

The Near-Death Experience as a Shamanic Initiation: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT: The field of near-death studies shares a number of interesting, often compelling, similarities with the ancient spiritual tradition known as shamanism. Not least among these similarities is the fact that a near-death experience (NDE) is a time-honored form of shamanic initiation. I present a case example illustrating how a deep NDE can propel a person who had no prior knowledge or interest in shamanism into spontaneous, often classic, shamanic experiences, while living an apparently normal life in the midst of modern Western society.

KEY WORDS: near-death experience; shamanism.

Shamanism is an ancient spiritual tradition that had been practiced in many tribal and preliterate societies for at least 30,000 years, and which is based on the ability to enter into a state of ecstasy. Although there are many aspects to shamanism and many different types of shamanic practitioners, central to all shamanic activities is what is referred to as the *shamanic journey*. During these journeys, the shaman leaves his or her body, enters into spiritual reality, and communicates with spirit helpers he or she encounters there. Often shamans have what is called a *tutelary spirit helper*, which usually appears in the form of a person or deity. Shamans also develop relationships with the spirits of different animals, referred to as *power animals*, who assist them in their work. The role of a shaman is to utilize his or her ability to enter into ecstatic trance and make contact with sacred reality, in order to assist members of his or her community for a wide variety of reasons.

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Leading authorities in the areas of shamanism and near-death studies have noted a number of interesting parallels and commonalities shared by the two fields (Green, 1998; Halifax, 1990; Harner, 1980; Ingerman, 1991; Kalweit, 1984, 1987; Peters, 1990; Ring, 1989, 1990; Walsh, 1990). In answer to the question of whether near-death experiences (NDEs) are similar to shamanic journeys, Michael Harner, considered by many the world's leading authority on shamanism, wrote:

Yes. The shaman's journey starts with an experience of going through a tunnel of some kind, usually with a light at the end, and this is very similar to descriptions of the so-called near-death experiences. But the shaman goes all the way through the tunnel and explores the world that people feel themselves passing into at the time of death. (1987, pp. 5–6)

From within the field of near-death studies, Kenneth Ring was the first to note the strong connection between NDEs and shamanism:

By coming close to death, the NDEer has inadvertently and involuntarily been initiated into a shamanic journey. . . .

By taking the shamanistic perspective, we can appreciate that the plane of experience NDEers enter into during their near-death crisis is the same one that shamans learn to access freely during the course of their training. Therefore, strictly speaking, this realm is not one that awaits us only after death. It exists now and is in principle available *in life* to anyone who has learned the "access code." (1990, pp. 208–209)

Sandra Ingerman in a very real sense straddles both fields. She is a prominent shamanic practitioner, a writer, and also an NDEr. She wrote of her own NDE and how it impacted the development of her shamanic skills:

Traditionally shamans have been people who have had a near-death experience, life threatening illness, or a psychotic break. In my case, I almost drowned, and this near-death experience showed me the way to the other side. Many survivors of near-death experiences report going to a great blinding light that pulsates only love. In my own near-death experience in 1971, I too was received by the light. For me, this light represented the Father and Mother God. I started thinking about God's being pure light. The Bible says that God created man in his own image. What that means to me, then, is that we are really balls of light. I started to experience myself as being light surrounded by matter, the body. We are a body; we have a mind; and we have this beautiful light that shines in us that is Spirit, which connects us to the divine. (1991, p. 202)

Previously in this Journal I discussed the overlap between NDEs and shamanism, noted the consensus of opinion that an NDE is a classic

form of shamanic initiation, and suggested that NDErs would be among the best candidates for further training in shamanism and that, by incorporating shamanic techniques, the field of near-death studies could broaden its scope to include a therapeutic clinical methodology based on the experience of ecstasy (Green, 1998).

