science," or knowledge, was tied to the quest for wisdom, for *arete* or personal excellence, and for happiness in the context of communal life. In that sense it was erotic, and sought the wholeness of inner and outer, individual and social, human and divine. Content to serve the profitable gods of industry and the state, modern science has detached itself from the quest for holistic wisdom.

The new literature of hope *uses* information, language itself, in a way designed to be an agent of change. Of course, this is nothing new. The prophets, poets, and mystics of old were not impassive observers of life; the rhetoric of the spirit is an ancient phenomenon. The novel twist is for people within the scientific tradition to be turning to forms of spiritual rhetoric. Again, this is not just a current phenomenon; the Renaissance saw many visionary scientific utopias (Bacon, More, Campanella). Each of these authors fashioned utopias of higher humanity from the materials of the emerging science of the day. They failed because they lacked insight into the darkest *and* the highest potentialities of the human psyche. Ideally, the new literature of hope is neither psychologically naive nor does it neglect the higher potentialities of our inner selves. It is critical as well as constructive. Indeed, it raises questions about the validity of the most basic premises of Western civilization. Thus Marilyn Ferguson, in another example of the genre in question, writes of the emerging network of "Aquarian conspirators": "Its members have broken with

certain key elements of Western thought, and they may even have broken continuity with history" (1980, p. 23).

Just as a book may itself become an agent of political change, so might certain books be thought of as agents of psychospiritual change. The transformative intent of Ring's book is clear when he says: "And thus it could be that eight million NDErs may be to the world what that hundredth monkey was to his islands. The myth at least gives us hope of possibility and if it should become widely enough shared, it could begin to generate its own reality" (p. 263). The new literature of hope—Ring's *Heading Toward Omega* is a shining illustration—offers itself as a tool in the evolutionary process itself, as an agent in the field of self-verifying and self-generating truth. Science is often thought of as a passive and impartial recording of truth; perhaps a more creative understanding of truth is essential for survival. Unprecedented forces of destruction threaten life on earth; a radically creative counterforce is essential to meet the challenge. The new literature of hope questions basic conceptions of science, truth, and objectivity. It is a sign of stirring in the conscience of science, an awakening to the need for science to ally itself with the deepest interests of humanity. Kenneth Ring's book helps raise these questions and spur this awakening.

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