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Journal of Near-Death Studies

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Editor's Foreword

We start this issue of the Journal with a guest editorial by Austrian psychologist Engelbert Winkler describing the Elias Project, in which texts and commentary based on near-death experiences (NDEs) and relevant research are used therapeutically in working with suicidal individuals and with other individuals engaged in issues of death and dying.

The lead article in this issue is a study of Native American NDEs by developmental psychologist Jenny Wade. Presenting 11 historical accounts from the past four centuries, she explores commonalities among these accounts and comparisons with NDEs from other cultures. Continuing this theme of examining the cultural contexts of NDEs, Malaysian sociologist Raymond Lee addresses in the next article the question of how NDE accounts are affected by the context of contemporary social conditions. Lee describes the process of "disenchantment" of the world that reached a peak in the 20th century, alienating modern cultures from their spiritual traditions, and he argues that the increasing discourse of NDEs plays a significant role in the emerging counterprocess of "reenchantment." Finally, in a methodological paper, psychologist Kevin Prosnick and education professor William Evans describe the development and psychometric properties of a short form of the NDE Scale for use in research and clinical settings.

This issue includes two book reviews. Psychologist Ken Vincent reviews Canon Michael Perry's Psychic and Spiritual, an examination of Christian attitudes toward the paranormal, including NDEs. And hospice chaplain and psychotherapist Dianne Arcangel reviews NDEr and respiratory and massage therapist Barbara Whitfield's Final Passage, a guide to fostering spiritual growth and healing at the end of life.

We end this issue with a letter from NDEr P. M. H. Atwater, offering an elaboration and clarification of NDEr and pastoral counselor Nancy Evans Bush's article on finding meaning in frightening NDEs, which appeared in our Winter 2002 issue.

Bruce Greyson, M.D.
This essay describes the therapeutic usefulness of near-death experiences (NDEs). The fundamental hypothesis is that reports of NDEs together with relevant research can be understood to be a modern book of death and dying, one that is not only useful but also applicable to therapeutic purposes.

I describe an actual case of a suicidal boy who was successfully treated through the use of NDEs. This event developed into what came to be called the Elias Project. The foundation of the Elias Project is in the form of two texts with commentary, one for adults and one for children. Both texts have been distilled out of a large number of NDE reports. Also included are clinical cases that have to do with difficult and varied psychological problems. These have been included in the Occidental Book of Death and Dying because this approach has proved its therapeutic effectiveness.

The Elias Project: Using the NDE Potential in Therapy

Patrick—A Child Who Decided to Die

Some years ago the department of social services referred to me a new client: a suicidal 9-year-old boy. I had no idea what a challenge
this would be. Some months previously Patrick's father had hung himself. Since that time Patrick had developed various behavioral problems, some of which were very serious, including the idea to kill himself. With increasing frequency he communicated his intention to end his life. This brought his mother and a number of professional (and many nonprofessional) helpers to the edge of desperation. Following my examination of Patrick, I saw that his threats of suicide must be taken seriously. First of all, I arranged for long-term family therapy that included all family members. To this I added a component of crisis intervention that involved working with the theme of death and dying in a way appropriate to Patrick's age. This proved to be extraordinarily difficult because Patrick showed no willingness to participate in the usual child-oriented therapeutic approaches. He withdrew more and more into himself, was noticeably more troubled and commented that he would not live to see his next birthday, which was six months away. A variety of individual and family approaches were attempted but failed to reach Patrick in his hopelessness. Then I recalled the interesting effect that the visions of those who have had a near-death experience can have on suicidal people.

I had previously been involved in a project to investigate what effect was left with people who had passed through a near-death experience, and in the context of this research I learned about the paradoxical effect of NDEs on people who had attempted suicide. On the one hand, the content of the NDE is for most people positive—so positive, in fact, that most of them only unwillingly return to this life. On the other hand, most of these people also discover a new joy in living that lasts years afterwards. In my research I had met both men and women who had attempted suicide, but their attempts had taken them only to the edge of death. There they found a "beauty beyond any earthly ability to imagine," as one person put it, and yet they had no thought to repeat their suicide attempt. On the contrary, the deeper the NDE was, the more all self-destructive impulses were dissolved. Beyond this, the reason that had led the person to attempt suicide was often no longer present following his or her near-death vision. It was not unusual that feelings of the meaninglessness of life and self-worthlessness were transformed into a sense of the richness of life and all its possibilities.

Thus I knew the positive effects of an NDE on adults. But how might this affect a child? I had no idea how a 9-year-old boy who had decided to follow his dead father would react to the powerful images that are common in NDEs. Might they strengthen his wish to die? On the other hand, I (and others) had done all we could think of to do. Consulting
with other experienced colleagues gave me no new therapeutic insights for working with Patrick, and as his mental condition became more serious, I decided on an experiment with some risk.

I organized the typical experiences of those who had had a near-death vision into a text that was appropriate for the mental development and understanding of a child. Then I gave it to a well-known art master who worked with the children of a local junior high school. The children were asked to paint pictures to go with the story. The results were astounding. The pictures they created gave me the impression that they still had some memories of that place to which we all must return some day. Their pictures contained details that went beyond what I had included in the story.

This story, which I called “The Day Elias Died,” was my last hope for Patrick. Under special circumstances the pictures and story was shown to Patrick, his siblings, and mother. The entire family was spontaneously changed. Patrick showed a deep interest in the text and pictures and, along with the other family members, became deeply involved in it. The children painted pictures for themselves of their favorite parts of the story and—for the first time—talked about the death of their father with their mother. Patrick’s suicidal thoughts started fading away and at last disappeared. At the same time his social behaviour changed dramatically: his previous very aggressive tendencies, particularly toward his siblings, dissolved into expressions of reconciliation. Patrick’s “return” to the family group obviated his self-destructive impulse and he was soon excitedly looking forward to his birthday. The decisive change was the newly won ability of the family to speak without fear about the death of the father and further, necessary, family therapy could continue in a more relaxed atmosphere.

_Toward a Contemporary Book of Death and Dying_

This story, “The Day Elias Died,” later proved useful in other difficult cases. It gradually became clear to me that here was a highly useful healing tool. Increasingly I began to incorporate elements of the NDE in my therapeutic work not only with children but also with adults. The results were often more successful than if I had used more conventional methods. I offer two examples here: One was a mother terminally ill with cancer who could not give herself permission to die and the other was a member of a fundamentalist religious group who was terrified of what he believed was to come after death. In both
cases, the positive effects supported further applications of this unconventional method. I have continued to expand the area in which I make use of this approach and I feel I have not yet reached the healing boundaries, to say nothing of going too far. The Elias Project took on unforeseeable dimensions.

Using accounts of the contents of NDEs in various areas of healing work has proved to be effective again and again. Thus it is not too extreme to consider a new kind of a Book of Death and Dying that would be a collection of the various oral and written accounts of the NDE which are to be found within our 21st century high tech culture. In this way therapeutic work instrumenting NDEs would then merely be representing the contemporary tradition of death and dying, of course, in a positive healing way.

Today I see the Elias Project as an attempt to develop a comprehensive approach to the use of an occidental death and dying tradition in the areas of therapy, counseling, and personal growth. The essential elements of the project are the two texts I have written: one for adults and one for children. No matter how one is personally disposed in regard to NDEs, nevertheless, their unusual usefulness has been proven beyond doubt. Therefore it is reasonable to speak of a Book of Death and Dying as a medicine or a truly healing tool. Using special strategies like hypnosis, breathwork, and lucid dreaming can increase their effectiveness.

Reference

In a Sacred Manner We Died: Native American Near-Death Experiences

Jenny Wade, Ph.D.
Institute of Transpersonal Psychology

ABSTRACT: This article presents 11 historical Native American near-death experiences from the 1600s to the early 20th century as they appeared in the accounts of early explorers, autobiographical records, and ethnographic accounts. It includes two stories from tribes around the Roanoke, Virginia area; two Chippewa accounts from the Mississippi Valley; a Chiricahua Apache account reported by Geronimo; two Zuni reports; two Saulteaux accounts from the Berens River area of what is now British Columbia; and two stories from the Oglala Sioux Black Elk. I explore commonalities among the accounts and comparisons with near-death experiences from other cultures.

KEY WORDS: near-death experience; Native Americans.

This article represents the first overview of historic Native American accounts of near-death experiences. It was begun when Harry Miller of Bowling Green, KY, drew my attention to two accounts he had come across through an antiquarian book dealer who possessed some of the original folio pages of the 1623 edition of Captain John Smith's Generall Historie, and although this paper does not aspire to a complete investigation of all the Native American records, it presents at least a representative sample of historical accounts precluding, as much as possible, colonial influences.

Jenny Wade, Ph.D., is a developmental psychologist specializing in consciousness studies, especially consciousness at the edges of life, and adventitious altered states occurring in normal populations. She is on the core faculty at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology and on the adjunct faculty at the Santa Barbara Graduate Institute, the Saybrook Institute, and John F. Kennedy University. Reprint requests should be address to Dr. Wade at 235 Uplands Circle, Corte Madera, CA 94925; e-mail: jwadephd@yahoo.com.
It is difficult, if not impossible and inappropriate, to bring the usual standards for today's field studies to bear on accounts from ancient indigenous cultures that suffered unknowable colonial contamination, when they were not utterly destroyed; that had largely oral traditions in languages their recorders often did not speak; that had spiritual traditions that might have been concealed from all outsiders, especially their conquerors; and that did not recognize arbitrary categories like "fact" and "myth," especially in regard to spiritual matters. "Spiritual matters" in themselves often do not constitute a separate category from "secular" matters in most indigenous and traditional cultures; concepts like "spiritual" and "secular" are rather modern Western constructions. Therefore some important qualifications should be borne in mind regarding the presentation of these narratives.

They represent diverse First Nations cultures from different geographic areas and times, recorded by Europeans or EuroAmericans with varying degrees of skill and varying relationships to their sources. Although the stories are grouped by culture, the primary organization is from the earliest to the latest records, in an attempt to order them from when European incursions were minimal up to the point where the Native Americans had, in their turn, become the minority culture. This may not seem, on the surface, to make much difference, since the stories themselves are quite diverse across tribal groups. However, the influence of the colonials can be traced in some of the stories, in the questions and expectations some narrators were addressing, and certainly in the way the accounts were obtained. The power balance between narrator and recorder shifted as European or EuroAmerican recorders went from being guests hospitably treated or merely tolerated to being the conquerors of an eviscerated, endangered remnant, who treated the people they were studying like a raree-show, often too arrogant even to learn their language. Compounding that, of course, is the fact that many of the reports were gathered by ignorant colonials who represented the cultural biases of their day and whose judgments probably distorted the meanings entrusted to them as much as language differences did.

In cultures where oral transmission is primary, many members have unusually well-trained memories for the spoken word, and provide almost word-for-word accounts of material that has been passed across numerous speakers over time and distance; the congruence of ancient Norse oral traditions from widely dispersed geographic areas over centuries is a prime example. Nevertheless, it is difficult to generalize about such diverse groups as those represented
by the North American First Nations people. Thus the exact choice of words may well have been significant, such as indicating which narratives represented shamanic soul-journeying and which represented “real” near-death experiences (NDEs); but many such distinctions may have been lost forever, owing to poor translation or the tendency of the European recorders to dismiss Native American accounts as the fantasies and myths of quaint “ignorant savages.”

Ironically, some of the more recent EuroAmerican enthusiasm for indigenous spiritual traditions has led to a greater conflation of NDEs with other otherworldly adventures, rather than a clarification. Although commonalities between NDEs and shamanic journeying have been widely noted (Green, 1998, 2001; Kalweit, 1988; Ring, 1992), they are often grouped willy-nilly with other otherworldly altered states (Kalweit, 1988, Schorer, 1985). Without specific language suggesting the individual was actually near death, it is often difficult to discern which narratives might actually represent NDEs, as opposed to other altered states in which a person journeys to a spirit world or underworld, including even cases of illness or injury where delirium or psychotropic medicaments may be factors, and where the nature of the conditions is obscure. The degree to which cultural elements or deliberate obfuscation may further confuse foreign ethnographers is hard to discern.

To try to bring as much clarity as possible to these confusing dynamics, I present all the following accounts with relevant context about the narrators, their beliefs about death and the afterlife, the events surrounding the episode, and the recorders. I made every attempt to include only stories that were attributed to historical people who were believed to have died from wounds or illness but recovered. Although some records were so long they had to be paraphrased, where possible they are given word for word. I will discuss the experiences after introducing all of the accounts.

**The Earliest Native American Near-Death Accounts**

Captain John Smith, “Sometime Governour of Virginia and Admirall of New England,” as he styled himself in his *Generall Historie of Virginia, the Somer Isles, and New England with the Names of the Adventurers and their Adventures*, published in 1623, just 16 years after the establishment of Jamestown, chronicled what would appear to be the first recorded NDEs in the New World. The
Generall Historie is an anthology comprising six books on the first English-settled areas of the New World. Book I is Smith's haphazardly compiled extracts from "ancient authors" (as early as 1584) dealing with the discovery, exploration, and history of America, as well as his own first-person accounts. His reports of NDEs may well be the most significant of the Native American records for two reasons. First, they represent actual, recent events (regrettably not witnessed by Smith), rather than ancient oral traditions that might have acquired mythic or instructional cultural overlays. And second, they occurred well before Christian proselytizing had had much impact on the First Nations' traditional beliefs. I present Smith's report in its entirety:

They beleev the immortality of the Soule, when life departing from the body, according to the good or bad workes it hath done, it is carried up to the Tabernacles of the gods, to perpetuall happinesse, or to Popogusso, a great pit: which they thinke to be at the furthest parts of the world, where the Sunne sets, and there burne continually.

To confirme this they told me of two men that had beene lately dead, and revived againe; the one hapned but few yeares before our coming into the country; of a bad man, which being dead and buried, the next day the earth over him being seene to move, was taken up, who told them his soule was very neare entering into Popogusso, had not one of the gods saved him and gave him leave to returne again, to teach his friends what they should doe to avoyd such torment. The other hapned the same yeare we were there, but sixtie myles from us, which they told me for news, that one being dead, buried, and taken up as the first, shewed, that although his body had layne dead in the grave, yet his soule lived, and had travailed far in a long broad way, on both sides whereof grew more sweet, fayre, and delicate trees and fruits, then ever he had seene before; at length he came to the most brave [fine] and fayre houses, neare which he met his Father, that was dead long agoe, who gave him charge to goe backe, to shew his friends what good there was to doe, to injoy the pleasures of that place; which when hee had done hee should come againe. (Smith, 1623, Book I, folio 11, in Barbour, 1983, p. 79).

Two Chippewa Tales

Two centuries later, in the 1820s, a scout named Henry Schoolcraft was commissioned by the United States government to explore the Mississippi Valley with regard to its mineral resources. His lengthy report was published (Schoolcraft, 1975/1825) for wider distribution, in part because of the interest it provoked about these relatively unknown territories and the "aboriginal populations" who lived there.
Although Schoolcraft’s narrative contained the blatantly chauvinistic distortions characteristic of EuroAmerican colonial attitudes at the time and he frequently made undifferentiated generalizations when he might actually be talking about such diverse groups as the Iroquois, Wyandots, Senecas, Ricaras, Chippewas, and so on, he was perhaps still close enough to the Romantic period and some of its Noble Savage ideals to recognize and admire many Native American values, practices, and characteristics. He was also a great appreciator of their language and its complexity.