And finally, transpersonal psychiatrist Roger Walsh, in a quote that could easily have been written to introduce the following case study, wrote:

Shamans learn, sometimes over many years, to induce and direct their journeys. Yet around the world people who have never even heard of shamanism may be surprised to find themselves having journeylike experiences. These may erupt spontaneously and entirely unsought as out-of-body experiences (OOBEs), lucid dreams, or near-death experiences (NDEs). Such experiences have presumably occurred throughout human history. As such they may have provided the inspiration for consciously induced journeys, first in shamanism, then in other religious traditions, and most recently in psychotherapy. (1990, p. 148)

If Walsh is correct that such experiences have occurred throughout history, we would expect them still to be occurring now, in modern Western society. And in fact that is exactly what we find. The following case study illustrates how an NDE can spontaneously lead an individual who had no previous knowledge or interest in shamanism into what are at times classic and time-honored shamanic experiences.

Mary's NDE and Shamanic Initiation

In the course of my work as a clinical psychologist, people are sometimes referred to me who have had NDEs, and who are having problems understanding their experiences and readjusting to everyday reality. One day I picked up a message in my office from a woman I shall call Mary. The message she left with my answering service said that another psychologist, one who attended a lecture I had given on NDEs, had referred her to me.

Mary had been involved in an automobile accident in November, 1992, while on her way to a meeting. During the accident she had a deep NDE which she was now having difficulty understanding and coping with. Mary had suffered a number of physical injuries as a result of the accident. Psychologically, her most pressing problem was that she no longer wanted to live. She was not suicidal in the typical sense; she just did not want to be alive in *this* realm any longer. Like so many other NDErs, Mary had gone into a light during her experience, a light

that had been so attractive that she desperately wanted to return to it. She was convinced that if she could die physically, she would find herself very much alive within that light with its perfect peace, love, and acceptance. As will be clear from the following account, little else seemed to matter to her at that time.

During our first few sessions, I was able to help Mary by validating her experience and assuring her that she was not crazy. I told her of others whom I knew who had undergone similar experiences, and suggested she read P. M. H. Atwater's (1988) book, which deals specifically with difficulties people have following NDEs. She also read during this period books by Raymond Moody (1975, 1977) and Melvin Morse (Morse and Perry, 1990, 1992). I was able to arrange for Mary to speak to another woman who had had a deep NDE. She later told me that this was one of the most helpful things for her during this difficult period of adjustment.

As I got to know Mary, I learned that prior to her NDE she had been a very conventional woman in most ways. She was a Caucasian woman in her 40s and she had been happily married to the same man for more than 20 years. The couple had no children and she worked as a bookkeeper in a company owned by her husband. She was a very meticulous, detail-oriented person and she was also good with numbers. She described herself as a "workaholic." A typical day was one during which she worked all day, went home, had dinner with her husband, and then the two would continue working at home until late at night. They often worked seven days a week.

Mary was also very involved with her appearance. She would not leave the house without having her makeup on and being dressed up. She shopped for clothes at the best stores as often as three times a week and kept closets full of expensive outfits. The two most important things in her life were working hard and making money.

Although as a child she had been raised in a strict Protestant church, Mary was not a particularly religious person. As an adult, she had not been a member of any church and she had never been especially interested in spiritual matters. However, she loved animals and had a deep appreciation for nature. When she was in natural settings or witnessed some of the miracles of nature, such as the birth of a child, she sensed that there was a higher being of some kind. She had not given much thought about whether or not there was an afterlife.

Much of this changed abruptly that afternoon in November, 1992, when a man came through a stop sign and hit her car on the driver's side. Mary never saw the other car approach and has no memory of

the accident itself. The last thing she recalled prior to the accident was the sign of a nearby Coco's restaurant. The following is the account of the initial portion of her NDE:

I was driving to an appointment and I remember seeing the sign at the Coco's restaurant and all of a sudden I was flying down this really big dark, black tunnel. I could see this white light at the end. I was thinking that the tunnel was really scary, but for some reason because the light was there it made me feel everything was going to be O.K. I remember I couldn't wait until I got to that light. Something about it seemed like it was really wonderful. I got to it and I went right into it. After I was in it, I started noticing other lights around and they all looked the same, but they were people. I could feel that they loved me, and then all of a sudden I looked at one of the lights, and I knew it was Frank Myers. He said, "It's not your time and you need to go back." I just said, "O.K." The next thing I knew, I felt myself rushing back through the tunnel.

