

## Over Easy: A Cultural Anthropologist's Near-Death Experience

Patrick Gallagher

### ABSTRACT

Otherwise rather similar to the phenomenon and after-effects of his participant-observations in anthropological fieldwork, the author's near-death experience was a more exact solitary form of learning a new reality, replete with symbolic meanings that altered his view of life, death, and their intermediate cultural patterns. While unconscious and partially paralyzed for weeks, he had the usual NDE visions: he idly examined his body from above, lost gravity to gain flight, passed through a void tunnel to a luminous world, and encountered there personages of *radiant* knowledge and total love, all of whom had no need to eat, drink, sleep, dream, demonstrate personal worth, or use words rather than interest to know each other and everything else. Through a curious wish, he returned to terrestrial life at the cost of losing such *radiance*.

Since he recovered, his memory of these visions strangely has increased, causing him gradually to abandon many typical cultural patterns – such as frenzied competition, boredom in conversations, material collection, and continual anxiety and concern over quite brief events and imagined statuses – and to replace them with the recognition of the eternity granted by adherence to the present moment and of the remarkable worth and interest of everyone he encounters.

### INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists differ from all other social scientists because they yearn for a culture quite different from their native one and must study it in solitary field work under the conditions of “participant-observation.” This axiom of course, requires more than merely learning another language, here and now, or there and then, in some strange place. As the hyphenated term itself suggests, the anthropologist must live, follow, and practice a new set of social behaviors – long enough to acquire and understand new symbols and *their* arbitrary meanings – to finally become a recognized, active member of a previously unknown culture. “Prolonged participant-observation, actually sharing in the lives of savages to see the world through their eyes,” is so crucial that without it modern ethnography is impossible (Gallagher, 1967, p. 24). My twenty some years as an anthropologist and a college professor have greatly supported a certainty herein implied: the best way to learn is to do.

This anthropological lore may also serve as a preamble to explaining the phenomenon and after-effects of my near-death experience. Presumably like all others, my NDE is a solitary form of learning through participant-observing of a quite new style of life or reality, replete with symbolic meanings. Further, what I learned from my NDE seems far sounder and more exact than the results of my prolonged field work with the Guajiro Indians of Venezuela (Gallagher, 1961, 1962, 1964, 1976). Virtually all the reports later recorded by researchers from NDErs show practically identical perceptions and descriptions of the event — despite vast differences in the witnesses' cultures, languages, educations, ages, religious beliefs, and occupations — and these accounts are all independent. Sound anthropological reports of similar events are seldom identical, or even similar, no matter how alike the reporters may be (Miller, 1979). Similarly, what I learned formally about the nature and prospect of death (from my brief post-doctoral study at the Washington School of Psychiatry) is far less exact than what I learned from my NDE. And, like other NDErs, I no longer need tremble. Now I know that our current life is merely an interlude, and that “Over Easy” far more accurately defines death than does *that word*. Families in our society spend more money on private funerals that last a few days than they do on private educations that persist for years. Clearly, to our society, Death is a more sanctified horror than illiteracy, worthy of far more thought, effort, and worry. My NDE has permitted me to abandon such gross anxiety and graced me with the truth that *life has hardly begun until you die*. As other NDErs often mention, such freedom from the terrifying concept of death (embraced by the majority of the members of our culture) automatically has elevated my love of life and has made life far more interesting, useful, and delightful than mere poetic words can explain. Other patterns of our culture — living for urgent goals, roles, dreams, or schemes — now seem to be of little rhyme or reason. The patterns that replaced those increase daily in importance. These changes appear to be related to what anthropologists generally experience shortly after entering a society to do field work (“culture shock”) and then, much later, upon returning to their native cultures (“counter shock”).

#### THE NDE AND ITS AFTER-EFFECTS

The accident that propelled me into my new life style occurred in 1976 when I was driving from a visit with former students near Death Valley to meet my wife and return with her to our home in

Berkeley. The accident caused that meeting to be considerably postponed, for I was greatly damaged by flying through the windshield some fifty feet and landing on the highway. In a hospital a number of physicians aided me as I was comatose. My twenty-year-old son, by chance telephoning, learned of my hospitalization and was the first to speak with the physicians. The head physician told him I would never walk or talk again, mainly to prepare him for my certain death that day. When I awoke instead, the entire right side of my body was paralyzed because of skull fractures over the left hemisphere, and I had grave difficulty in breathing because of the paralysis and because of broken ribs on the other side. I was unconscious for weeks and suffered from lacerations and other major problems.