In one of his generalities, Schoolcraft observed that Native Americans were “deists” who did not fear death but regarded it as a change of state that ends a life of both earthly pleasures and hardships, with the emphasis on the diminishment of suffering at death, although some notion of reward and punishment existed (Schoolcraft, 1975/1825). Strong beliefs about the nature of the afterlife appear to have been inchoate:

But what this happiness is to be, where it is to be enjoyed, and what is to be the nature of the rewards and punishments, does not appear to be definitely fixed in the minds of any. If a man dies, it is said, he has gone to the happy land before us—he has outrun us in the race, but we shall soon follow. (Schoolcraft, 1975/1825, p. 397)

The dead were dressed in their best clothing, and a close relative or elder addressed the deceased as if he or she were still conscious of what was taking place (Schoolcraft, 1975/1825). They were told what to expect in the afterlife, and reminded of their preparation for the trials they would undergo, as Schoolcraft reported from personally witnessing some funerary preparations:

You are going to go to another country, which we trust you will find pleasant; but in your journey thither, you will have to be very cautious how you travel, for your path is beset with dangers. There is one place in particular, where you must be extremely cautious. You have a dark stream to cross, which is wide and deep, and the water runs rapidly. There is but a single tree lying across it, and you will be compelled to cross over it, without the help of a staff...

If your actions have been pleasing to the Great Spirit ... you will get safely over; but if not, you will surely fall into the stream. (1975/1825, p. 398)

The theme of this perilous passage over a narrow bridge appeared here and elsewhere in beliefs about the afterlife (Thompson, 1929; it also appeared in other cultures, as reported by Zaleski, 1987), but interestingly it was never mentioned as transpiring in any of the accounts. The general practice Schoolcraft reported (1975/1825) was
for the orator then to describe actual events when he killed and scalped an enemy warrior, whose spirit then became enslaved to him. The orator ceremonially transferred ownership to the deceased, who would then encounter the slave after death and would have to ask him to serve him by hunting to provide food for the journey, cutting wood and making fires, and otherwise ensuring the deceased's comfort after death. Weapons, cooking vessels, and provisions were placed around the deceased for the slave to use in carrying out these tasks. A dog was sometimes dispatched to accompany the dead.

After describing the custom of building a small fire on the grave for four or more nights after a funeral he had witnessed, Schoolcraft proceeded to tell of an altered-state event associated with death (1975/1825). He alleged that he recorded an almost word-for-word account, which I have paraphrased here for length constraints, told to him by Chippewas at the Sault of St. Mary, in what is now Michigan. He added that his account represented a faithful English translation of what was said, free from the conventional literary embellishments valued by EuroAmericans at the time because he was too rushed in taking notes, and then later declined to change the almost word-for-word record (Schoolcraft, 1975/1825, p. 409). In fact, he expressed regret that no English translation could capture the beauty and poetry of the original.

It is notable that this story was not attributed to a named individual, for it, and the following account, which was ascribed to a chief from the vague past, seem markedly different from the other NDEs. According to this oral history (Schoolcraft, 1825/1975, pp. 404–409), a small Chippewa war-party fought a fierce battle with their enemies, and just as their leader had secured the victory, he was shot in the chest with an arrow and fell dead. The custom was not to bury warriors who died in battle. His body was arrayed in his headdress and other accoutrements, and his bow was leaned against his shoulder as he was propped in a sitting position with his back against a tree, in a position to gaze in the direction of the fleeing enemies.

Evidently the leader was not dead, however, for though he could neither move nor speak, he later said he heard all his friends had said, and felt their hands arranging his body. He was consumed with a desire to remain with them, and as they departed for home, he made a mighty exertion and seemed to rise and follow their tracks. However, after repeated anguished attempts to get their attention, he realized that they could not see him. Frustrated, angry, and disappointed, he nevertheless kept pace with them on the long journey. His bodily needs had not ceased, but he was unable, of course, to eat or drink, and his wounds
bothered him. The only thing he could do was sleep when they slept. He berated them for not helping him, but "no one seemed to hear his words; if they heard his voice they mistook its sound for the winds of summer, rustling among the green leaves" (Schoolcraft, 1975/1825, p. 406).

The war party finally arrived at their village, where they sang the praises of the fallen leader's bravery to the man's elderly father and his wife. The more the stories were told, the more indignant the dead leader became, insisting that he had not been killed and left upon the battlefield, but was right in their midst. He followed his wife into their lodge and watched her grieve and lament. Shouting as loudly as he could, he demanded that she tend his wounds and bring him food, but she merely remarked to someone sitting near that she heard a buzzing in her ear. The husband, enraged, struck her as hard as he could on the forehead, but she merely touched her forehead saying she must have a slight headache.

At this point, the warrior seemed to recollect traditions he had learned in which the spirit could leave the body, and it began to dawn on him that perhaps only his spirit had accompanied his friends and that his body indeed might still be on the battlefield, four days' journey away. He immediately began the return journey, which was uneventful until the evening of the fourth day, when he approached the edge of the battlefield. A fire then appeared on the path in front of him, and no matter which way he moved, it moved with him to block his passage. He declared his lack of fear and jumped through it. When he did so, he awoke from his eight-day coma, finding himself just as his friends had left him. Up in the tree they had propped him against was a "canieu or war eagle" (Schoolcraft, 1825/1975, p. 408), the bird he had selected as his guardian spirit in youth, which he believed had kept watch over his body and kept scavengers away. He got up, but was very weak. His wound was no longer bleeding, so he bound it and prepared and ate medicinal plants he foraged to recover his strength. There was no big game nearby, though, and he was exceedingly hungry. Sustaining himself by shooting small birds, he journeyed back to his village, greatly surprising everyone.

The war leader then related his adventures to his people and told them that it would please the deceased to have a fire built upon his grave for four nights after death, for the light and warmth it would provide on the four-day journey "to the land appointed for the residence of the spirit" (Schoolcraft, 1975/1825, p. 409), and so that the spirit would not be subjected to this irksome task.

Schoolcraft followed this story with a brief commentary about changes
in burial customs among the Chippewa (1975/1825, p. 410). Formerly they had buried almost everything a person owned with the deceased, but they later limited grave goods to a few favorite articles. Schoolcraft attributed this change to a story about Gitshee Gauzinee, an allegedly historic chief “of former days” (1975/1825, p. 410).

Gitshee Gauzinee died suddenly after an illness of a few days. A renowned hunter, he had requested that his rifle be buried with him, but nobody wanted to do this, since guns had only recently been introduced to the Chippewas and were extremely precious. Some people, believing he might not be dead but comatose, determined not to bury him right away, but to remove his body to a separate lodge where it was carefully attended by his widow, who, at times, thought she could detect a feeble heartbeat. In four days, Gitshee Gauzinee awoke, complaining of thirst, and then began to regain his strength. He related how he had traveled uneventfully for three days “on the path of the dead” (Schoolcraft, 1975/1825, p. 411). He was getting hungrier and hungrier, and on the fourth day, when he came within sight of the “village of the dead,” he saw lots of healthy, fat game, including herds of deer and moose, who grazed tamely near his path. He could do nothing to assuage his hunger, however, because he had no weapons. He remembered the gun he had left behind and began the return journey to get it.

On the way back, he met hordes of heavily laden men, women, and children traveling toward the village of the dead. They were all complaining about being burdened by having to carry their axes, kettles, pots, pans, clothing, food, and so on, that their friends had given them at their deaths. Gitshee Gauzinee courteously listened to their complaints and accepted as gifts some of the items offered to him to lighten the loads of others, but he continued on his way back to his lodge. Here, he was barred from entering by a wall of fire that encircled the lodge and would flame up into “brilliant cones” wherever he attempted to cross. He finally made one desperate attempt to cross it, which brought him back to life. He advised his friends that their ancient habits were burdensome to the dead, and that from that point on they should dress the dead in their best clothes to delight them and only bury things that could be carried easily, with perhaps a pipe to “afford ... a pleasant amusement on [the] road. If he has anything more, let it be divided among his nearest relatives and friends” (Schoolcraft, 1975/1825, p. 412).

These stories may or may not recount actual events that were mythologized later. Schoolcraft did not demonstrate any awareness
of NDEs, which conceivably might have been rare but certainly not unheard of at that time, regardless of how they were framed: “It will be at once perceived that their traditions and fictions are intimately blended. It would be impossible to decide whether the custom existed prior to the tale, or the tale has been invented to suit the custom” (1975/1925, p. 404). Schoolcraft made it clear (1975/1825, p. 412) that he viewed these two narratives as tutelary tales whose purpose was primarily to maintain custom and instruct the young in the proper traditions.

Despite the reporter’s thoughtful qualification, 160 years later, in a 1985 issue of Omega, C. E. Schorer, a physician at Wayne State University, published a paper on Schoolcraft’s Chippewa accounts, stating that they “exemplify two types of near-death experiences.” Schorer’s article was rather garbled; he first suggested that the two accounts were NDEs, citing as proof the “autoscopic” nature of the first and the “transcendental” elements of the second, as Michael Sabom (1982) had used those terms to categorize NDEs (Schorer, 1985, p. 111). But then Schorer itemized elements that were actually not part of these narratives but either appeared in later parts of Schoolcraft’s report or in other sources, including two poems that he alleged “are certainly in the form of popular nineteenth-century American gift books,” in an attempt to “argu[e] for the influence of the white man” on these stories (1985, p. 112). Both his mixing of sources and his reasoning are obscure, especially since he promiscuously cited Stith Thompson’s Tales of the North American Indians as containing similar accounts (“many tales of Native American travel through the land of the dead” [Schorer, 1985, p. 112]). In fact, this book is a compendium of myths and folktales, none of which was represented as having any historical basis, nor of having any stronger relationship to the afterlife than the enchanted realms of European folktales, where heroes are tempted by visions of plenty and are compelled to undergo trials. Schorer’s efforts obfuscated rather than clarified the potential of Schoolcraft’s contribution, a trend seen in other compilations.

**Geronimo’s Account**

In an autobiography recorded and published by Stephen Melvil Barrett in 1906, the great Chiricahua Apache chief Geronimo (1829–1909) spoke about his people’s rather vague beliefs about survival of death and the afterlife. He sounded personally skeptical about survival, especially as it was expressed by Christians:
As to that future state, the teachings of our tribe were not specific, that is we had no definite idea of our relations and surroundings in the after life. We believed that there is a life after this one, but no one ever told me as to what part of man lived after death. I have seen many men die; I have seen many human bodies decayed, but I have never seen that part which is called a spirit; I do not know what it is; nor have I yet been able to understand that part of the Christian religion.

We held that the discharge of one's duty would make his future life more pleasant, but whether that future life was worse than this life or better, we did not know, and no one was able to tell us. We hoped that in the future life family and tribal relations would be resumed. In a way we believed in this, but we did not know it. (Barrett, 1970/1906, pp. 166–7)

It must be remembered that Geronimo, who had held out the longest against the United States government, and escaped imprisonment only to be dragged back to the United States from Mexico as a prisoner of war when he was already an old man, was regarded by his people as having the magical powers associated with shamans. By the time this narrative was recorded, his people had been virtually destroyed and their nation was rapidly being industrialized. He was ending his days in captivity in the occupied territory of the murderers of his family and his world. He had formally joined the Dutch Reformed Church; he was baptized in the summer of 1903 and attended services regularly during his incarceration at the Fort Sill Reservation, but was ultimately expelled for gambling (Barrett, 1970/1906, p. 169). It is undoubtedly significant that in discussing the following near-death story, he prefaced and ended his remarks with qualifications strongly suggesting that his conversion was a pragmatic concession to his hopeless circumstances:

Since my life as a prisoner has begun, I have heard the teachings of the white man's religion, and in many respects believe it to be better than the religion of my fathers. However, I have always prayed, and I believe that the Almighty has always protected me.

Believing that in a wise way it is good to go to church ... I have advised all of my people who are not Christians, to study that religion. (Barrett, 1970/1906, pp. 168–169)

Geronimo related a story told to him by an unnamed tribesman he met when both were forced to live on the San Carlos Reservation. This man claimed that while lying unconscious on a battlefield, he had died and passed into the “spirit land” (Barrett, 1970/1906, pp. 167–168). He first came to a place where a mulberry tree was growing out from
a cave in the ground. A guard seemed to be posted in front of the cave, but the guard let him pass unchallenged when approached without showing any fear. The path into the cave descended, and after a little way it widened, terminating in a huge, perpendicular rock that stretched for hundreds of feet in all directions. Although it was dark, by peering around, the man was able to grasp a bush and swing himself from the edge of the rock, so that he could drop into a pile of sand that started about twenty feet down, which allowed him to slide quickly down the steep rock into the blackness.

He found himself in a narrow passage at the bottom that led westward, through a canyon that became progressively lighter until it was as bright as day, though no sun could be seen. The passage became extremely narrow at a point where two gigantic snakes coiled. As he approached, they reared and hissed at him, but when he showed no fear, they also let him pass. Then the passage widened, and there, two grizzly bears started to attack him, but when he spoke calmly to them, they too gave him ingress. At a later, wide part of the passage, two mountain lions threatened him, but let him pass unchallenged when he spoke to them with courage. After this, the passage narrowed again and its walls were “clashing together at regular intervals with tremendous sounds” (Barrett, 1970/1906, p. 168). When he approached, though, they remained apart until after he had safely passed. He then found himself in a forest, where he followed a westward path until he came to a “green valley where there were many Indians camped and plenty of game” (Barrett, 1970/1906, p. 168) and where he recognized many people he had known during life. This place was so pleasant, he was sorry to be brought back to consciousness.

Geronimo’s reaction to this narrative was measured:

I told him if I knew this to be true I would not want to live another day, but by some means, if by my own hands, I would die in order to enjoy these pleasures. I myself have lain unconscious on the battlefield, and while in that condition have had some strange thoughts or experiences; but they are very dim and I cannot recall them well enough to relate them. Many Indians believed this warrior, and I cannot say he did not tell the truth. I wish I knew that what he said is beyond question true. (Barrett, 1970/1906, p.168)

Frederick Turner, the editor of the 1970 edition of Barrett’s account, added this footnote, five years before Raymond Moody (1975) coined the term “near-death experiences”: “This dream vision was a standard one among the Chiricahua and serves to remind us of the various and
profound ways in which a culture influences the minds of its people” (Turner, in Barrett, 1970/1906, p. 168).

Two Zuni Stories

Death and the afterlife are two areas of relatively minimal religious significance in Zuni spirituality, which is focused on religious ritual and ceremony to promote fertility through rain and which has a communal rather than an individual focus (Benedict, 1934; Hultkrantz, 1987). The rituals associated with death, like those associated with marriage, are the least complicated, take very little preparation, and are finished as quickly as possible so the community’s life can go on. The few myths that refer to the spirit land where the dead go are vague. Similar to most other Native American traditions, the dead do not depart for the underworld for four days, and when they go, they take a westward path. They have ghostly bodies that are invisible and that permit them to pass through objects unharmed, but they wear a feather on their heads that may be seen. They take the form of the wind, and can change shape at will. They can penetrate the lake of the kachinas, which the living are unable to do. It is not healthy for the living to grieve long for them or make changes in their lives that would offend the dead, such as a widower taking a new spouse, for they fear that the dead would be drawn to their grief or angered by their actions and would come to harm them or snatch them away into death. None of these elements appears at all in the NDEs reported.