Prior to her NDE, Mary had known a man whom I shall call Frank Myers, who worked in the office of her veterinarian. The two had become friends, in part because they shared a love for whippets, a particular breed of dog. Frank became ill in 1989. After a prolonged bout of fatigue, he was diagnosed with leukemia. He began a course of radiation treatments that were very unpleasant. He went into remission, but one day over lunch, he told Mary that if the leukemia recurred he would refuse further treatment and let nature take its course. The leukemia did recur and Frank died approximately nine months later. This was the same Frank Myers that Mary met during her initial experience and who, as we will see shortly, was to become such a significant part of her life from that time on. I continue with Mary's account at the point where she has returned to her body at the scene of the accident:

Then the next thing I felt was the left side of my head and it hurt really bad. I felt like I was leaning practically into the passenger's side of the car. My body was half way between both seats and the pain in my head was so terrible, it hurt so much, that I felt like I left my body again, only this time I didn't go through the tunnel, I went right into the light. When I went into the light there were all of these lights. And there was a big light or the major light—I don't know what you would call it—God or Jesus, but it was definitely a higher being that has something to do with why we are all here. Anyway, I went back into it and there were all of these people and they were all letting me know that they loved me and one of the lights I knew was Frank Myers. I just started talking to him and he said, "Well you're going to have to go back because this is not part of the plan." And I said, "Oh no, I'm not going back. I did that last time and my head hurt really bad and I don't

want that pain." I felt like we were walking around or moving around over there. The more that we moved around it seemed like there were more of these lights that were beings and they were letting me know that they loved me. And I could hear the most beautiful music. It was absolutely beautiful. I have never heard music like that on this earth. And so then Frank said, "Well you really do need to go back." And I said, "No, I don't know what's happening here, but I am not going back."

To this point in her experience, Mary's account corresponded in almost every detail to that of other NDErs. She found herself being propelled down a dark tunnel-like area, saw a light, entered into the light, heard celestial music, and saw other spiritual presences, one of which she identified as God or Jesus. Mary also saw and communicated with a deceased friend who told her it was not her time and she must return. Although the first time she did not resist, the second time she was adamant that she did not want to return because of the pain in her body:

Then he told me I need to go back and I said, "No. I can't go back." I started to get very upset and I said, "That pain in my head, I can't bear it." I started feeling these other people around and they started letting me know that they loved me and they would help me no matter how hard it was. I said, "What about the pain in my head?" Frank said he would help me with that so I agreed to return.

I started to come back, but I really didn't want to. I started begging, saying, "Please don't make me go back." At that point, he showed me all of the prayers that I had ever said in my entire life. There were a lot of prayers but they went really fast. It was like a panoramic view of them and I saw in the prayers where I had prayed to reach the goals that we had come here to reach. Then he said, "Now after seeing that, don't you realize that you are part of the plan?" Then all of a sudden, I remembered something and I said, "Oh, all right," and I agreed to come back. He kind of laughed and told me not to worry, that life was only the blink of an eye. He said that I was part of the plan and I must do this.

While many people who have NDEs report a panoramic replay of their entire lives, Mary saw not her life, but all of the prayers that she had ever prayed. After viewing these prayers she remembered something that caused her to agree to return to earthly life.

Mary later told me that what she saw was her spiritual self prior to her birth. She realized not only that had she agreed to enter physical life, but that she had participated in the decision about what her life would be like, what goals she would attempt to attain, and what lessons she would learn. She now sees life as a sort of "school for the spirit": we take on physical form to come here to learn specific lessons,

or to achieve specific goals, and then we return to the spiritual realm. This is a commonly held belief among individuals who have had deep NDEs.

After Mary agreed to return, she again found herself at the scene of the accident, where her account continued as follows:

Then I saw all of these people on earth and I got really confused and I didn't know which one was my body. I saw a bunch of men and women and there was a body laying on the sidewalk but it never occurred to me that might be my body. I almost walked right into this one man. I was just going to take whatever body I came to first and then Frank said, "No, not that one." I said, "Which one am I supposed to get into?" Frank said the one on the sidewalk. At that point I didn't recognize my body. I didn't feel I was a woman or a man or anything. I was just getting into a body that they pointed out. So I got into the body. I remember these lights fading, like they were fading into the distance. The next thing I remember, I woke up in the hospital. I had no idea where I was and all of a sudden I remembered the Coco's sign and I thought, "I've got to get to the Coco's sign and find the lights."