When I awoke, I was amazed at being unable to move the right side of my body but unaware of all else. I could not recognize anyone who greeted me, including my wife and children. And, of course, I didn't know who I was. Finally, after a couple of weeks, I discovered language exists on earth, but the one that began to return was Spanish. Perhaps this second language came first because I am ambidextrous and so use the left hemisphere for English and the right for the second language, and the left neurons damaged in the skull fracture hindered English far more than Spanish. Since the ambidextrous person has greater ease in shifting brain functions, English began to return a few days later with the two problems observed by linguists in people who miraculously regain language. One is using the wrong noun, to produce "Hand me your elbow" instead of "Hand me your book"; the second, disastrous to understanding, involves arranging words of a sentence in a wrong order and thus violating vastly important syntax rules. But after a short period of time, I was able to speak fairly accurately. As English returned, I gradually lost the paralysis of the right side of my body and regained other capabilities as well. So to the astonishment of many people, including the physicians, I did recover enough to begin lecturing again without much noticeable damage. I began to have seizures, however, (probably because of scars in my brain tissue), which almost always commenced with auditory (rather than visual) curiosities. Generally, I would distinctly hear classical music, a warning to lie down immediately to avoid falling down. Some seizures led to another day or two in the hospital in a coma, but I do not recall having any of the visions then that were common when I was first unconscious.

These visions (no term is more descriptive), though still not as clear as when original, have been strongly developing in my memory (in a manner similar to my gradually regaining language without any

conscious effort). They also seem sequential. ( I say “seem,” for time itself did not exist for me in the comatose state.) The first vision, that of my own dead body, was a far clearer view of death than the typical one seen on television. My body was inert and totally prone. I was floating in the air, but not in some kind of a room, as is often reported. I viewed the body from above at a diagonal angle, with great interest but without any consternation. I cannot recall if I was clothed or not. But soon thereafter, so to say, I noticed I had something else to think about in addition to the bereaved body. Not only was I freed from gravity but from all other human restrictions as well. I could fly, and fly so adeptly that I felt transformed, with far greater freedom than hang-gliding provides compared with an airplane flight. The speed and joy of flying without the usual restrictions and constrictions that inhibit flight, cause fright, and so remove one from the true sensation is one that even the Wright brothers missed. Total ease and joy are but a part of such complete, solely human, non-mechanical, and unimpeded flight.

Next in the sequence was the sight of a dark area ahead, void of all light, which I saw to be the entrance of a tunnel. Flying into the tunnel at once and so moving very, very rapidly, I enjoyed the flight even more, freer from other distractions by being barred of sight. The time I was in the tunnel can only be speculated, for as I said earlier, time itself seemed unavailable, but finally I saw a circular light in the distance. As I continued to roar along, the light began to look somewhat like the sun on the horizon, in one of the rather rare earthly views that allow a brief gaze at a planet-like, highly luminescent moon – without the problems one has in so sighting the sun. The end of the tunnel was an incredible sight, with an illuminating marvel of yellow-orange color of total beauty, which also seemed at once a marvelous place to be.

When I left the tunnel, I entered a dazzlingly beautiful area, where – like time – space was so abundant as to provide no reality for considering parts of it as compartments, as we normally tend to do. It was complete space, that is, as totally and perfectly illuminated as the end of the tunnel, with the same ideal colors and radiance. I also saw within this space of space certain surprising creatures, such as lions and other marvels, all wondrously proportioned and replete with grace and beauty beyond imagining. I saw as well a number of people, some of whom were clothed and some of whom weren't. The clothing, which seemed transparent, was adornment but not the sort of shielding safeguards more familiar; it appeared that waving a hand close to such garments would allow it to pass through without distur-

bance of any kind. The people themselves, also of graceful beauty, all seemed to be those that I have long been interested in, such as my father (who had been dead for some twenty-five years) and Sigmund Freud and Charles Darwin (whom I had written, read, and lectured about for many years). But everyone there, as I knew the very moment I was there, seemed to possess a knowledge as radiant, transfiguring, and ideal as the luminous light. And I possessed it, too. Naturally, I had never experienced or believed such phenomena could be, but there they were, as though I had always had them and they were merely recalled, revealed. Although attempting to learn things had always been an inclination for me before, now all was there, and even so it seemed I had a number of choices to make. Flying ceased, replaced by my greater interest in these new phenomena, and, like the others there, I walked around as I wished. Others were reclining. I knew that all one had to do was approach an interesting person and quite easily and almost immediately *understand his essence*. To do so completely required only a brief glance (not interrupted by usual bilateral pauses) into the person's eyes, without any speech. Time was unnecessary, but the entire episode might be termed minute, requiring only interest on the part of the viewer. The other person had the same type of interest, and the result was consummate exchange of knowledge. Words cannot provide a hint of such universal knowledge.