In Holger Kalweit’s classic book on shamanism, Dreamtime and Inner Space (1988), he reported a story collected by prominent anthropologist Ruth Bunzel who studied Zuni culture in the early 20th century. Unfortunately, Kalweit’s full citation of Bunzel’s work is missing, but he appeared to be referencing The Forty-Seventh Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology 1920–1930 published by the Smithsonian Institute. Kalweit was knowledgeable about NDEs and he speculated on their relationship to nonvolitional shamanic initiations and other forms of shamanic journeying, though without suggesting that the two are interchangeable. He provided this direct quote of a story a Zuni told Bunzel:

When I was sick [with] the measles I was very sick. On the third day I didn’t know anything. Maybe I fainted, or maybe I really died and came back. I never believed that could happen, but it really did,
because when I came back the room was going round and round and there was a little light coming through the window, although there was a bright light in the room. While I was dead I dreamed I was going toward the West. ... I was so happy to see my grandfather. Since then I've never worried about dying, even when I was very sick, because I saw all these dead people and saw they were still living the way we do. (Bunzel, cited in Kalweit, 1988, p. 204; ellipses in Kalweit)

Kalweit (1988) went on to state, however, that Native Americans expected experiences of the light and that these were not necessarily limited to NDEs but could occur in other states where the soul was the primary perceiver rather than the sensory organs:

Light-experiences are very common when a person comes close to death. Tribal societies commonly believe that the inner light is not perceived by the physical body, but by the soul-body in an altered state of consciousness [dying or a shamanic state]. Sometimes the soul itself is considered to be the body of light. (Kalweit, 1988, p. 204)

It is notable that in one of the accounts below, Black Elk, after returning from an otherworldly journey while seriously ill but that was not specifically identified as the place of the dead, appeared to certain others to be filled with light.

Kalweit reported another Zuni account told to anthropologist Frank Hamilton Cushing in 1882 by his adoptive father and governor of the Zuni, Palowahtiva (Cushing, cited in Kalweit, 1988, pp. 39–41). When he was a young man, Palowahtiva was critically ill and had been too weak to get out of bed for days. His relatives had been summoned but had not yet arrived. Even though it was daylight, his vision darkened:

Then I saw again, and the light was coming through the window at the end of the room, brighter than before, so that all things were clear to me, very clear. I looked around the room, wondering that everything was so much better than it had been for so long ... feeling that I no longer need lie there.

I saw a broad-shouldered, god-sized man coming toward me. ... I did not know him. He was dressed in the ancient costume of my people. He came toward me, holding in one hand, which was extended toward the door a [lasso], as though he had led a horse behind him. (Kalweit, 1988, p. 39)

The man looked down at Palowahtiva lying there, smiled, but instead of expressing the customary greetings, uttered a single word
that is usually translated as meaning “is everything ready?” (Cushing, cited in Kalweit, 1988, p. 39). Palowahtiva assented but hesitated, because he did not seem to know the man and could not see his face clearly against the bright light. The man explained that he was the sick man’s “grand-grand-uncle” who had gone “away from the Zuni” “before you were in the womb of your mother” (Cushing, cited in Kalweit, 1988, p. 39–40). At this, Palowahtiva said he was ready, and the man said he had brought two fine horses, all saddled and bridled for the journey.

Palowahtiva was rising easily from his sickbed when a wrinkled, little old man “dressed in the most ancient costume” of the Zunis and with his hair done in a “strange old-fashioned knot” appeared in the room as though he had walked through one of the walls (Kalweit, 1988, p. 40). Despite his ancient appearance and great age, he moved gracefully and majestically. The old man told the uncle that it was not time for Palowahtiva to go, but the uncle disputed with him. Their conflict was loving but decisive; the old man prevailed, and the uncle left through the door. The old man then turned toward Palowahtiva as he lay there and told him it was not his time:

One sometimes learns wisdom through great illness. Therefore you have been ill. . . . You will not go, no. . . . You will become old, even as I am, before you go. . . . Were you to go now, one fewer would be those in the world where so many once dwelt who give us those attentions which we cherish, who sacrifice plumes of worship to us, as was directed in ancient times, who pray to us and greet us, and show that our children among men have not forgotten us. . . . Live, my child! . . .

A few days, and your flesh will begin to gather upon your bones, and as you were, so will you become again. And although it may not be pleasant to you to think that you must endure illness and suffering, and many unhappinesses, yet know it is best that this should be so. . . . When the time has come for you to go, it will be said, 'Yes,' and we will come for you. Farewell. Be it even as I have said. (Cushing, cited in Kalweit, 1988, pp. 40–41)

The old man turned away, and Palowahtiva’s vision grew dark again, and the next thing he knew, he heard the lamentations of his relatives who were chafing his hands and feet because they thought he had died (Cushing, cited in Kalweit, 1988, p. 41).

Both these stories are remarkable in that they do not correspond closely at all to traditional Zuni beliefs, as delineated above.
Two Reports from the Berens River Saulteaux

The Saulteaux are a First Nations people located in what is now British Columbia. Aspects of their cultural approach toward death and dying were collected by Irving Hallowell and first published in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* in 1940. Hallowell began his treatment with what at the time must have been a remarkable stance and one that is a tribute to his objectivity in field research:

Aboriginal beliefs in the reality of a life beyond the grave cannot be viewed as simple dogmas that gain currency without any appeal to observation and experience.

In the case of the Berens River Saulteaux, they are supported by the testimony of individuals who are said to have traveled beyond the bourne and returned to tell their fellows about it; by the testimony of those who have approached the land of the dead in dreams; by the resurrection, or resuscitation, of persons reputed to be dead; by the invocation of the spirits of the dead in the conjuring lodge, and in other ways. (1967/1940, p. 151).

Hallowell went on to say that, despite the fact that in “native theory” (not exclusively Saulteaux) the soul may detach from the body and travel to otherworldly realms in what are considered “real experiences,” the Saulteaux made clear, consistent linguistic distinctions to differentiate people who had actually visited the “spirit (ghost) land, [who] are usually persons believed to be dead, or thought to be fatally ill” from healthy people who had “dreamed” of these realms or entered them through other altered states but were healthy (1967/1940, p. 151). Although Hallowell acknowledged that this might have seemed farfetched to the EuroAmerican way of thinking, he honored the validity of the Saulteaux distinction:

The experiences described by persons observed to be dead, or fatally ill, are not said to have been “dreamed,” while the “experiences” described by healthy persons are said to have been dreamed. The distinction is based on the direct observation of the bodily condition of the persons involved. In the former cases, it is coma, or illness, that lends support to their testimony. So far as I understand the matter, while healthy persons may dream of the dead, or even approach [the spirit or ghost land], their souls do not ordinarily visit this land of the dead. To do so is very dangerous, if one wishes to return to the land of the living; so only persons with extraordinary spiritual powers could achieve the journey ....

Specific individuals are referred to, whose historicity is not in question, however one may choose to evaluate their testimony. When I made inquiries about life after death, it was the alleged experiences
of these individuals that were first mentioned. I was not given
generalized statements. (1967/1940, pp. 151–2; emphasis in original)

As a result of these important distinctions captured by the narrators
and the EuroAmerican recorder, there is more reason to believe these
experiences represent NDEs rather than other altered-state journey-
ing. Hallowell then presented two such narratives. The first one was
told by a man who had heard it often related by an individual named
Nøbagábek (Flat-Stone) in the following manner:

I saw a man who died and lay dead for two days. He told me what had
happened to him. He never felt any pain. He thought he was going to
sleep. Then, "all of a sudden," he said, "I found myself walking on
a good road. I followed this [ghost road]. On it I came to a wigwam. I
saw an old man there. He spoke to me. 'Where are you going?' he
asked me. I told him, 'I'm going this way.' 'You better stop and have
something to eat,' he said. I told him I was not hungry, and started off
again. He came along with me. 'I'll show you where your parents are
staying,' he said. While we were walking we came in sight of lots of
wigwams [a]s far as I could see. ... The old man pointed one of them
out to me. 'You go there,' he said, 'that's where your mother and
father live.'

"So I went there. I found my father in the wigwam. He shook
hands with me and kissed me. My mother was not there. Soon she
came in, and greeted me in the same way. My father called out, 'Our
son is here!' After that a lot of people came in to see me. They asked
about people on this earth. They wanted to know whether their
friends were well. I told them that they were not sick. Then I was
offered something to eat. But I could not eat. Some of these people
that came to visit me had moss growing on their foreheads, they died
so long ago.

"While I was talking, I heard three or four beats of a drumstick.
They were very faint, I just barely heard them, they were so far away.
All of a sudden I thought about coming back. I thought of my children
I had left behind. I went outside the wigwam without telling my
parents. I started back along the same road I had followed before.
When I came to the old man's wigwam he was not there. I kept on
walking along the road. Then I thought I heard someone calling me. I
could hardly hear the voice and I could not recognize who it was.
Finally the voice became plainer. I knew that I was getting nearer
then. When I got still closer, I could hear my wife and children crying.
Then I lost my senses. I could not hear anything anymore.

"When I opened my eyes and came to my senses it was daylight.
But even daylight here is not so bright as it is in the country I had
visited. I had been lying for two days. But I had traveled a long
distance in that length of time. It is not right to cry too much for our
friends, because they are in a good place. They are well off there. So
I'm going to tell everybody not to be scared about dying." (Hallowell, 1967/1940, pp. 152–3)

The second narrative came from a man named Caúwanzás (One Who Travels with the South Wind), who was so ill he was expected to die. When he recovered, he told his nephew: “I got pretty close to [the spirit/ghost land]. I was on the road there” (Hallowell, 1967/1940, p. 153). He said that he saw lots of strawberries along the way to that place, including one so gigantic passersby had scooped out parts of it to eat just on the border of a town. As he approached the town, he could hear laughter and shouting, but someone met him on the road and ordered him back, saying he was not yet ready. He had gotten close enough to the town, though, to recognize one person he knew, a man of the Poplar River Band who had quite a reputation among the Saulteaux because he had once eaten human flesh.

Black Elk’s Two NDEs

The famous oral history of Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux shaman (1863–1950) who survived the battle with Custer and the massacre at Wounded Knee, was recorded in 1930 by John Neihardt. Neihardt was a poet, not an anthropologist, and there has been considerable debate about how much of the account was Black Elk’s voice and how much was Neihardt’s. Neihardt’s *Black Elk Speaks* (1988/1932) has become so widely known and has had such appeal that it has been taken virtually as a canon of Native American beliefs, though in fact it not only represents a particular tribe’s culture but also reflects the rather unusual Messianic orientation of the last remaining Sioux, who were reduced to a remnant while their surroundings were rapidly moving into the industrialized 20th century. Black Elk’s story contains two accounts of otherworldly journeys when he was seriously ill.

The first occurred when Black Elk was only 9, and is widely regarded retrospectively as his shamanic initiation (Neihardt, 1988/1932, pp. 20–47). It is impossible to give anything but the briefest overview of that experience here, but it was so sweeping in scope that it was immortalized in Neihardt’s account as “The Great Vision.” He became very ill, and lay as though dead for 12 days. While he was in that state, Black Elk was guided to the Grandfathers he was told were calling him, and he found himself flying through the air toward a celestial realm that resembled a radiant, beautiful Earth. There he
saw visions of plenteous herds of magnificent animals before going to the Grandfathers' council, which he realized was actually a convocation of all the cosmic forces personified. In turn, each of the Grandfathers gave him supernatural powers, insight, and prophetic visions. He saw heavenly visions of his people prospering and happy, and although he perceived many threats and hard times ahead, the tone of his vision was one of Messianic hope, in that he seemed to be given magical powers that would assuage the hardships threatening his people. In several scenes, Black Elk responded to challenges correctly, so that the Grandfathers later said he had “triumphed” and they brought him back to earth (Neihardt, 1988/1932, p. 44). It was obvious to some members of his tribe that Black Elk had changed as a result of his experience. He appeared to some to be filled with radiant light (Neihardt, 1988/1932, p. 49).

Many years later, after the Sioux had been defeated, Black Elk performed in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in London for two years, until he began to sicken and long for home (Neihardt, 1988/1932, pp. 224–5). The show moved on to Paris, but he was too ill to participate. One morning, as he was sitting down to breakfast with his girlfriend and her family, the ceiling and the room started spinning, and Black Elk was again swept into a vision. According to his breakfast companions, he had looked up, smiled, and then fallen “dead out of [his] chair,” remaining comatose for three days (Neihardt, 1988/1932, p. 228). As for Black Elk, he was being carried high above the ground on a cloud high above the Earth that took him from Europe to a place above the Missouri River and the Black Hills and the “center of the world where the spirits had taken [him] in [his] great vision” (Neihardt, 1988/1932, p. 226).

The cloud finally stopped over an enormous encampment of all the Sioux bands, where he could see his parents' teepee. Black Elk wanted to join them, but he feared jumping down from such a height would kill him. His mother, who was outside cooking, seemed to look up and see him, but at that moment the cloud started moving rapidly away, carrying him over strange, industrialized landscapes into a blackness. Black Elk grieved because he wanted to be with his people, but soon he began to see light ahead and then “towns and green land and houses all flying backwards,” as he was returned to the household where his body lay (Neihardt, 1988/1932, p. 227). Black Elk asked to go back to the United States, and although he was sick, he made passage almost immediately. He headed toward Pine Ridge to find his people:
Everything was just as I had seen it from the cloud. All the Lakotas were there, as I had seen them, because that was the year of the treaty (1889) when the [whites] bought some more of our land ... I had been away nearly three years and knew nothing about this foolish thing until then.

My mother's tepee was right where I had seen it when I looked down from the cloud, and other people were camped exactly where I saw them.

My parents were in great joy to see me and my mother cried because she was so happy. I cried too. I was supposed to be a man now, but the tears came out anyway. My mother told me she had dreamed one night in her sleep that I had come back on a cloud, but could not stay. So I told her about my vision. (Neihardt, 1988/1932, p. 229)

Profiling the Accounts

What can be said about this handful of accounts spanning almost four centuries, most of a continent, and at least six different cultures? They share a number of features that are associated with the NDE markers common in industrialized countries and across multicultural studies. However, since these narratives were not gathered with the aid of today's protocols, certain areas of comparison are difficult to determine. For instance, it is impossible to infer from some of these accounts whether the experiencers felt a sense of well-being upon making the transition; only in the case of Palowahtiva is this explicit. Nor is there an explicit sense of having out-of-body experiences as they have been reported in the NDE literature.

Some well-known modern phenomena were not prominently featured in these narratives at all. Entering the darkness was hardly a universal experience, and the only transition remotely resembling a tunnel was the subterranean passage in Geronimo's account. No life reviews were reported. The illumination of the other world seemed qualitatively different from the lit-from-within jewel-like landscapes of contemporary NDE accounts, and neither the dead nor the gods, with the possible exception of some entities in Black Elk's Great Vision, were described in terms suggestive of the Beings of Light. None of the Native Americans described anything like seeing the Light, reported as a distinct phenomenon with a presence or intelligence noted in contemporary NDE accounts, and then going into the Light. Nevertheless, these accounts did cluster along certain groups of features common to other NDEs, in addition to features that seemed particular to them as a group.
The following section discusses clusters of experience represented by the accounts. Frequencies are shown, but the material is grouped according to related phenomena to avoid redundancy and to connect certain themes.

Crossing the Border into the Other World

Although some contemporary NDE accounts read like a journey from one spatial location to another where a path appears for the experiencer’s progress, such a structural unfolding is not the norm. Crossing from life to death in the Christian medieval stories gathered by Carol Zaleski (1987), however, seems to unfold in just such a way, and she described sometimes incredibly detailed landscapes negotiated by either a path of sorrow and pain or a pleasant one. The Native American accounts resembled medieval Christian ones in this regard.

Journeying along a Spirit Road: 6 Accounts. One of the most common elements in the accounts was the sense of traveling along a pathway in the spirit realm that led the deceased from his present location to a destination, which turned out to be the paradisiacal place where the dead dwelt. The means of locomotion was not specified, as though it was unremarkable, leading to the inference that it might usually have been walking, since horses and other significant animals were usually described. Only Palowahtiva and Black Elk made explicit reference to horses. The sense of the stories implied that the journey took several days. The four-day convention, which appeared in the Chippewa narratives, was a common one in a number of Native American traditions.