In Mary's mind the Coco's sign had become associated with entering into the light, simply because it was the last thing she remembered seeing prior to the accident. For a long time following this, she was quite fixated on the Coco's sign. At one point, she actually forced her husband to drive her to the sign and simply sit in the car to see if somehow, by doing so, she would reenter the light. Another time, while sitting in a different restaurant, she became so focused on the Coco's sign that she had a spontaneous out-of-body experience (OBE) and found herself there.

After her NDE, Mary also had difficulty identifying, as well as identifying with, her physical body. She was confused and ready to enter whichever body she came to first. Frank intervened and directed her to the correct body, which Mary then reentered. Many people who report NDEs describe this sense of detachment from their physical body. People often report that during OBEs associated with NDEs they may see their body and realize it is their body but they feel no attachment to the physical body while in that state. Many will say that their *real* self was the self that they experienced while out-of-body.

Mary was then transported to a local emergency room. Her account continued from the point where she found herself in the hospital:

The next thing I knew I started lifting up. My head down to my waist started lifting up out of my body and I looked around and that's the first glimpse I got of the hospital. But I didn't know what it was. I thought, "Well this is really weird. Where am I?" In my mind I still had to get to the Coco's sign to get back to the light and I thought, "This is really

strange." So all of a sudden, when I thought I was trying to get off of the bed, the rest of my body came out and I found myself floating around on the ceiling in what must have been the emergency room of the hospital. I was looking down and all of these doctors and nurses were running around and I thought "Why are these people acting this way?" As I looked at it, I got this terrible feeling. I thought, "Oh my God! This is so much stress and so overwhelming, how could they stand this?" Then I thought, "I've got to find the Coco's sign," and that's when I started floating around in the hospital. I could just go through walls. I went into this room and there was this lady lying in this bed. She had short dark hair and it was kind of curly and she had dark colored skin. She had blood coming out of her nose and she had her eyes closed and all of these doctors were doing all of this work on her, sticking things down her mouth. They were moving around in there really fast. One of the doctors came into the room and said that some s.o.b. had just mowed her down. There was a nurse and she said, "She's a goner." I was looking at this and I still didn't realize I was in a hospital. Then all of a sudden I felt this presence up at the ceiling with me. I guess you could call it a spirit or soul. It was looking down at the body also. We were looking at the body together and after a while this presence disappeared. It just sort of floated off and went away. I heard the doctor down below just say, "That's it, she's gone."

The next thing I thought was that I had to get to the Coco's sign to get back to the light and find out what was going on. So I went back to the area where they have all of the beds and they have curtains marking off where the beds are. I just started flying through the curtains as fast as I could, thinking I've got to find my body. I was really frantic. All of these thoughts were happening at the same time. Somehow, I remembered that the doctor who was treating me had these really thick glasses and I thought, "O.K., I'll have to find this man and then I'll know that's the body where I should go. All of a sudden, I saw this doctor with the thick glasses and there was this body lying on the bed. So I felt like I went into my body through my head. All of a sudden I opened my eyes and there was the doctor with the thick glasses.

Mary was released from the hospital in the care of her husband the night of the accident. If her account ended at that point, I would have been quite impressed. She had described an NDE that was entirely consistent with hundreds of others that I have heard and thousands that other researchers have documented. Her account also included almost all of the components that are commonly associated with NDEs.