Without reflection or words, I knew them as completely as they knew me and finally understood why poets cite eyes as the entrance to the souls. (Earlier, I sadly felt the poetic view was solely our total dependence in conversation of following the rules of periodic eye-staring, directly and then laterally, no matter what else one may be doing while speaking and listening.) I also knew that the illuminating light would never cease: no one had the need to sleep since we sleep only to dream, and dreams were not required for persons with radiant absolute knowledge. I also understood that everyone present was in a state of perfect compassion with everyone else and everything else, that there was no specific need at all for portions of space since total space was available, and similarly there were no preferences for specific time since *all* time is experienced only in the present moment. We were freed from all those contrivances historians often claim to be the causes of war and other conflicts, including land, food, and shelters. Love was the only axiom. These ideal conditions produced a phenomenal state, for neither hate or any other disturbing passion was present — only the total presence of love. As a result, one might say that there were no emotions at all. But I think a better

version is that since love was complete, it also included slight variants such as consideration, respect, compassion, and interest, and that all of these merged.

I knew it quite possible to return to my terrestrial life, and I missed other people I also admired (those paradoxically called “living”), my children, my wife, and many others. I did decide to return, though I knew also that the price of ticket would be gargantuan: accepting the biological, physiological, and physical needs and handicaps of my body, as well as the loss of all but a splinter of my luminous knowledge. I know nothing of any aspect of the return trip, but as soon as I decided to return and so lost the ALL of what I have ever wanted to be or to know, I was there. Neither do I know how often I had visions while comatose for those weeks, but I speculate that they occurred during all the time I was unconscious.

When I returned to consciousness, a great number of other things were required of me because I was far from recovery. Although I didn't recognize my children, or any other relatives or friends, I did note the continuous, loud sound of the vacuum sweeper occasionally used in my room was far more intense and likely more meaningful than the sound of speech. I recall being puzzled by the attentive glances to the often silent and always interrupted mumbo-jumbo that comprised conversations between persons and the disregard paid to the majesty of the vacuum sweeper's sound. In many ways, I had to relearn things that we usually take for granted. I had to relearn Spanish, English, our culture, and my role in it as a “human”: to live, to be social, to lecture, to deal with all the earlier, myriad details of my life. All that returned, however, did so without formal effort or even wish on my part.

All visions here described are absolutely distinctive from what I have experienced and studied both in dreams and with psychoactive drugs. Dreams, as psychoanalytic creeds often propose, may be of considerable worth to all of us. But clearly, dreams must first be translated in order to follow the premises (of our “rational” awakesness) of time, space and logic, with causality added to uncover their meanings. We thus have to handle such impossibilities as a dream in which the dreamer acts as a child while simultaneously viewing the scene as an adult in the audience, and in which some participants can be familiar personages long dead, some participants composed of other, thus hidden, representatives. These entirely acceptable conditions in dreams would cause one to panic were they to appear in a wakeful moment. The language used in dreams, if to be understood, clearly needs translation. The events in my visions are com-

pletely different. There is no need at all for translation in any sense in order to achieve understanding of the semantics involved, either physically, socially, mentally, or linguistically. The extraordinary knowledge there for one and all cannot be improved and – rising quite above all temporal, spatial, and logical conditions and far beyond any yearning for causality – makes any earthly conjecture pitiful, no matter how universal its terrestrial acceptance may be. In large part this difficulty is because of our conscious reliance and dependence upon words. But as I've mentioned, I knew what I knew in my visions *without* the use of or reliance upon translation for meaning and function. Not one word existed there. Words, after all, are extremely weak, erroneous approximations – far less than, or even contrary to, the luminosity I experienced. Hence, visions and dreams are not the same in any sense. For the same reason, hallucinations and other changes in perceptions or altered states of consciousness, while interesting, are also quite different from my NDE visions. Further, it may well be that a substantial minority of the human population fails to receive either the blunders or the blessings of hallucination however termed, but all of us can rest assured that the visions I describe and evaluate will not be denied to a soul on our planet. Even more reassuring, the automatic knowledge that awaits us all is actually already within us. As a faint example of this point, compare the discovery of the semantics of sex by (1) cautiously and carefully studying all the meaning of that useful subject given to us in the heroic volumes of Sigmund Freud to (2) losing yourself by becoming one with an engaging person who also is lost for you, all out of love. Freud's work is without; the other is within. Keep in mind that I have earned and spent my position in terrestrial life by learning, writing, and speaking words from 1936 to 1982 with scarcely a pause. But the brief experience I haphazardly write about now is itself entirely wordless and entirely worthy. St. Augustine is given credit for the anthropological axiom, "The world is a book and those who do not travel read but a single page." I can justifiably lay claim, I think, to learning a lot about terrestrial life from my visionary flight elsewhere. It may appear that I rely on my memory for such knowledge. But memories can fail or be sketchy at times. Most astonishing to me, the remembrance I use to explain the meaning and nature of my travels does not diminish over time but actually greatly increases. Instead of fading, it daily grows, largely I think because the spiritual dimension of my reflections on that event continuously changes me and gives me insight into our life on this planet.