In three reports, the countryside surrounding the spirit path was Arcadian: beautiful, full of lush and wondrous plants and plentiful, fat, large game animals. The beauty of this sylvan landscape directly paralleled that of the pastoral scenes described in NDEs from other cultures (Lundahl and Widdison, 1997). Only in the Apache story was the pathway hazardous. Interestingly, in marked contrast to Native American beliefs as recorded in myths and folktales (Hallowell, 1967; Kalweit, 1988; Thompson, 1929), none of these NDEs, including the Apache report, featured the afterlife convention of a narrow, slippery bridge over a black river full of people who had not been able to make the passage that the dead must cross. However, in two accounts the direction of the path was indicated as westward, which did correspond
to the common belief in Native American and many other cultures that the dead lived where the sun set.

**Being Led by a Guide: 3 Accounts.** Only a few individuals met psychopomps who were to serve as their guides to the spirit world, and there was no commonality among the guides other than their function. In contrast to the majority of contemporary records, only one psychopomp was a deceased relative, and, rather surprisingly, one whom the deceased did not recognize, and for that reason, hesitated to accompany: the unknown “grand-grand-uncle” in Palowahtiva's narrative. Flat-Stone was already on his way when he met a stranger who offered food and, when this was declined, his company and guidance for the journey. Black Elk was summoned by supernatural warriors he recognized from a previous vision (not a near-death experience) descending from the clouds, who told him the Grandfathers had summoned him.

**Meeting Challenges: 4 Accounts.** Like the medieval narratives with their pathway construction beset with ordeals (Zaleski, 1987), the Native American accounts featured obstacles on some of the paths. Of the narratives that contained challenges, three involved obstacles barring further progress along the path, and all represented barriers to the next stage of the journey, almost in the nature of ordeals. The most elaborate of the passage ordeals was the Apache account, in which the deceased immediately encountered what appeared to be a guard, posted to bar entrance to a natural passageway in the landscape; next an apparently insurmountable rock blocked the path; and then, the subterranean passage widened and narrowed, forcing the deceased to progress through a series of deadly animal pairs that threatened him, before finally having to negotiate the clashing stone walls of the passage. With the exception of the rock, which demanded ingenuity, agility, and courage to skirt, the correct response to the challenges was to confront them bravely by walking through or past them, as though they engendered no fear.

The two Chippewa narratives generally followed the same pattern, except that the obstacles took the form of supernatural fire that would move and flare up to block the path of the deceased, no matter which evasive maneuvers he took. In both cases, the deceased had to exert a tremendous force of will to overcome his natural reluctance to hurl himself through the towering wall of fire in front of him to reach his goal. A feature unique to these accounts, though, is that this obstacle was a bar not to further journeying in the spirit world, but to the land
of the living. The fires in the Chippewa stories blocked the war-leader from re-entering the battlefield to reclaim his body after his frustrating attempts to exist without it, and they blocked Gitshee Gauzinee from re-entering his lodge to obtain his rifle, which he needed in the spirit world. The war-leader, whose spirit had not gone into the spirit world but remained in the here-and-now, wanted to return to the world, which only his body had left, but it appeared that Gitshee Gauzinee merely wanted to get his rifle and stay in the spirit world where he was. Both found that by crossing the fire, they had come back into their bodies in the realm of the living.

Black Elk’s ordeals were quite different. His adventures in the spirit world did not involve a pathway so much as flying through the air, and instead of encountering obstacles to his way, he was instructed to undertake certain actions with some of the magic gifts he had been given, which he accomplished with ease, such as killing a supernatural being to restore harmony and plenty.

*Interacting with the Living: 2 Accounts.* The Chippewa war-leader and Black Elk were the only two individuals who seemed able to interact in the world of the living. The war-leader clearly experienced himself subjectively as having a normally functioning material body that was operating in the here-and-now, yet nobody else could see him. Although he was wounded, he managed to keep up with the others on the return journey, “walking when they walked, and running when they ran” (Schoolcraft, 1975/1825, p. 405), but the account made it clear that he suffered from hunger, thirst, his wounds, and the cold in attempting to keep pace with them. His interactions, try as he might, were ineffectual, and the most he could manage was to create soughing sounds when he shouted and a slight headache when he struck his wife a doughty blow. His experience of events seemed completely realistic, and the account implied, though it never stated explicitly, that the actions of the living he observed actually took place.

Black Elk, on the other hand, flew over a realistic landscape in a manner suggestive of airplane travel, an impossibility at the time of the events he related but extant by the time his narration was recorded, viewing the living from this great height; yet he was able to capture his mother’s attention far below. According to Black Elk, when he was able return to the United States, the encampment was just as he had seen in his vision, including the location of his parents’ teepee, and his mother corroborated that she had seen him in a dream.
Going into Darkness: 3 Accounts. Darkness was not a prominent feature of these narratives, and nothing like a tunnel appeared, with the exception of the darkness around the subterranean passage beginning the Apache account and Palowahtiva’s darkening vision, after the ancient Zuni ancestor turned to depart and he found himself in his sick body again. The only other period of darkness reported was one through which Black Elk had to pass when his traveling cloud took him “backwards” from his parents’ village to his departure point in Europe, in a manner highly suggestive of an airplane passing through different time zones.

The Happy Hunting Grounds

The nature of the spirit world and the beings that inhabited it differed in their numbers more they did in kind from contemporary accounts. As noted above, some features did not appear, but of the ones that did, only superficial differences existed.

Light in the Spirit World: 5 Accounts. The radiant illumination of the spirit world appeared in over half the reports, though not in the pronounced way it does in contemporary accounts. Light was not said to glow from the natural features of the landscape, but to form a general brilliance that illuminated everything the way a celestial body does, though no source for the light was ever mentioned. Light from the spirit world might have entered the here-and-now, as it did in Palowahtiva’s story, or lingered afterward inside the person, as it was said to in Black Elk.

Reaching Paradise: 5 Accounts. The destination at the end of the spirit road appeared to be the Native American equivalent of the celestial cities mentioned in EuroAmerican NDEs, blended with the elysian fields those accounts also mentioned. It was each culture’s version of paradise, a splendid but recognizable place where the other spirit beings dwelt. In the First Nations records, it was a large clustering of dwellings, such as lodges, wigwams, or teepees, laid out in a familiar arrangement from the person’s tradition. The accounts clearly suggested that these encampments were considerably larger and more populous than usual in life. These prosperous settlements were located in lush countryside, rich with vegetation and game, the “happy hunting grounds” of legend. The inhabitants appeared to be going about their usual activities, just as they did in the accounts from other cultures (Lundahl and Widdison, 1997).
Seeing the Dead: 6 Accounts. Most narrators specifically mentioned seeing the dead, usually meeting predeceased relatives, especially parents, but often other individuals known to them or comparative strangers, such as the man who had a reputation for having once eaten human flesh in the second Saulteaux narrative, and the long-dead who had moss growing from their foreheads. These spirit beings were evidently easily recognizable so they must have closely resembled what they looked like in life. None was mentioned as glowing with light. In most cases there was a sense of joy in being reunited with loved ones and being among their people again, made more poignant in the later stories when the First Nations had been almost obliterated, such as the one Geronimo related, when the narrator's yearning to be back among the friends, family, and entire society since lost was piercing.

Finding Death Beatific: 5 Accounts. With the exception of the first narrative John Smith reported, in which the person was saved from going to the hell of Popogusso, the rest who glimpsed afterlife found it to be sublime. The dead lived in joy and plenty, a fact that impressed the deceased so much that some of them could hardly wait to tell others the good news so that they would not be afraid to die.

Meeting a God: 3 Accounts. Three persons met supernatural beings who were more like gods than humans. No detail was given for the god who saved the man from entering hell in the Smith account. In Palowahtiva's narrative, the extremely ancient man who authoritatively denied that his “god-like” grand-grand-uncle could take him seemed, by inference, through his human appearance, which included significant decrepitude, to have been an ancestral progenitor of the Zuni people from the primordial past of myth. Black Elk's Great Vision was full of supernatural beings, but the ones that clearly had the most power were the Six Grandfathers, whom he characterized as being the Spirit of each of the cardinal directions, the Spirit of the Sky, and the Spirit of the Earth.

Returning to Life

The return of these speakers to the land of the living occurred under varying circumstances, just as it does in contemporary accounts, although no clear borderline appeared to block their progress into the spirit world. Instead, spirit beings turned them back, or they found themselves unintentionally drawn back by their own actions, or by the actions of others. Like many of the medieval experiencers (Zaleski,
some felt they now had a responsibility to tell others what had happened to them, while others felt they had a specific charge they must undertake.

**Being Told to Return: 4 Accounts.** People were told to return with varying degrees of forcefulness and varying rationales. In one of the Smith stories, the deceased was “given leave” to return (Smith, Book I, folio 11, in Barbour, 1986, p. 79), but was charged with a commission, which might have meant that the suggestion of permission was merely a polite phrasing for a command. In the second Smith story, the dead individual’s mission was clearly the reason he had to return. Palowahtiva’s return was disputed by the two spirit beings he met, but the ancestor-god made it clear that he was needed on earth, and that he would not be called to join the spirits until he was an old man. The reasoning was that he and others like him were needed on earth to support the spirit world. The Saulteaux One Who Travels with the South Wind was turned back on the roadway because it was not his time either, and Black Elk’s traveling cloud snatched him away against his will and back to life.

**Returning Unintentionally: 2 Accounts.** Gitshee Gauzinee, who had only gone back to get his rifle, found, when he passed through the fire, that he was back in his body and among the living, though leaving the spirit world had not been his intent. In the Flat-Stone Saulteaux narrative, the beating of a drum interrupted the deceased’s conversation with his parents, causing him to remember the world he had left behind, especially his children, summoning him back to life. He appeared to be drawn back along the pathway he had come by more and more sounds that gradually were discernable coming from the living, until he awoke to the laments of his wife and children.

**Receiving a Commission: 4 Accounts.** A significant number of people were charged with commissions to perform when they came back to life. Three of the four came from gods, while one, in the second Smith account, came from the man’s deceased father. Both of the Smith commissions concerned injunctions to instruct people how to live well in order to enjoy the pleasures of the afterlife. Palowahtiva, on the other hand, was told, in effect, to “keep the faith” in terms of making the traditional prayers and observances to sustain the spirits in the other world and maintain the integrity of the Zuni religion among its dwindling numbers. Black Elk was given extraordinary powers and
prophetic visions showing him that he had a special role to play to help his people survive extremely difficult times.

Creating a Commission: 3 Accounts. Some people were so moved by their experiences that they created their own missions to accomplish when they returned to the here-and-now. Both of the Chippewa stories involved insights about the afterlife from individuals who were focused on their bodily hardships after death, especially hunger. They determined to come back and share their experiences with the living, in order to alter funerary and burial customs that inconvenienced the dead, although in the first of these cases, the advice of building a fire on the grave seemed to have only a tangential relationship to the primary frustrations the deceased war-leader experienced in getting food, water, and medical treatment. In the Flat-Stone account, the experiencer was so delighted by what he had seen in the other world, he determined to spread the word on his own so that people would not sorrow too much for their loved ones or be afraid to die.

Considering these Native-American Narratives as a Whole

The group of published accounts most similar to these cases is Zaleski's medieval Christian study (1987), in which the majority of records featured a pathway organization through a structured landscape; two kinds of pathways, one beset with difficulties and another pleasant; a guide leading the individual through a series of ordeals which many did not pass, including fire; and a soteriological message that ultimately supported the religious conventions of the day. However, the Native American NDEs appeared to have the most in common with a single reported case of a Hawaiian woman recorded by Thomas Thrum in a 1907 book of traditional Hawaiian folktales and recounted recently by Allen Kellehear (2001).

The woman died, spent some time looking back at her body and comprehending her situation, and then began a journey, walking, as she supposed, along the path to the next village. Instead of finding the familiar hamlet she knew, she discovered an extremely large settlement thronged with thousands of people. She recognized some of them, but most were strangers to her, and the ones she knew were dead. She was amazed by how joyful they were. She went from that village to another, and another and another, where she found es-
sentially the same thing, until, on her way to a volcano, a group of people told her she had to return to life.

This case, although it includes the out-of-body experience missing from Native American reports, clearly demonstrated the pathway progress to a large, paradisiacal settlement of the joyful dead. Like most of the Native American accounts, it also lacked a tunnel-like transitional element or passage through darkness, a life review, any report of personal euphoria, a different sense of body, beings of Light, and the Light as a presence or intelligence. The Hawaiian case was also interesting in that, even more than the later Native Americans who were largely treated as enemies and savages by the Europeans, the Hawaiian people had been subject to extreme religious pressure by Christian missionaries to abandon their traditional beliefs; yet the imagery in this account remained quite consistent with the bulk of the Native American ones. On the basis of this single case and the mere handful of Native American accounts, it is perhaps tenuous to speculate, but not tenuous to nullity. It may well be that indigenous people whose way of life was still largely uncontaminated by civilization had similar views of the afterlife.

The indigenous NDE literature is still a very small one. Where other accounts from indigenous people have been published, they showed a great deal more diversity in terms of their content, many having quite idiosyncratic elements as well as distinctly culture-bound features, such as the Kaliai Melanesian accounts reported by Dorothy Counts (1983), the Mapuche account described by Juan Gómez-Jeria (1993), the Chamorro accounts reported by Timothy Green (1984), and the Samoyed account described by Kalweit (1988). However, Counts, in the first and most thorough of these studies, observed that Kaliai NDEs lacked many of the features that contemporary researchers had attributed to NDEs, including the sense of being out of the body, euphoria, the tunnel, or a sense of having a different body (Counts, 1983, p. 131), all differences consistent with these Native American narratives.

Kellehear (1983), in a survey of non-Western NDEs, included a number of indigenous accounts: the garbled Schorer version of the Chippewa stories mentioned above (1985), Counts's Melanesian study (1983), and isolated cases from an Australian Aborigine and a New Zealand Maori. He also concurred that indigenous cases lacked the life review and tunnel experience, though periods of darkness occurred in some accounts. Kellehear opined that the religions with written traditions divided the world into a material sphere and a spiritual one,
whereas indigenous religions, and presumably others with oral traditions, did not sharply separate the two. He maintained that the religions with written traditions placed soteriological responsibility on the individual, making the person's past actions central to self-evaluation, hence making the life review significant. Extrapolating from Géza Róheim's psychoanalytic study of Australian Aborigines (1932), Kellehear maintained that in indigenous cultures, social sanctions were not internalized, so that indigenous people believed that they were fundamentally good and had no need for self-examination.

However, Kellehear's (1983) distinction did not hold for a significant proportion of Native American metaphysics. It was true that certain spirits inhabited the material world, but these tended to be the animate spirits of plants, animals, and natural forces. The dead lived in a spirit world that was quite separate, and some distance removed, from the material world. Clearly some of the accounts, including the earliest ones Smith gathered, included a sense of personal responsibility for actions. Whether the rationale was valid or not, Kellehear's and Counts's (1983) findings that the accounts of indigenous people tended to lack an out-of-body element and consistently lacked a tunnel, life review, and other body were supported by these Native American narratives.

Pursuing a related thread, it is worth turning a critical eye to the eleven Native American narratives as a group, albeit a very small one. Taken as a whole, there are four striking outliers from three sources: the Chippewa stories and Black Elk's experiences. Although these purported to be stories told by people who had survived death, their phenomenology and content were sufficiently different to suggest something different from the contemporary understanding of NDEs.