But in a real sense, this is only the beginning of Mary's story. Since her NDE, she has been in almost daily contact with her deceased friend Frank Myers, who has become something of a guardian angel or spirit teacher for her. True to his word, he has helped her on numerous

occasions with both physical and psychological problems. Although he often comes to her during sleep, a number of times she has seen and interacted with him while fully conscious. The first time this occurred was just a few days after the accident. Mary was resting at home when:

I decided to walk down stairs and here was this light, like a form, but the feet didn't touch the ground. It scared me. Then all of a sudden it became a person and it was Frank and he had clothes on like humans have but his feet still didn't touch the stairs. I said, "Oh, I'm glad it's you." I said I'd been trying to get back to that Coco's sign and find that light and I have no idea what was happening. I said, "You've got to help me explain something to these people." I was totally conscious when this happened. When he was on the steps he had a little dog named Teddy and I said to him, "What are you doing with Teddy? That's Gary's dog." I said, "Oh my God, is Teddy with you?" He said that he was and he looked so happy. I could see Teddy licking Frank's face. I said, "This is really unbelievable." I asked him why he didn't have Pistachio with him. He said that Teddy and he worked real well together. He has had Teddy ever since he has been coming to see me. I said, "I just want to go with you." So I begged Frank to take me and he told me to remember that I am part of the plan and I must stay here for the time being. Then he smiled and he said, "We'll come back when you are ready." I started crying and threw a fit.

Frank Myers was taking on the role of what shamanic traditions call a *spirit teacher* for Mary. In shamanic cultures, the spirit teacher has a special relationship with the shaman. The shaman can call upon the spirit teacher to ask questions, for help with problems, or for healings. Although the shaman is said to be in control of his or her spirit teacher, in the sense that they are in direct and ongoing contact with them, spirit teachers display an unmistakable independence and distinct existence from the shaman, something that has been apparent throughout Frank's relationship with Mary.

But shamans also often work with what they refer to as *power animals*, the spirits of animals that help and guide them in their journeys into the shamanic realm. Here I had a woman walk into my office who clearly had no knowledge of shamanism, and not only was she in contact with a spirit teacher, but in addition *the teacher had a spirit animal with him!* Domestic animals, such as dogs and cats, are not usually identified as power animals in shamanic cultures, and this dog has never acted in the role of a power animal for Mary. Nevertheless, the fact that Frank would present himself with an animal and state that "they work well together" is entirely consistent with both shamanic belief and practice.

I was so amazed by the obvious shamanic themes occurring spontaneously in Mary's case that I asked her if she was at all familiar with shamanism. She told me that the first time she had heard the term was when the other psychologist, who was treating her with conventional psychotherapeutic methods, had mentioned it while listening to her account. She asked him what the term meant and he told her to look it up in the dictionary, which she later did. At this point, I also briefly explained shamanism to her. Mary's visits with Frank continued:

The second time I saw him I just couldn't go to sleep and I decided to get a drink of water. I walked into the kitchen and there in the window was Frank. I dropped the glass in the sink and broke it and I said, "Oh, you scared me." All this time I was crying and I was so upset; I wanted to go into the light. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't do anything. I was just thinking about this light and I said, "I am so glad that you came back." I told him he had to take me to the light, that I didn't belong here. I told him I felt like a stranger even in my house. He said, "Your head is hurting; you're upset." He said, "We're going to help you with that." I kept crying and asking him to please take me with him. Then I felt like he was moving away and finally I couldn't see him anymore.

Central to shamanism is what is referred to as the *shamanic journey*. During these journeys, the shaman will enter into the spiritual or shamanic realm and travel, often to distant places. Frank will often simply appear to Mary, usually in a dream, but one in which she is conscious and in control of her faculties, and take her on journeys. Mary's descriptions of these journeys are quite similar to accounts of lucid dreams or OBEs. Initially, Mary was somewhat frightened of these journeys, fearing she would get lost and not be able to find her way back to her physical body. Frank assured her that this would not happen and repeatedly admonished her against being too serious. Mary described a journey with Frank that took them deep into the ocean:

One time we went down into the Pacific Ocean. We were flying deep down. He was showing me these barrels of stuff that our government dumped there. They had bad things in them and he showed me all these barrels. He said that this was really bad and that it had to stop because it was making things out of balance and that mankind will be really sorry. I asked if it would make us extinct and he said no, but we are going to have a real rough time. I felt like we were swimming on the floor of the ocean not too far from Japan and we went all the way past close to Australia. It seemed like we went really fast. When the trip was over we came back and sure enough I could recognize my house and I came back down through the ceiling and got back in bed.

