

Letter to the Editor

The Future of IANDS

To the Editor:

For the past several months, I have been thinking about writing a letter to the editor of the *Journal* about the possibility of broadening the scope of research reported and, by extension, expanding its readership. When Jan Holden, President of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), requested ideas regarding the future of IANDS in the most recent issue of *Vital Signs* (Holden, 2004), I was even more motivated to share my thinking with you.

In my view, IANDS has served three important functions. First, IANDS has been a reliable contact point for informing the press and public, insuring that information about near-death experiences (NDEs) can be provided in a professional (rather than a sensational) way. However, since experts and professionals in the field can now be found on the internet in a few minutes, this function has become less vital. Second, IANDS has provided comfort to NDErs and, through both local and national meetings, allowed their stories to be validated by professionals and/or fellow experiencers. Despite a public that is better informed about NDEs through books, articles, and the internet, I believe that these personal encounters are still a valuable service for experiencers – though others can speak to this more eloquently and thoroughly. Third, IANDS has provided a highly reputable, peer-reviewed, professional journal, a publication that I believe has greatly enhanced the credibility of the NDE because its prestigious contributors are drawn from an interdisciplinary field of physicians, social scientists, psychotherapists, theologians, and occasional physicists. It is the future of the *Journal* that I would like to address more specifically.

If IANDS were to cease to exist and the *Journal* to be discontinued, there would be no systematic place for these researchers to publish their findings. The truth is that researchers still find publishing articles on unorthodox topics infinitely harder than publishing on some mainline topic in their fields. This is not due entirely to prejudice in any given field but often because the editor has no access to someone

knowledgeable for peer review of these articles. The NDE is not the only unconventional topic that has this problem, and this brings me to my suggestion for expanding the scope of the Journal and, by doing so, vastly enlarging the circle of potential subscribers. Ralph Hood, author of *Dimensions of Mystical Experience* (2001) and one of the premier researchers in the area of mystical religious experience, has lamented the fact that there are only two reliable outlets for scientific articles on mysticism (R. Hood, personal communication, October 18, 2004). Mysticism is discussed in an occasional article in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* and a somewhat more frequent topic in the *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*. Both of these journals, however, also publish on other topics. Even the prestigious Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre (formerly at Oxford and now at University at Lampeter, Wales) does not publish a journal on the mystical religious experiences they study.

I would like to suggest that IANDS include mystical religious experiences in the focus of both the organization and the Journal. This is appropriate for several reasons, but most importantly because *many (myself included) see the NDE as either a subcategory of mystical religious experience or a closely related psychic phenomenon*. When Raymond Moody began his research on NDEs in the 1970s, the Alister Hardy Centre was researching mystical religious experiences; interestingly, they found that one of the “triggers” for a mystical religious experience in their first 3,000 cases was the prospect of death (Hardy, 1979). A similar phenomenon occurred in the cross-cultural research of Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson on deathbed visions. In their book, *At the Hour of Death* (1977), they included a chapter on patients who recovered, that is, patients who had NDEs rather than deathbed visions.

IANDS has a history of reaching out to experiences of related death phenomena such as deathbed visions, post-death visions, and reincarnation. I am suggesting that mystical religious experience be added to our mission and focus of study. National and international studies on mystical religious experience, such as those reported by the National Opinion Research Center at University of Chicago, usually show 40 percent of the general population having had a mystical religious experience (Wood, 1989). There is some evidence that this number increases to 65 percent when people are interviewed rather than researched by written questionnaire (Hardy, 1979, p. 126). Pamela Kircher, physician and NDEr, wrote in her book *Love is the Link* (1995) that these folks frequently appear at her talks, tell similar

stories, and have many of the same concerns as NDErs. Other examples of researchers who have reached this conclusion include theologian Judith Cressy (1994), neuropsychiatrist Peter Fenwick (Fenwick and Fenwick, 1995), and psychologist Mark Fox (2003). Including mystical religious experience will enable us to expand our base of professional members, as well as continue the very important work that was begun a century ago by William James in his classic book, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). With few exceptions, research into these areas is something that raises the eyebrows of one's colleagues. I call it an "Old Man/Old Woman's game," because most of us have job security before we pursue this type of research. Without a strong journal and organization, people will soon forget that the overwhelming majority of NDErs and mystical religious experiencers are normal and not mentally ill. Without a journal to keep this information respected academically, the public could revert to its old views, dismissing these topics as wishful thinking or worse. The Journal enables us to challenge offhand explanations as proof; when genuine questions are raised, we are able to offer a scientific alternative.

Society is never more than a few generations removed from ignorance, and history is full of examples of a very few people standing up and making a difference when it comes to knowledge. The continued presence of IANDS matters! Let's make IANDS stronger by adding a related topic: mystical religious experiences. How about a name change to the "International Association of Near-Death and Mystical Studies" (IANDMS)?

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