The first Chippewa story did not occur in the spirit world at all; rather, it was about paranormal events in the here-and-now, and it was ascribed not to a particular, historical person, but rather to a warleader described as a mighty hero felled at exactly the mythical moment when he turned the tide of a battle. There was more than a whiff of the legendary in that account, despite the fact that many cultures, including contemporary industrialized ones, have strong traditions that describe the spirits of the dead having just such difficulty interacting with the living. It is a theme mentioned in the out-of-body phase of contemporary NDEs, where the dead attempt vainly to secure the attention of rescue workers or grieving loved ones.

It also bore a strong resemblance to Tibetan delog accounts (Bailey, 2001). Delogs were persons who seemingly had been dead for several
hours or days, but recovered spontaneously to tell detailed accounts of otherworldly journeys, usually emphasizing the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. A standard feature of the delog accounts was a fairly long period of time and several adventures that occurred when the delog did not realize he or she was dead and continued to try to interact with the living. Bailey, drawing on the work of Françoise Pommaret (1989), raised the issue that the linguistic and cultural definition of death was different in Tibetan and other eastern cultures, and that delog accounts might not have referred to clinical death as understood in the West but to the "departing of the principle of consciousness from the bodily envelope" (Bailey, 2001, p. 153), a condition that looked like death but that could occur under other circumstances, such as the meditative state called nirodh (Goleman, 1988). Thus, the possibly legendary war-leader may have been describing events that conformed to folk expectations, especially since he realized, at one point in the narrative, that he himself had been told of such times when the spirit left the body; or he might have been having a delog-type experience that might have resembled, but not been the same as, an NDE.

Moving to the second Chippewa account, without laying the first completely aside, it was attributed to a named individual, Gitshee Gauzinee. However, he emerged from an extremely vague time horizon that might well have been the mythic, or at least quasi-legendary, rather than the historical, past. Even the dating of the story around the time rifles had been introduced among these tribes was not particularly helpful, especially since such a detail served only as a narrative device that could have been served equally well by another precious object. The aim of this story seemed primarily instrumental, even though it contained more of the same elements as the other First Nations NDEs: a path-led journey into the spirit world and a vision of the paradisiacal settlement surrounded by fat game. Its purpose was to convince the Chippewa to alter their burial practices.

Both these stories, in marked contrast to the other Native American accounts, centered on the bodily needs of the individuals, and both were essentially didactic in nature, concerning both the justification and alteration of religious traditions associated with the dead. This hardly made them unique in the near-death literature, however, for by so doing, they appeared to fulfill the same purposes of the medieval Christian accounts in upholding, establishing, and transmitting certain religious conventions.

Black Elk's visions were something else entirely. Prior to his Great
Vision, he had had a number of other auditory and visual hallucinations as a young boy, and some of this early imagery was repeated in his Great Vision (Neihardt, 1988/1932). Unlike the other NDErs in this sample, Black Elk did not walk but flew through the air, and rode supernatural horses and clouds; he met all the gods, and from them received supernatural powers, prophetic and archetypal visions of good and evil outcomes; he was charged with tasks in the other world and with commissions for this world. His visions accorded much more closely with the shamanic tradition than the near-death records, even though various individual NDE accounts contained some of these elements.

As I have already been mentioned, Black Elk grew up in a time of widespread Messianic and apocalyptic ghost dance visions among the few First Nations left as they were on the verge of extinction, and, not surprisingly, his early years were dominated by a desire to return to the former life his people had enjoyed before the coming of the Europeans. Furthermore, his second vision, as he clearly stated, came from a time of great homesickness, which may literally have been the foundation of the condition from which he was suffering, when he was exiled from the United States to perform in Europe. He certainly attributed his decline to this long and humiliating separation from his people (Neihardt, 1988/1932, p. 225). Thus, it was perhaps not surprising that he was transported to the place where his family and the rest of his people were.

Without suggesting that he was not seriously ill on both occasions, it may well have been that an individual with his paranormal gifts or sensitivities either was susceptible to imagery beyond that of most people near death, or that despite the fact that he was ill, he was, in fact, having some other kind of altered-state experience.

In the first instance, the simple but plausible explanation is that some people — those who become known as psychics, shamans, magi, prophets, and so on — have greater sensitivities and capabilities than most other people. Ernest Hartmann (1991), James Brown (1986), and Andrew Newberg, Eugene d’Aquili, and Vince Rause (2001) have suggested this, and it is, in a way, just another reflection of the imaginally-sensitive psyche that has been used to explain some people’s predilection to altered states, including NDEs (Ring, 1992). Such a sensitivity and history of prior visions may indeed have predisposed Black Elk to have had unique NDEs with richer and more varied content than most. This may have been especially true given the context of his times. Kenneth Ring, describing the prophetic
visions of some contemporary NDEs, concluded that they should be understood as “manifestations of a collective prophetic impulse that historically tends to arise during periods of cultural crisis” (1988, p. 4), citing in support of this argument John Weir Perry’s *The Heart of History* (1987), which specifically discussed the Messianic movement among Native Americans during the period in question.

In the second instance, it might be possible that Black Elk, regardless of his illness, actually did not have an NDE but instead went into another state, perhaps resembling the withdrawal of consciousness from the body described in many Eastern traditions that looks like death, such as is experienced by the Tibetan delogs (Bailey, 2001; Pommaret, 1989) and in the meditative state of nirodh (Goleman, 1988). It has become a popular supposition in contemporary shamanic studies that many involuntary initiatory events were NDEs, but there is no compelling evidence to suggest that this has been the case, especially since there is a vast variety of other altered states that may leave the body motionless and with an extremely low metabolism for extended periods of time.

In conclusion, it is impossible to determine whether these outliers represented NDEs according to contemporary definitions, other death-related altered states, or something else. But is worth noting the ways in which they differed from the other accounts in this sample, as well as the majority of other NDEs collected crossculturally and from other old sources. Even though this paper presents only a small sample of allegedly historical Native American near-death stories, one of the most striking things about these narratives that speak across the myriad cultures and centuries was that, as in contemporary and even the medieval NDEs, the narrators never quite found the afterlife to be what they expected, and for the most part, they were amazed at the beauty and richness of the afterlife, particularly the pervasive joy of those who live in the spirit world.

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The Reenchantment of Death: Near-Death, Death Awareness, and the New Age

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ABSTRACT: Since the first publication on the near-death phenomenon appeared about 30 years ago, many theories have been offered to explain its manifestation and meaning in relation to the question of the survival of consciousness after death. However, the contextual question regarding the receptivity of the near-death phenomenon has not been adequately answered. This question concerns the social conditions that have popularized the discourse of the near-death experience. These conditions can be identified as the reenchantment of the world within the context of the New Age, the emergence of death awareness in a rapidly aging population, and the renewal of faith within the context of religious revivalism.

KEY WORDS: near-death experience; death awareness; reenchantment; New Age; religious worldviews

In the last 30 years, the near-death phenomenon has enlivened our imagination of the afterlife. Research on the near-death experience (NDE) pioneered by Raymond Moody (1975, 1977), Kenneth Ring (1980, 1984) and Michael Sabom (1982, 1998) has received much public attention. Various theories have been offered to explain its manifestation and meaning. A comprehensive review of these theories can be found in a recent review by Mark Fox (2003). Most of the near-death...
literature deals with the phenomenology rather than the sociology of the NDE. Although some writings on the NDE, such as those by Carol Zaleski (1987), Ioan Couliano (1991), and Allan Kellehear (1996), attempt to frame it within a historical and crosscultural perspective, these writings were more concerned with the comparative aspects of the NDE to demonstrate that the NDE is not exclusively a 20th century or Western phenomenon. The question of why the NDE came into public view in the closing decades of the 20th century has not been adequately answered.

What is it about this period that has nurtured public awareness and receptivity of the NDE? Such a question suggests that the social context in which discourse of the NDE emerged is critical to an understanding of the social recognition given to the meaning of the near-death phenomenon. In other words, the contemporary identification of the NDE cannot be divorced from the wider social context in which such interest arose in the first place. Kellehear (1996) addressed the changes in death attitudes and development of medical technology that have contributed to the public receptivity of the NDE. But there are other social factors that need to be considered.

The aim of this article is to identify the social conditions that have made possible the appearance and celebration of the NDE and its reification through an expanding literature, ongoing research, and public controversy. I adopt three approaches to discuss the conditions underlying the discourse of the NDE. First, I discuss the process of reenchantment. This refers to a process of reactivating thoughts, ideas, and beliefs that had become moribund or untenable with the rise of the scientific worldview. The occurrence of reenchantment in the New Age is relevant for understanding how the NDE fits into a new spiritual paradigm. Second, the emergence of death awareness has contributed to an increased interest in the meaning of death and the means for overcoming the fear of death. The NDE represents a challenge to the nihilism that underlies the universal terror of death. Third, debate about the nature of the NDE has disclosed a universalistic versus a particularistic interpretation of the NDE within the context of religious revivalism during the closing decades of the 20th century. These opposing views of the NDE suggest that the NDE is not necessarily an objective phenomenon. Rather, they are couched within a sharply divided religious environment that promotes disparate views of the meaning of the NDE.
The New Age and Reenchantment

Reenchantment is the reverse of disenchantment, the process of disentangling science from magical worldviews. Max Weber (1946), the eminent German sociologist, spoke of disenchantment of the world as the reduction of human perceptions and actions to regulated and predictable patterns that left no room for mystical ruminations and supernatural explanations. The emergence of the scientific worldview constituted the basis from which worldly progress was construed as the overcoming of the magical and enchanted framework of reality. Disenchantment offered a new outlook for the empirical verification of everyday reality, freeing reason to become the driving force of world development and mastery. By closing off the traditions that informed an enchanted worldview and transforming them into rationalized structures of belief and action, a modernized sense of reality came into being to address all conditions of plausibility as resting on the primacy of falsifiable proof. Beliefs in spirits, souls, and arcane forces became marginalized, relegated to the anachronistic realms of religion and superstition.

Scholars using Weber’s ideas have noted that disenchantment was not separate from the process of secularization in which institutionalized religion declined in influence (Bruce, 2002). Religious beliefs about the world and the afterlife did not necessarily become otiose, but they could no longer compete with the rapid growth of scientific and technological outlooks. Disenchantment offered a more objective and lucrative approach to the manipulation of reality, compared with religious enchantment that could only offer at best the allurement of faith. Secularization became indispensable to societal development, paralleled by disenchantment that replaced the intangibility of the spirit world with the rationality of the ordinary world.

A consequence of disenchantment was the increasing identification of predictability with bureaucracy and routinization. It was reason that was now animating the structures of bureaucracy. Originally conceived as the key to world mastery, reason now came to circumvent creativity through the disenchanted ethos of work, management, and social order. Yet, the sense of creativity was never completely extinguished by disenchantment. It lived on in the Romantic and neoRomantic currents of Western society, constituting a source for the reenchantment of the self (Lee, 2003).
Reenchantment marks the outer limits of disenchantment. It is a process that reintroduces and revives beliefs and knowledge that became obfuscated by the conventions of science, technology, and bureaucracy. This does not necessarily imply the end of disenchantment. Rather, the structures of disenchantment are no longer the privileged disseminators of truth. For the better part of the 20th century, these structures determined the contours of modern reality. Modern societies of the 20th century were indisputably disenchanted in terms of organization and cultural belief. Yet, throughout the 20th century, and more noticeably in the latter half of that century, cultural and religious movements in the West made significant impact in challenging the conventionalities of disenchantment (Robbins, 1988; Zellner, 1994). Informed by Romantic ideals, these movements addressed the aridity and inadequacies of the disenchanted mind. They were not critical of science and technology in themselves, but gave more emphasis to ideas and beliefs outside the scientific worldview as part of the bigger picture of reality. The activities of these movements represented a "major counterprocess of modernity" (Tiryakian, 1992, p. 86).

It is in this counterprocess that we see the germ of reenchantment. Unlike disenchantment, which contributed to the fragmentation of knowledge as a feature of modernity, this counterprocess attempts to reorganize the meaning of knowledge through an appeal to esotericism (Lee and Ackerman, 2002). Knowledge is no longer treated as mutually exclusive segments of the same reality, but as varying dimensions of a generally unified state of existence. In other words, it is unnecessary to isolate knowledge that is not within the purview of conventional science and technology. Although such knowledge is considered esoteric insofar as it does not conform to scientific conventions, it is nevertheless regarded as vital to a deeper understanding of the nature of reality. Reenchantment is, therefore, not merely a component of this counterprocess that attempts to rejuvenate a holistic approach to knowledge. It is also a process of actualizing esotericism in everyday life, bringing into practice the beliefs that science had jettisoned as superstition. As esotericism pervades everyday thought and behavior, it comes to be treated as less threatening to conventional knowledge and routines. Over the course of time, it is likely to become normalized as an acceptable option to the meaning of existence.

The context in which reenchantment is occurring has been referred to as the New Age (Heelas, 1996; York, 1995). The New Age is not considered "new" in the sense of innovative discoveries in the
manipulation of reality, but in terms of replumbing the depths of human potential for a more complete understanding of reality. In this regard, the New Age is treated more like a cultural movement, rather than a specific era of discovery, that attempts to overcome barriers to an inner understanding of human experiences. New Age exponents are not necessarily hostile to empirical knowledge based on the criteria of the external world, but they tend to construe such knowledge as limited and a demonstration of the impoverished human mind. Inner understanding allegedly provides a wider, holistic perspective that takes the external world as a manifestation of deeper principles not readily accessible to our ordinary senses and perceptions. The external world, according to this perspective, is not a given, and therefore cannot be taken for granted. It merely represents a construction of our minds that unwittingly veils a more subtle reality fundamental to the human spirit. Thus, the New Age is concerned with the committed exploration of our inner self in order to recover the hidden spirituality common to all human beings. It is a term closely associated with people “who maintain that inner spirituality—embedded within the self and the natural order as a whole—serves as the key to moving from all that is wrong with life to all that is right” (Heelas, 1996, p. 16).

The New Age is not in itself a closely knit, cohesive movement. It is a disparate movement with many strands of spiritual thought and activity that are traceable to 19th century Romanticism and the counterculture of the 1960s. Despite this diversity, spiritual seekers in the New Age are bound by the belief in the authenticity of the inner voice. It is this voice that guides our decisions and choices in everyday life. If untapped, it becomes dormant, seemingly inaccessible to ordinary people, whose lives are considered banal and inauthentic. Paul Heelas (1996) referred to this voice as the Self-ethic, or the source of guidance that lies deep within, transcending the boundaries imposed by the ego. Within the framework of the Self-ethic, meaning is no longer subjected to the conventions of the disenchanted world, but realized as the possibilities of inner knowledge finding expression through the processes of reenchantment. The self intuitively discovers the esoteric dimensions of its own potential simply by looking within for the freedom denied by the structures of disenchantment.

How does the NDE fit into this new spiritual paradigm that promotes the power of the inner self? Firstly, the NDE is not an experience that can be actively sought after, like many types of
New Age activities. The NDE is essentially an involuntary process of entering an altered state of consciousness following clinical death. Most people who report NDEs are not likely to be experimenting with dying in order to test the survival of consciousness after death. NDErs are typically people who were not prepared for death, but died momentarily and later were resuscitated. It is only during this brief period of clinical death that they came to experience traveling to another realm to meet deceased relatives and friends and to encounter an extraordinary light. Such experiences tend to provide NDErs with a sense of self-empowerment not derived from their ordinary lives.

Secondly, it is the esotericism of the New Age that facilitates the translation of this sense of empowerment into a candid acceptance of new realities. It is as though the veil of disenchantment had been lifted, to reveal other dimensions of existence hidden deep within the NDErs' consciousness. Like New Age seekers, NDErs' discovery of their inner power to access alternative realities is a form of self-transformation within a larger framework of spiritual realization. They no longer see the world through the prism of disenchantment, but are able to reinterpret their lives in terms of broader spiritual principles. These principles underlie the inner experiences of both the NDEr and the New Age seeker.