This concern about the earth and maintaining balance in and with nature is a theme often heard in shamanism. Mary reports another time-honored shamanic theme, of being in nature and communicating with animals, that arose during another journey:

Another time we went up to Lake Arrowhead and they have these big trees and I was at the top of these trees and touching these acorns and flying around and communicating with these birds that were perching on these trees. I could feel their happiness and how happy they were to have these big trees. It was just really a wonderful feeling. We were talking about how beautiful it was: the birds in the trees and how blue the sky was, just how magnificent it was.

In most shamanic cultures, sustained drumming is used to produce the altered state of consciousness that allows one entrance into the shamanic realm. I discussed this with Mary and suggested that, if she were interested in doing so, I could guide her through a form of shamanic journeying using a tape recording of drumming that can be done in a office setting. I felt this might help her cope more effectively with her intense need to reenter the light. My reasoning was that if she were able to reenter the light even for a brief period of time it might help her readjustment to physical life. She agreed to do this and, after careful preparation, she came in and listened to a drumming tape in the my office. When she arrived for her appointment she was experiencing pain that radiated from her hip down to her toes on her left side.

Almost immediately after turning on the tape, Mary reported she was suddenly in the light again and Frank Myers was there. She had no sensation of going anywhere. She experienced it more as suddenly becoming conscious that he was right there in the room with her. He told her that he was aware of the pain in her hip and he made some adjustments which she experienced as a physical sensation of the realigning of her leg.

When the drumming ended, she was somewhat disturbed and disoriented. The drumming caused her to have a headache and the intensity of the experience was somewhat overwhelming for her. However, she reported that she no longer had any pain or discomfort in her leg and the pain never returned. This is a clear example of a spontaneous healing, which occurs quite frequently in shamanic states of consciousness.

Since her accident, Mary has had difficulty sleeping. One aspect of this has been a recurrent nightmare of running through a hospital with doctors and armed guards chasing her. In the nightmare, Mary would find herself running down corridors and hiding under beds, only to be discovered and having to continue running. These dreams caused her to

wake up repeatedly throughout the night and she had difficulty going back to sleep. Again, Frank intervened on her behalf:

I would run out and find another bed to hide under and I was just really panicked and scared. I kept thinking they were going to hurt me. Then all of a sudden—and this has happened numerous times—Frank would be there, snap his fingers and they would disappear. When they would disappear he would smile at me and say, “Come on, let’s go for a walk,” or sometimes he’d say, “Let’s go have fun.” I would tell him that I felt like I just didn’t belong here, I don’t fit in anymore and I think I lived past my time of dying. Maybe somebody made a mistake. I just wanted to die. He’d say no, that the plan was perfect and there was no way a mistake could be made. He told me I had to trust that he knew what he was talking about. He told me not to worry, that he could help me. And I said, “Well I can’t keep having these nightmares; they’re scaring me and making me tired all day.” He explained that whenever I had one he would always be there to help me. He said, “I made them go away this time.” I smiled and said yes and then I would find myself begging him to please let me come over there. At one point I was so desperate I said, “Did I do something wrong? Is that why I have to stay here?” He said, “No, it’s not about that; it’s just that it isn’t your time to go and you have something else to do.” He always tells me, “Don’t worry; life is short. Life is the blink of an eye.” He said that, although we over here have a tendency to believe in time and space, there really isn’t any time or space.

At one point, Mary consulted a psychiatrist because of her sleep disturbance. He gave her a prescription for a commonly used sleeping pill. Because he was very specific about the instructions for the use of the medication, Mary thought that if she took all 25 pills at once, it might be a lethal dose. When she got home, she took the pills out of the container and lined them up on the counter. She was deciding whether or not to leave her husband a suicide note when:

Suddenly something really strange came over me. It was like a feeling in my heart. Something told me or made me look into the mirror, like I was being guided to do this. It was a very strange feeling. I looked in the mirror and there was Frank and all of my whippets that had died. He was still holding Teddy and he had the lady that had raised me with him. She looked younger than she was when she died. I was just sitting there and I was so flabbergasted seeing this in a mirror. But somehow it gave me the feeling that everything was O.K. The really horrible feeling I had before this went away. I guess you’d call this a vision. I really don’t know what to call these things. By the time all of this happened I was just so thrilled to see all of my dogs, and the lady who raised me was saying, “I am with you too; you don’t have to worry.” After that I even felt better physically. I didn’t feel so much pain in my

body when it was over. So I just threw all the pills away and forgot about attempting suicide.