Such "counter-shock" insight on my return includes the

dimensions of our reality – time, space, and logic – which my NDE has profitably altered. Consider, for example, our dimensions of time. I once read in an antique philosophic book the idea that “children, savages, and seers all share a remarkable characteristic that is not found elsewhere even though it marvelously enhances their lives: they are always in the present moment.” The simple rule, *Pay attention now, do it now*, is often used in our society because we characteristically are concerned solely with what has happened in our past, thus generally causing a host of costly and unpleasant sensations (such as resentment, hatred, guilt, shame, and anxiety) to persist for decades after their cause or source has disappeared; or else we plan for the future: a student studies to pass courses to get a degree to get a job to be promoted to become important, and so it goes, ever onward. Hence, with us something appears to be done not for its own sake but for some other reason. I have learned from my experience that by staying in the here and now present moment, I cannot be bored by any conversationalist. A person must have his mind in another time period in order to be bored and so not to pay attention in conversation. Calamities and disasters can occur in my life, but as long as I stay in the present moment, such events are only matters of interest *when* I wish to reflect upon them. The calamitous events in one’s life can cause little more than brief grief by themselves. I am certain that I can become properly horrified by reading any of Poe’s tales of mystery and horror. But I also know that such an emotion of terror will absolutely vanish the moment I stop attending to it and resume my affairs in the here and now, once the book is closed.

I am truly amazed at the enormity of the value of time in our lives and how big a dimension time is in our concept of reality. By contrast, the Cuna Indians, neighbors to the Guajiro Indians, who live in northeastern Colombia and adjacent Panama, have a native language as adroit and elegant as Spanish or English, which has no past tense, and their noun for the shortest period of time is not a *nano-second* (i.e., one billionth of second) like ours, but a *month*. But despite the gargantuan importance we place on time in all sectors of our culture, we are generally out of the present, the only time that can be experienced, the only time there is. My NDE taught me also that the present moment without question and *right now* presents eternity to all those souls who heed it constantly. For me, it helps to understand the present if I keep in mind that each sentence I utter begins in the past and will end in the future, but it is still understood as it proceeds and is heard in the present. I see I am

not alone, for according to Waismann (1965), St. Augustine "roughly" answers the question of time measurement by insisting, "We cannot measure an interval of time in the past because the past is no longer at hand, nor can we measure one in the future because the future is not yet here, and the present is only a point." Accepting for the moment St. Augustine's notion of the present's length – the miniscule point I believe we must all so assume is nothingless by contrast to the length of the past and future – helps me to consider the present moment as out of time – therefore an eternity. While in my coma, I knew with far greater certainty just how nothingness in time means eternity as precisely as nothingness in gravity means floating. In order to gain all love one must give it all away, and so I am persuaded that in acting upon our love of time we would do best by giving away our curious concerns over the unattainable, unending, lineal components of time and be left in joy with the eternal point of the present moment. The answer in Buddhism to the question, What is Zen? is more exact: all that may be, all we experience, and all we know are in the present moment and not elsewhere. In naming his book *The Doors of Perception*, I think Aldous Huxley (1954) shares my views also, for he began his book with the quote from William Blake, "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinte." Among others, that is a virtue of my NDE.

## REFERENCES

- Gallagher, P. Caribbean. *American Antiquity*, 1961, 26, 464-467.
- Gallagher, P. La Pitía. *El Farol*, 1962, 24, 6-14.
- Gallagher, P. La Pitía: an early ceramic site in northwestern Venezuela. Yale University Ph.D. thesis. Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1964.
- Gallagher, P. Games Malinowski played. *New Republic*, 1967, 156 (24), 24-26.
- Gallagher, P. *La Pitía: An Archaeological Series in Northwestern Venezuela*. New Haven: Yale University Publications in Anthropology No. 76, 1976.
- Huxley, A. *The Doors of Perception*. New York: Harper and Row, 1954.
- Miller, E.S. *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979.
- Waismann, F. *The Principles of Linguistic Philosophy*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965.

*Requests for reprints to:*

Patrick Gallagher  
221 E. Avenue P-1  
Palmdale, California 93550