The parallels between the NDEr and the New Age seeker do not necessarily suggest that the NDEr is actually a type of New Age seeker. Unlike the New Age seeker who actively explores alternatives to a life of disenchantment, the NDEr is generally an explorer of inner space by serendipity. Because of an unanticipated encounter with other realms of existence through dying, the NDEr comes to appreciate alternative meanings to the present life that previously were unknown or did not appeal to him or her. It is a process of self-transformation in the NDEr that connects him or her to the New Age understanding of subtler realities.

Thirdly, ongoing reenchantment in contemporary society has opened an interstice in the structures of disenchantment that can foster communication between NDErs and near-death researchers. Such communication has led to greater public awareness of the near-death phenomenon as a plausible area of investigation and personal reflection. The pioneers of near-death research were physicians and psychologists whose training within the structures of disenchantment did not form an obstacle to their acceptance of the NDE as a phenomenon worth studying. It is likely that near-death research
has attained a level of legitimacy because of the professional standing of these pioneers. In other words, the legitimacy for near-death research reflects and feeds into the processes of reenchantment in contemporary society. Fascination with the NDE does not imply that near-death researchers are by definition New Age seekers, but that they are not immune to the effects of reenchantment. Without reenchantment, it is unlikely that the NDE would have made such an impact on scientific professionals nurtured within the structures of disenchantment. The NDE would have been dismissed simply as the deliriums or hysterical visions of resuscitated patients.

The relationship between the NDE, the New Age, and reenchantment suggests the importance of contextual developments in understanding how unusual phenomena, initially considered absurd, come to be defined as something acceptable for further inquiry. Near-death research has attained legitimacy not because the structures of disenchantment are no longer hegemonic, but because reenchantment is providing a context for addressing all the voids left unfulfilled by the theory and method of the disenchanted worldview. The power of the inner self is one of these voids that have not been satisfactorily addressed within the framework of disenchantment. Ongoing reenchantment has provided a vehicle for connecting the sense of inner power with the NDE, in the context of emerging awareness of death and dying.

**The Emergence of Death Awareness**

The conjecture that the death taboo has replaced the sex taboo in modern society appears to have been nullified by the emergence of death awareness in the last few decades. Death awareness refers to sensitivity toward philosophical, ethical, and religious issues concerning human mortality. Awareness of mortality is not in itself a new development of human reflexivity, but it is the intensity of this awareness that is changing attitudes toward the meaning of death. It is these changing attitudes that have played an important role in increasing public receptivity to the NDE.

What factors have contributed to the intensification of death awareness? Firstly, the terror of death has, in its own paradoxical way, transformed the denial of death into a confrontation with death. It is as though people fear death in order to come to terms with it. Far from alienating us from our mortality, the dread of death is
inadvertently opening up new ways for us to inquire into our fate to die. The appearance of two books about three decades ago signaled this transformation. One was a book on death and dying by a physician, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969). The other was a book on the denial of death by an anthropologist, Ernest Becker (1973). As a physician who worked with dying patients, Kübler-Ross addressed dying as a five-stage process that included denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. By identifying these stages of emotional turmoil in dying, it was possible to work with dying patients more effectively. Becker, on the other hand, was more concerned with the anxiety of death as the basis of all human drives. His work was theoretically a neoFreudian confrontation with the existential problem of dying. Together, these two books brought to public attention the modern fear of death and its consequences. They penetrated the death taboo to transform it into a method of knowing death.

The impact of these books cannot be separated from the growth of the hospice movement and the increasing concern with care for the dying. The modern concern with death is not about the quest for immortality, but about the limits of the physical self, strategies for coping with dying, and dealing with the pathos of death. It is a concern that is deeply rooted in a pragmatic attitude toward the world. Modern physicians, hospice workers, and care providers grapple with mortality in the most practical manner. They attempt to give back to dying patients their dignity and identity. By providing physical comfort and counseling to the dying, these professionals attempt to instill hope in an experience governed by fear. It is a hope that reinforces the patient’s identity. This identity is affirmed by an acceptance of death as the final exit, a culmination of experiences that have enriched the patient’s journey through life. Dying patients are taught to let go without losing their sense of self. A highly informative review of these developments in death and dying can be found in Tony Walter’s book, *The Revival of Death* (1994).

These attempts to understand death and dying were embedded largely within a disenchanted worldview, and did not consider the possibility of death as a doorway to alternative realities. Dealing with the fear of death within a disenchanted worldview only reduced the sense of desperation in coping with the termination of life. Death could not be stopped, but at least people could come to accept it unconditionally if they no longer feared it. At the same time, being aware of the inevitability of dying has made possible a greater
willingness to inquire into the nature of death itself and the possibility of consciousness surviving death. In this context of death awareness, the NDE would not be considered an egregious outcome of unscientific thinking, but a profound phenomenon that might revolutionize the way most people think about death and dying.

Secondly, the growing number of older people in the world population suggests a demographic dimension to the intensification of death awareness. According to a recent World Health Organization report (http://www.who.int/hpr/ageing/ActiveAgeingPolicyFrame.pdf), across the world the proportion of people aged 60 and above is growing faster than any other age group. The population of people over the age of 60 is expected to reach 1.2 billion in 2025. In developed countries such as the United States, the number of people aged 60 and above totaled 46.9 million, or about 16 percent of the population, in 2002. In the United Kingdom, people in the 60 and above age group comprised 20.8 percent of the population in 2002.

It is inevitable that as people reach middle and late age, their attention will shift to practical concerns that are related to the anticipation of retirement. One of these concerns relates to preparation for their eventual demise, such as writing of wills, disposal of property, and so on. It is during this period of gradual withdrawal from work and career that most people would feel an inclination to reflect on their exit from the world. As more people, especially in developed countries, live longer and healthier lives, they tend to have more time to dwell on the meaning of their lives in the context of imminent death. Questions related to dying and the afterlife become more meaningful at this stage in life. The larger number of such people in the world over the last few decades implies that these questions are not confined to a small minority, but have become central to the lives of a significant segment of the world population. Such a trend is likely to be more significant in developed countries, especially in the West, where advanced knowledge in medicine and health care is prolonging the lives of many elderly people.

Given this demographic profile, it should not be surprising that the NDE has become a preoccupation of many people in societies with aging populations, especially those in the West. Uncertain about the fate of their consciousness, many middle-aged and elderly people would want to know whether there is life after death. The NDE provides a special discourse for probing a question that is foremost in the minds of people in their twilight years. In populations with many such people, the NDE would undoubtedly be considered a phenomenon
not to be dismissed lightly, because it addresses their concern with the possibility of life after death.

Thirdly, the process of reenchantment cannot but impact on the growth of death awareness, since it is a process that offers an alternative worldview that extends beyond the meaning of life in the here-and-now. As discussed above, reenchantment is a process that rejuvenates esoteric worldviews, and it can therefore blunt the nihilistic view of death by addressing death as a bridge between different levels of consciousness. The reenchanted view of death eschews the vision of nothingness, because it is focused on the empowerment of consciousness in any state of existence. It means that the power of consciousness is a power of transformation that regenerates movement and action. Thus, death is not necessarily the end of life, but its transformation, “a change of scenery.”

Death awareness developing within a reenchanted worldview is likely to result in attempts to cultivate knowledge for entering new states of consciousness upon dying. These attempts offer practitioners of dying techniques the means to manipulate consciousness within a framework of esoteric knowledge. Discussion of some of these techniques can be found in manuals of instruction for dying, such as the one written by Anya Foos-Graber (1989). Basically, these manuals are derived from the principles of Indian metaphysics concerning the movement of energy and consciousness in the subtle body. The techniques are based on the belief in the existence of such a body and its components such as the central channel (sushumna) and the energy wheels (chakras). Instructions in these manuals focus on visualizing and manipulating the movement of energy and consciousness along the central channel and in the energy wheels as the dying person prepares to exit his or her physical body.

Without a reenchanted view of death, the NDE would likely be treated as a new myth invented by seekers of immortality. However, the process of reenchantment is not about the fixation on the search for immortality. The question of seeking immortality is not addressed, because reenchantment is concerned with the empowerment of consciousness at different levels of reality. Techniques of dying are therefore not special methods for attaining immortality, but for realizing new levels of postphysical reality. Within this context of death awareness, the NDE would be considered credible because it confirms the movement of consciousness between different levels of reality. In a popular book on the Tibetan approach to death and dying, Sogyal Rinpoche (1993) addressed the NDE as providing a glimpse
into other levels of postphysical reality. Ostensibly, he recognized the NDE as special phenomenon within a reenchanted view of death, but without implicating it in the debate on the quest for immortality.

The relationship between the emergence of death awareness and the discourse on the NDE suggests that the recent public engagement with issues of death and dying was critical to the development of a favorable reception of the NDE as a phenomenon in its own right. This reception of the NDE must also be considered within the context of a religious trend emphasizing the renewal of spiritual beliefs and missionary action. Different interpretations of the NDE within this context of religious revivalism have polarized the meaning of death and the afterlife.

**Religious Revivalism and Interpretation**

The discourse of the NDE occurred during a period of fervent revivalism in the world religions. The causes and consequences of this revivalism have been documented and discussed at length in other works (Stark and Bainbridge, 1986). What concerns us here is the significance of this revivalism for the reception and interpretation of the NDE. The NDE is in itself not considered a religious phenomenon, but within the context of religious resurgence it can come to take on religious meanings. In other words, interpretations of the NDE are not devoid of religious influences and can come to be marshaled as evidence for particular religious theories of human existence.

One of the important features of religious revivalism is the renewal of faith. When religious beliefs and actions are reactivated and receive inordinate attention, the question of faith attains greater value in relation to the way people interpret the meaning of their lives as conditioned by grace or divine influences. The mundane world is no longer taken for granted, but perceived as an inherent outcome of a grander scheme, to which only faith can penetrate and take hold. The renewal of faith constitutes a fervent exercise in redoubling one’s belief in the forces of the unseen world that act upon everyday reality. Within the religious system to which a person belongs, this belief not only becomes stronger, but also contributes to the continuation and even possibly the transformation of the entire system or part of it.

In the case of the NDE, the experience itself is generally not considered religious, because it lacks the motivation that is attributed
to salvationary actions. People who report NDEs do not typically place themselves in a perilous position to achieve salvationary goals. The average NDEr is not impelled by religious beliefs to seek death as a means to reach God. Only in accounts of their experiences after the fact are religious references found. Thus, the extraordinary light in their encounters may be interpreted as God, Jesus, or some other religious figure. It is important to note the point made by Fox (2003) that the accounts given by NDErs share structural similarities with testimonies provided by religious experiencers and converts. The implication here is that NDErs, like other religious experiencers, are susceptible to outside influences that shape and modify their accounts. Within the context of religious revivalism, their conceptualization of the NDE can come to take on specific religious meanings that signify a renewal of faith.

Sabom, one of the pioneers of near-death research, confessed that since the publication of his first book on NDEs his “love of Scripture has grown” and his “walk with the Lord has deepened” (1998, pp. 193–194). Claiming “deeper spiritual maturity,” he could now reconsider the Biblical meaning of the NDE. Quoting extensively from the Bible, Sabom surmised that the NDE was not an actual experience of the afterlife, since the dead could not return to life without the rare intervention of divine forces. The NDEr was not such a reanimated person. Yet he noted that many NDErs became convinced of the reality of life after death, and that the NDE promoted belief in certain Biblical principles. From his Christian perspective, he concluded that the NDE was not anything more than a powerful spiritual experience that produced a deepened belief in the existence and universal laws of God (Sabom, 1998).

Although Sabom himself is not a near-death experiencer, his interpretation of the NDE from the perspective of a committed Christian took a particularistic approach that rejected the NDE as an inexorable account of the afterlife, but viewed it as a special encounter that renewed the faith of the experiencers. The accounts given by NDErs in his study provided specific material from which he adduced a religious dimension that was revelational and stressed the renewal of the Christian message. Within the context of religious revivalism, Sabom’s interpretation of the NDE underscored the meaning of a momentous experience as something embedded in the rediscovery of Christian truth. This truth is not found in the NDE itself, but in the way the NDE comes to be seen as representing God’s revelation in the wider Christian community.
Part of Sabom’s conclusion was used to rebut the finding by Ring (1984) that the NDE tended to redirect people toward a more universalistic spiritualism. Unlike Sabom, who found his subjects to be more committed Christians after their NDEs, Ring reported that the NDErs in his study expressed a more ecumenical attitude:

It is precisely this ecumenical orientation that must closely represent the core of NDErs’ own spiritual perspective. In a sense, their embrace of Eastern religion is not so much a substitution of new doctrines for old as it is an endorsement of the ecumenical spirit of Eastern world views. Indeed, the strongest evidence of NDErs’ universalistically spiritual orientation and in many ways the culmination of the qualities already discussed is their belief in the underlying unity of all religions and their desire for a universal religious faith that will transcend the historical divisiveness of the world’s great religions. (1984, p. 162)

Ring’s interpretation of the NDErs’ spiritual transformation has a familiar ring that connects to the work done on the growth of religious movements in America as influenced by Eastern and nonChristian religions (Ellwood, 1979). The influence of these religions in American society in the latter half of the 20th century undermined traditional patterns of Christian belief and commitment. Some of these religions were monistic, some polytheistic, and some philosophically nontheistic, as in the case of Buddhism. Instead of stressing a personal relationship between the devotee and God or Jesus Christ, many of these “new” religions promoted a holistic approach to the cultivation of an inner self that did not conflict with nature or elements of the wider environment. They emphasized meditation as a means to calming the mind in order to arrive at the meaning of truth (Naranjo and Ornstein, 1971). These changes in religious attitudes coincided with the increasing challenge that developed against the structures of disenchantment, first by the counterculture of the 1960s and later by the New Age movement. In this context of religious resurgence, Christianity also underwent different currents of revivalist activity (Kepel, 1994), and some Christians came to define the New Age movement as a threat to their mission (Groothuis, 1986). It is therefore not surprising that Ring’s ecumenical interpretation of the NDE, which is not antithetical to the ethos of the New Age movement, has been challenged by the more fervent Christian outlook exemplified by Sabom.

The meaning of the NDE in the context of religious revivalism cannot be divorced from the explicit or implicit interests associated
with the renewal of faith in any organized religion or religious movement. An understanding of this context suggests that it would be naive to assume the interpretation of the NDE to be an actual objective account of extraordinary events. Although the NDE constitutes a phenomenon in its own right, it is the cultural and religious filter through which it passes that transforms it into a dependent variable. Thus, in another cultural context in which shamanism is highly valued, it is likely that the meaning of the NDE would be taken as a symbol of a special calling.

Conclusion

The NDE has held public attention and fascinated researchers and lay people alike in the last 30 years or so. Its discovery and emergence as a special phenomenon must be treated not as something self-originating, but as an outcome of contextual developments affecting social attitudes and cultural perceptions. It is chiefly the reenchantment of society that has contributed to a more receptive attitude toward reports of unusual experiences. Changes in popular and scientific thinking, influenced by challenges to the paradigm of disenchantment, have opened the way for the discourse of the NDE. Yet, this discourse has revealed a conflict between universalistic and particularistic interpretations, centering on the question of whether NDErs embrace a more cosmic or specifically religious outlook. Embedded in certain religious trends in society, these interpretations suggest that the NDE cannot be separated from the values that human beings attribute to their experiences. Nevertheless, the growth of death awareness and New Age thinking has provided a niche for the NDE to be researched and discussed for some time to come. These developments have made it possible for us to reconsider the meaning of death without being constrained by the old taboos of disenchantment.