On another occasion, Mary was sitting in her bedroom when her dog alerted her to a similar vision of Frank in the mirror.

Another time my dog got up on the little bench that I sit on in my dressing area and she started pawing and whimpering and trying to put her paw on the mirror. I could see her and I wondered what she was doing. I'd never seen her act that way before. Finally, I walked out and I looked in the mirror and there was Frank. I said, "I can't believe this is happening. I can't believe that my dog can see this." The dog was still whimpering and batting at the mirror the whole time. Frank was just smiling, like he was visiting.

Mary's experience of seeing deceased friends in a mirror is similar to a type of divination work that is often seen in shamanism. Mircea Eliade (1964) discussed the fact that quartz crystals are used in many shamanic traditions throughout the world to see and communicate with spirits or to divine messages or information. This is also very close to Raymond Moody's work with what he refers to as "facilitated visionary encounters" (Moody, 1992; Moody and Perry, 1993), based on the ancient Greek tradition of the Oracles of the Dead. Moody became convinced that ancient accounts of seeing apparitions of dead relatives were actual encounters with those apparitions. He developed a procedure that consists of carefully preparing a person throughout the day and then, at dusk, seating the individual in front of a mirror surrounded entirely by black curtains. The mirror is slightly elevated in such a way that the person is looking into a mirror that is empty and reflecting nothing. Moody has found that almost 50 percent of the people who have gone through this procedure report vivid apparitions of dead relatives or friends and, more importantly, that these encounters are often therapeutic.

Mary had a friend named Gary who also liked dogs. In fact, Teddy, the dog that accompanied Frank on his visits to Mary, had been Gary's dog. One night Frank gave Mary specific instructions that turned out to be quite helpful to Gary:

In the dream Frank told me to tell Gary about the experiences, and I said, "I can't do that." He told me to tell him about the NDE, and I said, "No, I might lose his friendship." He said, "I want you to tell him about Teddy." He said, "It is time to do this, and you have to tell him about the NDE and tell him that Teddy is O.K." I woke up in the morning and I thought, "Do I dare?" Then I had such a compulsion to do this,

I just couldn't stop myself from calling Gary and telling him. I called him and said, "I have a story to tell you that has been happening for a year, and I don't know how you are going to take this." He said, "I can take a lot of things." I said, "No, this is something that's really wild."

I started telling him the story from the NDE to the point when Frank kept coming to me and had Teddy with him. He was silent for a long time and then he said, "Is Teddy O.K.?" I said, "He's wonderful, he's so happy, he's just such a happy little guy." Then he started crying. I asked him why he was crying. I thought it was because of Teddy. Then he told me that he was crying because his aunt had died that morning at about 3:00 o'clock. He had been up all morning crying and was upset because he was very close to her. He told me that I had no idea how much this telephone call meant to him, how much better it made him feel.

Mary also experienced an apparent OBE that included me. While at that time I had become fairly good at having lucid dreams, and had even had some apparent OBEs, I have no memory of this experience or anything like it, and I certainly take no credit for it:

I dreamed that we were flying around out of our bodies and we went down to Esperanza's house and went into her bedroom, and she was laying down on her bed with her dark hair pulled back from her face on her pillow. You and I were talking and we knew it was Esperanza's house. You said to me, "Can you feel the vibration?" I said, "No, I can't feel anything." You said that she must be on another plane and you told me to be real, real still and you can feel the vibration. I became real still mentally and I could feel the vibration. When I felt it, it scared me. I said, "I'm getting out of here." You said you could tell from the vibration that she was on another plane. So we were just hovering around this ceiling talking about this vibration and her being on another plane for what seemed like a long time.

Mary had apparently received a great deal of help and good information from Frank. During our sessions, I frequently found myself suggesting she consult Frank about problems. Recently, Mary called me to ask my opinion about a family problem. After listening to the problem, I gave her my opinion. I then suggested she ask Frank what she should do. She told me she had already done so and that his advice was the same as mine. I didn't tell Mary at the time, but I was secretly glad, and somewhat relieved, that my advice had concurred with that of her spirit teacher.