References


Validity and Reliability of the Near-Death Experience Scale-6 (NDE-6)

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ABSTRACT: This research reports the development and psychometric properties of a 6-item Near-Death Experience Scale (NDE-6) drawn largely from the 16-item parent scale. This short form evidenced adequate test-retest reliability and internal consistency, as well as construct validity. The index shows promise for use in research and as a screening scale in clinical contexts.

KEY WORDS: near-death experience; NDE Scale; NDE-6 Scale; transpersonal.

A near-death experience (NDE) has been defined as “a profound subjective event with transcendental or mystical elements” (Greyson, 1994, p. 103). Bruce Greyson’s (1983) 16-item Near-Death Experience Scale (NDE-16) has been the preferred instrument in screening an individual or population in order to identify individuals who may have had a near-death experience. The NDE-16 exhibited adequate reliability in Greyson’s (1983) sample. However, some of the items that comprise the scale have questionable predictive validity in that these items may not be measuring aspects unique to a NDE (Greyson, 1990).

The need for shortened versions of assessment instruments has increased in recent years with the increased importance of mental

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health screening by health care providers, and the need for efficient methods to assess experiences of secondary interest. Short screening scales are also useful in surveys in order to select a subset of respondents who are likely to have had a particular experience or condition.

The purpose of the present study was to explore the psychometric properties of a 6-item scale drawn from the NDE-16 (Greyson, 1983). A parsimonious measure, shown to have adequate reliability and validity, would provide an efficient index with which to identify individuals who may have had NDEs.

**Methods**

This research examined the following reliability characteristics of the NDE-6: (a) internal consistency, and (b) test-retest reliability. With respect to construct validity, this research examined (a) the factor structure, and (b) the relationship of the index to measures of similar and different constructs. The institutional review board of Youngstown State University, where the study was conducted, approved the study; and all participants gave informed consent at the start of the study.

**Participants**

The sample consisted of 85 participants (65 women, 20 men) who were enrolled in a degree program at Youngstown State University, Youngstown, Ohio. The mean age was 36.76 years ($SD = 9.64$, range = 22 to 55). The mean number of years of education was 17.55 ($SD = 1.40$, range = 16 to 22). The racial composition of the sample was 94.1 percent Caucasian, 3.5 percent African American, 1.2 percent Hispanic American, and 1.2 percent unknown. The religious composition was 44.7 percent Catholic, 31.8 percent Protestant, 4.7 percent agnostic, 1.2 percent Jewish, 1.2 percent atheist, 15.3 percent other, and 1.2 percent unknown. The marital status of the sample was 63.5 percent married, 22.4 percent never married, 11.8 percent divorced, 1.2 percent cohabitating, and 1.2 percent unknown.

**NDE-6 Item Selection**

The goal of this stage of the project was to select a short subset of items from the NDE-16 (Greyson, 1983) that would most efficiently measure and screen for a NDE. The NDE-16 is a multiple choice questionnaire
created to measure the occurrence of a NDE as well as assess four component areas of a NDE: cognitive, affective, paranormal, and transcendental. The four subscales that measure the four component areas have four items each. The scale has been used in several research studies (for example, Greyson, 1985, 1994; Pacciolla, 1996).

As alluded to in our introduction, five items (items 1, 5, 6, 7, and 9 on the NDE-16) may not measure facets unique to a NDE. For example, the rate of positive responses ("b" or "c" responses) to these five items among NDErs ranged from 66 percent to 92 percent (as contrasted to 20 percent to 86 percent for the remaining 11 items), whereas positive responses to these items among nonexperiencers ranged from 27 percent to 45 percent (as contrasted to only 2 percent to 17 percent for the other 11 items). The fact that more than a quarter of the nonNDErs chose at least a mildly positive response to these five items suggested to Greyson (1990) that these "items might therefore be regarded not as features unique to the NDE but as less specific responses to a near-death encounter" (p. 160). Thus, these five items may be nonspecific responses for individuals who have had a close brush with death but not necessarily features that are unique to a NDE. Therefore, we considered these items, and the subscales they appear on, worthy of further study, but not deserving of inclusion on a short-form at this time.

Those five items are found on the cognitive, affective, and paranormal subscales of the NDE-16. Only the 4-item transcendental subscale does not contain any of the items in question. The NDE-6 was created by combining the transcendental subscale with an item that measures the frequently reported out-of-body component of the NDE, plus a screening item. If this initial screening item is responded to in the negative, the participant is directed to stop responding.

A list of the items that comprise the NDE-6 is provided in the Appendix. For item 1, agreement with answer "c" receives 2 points, answer "b" receives 1 point, and answer "a" no points. For the remaining five items, agreement with answer "a" receives 2 points, answer "b" receives 1 point, and answer "c" no points. The instrument has a possible scoring range of 0 to 12.

**Validity Instruments**

*The Short Index of Self-Directedness (SISD).* The SISD (Prosnick, Evans, and Farris, 2003) is an efficient 10-item Likert-type measure of the character trait of self-directedness. Individuals scoring high on
the SISD can be characterized as more responsible, purposeful, resourceful, and self-disciplined. The SISD consists of items drawn from the 25-item Self-Directedness Scale of the Temperament and Character Inventory (TCI-125) (Cloninger, Przybeck, Svrakic, and Weltzel, 1994). Kevin Prosnick, Bill Evans, and Jaelyn Farris (2003) reported high one-week test-retest reliability \( r = .86 \) and high internal consistency \( r = .87 \) for the index. A significant positive correlation was found between the 25-item Self-Directedness Scale of the TCI-125 and scores on the SISD \( r = .77, p < .001 \), thus indicating near equivalence. The NDE-6 was expected to evidence a positive and significant correlation, based upon previous research indicating that respondents who have had NDEs exhibit greater self-confidence and purposefulness (Greyson, 1994).

**The Short Index of Present-Centeredness (SIPC).** The SIPC is a 5-item Likert-type scale intended to measure one's capacity to dwell in the present moment. Prosnick, Evans, and Elliott Ingersoll (Validity and reliability of the Short Index of Present-Centeredness [SIPC], unpublished manuscript, 2003) reported adequate one-week test-retest reliability \( r = .74 \) and average internal consistency \( r = .55 \). The SIPC evidenced construct validity by exhibiting significant positive correlations with measures of constructs that involve present-centered experience, that is, self-actualization and mystical experiences. Since present-centeredness is considered a subphenomena of self-actualization, and since previous research reported no significant relationship between an NDE and self-actualization (Greyson, 1992; Prosnick, 1999), the NDE-6 was expected not to evidence a significant relationship with the SIPC.

**The Egotism/Transfluence Scale (ET Scale).** The ET Scale (Prosnick, Validity and reliability of the Egotism/Transfluence Scale [ET Scale], unpublished manuscript, 2003) is a 30-item Likert-type scale created through multiple test construction methodologies, including factor analysis. The ET Scale is comprised of two subscales and one "honest reporting" validity-type item. The Egotism (Eg) Subscale, consisting of 11 items, measures the Gestalt resistance process whereby an individual mentally detaches from their experience and thereby avoids full interpersonal contact. The Transfluence (Tf) Subscale, consisting of 18 items, measures an individual's experience of transpersonal realities, including such experiences as seeing auras and mystical visions. Prosnick reported adequate internal consistency values of \( r = .76 \) and \( r = .90 \) for Eg and Tf respectively (1996), and
high one-week test-retest reliability values of \( r = .80 \) for Eg and \( r = .89 \) for Tf (Validity and reliability of the Egotism/Transfluence Scale [ET Scale], unpublished manuscript, 2003). The Egotism Subscale exhibited construct validity by correlating positively with other Gestalt resistance processes and negatively with self-actualization, self-directedness, and overall life satisfaction; and the Transfluence Subscale evidenced construct validity by correlating positively with measures of report of mystical experiences, self-transcendence, and transpersonal self-concept (Validity and reliability of the Egotism/Transfluence Scale [ET Scale], unpublished manuscript, 2003). The NDE-6 was expected not to evidence a significant relationship with Eg, since previous research reported no significant relationship between claim of an NDE and egotism (Prosnick, 1999). Also, since claim of an NDE was significantly correlated in a positive direction with transfluence in previous research findings (Prosnick, 1999), a significant positive correlation was expected between the NDE-6 and Tf.

Self-Expansiveness Level Form (SELF). The SELF (Friedman, 1983) is an 18-item Likert-type scale created through multiple test construction methodologies, including factor analysis. The Personal Subscale of the SELF (SELF-P), made up of five items, purports to measure the degree of self-identification that a person has with the “here-and-now” level of the self. The Transpersonal Subscale of the SELF (SELF-T), also made up of five items, purports to measure a person’s “degree of identification with aspects of reality beyond that which is ordinarily conceived as being part of the individual” (Friedman, 1983, p. 40). Harris Friedman (1983) reported high two-month test-retest reliability values of \( r = .83 \) and \( r = .80 \) for the SELF-P and SELF-T respectively. Adequate internal consistency values of \( r = .75 \) and \( r = .79 \) for the SELF-P and SELF-T respectively have been reported (MacDonald, Tsagarakis, and Holland, 1994). The SELF-P and SELF-T subscales have exhibited both construct and criterion validity (Friedman, 1983; MacDonald, Tsagarakis and Holland, 1994). Since “here-and-now” experience is considered a subphenomenon of self-actualization, and since previous research reported no significant relationship between an NDE and self-actualization (Greyson, 1992; Prosnick, 1999), the NDE-6 was expected not to evidence a significant relationship with the SELF-P. Since claim of an NDE was significantly correlated in a positive direction with measures of transpersonal experience in previous research findings (Prosnick, 1999), a significant positive correlation was expected between the NDE-6 and SELF-T.
Physio-Kundalini Syndrome Index-7 (PKSI-7). “In Eastern spiritual traditions, the biological mechanism of both individual enlightenment and evolution of the species toward higher consciousness is called kundalini, a potential force that once awakened can produce a variety of mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual effects” (Greyson, 1993a, p. 278). The physio-kundalini syndrome is a specific nonpathological cluster of experiences that can be differentiated from psychiatric illness.

The PKSI-7 is a 7-item short-form drawn from the 19-item Physio-Kundalini Syndrome Index (Greyson, 1993a). Prosnick and Evans (Validity and reliability of the Physio-Kundalini Syndrome Index-7 [PKSI-7], unpublished manuscript, 2003) reported good one-week test-retest reliability ($r = .74$) and average internal consistency ($r = .60$). The PKSI-7 evidenced construct validity by exhibiting positive and significant correlations with measures of similar constructs: the Transfluence (Tf) Subscale, SELF-T, and the NDE-4. Greyson (1993b) reported that his sample of near-death experiencers “had shown definite signs of kundalini arousal” (p. 48). Therefore, a positive and significant correlation was expected between the NDE-6 and PKSI-7.

Near Death Experience-4 Scale (NDE-4 Scale). The NDE-4 is comprised of the four items from the transcendental subscale from the Near-Death Experience Scale-16 (Greyson, 1983). Greyson (1983) reported that the NDE-4 has adequate internal reliability ($r = .76$) and excellent test-retest reliability ($r = .95$). Regarding construct validity, the NDE-4 was highly correlated ($r = .83$; Greyson, 1983) with the Weighted Core Experience Index (Ring, 1980), an instrument that purports to quantify the NDE experience. Greyson (1983) reported a mean of 3.85 and a standard deviation of 2.67 ($n = 74$) for the NDE-4 in a group of individuals claiming to have had a NDE. The NDE-6 was expected to exhibit a significant positive correlation with the NDE-4 because Greyson (1983) reported a positive and significant correlation between the NDE-4 and the NDE-16.

Level of Significance

In this research, $\alpha$ was set at .05. Tests of construct validity in which a prediction was made (NDE-6 with SISD, Tf, SELF-T, PKSI-7, and NDE-4) employed one-tailed tests of significance, while tests in which significant relationships were not expected (NDE-6 with SIPC, Eg, and SELF-T) involved two-tailed tests. A correction for multiple
simultaneous correlational tests was not applied, since each validity test was computed as a separate test of significance.

Results

As shown in Table 1, the NDE-6 had a mean of 3.08 and a standard deviation of 1.84 for the sample of 24 individuals who reported that they may have had an NDE (by answering "b" or "c" to question 1).

Internal Consistency

Question 1, the screening item that instructed participants who responded to it in the negative to stop responding, was omitted from computation of internal consistency so that a truer consistency of the NDE experience could be computed. For the remaining five items on the index, coefficient $\alpha$ was .71.

Test-retest Reliability

Temporal stability for a 7-day interval of a subsample of students ($n = 16$), who reported that they may have had a NDE, was $r = .89$ ($p < .000$, df = 14). The mean for the first testing was 3.69 ($S.D. = 2.50$); for the second testing the mean was 3.50 ($S.D. = 3.03$). The means did not differ significantly, and therefore we concluded that there was no significant practice effect or regression to the mean in our sample.

Construct Validity

The scale was subjected to an exploratory principle components factor analysis utilizing an orthogonal rotation to the VARIMAX criterion, after excluding item 1, the screening item. Those factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were retained, which resulted in two factors. The structure coefficients of the five items on the two retained factors are given in Table 2. Interpretable, salient structure coefficients were considered to be .40 or greater. The first factor accounted for 39.8 percent of the variance, and is related to experience of and interaction with transpersonal entities in an unearthly or transcendent environment (items 4 and 5) during an NDE. The second factor, which accounted for 36.0 percent of the variance, is related to the onset (items 2 and 3) and culmination (item 6) of an NDE.
As shown in Table 1, the NDE-6 evidenced significant positive correlations with the SISD ($r = .52, p < .01$), Tf ($r = .30, p < .05$), the PKSI-7, ($r = .41, p < .05$) and the NDE-4 ($r = .89, p < .001$). No other significant correlations were found between scores on the NDE-6 and the other measures used in this study.

### Discussion

The short index evidenced high temporal stability and high average internal reliability. There is a possible reason why the internal consistency coefficient reported was lower than the test-retest reliability coefficient. Cronbach’s (1951) $\alpha$ coefficient of internal consistency is also a function of scale length (Anastasia, 1988), and the NDE-6 has only six items. Item heterogeneity can also weaken internal consistency. Examination of test-retest reliability can help to determine whether scale length and/or item heterogeneity is operating to weaken internal consistency, since test-retest reliability is not directly a function of scale length and/or item heterogeneity. The test-retest correlation for the NDE-6 for two test administrations one week apart was considerably higher than the internal consistency coefficient. Thus, scale length and/or item heterogeneity seemed to be lowering the internal consistency coefficient. Therefore, reliability of the NDE-6 can be considered adequate.

The current study employed an exploratory principle components factor analysis utilizing an orthogonal rotation to the VARIMAX
KEVIN P. PROSNICK AND WILLIAM J. EVANS

Table 2
Factor Structure of the NDE-6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Factor 1</th>
<th>Factor 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Had a near-death experience? (excluded)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Felt separated from your physical body</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Entered some other, unearthly world</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Encountered a mystical being or presence</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Saw deceased spirits or religious figures</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Came to a border or point of no return</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Underscored values indicate salient and interpretable structure coefficients.

criterion. The results yielded two factors. Researchers attempting to cross validate these results might choose to use alternate factor analytic procedures. For example, principal axis factoring might be considered in addition to principle components analysis. Additionally, the orthogonal rotation utilized in this study assumed uncorrelated factors. However, because the underlying factors may be correlated, an oblique rotation may yield a different factor structure for the NDE-6.

As predicted, the NDE-6 evidenced significant positive correlations with the SISD, Tt, the PKSI-7, and the NDE-4. This is indicative of construct validity for the new index. The index evidenced a positive correlation with the SELF-T subscale, but the correlation coefficient was not significant. As also predicted, no other correlation differed significantly from zero. This indicates construct validity, and suggests that the scale may have discriminant validity.

A few limitations to the study should be mentioned. First, data came from one region of the United States and limited age range (22 to 55 years). Second, a small proportion of the respondents reported a possible NDE. Therefore, it would be prudent to replicate this study with larger and more varied samples. Third, the scale’s items may be more sensitive to a positive or neutral NDE, and less sensitive to what is known in the literature as a frightening near-death experience or fNDE (Bache, 1994, 1996).

Cut-off scores for the NDE-6 are considered provisional and tentative at this time, for two reasons: first, a small subset of individuals reported a possible NDE in our study (n = 24); and second, future research will
need to assess the impact of our “screening item,” which reflected more an opinion than an experience. Acknowledging these reservations, we suggest that a score of 0 or 1 point indicates a low probability of having had a NDE. Even so, in clinical contexts, individuals should be queried as to why they thought they might have had a NDE, to rule out an fNDE or an NDE with atypical features. A score of 2 or 3 (out of 12) suggests a moderate probability of having had a NDE. Such individuals could be administered the long version (the NDE-16), and/or a focused clinical interview could rule out an fNDE or atypical NDE, as above. A score of 4 or higher suggests a high probability of having had a NDE. Future research may determine if these cut-off scores offer sufficient levels of sensitivity, specificity, and predictive utility.

Finally, the short index is a more parsimonious and efficient method to screen for near-death experiences in epidemiologic and clinical studies than the NDE-16, due to its shorter length. The NDE-6 has an additional advantage over its predecessor. Whereas, the 16-item version is usually given only when there is evidence that the individual or individuals may have had a NDE; the NDE-6, because of the inclusion of a screening item, can be given with a packet of other instruments to any population for either research or clinical purposes. If used clinically, the NDE-6 should be considered a screening scale only, and not a substitute for dialogue and exploration of that individual's possible NDE.

**Conclusion**

We have presented a screening scale for the self-report measurement of a near-death experience and documented the procedures utilized in the development of the scale. The scale is a short version of the 16-item Near-Death Experience Scale (Greyson, 1983). The screening scale is designed to measure lifetime history of having had a near-death experience. The scale may exhibit utility as a semi-continuous predictor for the probability of having had a NDE.

**References**


**Appendix: Near-Death Experience Scale-6 (NDE-6)**

Please circle the answer to each question that best describes your experience.

1. Have you ever had a near-death experience?
   a. No
   b. Maybe; I'm not sure
   c. Yes, I think I have
If you answered "No" to question 1, please do not respond to items 2 to 6 below.

2. Did you feel separated from your physical body?
   a. Clearly left the body and existed outside it
   b. Lost awareness of the body
   c. Neither

3. Did you seem to enter some other, unearthly world?
   a. Clearly mystical or unearthly realm
   b. Unfamiliar, strange place
   c. Neither

4. Did you seem to encounter a mystical being or presence?
   a. Definite being, or voice clearly of mystical or otherworldly origin
   b. Unidentifiable voice
   c. Neither

5. Did you see deceased spirits or religious figures?
   a. Saw them
   b. Sensed their presence
   c. Neither

6. Did you come to a border or point of no return?
   a. A barrier I was not permitted to cross; or "sent back" to life involuntarily
   b. A conscious decision to "return" to life
   c. Neither

Psychical and Spiritual was written to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Churches' Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies. Its author, Canon Michael Perry, former Archdeacon of Durham, is the Fellowship's current president and has edited its quarterly, The Christian Parapsychologist, for the past 25 years. What makes this book unique is its Christian perspective on parapsychology. Perry uses a broad brush to introduce the reader to the vast field of anomalous psychology while omitting exhaustive data on any specific topic. About 1 percent of the book is dedicated to near-death experiences; research into mysticism and deathbed visions fares slightly better. However, two delightful chapters are dedicated to sampling parapsychological events in the Bible, which I will highlight in some detail later. Perry's theology appears moderate in every aspect except for his devotion to the paranormal. He chides liberal Christians for their "pick and choose" approach to theology, and he criticizes conservative Christians not only for their skepticism of the paranormal but especially for their rejection of parishioners who have psychic abilities or who have had psychic experiences.

The first chapter covers the author's parapsychological pilgrimage from childhood through his discovery and participation in the Churches' Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies. He makes clear that the members and office-holders in this organization belong
to mainstream churches and acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

The next chapter, entitled "What A Piece of Work Is Man," outlines the parapsychological and Biblical idea that man is spirit as well as flesh and blood. Perry traces the history of this concept to Socrates, the Wisdom of Solomon (in what Protestants call the "Apocrypha" of the Old Testament), and Er's near-death experience in Plato's Republic. His emphasis on the spiritual nature of humanity includes references from ancient sources such as St. Paul and the Venerable Bede, as well as modern ones such as James Dunn and Alister Hardy. Perry believes that all parapsychological events are gifts from God, and he briefly discusses a variety of paranormal abilities, including precognition, premonition, auras, hauntings, dowsing, the gift of healing, psychokinesis, and after-death communications. Despite his admission that mediumship is beset with fraud and that the majority of mediumistic communications are suspect, he feels that some mediums have a genuine gift and are worthy of support.

Chapter 3, "The Bible Tells Me So," is my favorite part of the book. In it, Perry declares: "If we were to expunge all accounts of the apparently paranormal from the pages of the Bible, we would be left with an intolerably emasculated volume" (p. 48). In my own experience, Christians who are very comfortable hearing about "miracles" in familiar Biblical language often find it startling to hear the same events described in the terminology of parapsychology. However, the Bible is a treasure-trove of mystical and paranormal experiences, and Perry is not the first to point this out. Other authors such as Boyce M. Bennett in his Anatomy of Revelation (1990) and Phillip Wiebe in his Visions of Jesus (1997) also classified Biblical experiences using the language of anomalous psychology. The following are some examples selected by Perry: extrasensory awareness, when Jesus told the woman at the well that she had had five husbands and that she was not married to her present partner (John 4:18); precognition, when Jesus predicted that Jerusalem would be sacked by invading armies (Matthew 24); psychokinesis, in the parting of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21); teleportation, when Philip was caught up in the desert and deposited in Azotus (Acts 8:39–40); auras, in the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–13); divination, for which purpose Joseph had a cup (Genesis 44:5, 15); mediumship, by the witch at Endor (I Samuel 28); visions, when Moses and Elijah appeared at Jesus' Transfiguration (Mathew 17:3); voices, when Jesus prayed and a voice from Heaven answered him (John 12:27–33); xenoglossy, in the feast of Pentecost.
(Acts 2:6); trance states, when Balaam saw a vision of the Almighty (Numbers 24:3–4); healings, when Jesus cured the fever of a sick woman (Mark 1:30–31); exorcism, when Jesus transferred a legion of demons into a herd of pigs (Luke 8:26–33); and near-death experiences, when Paul was stoned at Lystra and left for dead (Acts 14:19). Personally, I think better examples of near-death experiences in the Bible are Elijah, Elisha, and Jesus raising people from the dead (I Kings 17:20–24; II Kings 4:32–37; Matthew 9:18–26; Luke 7:11–16; John 11:1–44); however, in these accounts we do not have the individual’s description of what happened during their near-death experience.

Perry points out that Biblical authors had enough savvy to unmask trickery, an example of which is the story in the Apocrypha of Bel and the Dragon. He agrees that many of the attacks on the Bible are, in fact, scientism, a word coined by Charles Tart meaning “a ‘perversion of genuine science’ and ... ‘a dogmatic commitment to materialist philosophy that ‘explains away’ the spiritual rather than actually examining it carefully and trying to understand it’” (p. 60). Like all researchers of the paranormal, Perry sees paranormal events occurring today as similar to those in Biblical accounts. He claims that parapsychology is currently under assault not only from hard-core Humanists, but also from religious conservatives like those who show up regularly at his lectures to vilify mediumship as an “abomination of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 18:9–14). He sees this as a case of “the pot calling the kettle black” and counters with examples such as the magic tricks of Moses and Aaron (Exodus 7:8–12), the amazing psychic gifts of Elisha and Elijah, and the dream interpretation skills of Daniel.

In Chapter 4, "From the Realms of Glory," Perry continues to analyze paranormal accounts in the Bible, noting that from the earliest times, men and women have claimed to see events, things, and beings not visible to people in general. He also cautions that people who have psychic abilities may be subject to evil spirits, and documents this belief with Biblical references. He affirms the need for exorcisms, but emphasizes that they should be performed only by an authorized minister. His warnings on the use of Ouija boards is similar to what I’ve told students for years: playing with them invites malicious psychic entities that may prey on unsuspecting humans and, even if there were no such things as “evil spirits,” it can trigger dormant psychopathology. In Chapter 5, “Post-Mortem Prospects,” Perry discusses life after death. He devotes several pages to reincarnation, including the
excellent work of Ian Stevenson, but has problems with it from a Biblical standpoint. He claims that "there are a few texts [in the Bible] which may be interpreted this way, but only by reading the doctrine into them than out of them" (p. 105). The abundant evidence for life after death is highlighted briefly, including post-death visions, crisis apparitions, deathbed visions, near-death experiences, mediums, and automatic writing.

In the final chapter, "Christian Parapsychology," Perry discusses with loving-kindness his own ministry and the ministry of others to people who are "psychic sensitive." He reveals that those who have gifts of psychic abilities do not always perceive them as pleasant, and that too often psychics have been driven from the church and into spiritualist societies that are ME-centered rather than GOD-centered. He sees the mission of the Churches' Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies as one of aiding and assisting psychics, educating other ministers about this phenomenon, making psychics welcome in the church, and helping them deal with their skills. This program is similar to the ongoing educational efforts of members of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) to educate physicians, ministers, and the public at large about the near-death experience. The simple fact is that psychics, like near-death experiencers, stay in their own churches if they feel accepted there, whereas those whose paranormal experiences are rejected are compelled to seek spiritual comfort elsewhere.

In conclusion, this book is an introduction to Christian parapsychology. It will be informative to those looking for a Christian interpretation of the paranormal and a Christian approach to helping and learning from those whom Perry affirms are blessed with God-given gifts, the "psychic sensitives."

References

(Book Review)

Dianne Arcangel, M.S.
Houston, TX

Final Passage: Sharing the Journey as This Life Ends, by Barbara Harris Whitfield. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1998, 202 pp., $10.95.

Book titles are often misleading, but not in this case. Final Passage: Sharing the Journey as this Life Ends depicts exactly what the book is about—ten people who shared their final transitions with the author. Who is Barbara Harris Whitfield and why does she qualify as the litterateur? She is a thanatologist, respiratory therapist, and near-death experience researcher. Her literary accomplishments include numerous articles and two books, Full Circle: The Near-Death Experience and Beyond (Harris and Bascom, 1990) and Spiritual Awakenings: Insights of the Near-Death Experience and other Doorways to Our Soul (Whitfield, 1995). Beyond her professional achievements, she is a compassionate and caring individual who experienced a close call with death herself.

In the introduction, Whitfield stated her purpose for writing Final Passage: "I offer these stories and the way I experienced them in the hope that you may gain compassion and mastery over the process that we call death" (p. xviii). She furthermore set a sensitive tone that flows throughout the publication: "I wrote Final Passage from the perspective of how important universal energy is on many levels: in helping spiritual growth, in reducing pain and in creating a healing atmosphere" (p. xvii). Within the first ten pages, her thesis was well in place: By mastering death we learn how to live more fully.

Dianne Arcangel, M.S., is a former hospice chaplain, psychotherapist, Director of The Elisabeth Kübler-Ross Center of Houston, and Consultant to the Bigelow Chair of Consciousness Studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Reprint requests should be addressed to Ms. Arcangel at 6831 Cedar Lawn, Pasadena, TX 77505; e-mail: DianneArcangel@aol.com.
In Chapter One, "Healing: Barbara's Story," the author narrated her near-death experience along with pertinent data. For example, 80 percent of near-death experiencers (NDErs) do not experience life reviews. Whitfield, one of the 20 percent who did, chronicled how she continues to apply and benefit from her autobiographical replay. The only NDE presented in Final Passage was the author's.

The remaining eight chapters held touching accounts about people who made their transitions into the Great Beyond. Within each story, Whitfield reinforced her theme: We all hold a profound and common bond to a universal or divine energy. Although she described how she worked with the energy, I hungered to read more. Whitfield began and concluded Final Passage with a poem she wrote shortly after her NDE, wherein she invited readers to awaken and live more fully and authentically:

The only real pain
When we die
Is if we do it
Without living first. (pp. xi and 182)

Written from the heart, Final Passage is interesting, easy to read, and includes a bibliography and two-page index. I recommend it to anyone interested in the topics of death, dying, and the art of living. I furthermore consider it essential reading for anyone thinking about joining a hospice program as staff or volunteer.

References

Letter to Editor

Making Meaning of Frightening NDEs

To the Editor:

Nancy Evans Bush quoted John Sanford in her recent article entitled “Afterward: Making Meaning After a Frightening Near-Death Experience,” to remind us that Christianity is “the most psychological of all religions because of [its] emphasis on the inner development of the individual and the important role which it assigns to the ego as the bearer of consciousness” (Bush, 2002, p. 114).

We forget that fact, as near-death experiencers and researchers, in our quest to make “meaning,” to interpret the near-death phenomenon from a grander view, to assert spirituality over religiosity, to “free” ourselves from the limits of any dogma that might have constrained us in the past. Bush, as an experiencer of an unpleasant near-death episode, as President Emeritus of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), and from her extensive background in Christian studies and pastoral counseling, brought to the table a fresh and remarkably insightful viewpoint—especially as concerns that which is frightening or confusing to us.

Her article was masterful, the best interpretative piece I have ever read, book or article, on the near-death phenomenon and the meanings we may give it. I sincerely hope that this work was a mere precursor to a book she will pen on the subject. I have known Bush since she was first hired to work for IANDS, and have found her to be a deep and thoughtful individual, always thorough and always inviting us to rethink our ideas and commentary.

On page 111 of her article, she pointed a finger of suspicion at my discovery of four types of near-death states and how I described them, objecting most to the subtle, psychological profile I detailed for each, and especially as concerns unpleasant and/or hell-like episodes. She quoted me as saying this type “is usually experienced by those who seem to have deeply suppressed or repressed guilts, fears, and angers, and/or those who expect some kind of punishment or accountability after death” (Atwater, 1992, p. 156). Her objection was that people who
report radiantly wondrous accounts have self-described guilts, fears, and angers, too. And she was absolutely correct.

I have no argument here. But I would remind Bush that all my research findings are based on original fieldwork. My role has always been that of observer/investigator, not scholar or meaning-maker (global or otherwise). Yes, people who claimed to have visited heaven dealt with the unfinished business of their lives during and afterward, as did just about everyone else, irrespective of scenario type. What I witnessed with experiencers consistently, though, was that the predominant issues in their lives at the time were what appeared most to infuse the imagery and message of their near-death episode. What I discovered is exactly as declared. I cannot change what I found because it does not feel right or seems a cop-out of some kind or an assumption hastily made. Like it or not, there is a link between whatever exists within our deepest selves and what outpictures during a near-death episode. But that link is only an initial one. As Bush well knows, there is far more to the near-death phenomenon than the status of our attitudes and beliefs. I bow to her expertise in this regard, as she continues to uncover gems from the vast world of religious and spiritual traditions and what that might tell us about the near-death phenomenon, its aftereffects and implications.

References


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