Mary is fortunate to have a husband who seems to be able to take all these things in stride. Many people who have deep NDEs find that the changes that occur are very difficult for their family and friends to accept and deal with. Her husband has also been able, at times, to

verify things she has told me. For instance, while writing this account, Mary told me the following story.

More than a year ago she had been having chronic pain, and a chiropractor had given her a transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) unit, a small electrical device used to help relieve chronic pain. Mary lost the unit and tried to find it a number of times without success. She felt bad about not being able to find and return the unit and she discussed the matter with her husband on more than one occasion. Finally, she told him that she felt the only thing she could do was to pay the chiropractor for the missing unit.

That night Frank came to Mary in a dream and the two discussed a number of matters. Frank then mentioned he was aware Mary had been upset about the missing TENS unit and he would help her find it. He told her it was in a box in the garage. Mary said that the garage was filled with boxes and that she would never be able to find it. Frank told her that this box was green and she would be able to find it the next morning. Mary then said, "But what if I forget this dream?" Frank told her that when she got up in the morning she would not remember the dream, but when she took her first sip of coffee it would come back to her.

The next morning Mary got up and, just as Frank had said, the moment she took her first sip of coffee, the entire dream came back to her. She went into the garage and found a green box with the missing TENS unit inside. I spoke to her husband the same day and he verified that she had indeed found the TENS unit, which had been missing, by his own recollection, for more than a year.

These experiences are so numerous that space does not allow me in this paper to describe all the times Frank has been of assistance to Mary in ways both large and small. I will relate one more, to show how these encounters have led directly to important life changes for Mary.

Mary had been a smoker for almost 20 years. She smoked up to two packs of cigarettes a day and felt that it was useless to try to quit, simply because it was such a difficult habit to overcome. She also did not feel any real motivation to quit smoking, although she knew that it was bad for her health. During this period of time she developed a chronic lung infection that was never diagnosed conclusively. Some of the physicians who had examined her felt her condition was consistent with cancer, whereas others felt that it was related to a rare childhood condition.

One night in a dream Frank came to her and told her that he was going to help her stop smoking. When she awoke the next morning

she forgot the dream, but remembered it when she took her first sip of coffee. Unlike most other mornings, she also suddenly realized that she had simply forgotten to light a cigarette. She went the rest of the day without smoking and realized that she had absolutely no craving or desire to smoke. At this writing she has not smoked a cigarette in more than four months.

Like many other NDErs, Mary would like to work in the helping professions in the future. She has often told me that she would especially like to work with young people who are dying, who feel that it is not their time to go, to try to help them make their transition with less fear. She has not been able to do so yet, because her health has been so unpredictable that she cannot commit to being somewhere, even as a volunteer, a certain number of days per week. My overall impression is that much of Mary's time and energy over the last four and a half years has been taken up dealing with her physical problems and trying to reestablish some sense of normality in her life.

Mary has not sought out formal training in shamanism, nor is she interested—at least at this point in her life—in practicing shamanism. Although in many shamanic cultures, once the individual has been called by the spirits to practice, to refuse to do so is to invite all sorts of problems, including illness and even death, this does not appear to be the case with Mary.

On a more personal note, meeting Mary when I did was an amazing synchronicity. It was at about that time that I had become interested in shamanism and was working my way through as much of the literature on the subject as I could find. It had become clear to me that the connection between NDEs and shamanism was both strong and important. And although I had heard or read thousands of NDEs, I have never encountered an experience that so clearly illustrated as many of the phenomenological aspects of the two experiences.

On the other hand, I am sure Mary's story is not unique. I have little doubt that many NDErs would see the connection between their own experience and shamanism once it was pointed out to them. And having done so, they may also realize what shamanic cultures have always been aware of: that an NDE, while a profound spiritual experience in itself, is also an initiation. This initiation can be developed through practice and apprenticeship into the time-honored method of spiritual healing known as shamanism. Many NDErs return with a deeply felt need to enter the helping professions, and I can think of no better way to give expression to this need than seeking out formal training in shamanism.

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